

University of Strathclyde  
Department of Management

A Developing Framework for  
Strategic Thinking

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# Abstract

The topic of strategic thinking is important because it represents a significant challenge for executives and is increasingly prevalent in the literature. This research develops a framework for strategic thinking that is grounded in both academic literature and practitioner interpretations through a number of phases, each with an orientation towards either literature or empirical data. In empirical phases data was generated from interviews with executives in the UK NHS. Conceptually oriented phases evaluated the conceptions of strategy and strategic thinking, and synthesised the discrete themes of goals, issues and actions in the strategy literature. The framework of goals, issues and actions, and their interrelationships, represents a set of conceptual handles that bridge the conceptual and empirical worlds.

The framework offers guidance for strategic thinking practice that is relevant to different settings. Employing the framework involves three processes; constructing, refining and appraising. The framework indicates “about what to think”, is complemented by characteristics of strategic thinking that indicate “how to think” and these three processes indicate how to employ the “about what to think” and “how to think” aspects of strategic thinking in practice. This combination provides a comprehensive guidance for strategic thinking practice.

This research also offers guidance on management education to develop strategic thinking. The framework addresses the challenge of integrating experiential, contextualised knowledge with academic, generalised knowledge by using categories that have meaning for practitioners that are connected to central themes in the strategy literature. It is argued that the appropriate educational process is an inductive one that avoids an overly analytical and compartmentalised approach but preserves the integrated nature of the framework that reflects the nature of strategic thinking. The integrated nature of the framework may indicate that it represents a threshold concept that leads to a transformed understanding and way of thinking that integrates other concepts.

# 1 Introduction

This chapter clarifies the importance and relevance of strategic thinking as a research topic, including those factors personal to the researcher. In doing so the chapter draws on the prominent rigour-relevance debate in management research to justify the approach taken, provides an overview of that approach and the research questions that guided the research. What was perhaps the primary influence arose from the researcher's profession as a management educator and a conviction that the research should have clear managerial relevance whilst also grounded in relevant theoretical concepts. The metaphor of a bridge between the conceptual and the empirical emerged, with the notion of the development of "conceptual handles" (Huxham and Beech 2003) as a bridging mechanism. In deciding how to begin the bridging process, the notions of "preunderstanding" (Gummesson 2000) and the suggestion of concepts as either definitive or sensitising (Blumer 1940; 1954) were highly influential. The research was also influenced in broad terms by the perspective of the "strategy-as-practice" (Whittington 1996) movement, viewing strategic thinking as an everyday activity, rather than a rare or esoteric activity. A different researcher may have had different influences and hence taken a different approach, possibly resulting in different conclusions. By making these influential ideas and orientations explicit the validity of this approach can be judged by the reader.

Claims for the importance of strategic thinking have been made in the strategy literature for over two decades. Porter argued that "The need for strategic thinking has never been greater" (1987b:21) and strategic thinking is considered to be an important challenge facing executives (Bonn 2001; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991; Zahra and O'Neill 1998). A keyword search of ABI/INFORM Global Business database confirms the increasing interest in strategic thinking relative to strategic planning. Figure 1-1 shows the outcome of a keyword search of the ABI/INFORM Global Business database for the terms Strategic Thinking, Strategic Management, and Strategic Planning in the abstract field. To account for the increase in the number of published papers each year the results were normalised by dividing the number of papers by the number in the first time period. Figure 1-2 shows the outcome of a

similar search for the use of the terms in the title field. (Searches conducted on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006)

**Figure 1-1 Normalised results for abstract field search**

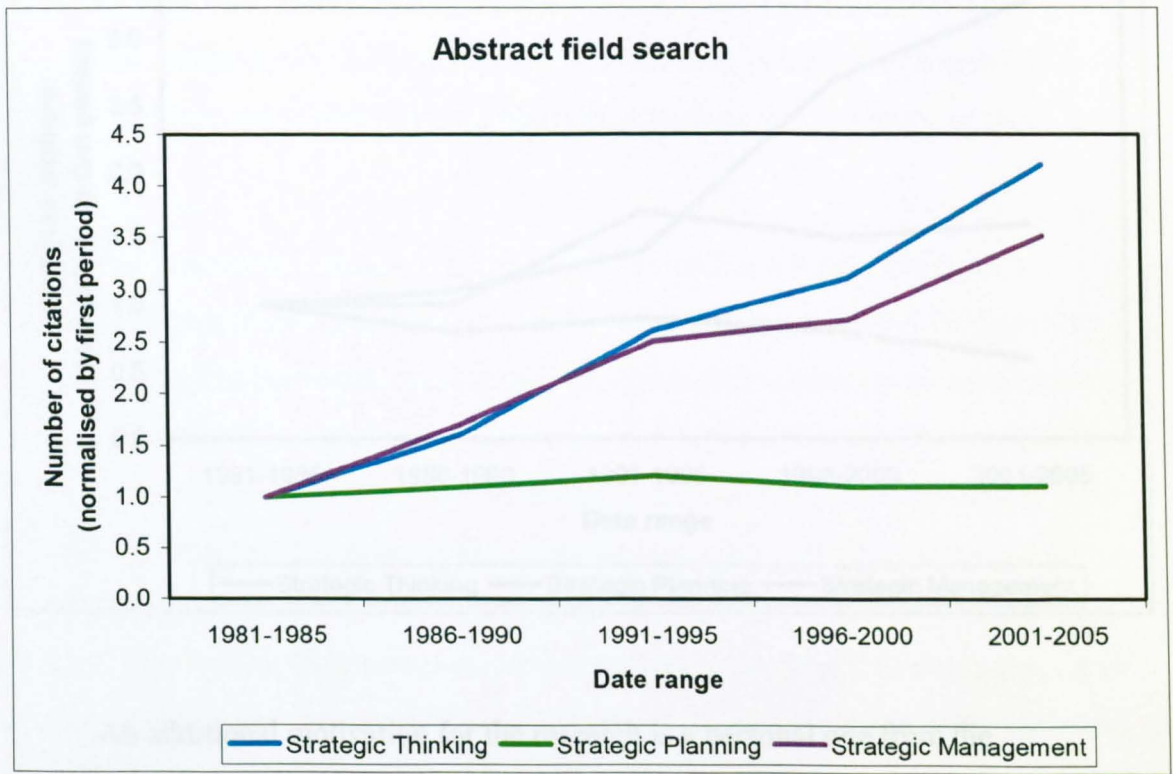
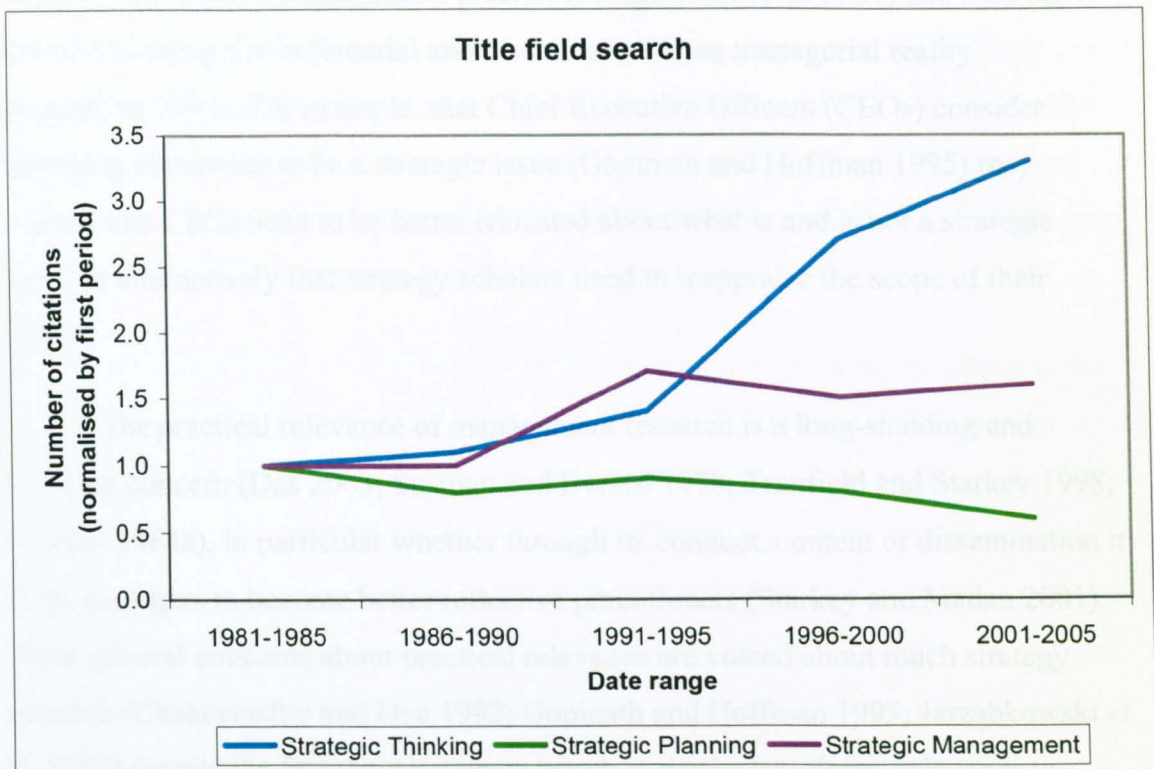


Figure 1-2 Normalised results for title field search



An additional motivation for the research is a personal one from the researcher's professional role as a management educator. Faced with an executive asking for guidance on how to become a better strategic thinker, the researcher felt there was little in the literature that offered robust but practical advice. Other strategy scholars might have empathy for the researcher's feelings that this was a somewhat unsatisfactory position and the associated embarrassment (Huff 2001; Whittington 2003). The researcher therefore felt a very personal motivation to research strategic thinking, initially guided by the fundamental questions, "What is strategic thinking?" and "What guidance might a management educator offer to improve strategic thinking?"

To what extent a management educator should be able to offer such advice, and the nature of management education, are subject to continuing debate (Schoemaker 2008). What is clear is that while management research could be considered the intellectual study of managerial phenomena it also has a significant practical orientation towards improving managerial practice (Whitley 1984b). Hence,

management research should avoid purely “Pedantic Science” which has high rigour but little relevance to management practice (Hodgkinson et al. 2001) and runs the risk of becoming self-referential and disconnected from managerial reality (Siggelkow 2007). For example, that Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) consider managing operations to be a strategic issue (Gopinath and Hoffman 1995) may suggest that CEOs need to be better educated about what is and is not a strategic issue, or alternatively that strategy scholars need to reappraise the scope of their field.

The practical relevance of management research is a long-standing and enduring concern (Das 2003; Susman and Evered 1978; Tranfield and Starkey 1998; Whitley 1984a), in particular whether through its conduct, content or dissemination it helps managers to become better reflective practitioners (Starkey and Madan 2001). These general concerns about practical relevance are voiced about much strategy research (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992; Gopinath and Hoffman 1995; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007) despite the fact that strategy research in particular, claims relevance to practice (Bettis 1991; Bowman et al. 2002; Pettigrew et al. 2002). For example, early strategy scholars were interested in identifying and developing best practice in order to improve managerial effectiveness (Hoskisson et al. 1999) and it is suggested that an appropriate research agenda involves helping organisations and individuals to take action to achieve desired outcomes (Huff 1997). One reason cited for a perceived lack of relevance in managerial research is an inherent difficulty in bridging managerial and academic worlds (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) and translating between the two (Shapiro et al. 2007). The nature and extent of any bridge and the bridging process is a matter of ongoing debate (Walsh et al. 2007). As the research developed this metaphor of bridging between the academic and managerial, the conceptual and empirical worlds became a significant influence and an orientating theme.

As a consequence of its applied nature, management research that attempts to bridge the conceptual and empirical worlds has to meet the double challenges of academic rigour and managerial relevance (Pettigrew 2001; Starkey and Madan 2001; Tranfield 2002a) and be both theory-sensitive and practice-led, thus

contributing to both theory and practice (Tranfield and Starkey 1998). Hence, “Pragmatic Science” is called for that has both high methodological and theoretical rigour but is also relevant in its application to managerial practice (Hodgkinson et al. 2001) with direct knowledge and conceptual knowledge complementing each other (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). This is achieved in this research by the development of “conceptual handles” (Huxham and Beech 2003) that have meaning for practitioners but that are also grounded in relevant theoretical concepts.

The emphasis on relevance to practice is consistent with the influence of the strategy-as-practice perspective (Jarzabkowski 2004; Whittington 1996) on this research. The research takes a view that strategic thinking is an everyday activity and involves the everyday utilisation of knowledge (Denis et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). The knowledge that managers utilise is often carried around in their heads (Eisenhardt 1989b; Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) and may be essentially idiosyncratic and unstable (Allard-Poesi 2005). Consequently, the methods for generating data in this research are attempts to reflect that everyday, idiosyncratic knowledge that managers carry around in managers’ heads and utilise in strategic thinking.

Acknowledging that management research is an applied field of knowledge, having an orientation towards improving practice, does not necessarily imply the immediate application of research findings or the immediate solution to managerial problems (Montgomery et al. 1989; Seth and Zinkhan 1991). When addressing specific problems of particular managers the emphasis should not only be on those specific problems but also on what those problems and solutions contribute towards a more fundamental understanding of managerial problems across a range of contexts (Weick 2001; Whitley 1984b). Management research must go beyond solving immediate managerial problems, and academics have a more valuable role in developing fundamental ideas and concepts that might shape managerial thinking and practice than immediate problem solving (Starkey and Madan 2001). Thus, while issues and relevant data may arise from the meanings and interpretations of practitioners, this research aims to develop appropriate concepts and more general frameworks (Huff 2000).



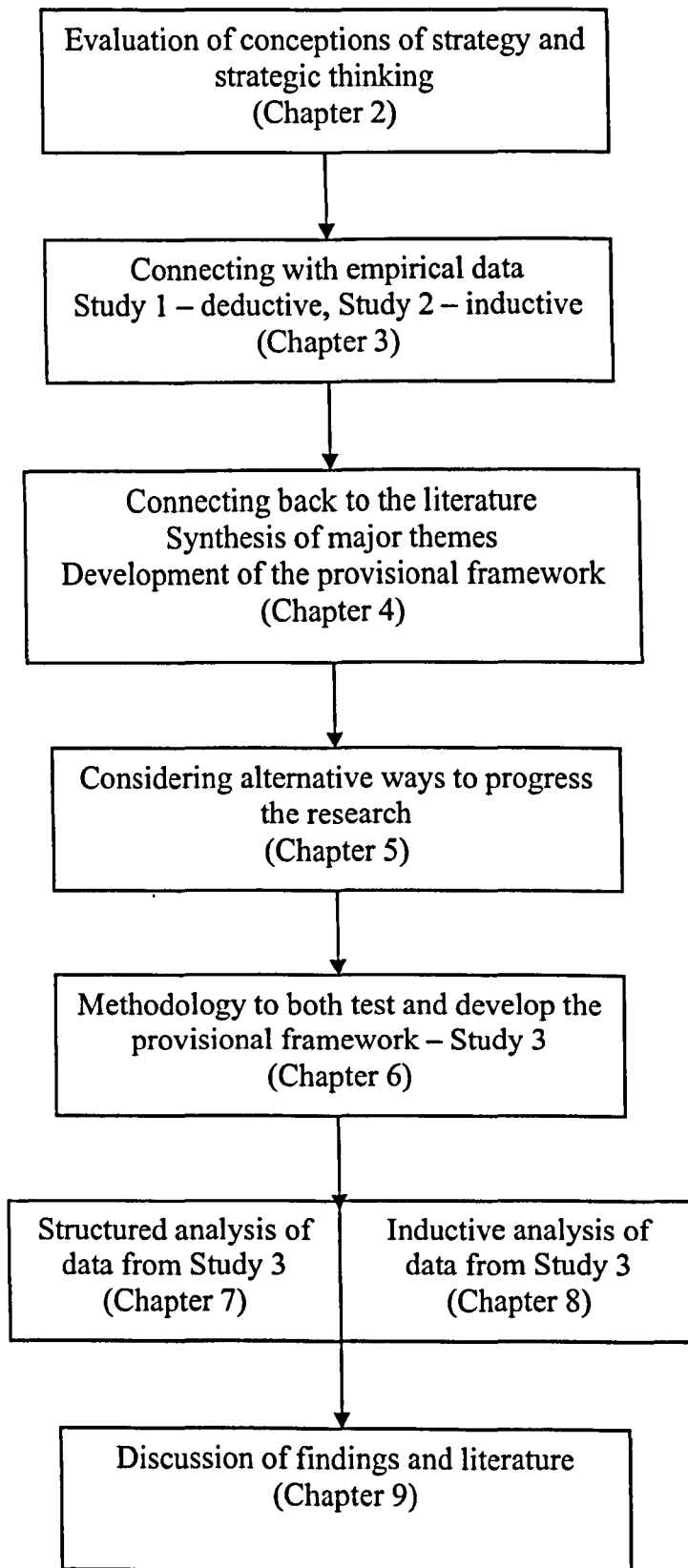
Indeed, since research, especially in well established and scientific fields of knowledge, is traditionally considered to involve the accumulation of knowledge regarding general laws, usually expressed as theories (Montgomery et al. 1989; Seth and Zinkhan 1991; Whitley 1984b), it is reasonable to expect this research to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge regarding strategic thinking. Producing knowledge in a cumulative way typically involves building on prior work (Camerer 1985; Hambrick 2004) which usually involves replicating or extending a previous study or conducting research to close a gap in the literature (Hambrick 2004; Tranfield et al. 2003). While this research does not replicate or extend a previous study it does identify a weakness in the literature and produces cumulative knowledge with respect to strategic thinking by grounding conceptual handles in relevant literature.

Given that the research aimed to both reflect practice and be grounded in theoretical concepts, a fundamental decision at the start of the research was whether to begin with the academic literature or to begin by studying practice. A major influence on this decision was the suggestion that all research begins with some degree of preunderstanding of a topic (Gummeson 2000) that guides decisions about what, where, when, whom and how to research. Preunderstanding is a result of both direct personal experience and indirect conceptual knowledge. Thus, one aspect of that preunderstanding is the nature of the concepts in the theoretical description of the topic. In research with an empirical dimension, concepts provide a connection between theoretical description and empirical data. A second major influence on the decision of where to begin was the idea that concepts can be classified as definitive or sensitising (Blumer 1940; 1954). Definitive concepts have clear and stable attributes, forming the basis for deductive research; sensitising concepts are vaguer, and are more suited to inductive research. As Blumer puts it “Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (1954:7). While vague concepts can be valuable in research because they facilitate imaginative thinking (Bateson 1972:83) their inappropriate employment can result in research that is neither efficient nor effective (Miles and Huberman 1994).

A first stage in this research then, was an evaluation of the theoretical concepts relevant to strategic thinking to assess to what extent they could be considered definitive in Blumer's (1940; 1954) terms. Strategic thinking is one component of the broader field of strategy and in its simplest interpretation strategic thinking could be considered as thinking about strategy. Thus, the nature of the concepts associated with strategy and strategic thinking were evaluated. In particular, to what extent those concepts have attributes that are clear and stable, and how well those concepts might provide a connection between theoretical description and empirical data.

The conclusion from this evaluation (chapter 2) was that neither strategy nor strategic thinking are sufficiently definitive concepts to form the basis for highly deductive research. However, given the substantial existing research regarding strategy and strategic thinking, and the preunderstanding of the researcher, highly inductive research would also be inappropriate. Thus, to progress the research, and commence the bridging process, two relatively small empirical studies were undertaken; one more deductive, one more inductive (chapter 3). A consideration of the findings from these two studies was used as a basis for reviewing the academic literature (chapter 4). The review of the academic literature produced a synthesis of three major themes in the literature. This synthesis is itself a notable contribution to the field. On the basis of the two small empirical studies and the synthesis of the academic literature a provisional framework for strategic thinking was proposed. Alternative ways to progress the research were considered (chapter 5) and a methodology designed for a larger study that involved a degree of both testing and further development of the provisional framework (chapter 6). The data from this larger study were analysed in a structured way (chapter 7) and also more inductively (chapter 8). The findings from the three empirical studies and relevant literature are discussed (chapter 9). An overview of these stages is shown in Figure 1-3.

**Figure 1-3 Overview of the research**



In summary, strategic thinking is an important and relevant research topic because it is considered a significant challenge for executives and because of the increasing use of the term in academic literature. The topic is of personal importance to the researcher because of the researcher's belief that they should be able to offer better guidance on how to improve strategic thinking. A number of ideas and orientations have influenced the research: the prominent rigour-relevance debate in management research; a conviction that the research should have clear managerial relevance whilst also grounded in relevant theoretical concepts; the metaphor of a bridge between the conceptual, with the notion of the development of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) as a bridging mechanism; the notions of preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000) and the suggestion of concepts as either definitive or sensitising (Blumer 1940; 1954); and the broad perspective of the strategy-as-practice (Whittington 1996) movement, viewing strategic thinking as an everyday activity, rather than a rare or esoteric activity. The research progressed through a number of phases (Figure 1-3), each of which had an orientation primarily towards either the academic literature or empirical data. The first of these phases involved an evaluation of the conceptualisations of strategy and strategic thinking in the academic literature and is discussed in chapter 2.

# 2 Evaluating the Conceptions of Strategy and Strategic Thinking

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the conceptions of strategy and strategic thinking are evaluated to assess to what extent they are definitive in Blumer's (1940; 1954) terms. This evaluation is not intended to produce a firm classification, since it could be argued that no concept in social science is strictly definitive (Hodgkinson 2007), but rather to guide a decision about whether the concepts form a robust basis for deductive research. The concept of strategy is considered first. To evaluate the concept of strategy this chapter considers the origins of the modern notion of strategy as applied to organisations and how that notion has changed with time, thus introducing a temporal instability to the concept. A presumption of stability is also questioned as a result of the increasingly diverse circumstances under which the strategy concept is invoked. It is suggested that while changes in the concept of strategy may reflect genuine efforts to improve the effectiveness of organisations, management fashions may have an influence on these changes as organisational actors attempt to demonstrate rationality or novelty to stakeholders. Consequently, it is concluded that the conceptions of strategy are not sufficiently definitive to justify highly deductive research into strategic thinking.

The concept of strategic thinking is considered next. To evaluate the concept of strategic thinking this chapter draws attention to how the concept of strategic thinking is sometimes used without an explicit definition or with a definition that is only implied, for example as thinking about strategy. It also considers how strategic thinking is related to strategic planning and identifies that there are different expressions of that relationship. More explicit conceptions of strategic thinking are as thinking with a particular structure or as thinking with particular characteristics. Thinking with particular characteristics is the most common way of conceptualising strategic thinking but because of the number and diversity of characteristics it is not clear how and why some characteristics should be included in a definition and others

excluded. Consequently, it is concluded that the conceptions of strategic thinking are not sufficiently definitive to justify highly deductive research into strategic thinking.

## **2.2 Evaluating the Conception of Strategy**

The modern concept of strategy, as applied to organisations, developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, although a notion of strategy has been recorded since ancient times (Bracker 1980). The essential characteristics of modern organisational strategy were derived from studies of large American corporations and described in the 1960s. These characteristics included: a long-term rather than short-term perspective; a separation of the strategic from the tactical, operational or administrative; an emphasis on rational processes; a mediating role between the organisation and its environment; an attention to rational allocation of resources; and an emphasis on profit as the primary goal of the organisation (Ansoff 1968; Chandler 1962).

However, since that time, the strategy concept has become less tightly defined and alternative conceptualisations have developed. For example, Bracker (1980) outlines the chronological development of the concept and considers some seventeen definitions of strategy as a basis for suggesting an alternative definition. Unfortunately, attempts to resolve confusion over definitions, by combining previous definitions, often adds to the confusion by adding yet another definition (Camerer 1985). To reduce confusion arising from competing definitions, Mintzberg (1987) proposes five complementary and interrelated definitions of strategy, and almost two decades after Bracker, strategy formation is conceived from as many as ten different perspectives (Mintzberg et al. 1998). As the study of strategy has proceeded, the number of definitions has increased rather than decreased. While this in itself is not necessarily problematic it does present the researcher with a range of alternative and possibly competing conceptions.

Multiple, complementary definitions of strategy may be necessary if strategy is conceived as multidimensional and contingent on circumstances (Chaffee 1985; Jenkins and Ambrosini 2002). Different definitions often reflect different research themes deployed to understand the strategy phenomenon. Some authors see such

diversity as hindering the development of the study of strategy, and have attempted to develop integrative frameworks (Chaffee 1985; Hart 1992; Rajagopalan and Spreitzer 1997). Others consider diversity produces a richer account and gives insights which are valuable to the development of the study of strategy (Mintzberg 1987; Thomas and Pruett 1993).

Conceptual diversity, or alternatively conceptual confusion, has not prevented the study of strategy, and fundamental areas of agreement amongst strategy researchers have been suggested (Chaffee 1985; Nag et al. 2007; Thomas and Pruett 1993). There appears to be a sufficiently widely accepted conceptualisation of strategy that has sufficient stability to permit it to be studied, discussed and taught, despite a lack of agreement over precise details. To borrow a metaphor from Mintzberg, Ahlstrand et. al. (1998), there is little doubt that the blind men are all feeling the same animal or at least members of the same species.

However, concerns about the assumption of a stable conceptualisation of strategy can be raised because of the different organisational circumstances under which the strategy concept is invoked. These circumstances may relate to whole organisations and include individual businesses (Porter 1980; 1985), organisations with a number of businesses (Porter 1987a), small firms (Ebben and Johnson 2005), international businesses (Yip 1989), and the public sector (Llewellyn and Tappin 2003). Additionally, strategy has lost its connotations of referring to a whole organisation (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001) and has been appropriated by a number of management disciplines (Barry and Elmes 1997; Lyles 1990). Indeed, the term has found increasing usage not just in management disciplines but in society more widely and is used as a basis for analysing actions in a wide range of contexts (Crow 1989; Knights and Morgan 1990).

An assumption of stability can also be questioned from a temporal perspective. For example, Mintzberg's (1994) critique of strategic planning describes a time when a planning approach was the way in which strategy was both practiced by organisations and conceptualised by researchers. Writing at the same time as Mintzberg, Prahalad and Hamel (1994) argue that both managers and academics doubt the relevance of traditional approaches to strategy, primarily as a result of a

number of significant environmental changes, and suggest a re-conceptualisation would have merit. Thus, the object of study, strategy, may change with time, both in terms of how strategy is practised by organisations and conceptualised by researchers.

Changes in the conceptualisation of strategy with time may reflect changing management fashion more than evidence of improvements in organisational effectiveness or attempts to improve organisational effectiveness. To maintain support from stakeholders, managers must engage in rhetoric about managing that has two characteristics (Abrahamson 1996; Barry and Elmes 1997). First, it must be credible by the appearance of rationality in pursuit of organisational goals. Second, it must be appealing by suggesting improvement over previous ways of managing, ideally with an associated characteristic of novelty. Thus, changing conceptualisations of strategy may reflect the changing expectations of what represents rational methods of pursuing organisational goals, and apparent progress in those methods, in the eyes of stakeholders.

However, rather than rigorous academic study, the main influence on these changing expectations appears to be the management advice industry (Collins 2004) reflecting management fads and fashions (Gibson and Tesone 2001). Indeed, the application of ecological theory to management fashion (Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999), and studies of the language used relating to organisational culture (Barley et al. 1988) suggest that the direction of influence may be from management practitioners to academics. The limited influence of academic research on management practice may arise because traditional academic research appears to lack relevance to management practitioners and is not disseminated in a way that is readily accessible (Gibbons et al. 2000; MacLean et al. 2002; Starkey and Madan 2001). The influence on management practice by academics may be hindered by an inherent difficulty in communicating between the world of management practice, which has a focus on the concrete, specific and immediate, and the world of management research, which is one of abstract concepts and generalisations to many settings (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a). However, it may become increasingly important that academics improve their influence on management practice as the



management knowledge industry changes and develops (Abrahamson and Eisenman 2001).

In the absence of academic rigour, various explanations have been suggested for the adoption of management fashions: rational effectiveness - because they work; psychodynamic reassurance - emotional reliance on a charismatic guru to assist anxieties of managerial life; status maintenance - providing a source of power and influence in organisations and higher reputation between organisations; dramaturgical performance - the persuasive rhetoric by management knowledge suppliers; external economic drivers - forces of economic necessity; institutional norms - societal and structural influences; and cultural norms - the cultural and historical embeddedness of knowledge (Clark and Salaman 1998; Collins 2003; Gibson and Tesone 2001; Gill and Whittle 1993; Grint 1997; Grint and Case 1998; Sturdy 2004).

While there may be various reasons for the adoption of management fashions, their impact on managerial effectiveness is unclear (Gibson and Tesone 2001; Gill and Whittle 1993). Management fashions can be beneficial to managers because they promise the ability to exert control in their managerial life, irrespective of whether this is reality or rhetoric (Watson 1994). However, management fashions might harm organisations in two ways: first because, despite reputational and other advantages, they may not positively affect economic performance; and second because they may replace incumbent practices that are superior (Abrahamson 1991). A study of popular management techniques (Staw and Epstein 2000) suggests that companies that adopt these techniques did not achieve superior economic performance but enjoyed a higher reputation and Chief Executive Officer pay was positively influenced. Even where innovations do not improve performance, a positive feedback process can be created in which adoptions by some firms creates increased pressure for other firms to adopt (Rosenkopf and Abrahamson 1999). In fact, computer models of administrative innovations suggest that cascades of adoption may occur even if the innovations are worthless (Strang and Macy 2001).

Thus, for this research, the adoption of a definitive conceptualisation of strategy is problematic for five reasons. First, there are conceptualisations with

different characteristics depending on which of a diverse range of organisational circumstances are considered. Second, the precision of conceptualisations has blurred as a range of management disciplines and wider society has adopted the term. If less precise conceptualisations of strategy are prevalent in organisations, a more precise one may miss important organisational phenomena, but a less precise one may contribute to further blurring of the concept. Third, there are alternative and changing conceptualisations depending on which point in time is considered. These may be attempts to improve organisational effectiveness and may be prompted by organisational dissatisfaction (Mintzberg 1994) or external factors (Prahalad and Hamel 1994). Fourth, any account given by a management practitioner may merely be an attempt at credible and appealing rhetoric. As Mezas and Starbuck (2003a) suggest, the use of a terminology by a manager is not necessarily evidence that they understand the concepts involved. Fifth, a given conceptualisation may be a transient one, reflecting a management fashion, which may last a shorter time than is required to complete the research. The lack of clarity over the concept of strategy has led to notable contributors to the field to ask the fundamental question “What is strategy?” (Porter 1996; Whittington 2001) and to attempts to recover and restate the fundamental features of strategy (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001).

### **2.2.1 Evaluating the Conception of Strategy as Practice**

A significant development, in what appears to be a continuing difficulty with defining strategy (Huff 2001), is the recent move to conceptualise strategy as a social practice, with an emphasis on the activities that people undertake when doing strategy (Whittington 1996). This conceptualisation has led to what has become termed the “strategy as practice” field. That a special edition of the *Journal of Management Studies*, and inaugural edition of *European Management Review*, were devoted to the topic indicate the significance of this movement. There are also established Strategy as Practice streams in both the Academy of Management and the British Academy of Management. Conceptualising strategy in this way adds two further topics to the existing strategy research agenda concerned with the relationships between strategy and organisational performance (Ketchen et al. 1996).

First, a concern with the social influences and effects of strategy, and second, how the effectiveness of a manager doing strategy might be improved (Whittington 2004).

However, it is not immediately apparent which activities constitute doing strategy, under what circumstances, and the details of those activities, particularly at the micro level of managerial activity (Johnson et al. 2003). Even what constitutes micro in this context is not clear (Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). Doing strategy might involve various activities, including engaging in organisational routines, attending meetings, preparing reports, making presentations, attending away-days, gathering data, analysing data and completing forms; although these visible behaviours might only be the manifestation of practice rather than practice itself (Chia 2004). Further, doing strategy may involve different types of activities in different parts of an organisation. For example, more inductive activities at the periphery of the organisation, i.e. subsidiaries or business units, and more deductive activities at the centre, i.e. corporate headquarters (Regnér 2003). If strategy is conceptualised as a social practice occurring in an organisational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) then the scope of research is widened to include activities occurring within an organisation, outside an organisation, and across organisational boundaries. If, as Whittington (2006:621) suggests, doing strategy may involve activities as diverse as “formal board meetings” and “informal conversations”, then the strategy researcher is presented with a significant challenge in identifying the relevant activities on which to focus.

Similarly, when adopting a strategy as practice conceptualisation, what is not immediately apparent is who is, or is not, involved in doing strategy. For example, in a study of strategy practices in three UK universities, Jarzabkowski (2003) justifies a focus on the top management team by arguing that they are key because of hierarchy, power and control of resources, but acknowledges that they are not the only strategic actors. Ackermann and Eden (2005), writing on the practice of making strategy, are even more committed by arguing that strategy without commitment from the “power-brokers” is unlikely to have any impact, although they then go on to argue for increased participation in order to create increased ownership and so increased probability of strategy delivery (Eden and Ackermann 1998). Thus, within a single

organisation, strategic actors may include not only the senior management team but also middle managers, strategic planners and other members of the organisation (Balogun et al. 2003; Whittington 2006). Taking the organisational field perspective, strategic actors can be potentially drawn from that organisational field. By definition, the organisational field will contain not just a single organisation but also similar organisations, consultancy firms, academic institutions, financial institutions, management media, management gurus, state institutions and pressure groups (Hendry 2000; Whittington et al. 2003). Conceptualising strategy as a social practice, rather than a phenomenon associated with a single organisation, increases the potential number of strategic actors and hence presents a significant challenge in identifying the relevant actors on which to focus.

In addition, how the micro level activities of doing strategy influence more macro level phenomena, both organisational and supra-organisational, and how these macro level phenomena are interpreted or constructed at the individual level are significant research questions (Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). Of particular interest is the relationship between managerial activities and strategic outcomes, since, while numerous factors may influence organisational and institutional practices, it is reasonable to suggest that those activities that produce effective strategic outcomes are likely to exert influence that is more significant. However, while managers may be involved in activities, the extent to which those activities impact on strategic outcomes, what those outcomes are, and how that influence comes about, has been little researched (Johnson et al. 2003). This represents a significant research challenge, since the link between managerial activities and organisational level outcomes will be obscured by environmental, intermediating and moderating factors, not least of which are rationalisation and dubious attribution of success and failure by managers (Knights and Morgan 1990; Wagner and Gooding 1997). Further, while some outcomes may be intended, in the sense that pursuit of these outcomes acts as a guide to managerial activity, other outcomes may be emergent, in the sense that they are the unanticipated consequences of managerial activity. Indeed, the relationships between managerial intentions, managerial activities and organisational outcomes may be so complex as to be essentially unknowable in the sense of establishing patterns of cause and effect (Stacey 1993; 1995). Thus, while the study of managers

doing strategy is of greater value if the detail of such study is understood in its wider context (Balogun et al. 2003; Knights 1992) how these activities relate to that wider context has been little researched and is poorly understood.

Thus, whilst conceptualising strategy as a social practice promises a valuable contribution to the study of strategy, for example by enabling the integration of alternative perspectives on strategic decision making (Hendry 2000) or circumventing the well established process – content divide in the subject (Johnson et al. 2003; Ketchen et al. 1996; Whittington 2007) it also presents three significant research challenges. First, if activities as diverse as “formal board meetings” and “informal conversations” (Whittington 2006:621), and numerous other activities, across an organisational field, constitute doing strategy, then the researcher is faced with difficult decisions regarding which activities to study, and may finish up studying management in some general sense rather than strategy in particular. Second, if those involved in doing strategy (strategists, strategy practitioners or strategic actors depending on the terminology used) may be drawn from various parts of an organisation, and from the wider organisational field, then the researcher is faced with difficult decisions regarding whom to study other than all organization actors, which is clearly impractical. Presented with the impossibility of studying every activity performed by every member of an organisational field, the researcher might be guided by prioritising those that are associated with strategic outcomes. This leads to the third challenge. The difficulty in establishing an association between the activities of doing strategy and strategic outcomes, which themselves are not clearly defined. It may be possible for strategic actors to engage in the activities of doing strategy and produce no outcomes or outcomes that are not strategic, unless of course such activities are defined as those that produce strategic outcomes. However, defining the activities of doing strategy in this way risks a circular definition between strategic outcomes and the activities of doing strategy by defining one in terms of the other. Associations that are established might be, to some extent, an artefact of choices made by the researcher about which people and activities to study. In choosing which activities to study, a researcher has already presumed, to some extent, which activities will influence strategic outcomes. Clearly, a researcher will not find associations between strategic outcomes and those activities they chose

not to study. Although, there is to some extent a general acceptance that, in terms of influencing strategic outcomes, some organisational actors are more significant than others (for example the Chief Executive), and some activities are more significant than others (for example a declared change in organisational strategy), there are still significant research challenges. In essence, the challenges are: who do I study; doing what activities; and how do I know which are of strategic significance?

A concept that might provide a framework for answering these research challenges is that of the strategic or strategising episode. A strategic episode has been taken to mean a reflexive opportunity during which routine processes and structures are suspended, for example during a strategy workshop (Hendry and Seidl 2003). Such episodes are proposed to have a structure of three phases. The first phase is initiation, during which the established hierarchy and normal communication routines are suspended. Second, conduct of the episode, during which a sequence of communications is undertaken and structured in some non-typical way. The final phase is termination, determined by the achievement of a goal or by time-limitation, at which point normal routines are reinstated. Clearly, this assumes that there are essentially two types of organisational routines. The strategic routines present in strategic episodes, which involve questioning and reflecting on organisational routines, are labelled as reflexive. The ongoing operational routines by which the continuity of the organisation is maintained are labelled as non-reflexive. While this concept of a strategic episode may be a useful framework for the study of circumscribed events, such as workshops, its wider application to the study of strategy is problematic. First, it is not clear what distinguishes a strategic episode from a different type of episode. For example, it is not clear what would categorise some “weekly pub lunches.” (Hendry and Seidl 2003:188) as strategic episodes and others as not. Second, the dichotomy between operational routines and strategic routines may be unrealistic, particularly empirically, and the classification problematic. A monthly management meeting may contain communications undertaken in a non-typical way (tabling reports, making presentations, etc) and contain communications that are non-reflexive (e.g. how much have we manufactured this month?) and reflexive (e.g. do we have the correct type of manufacturing equipment?). Hence, it would not be clear whether to classify the

meeting as part of the operational management of the organisation or a strategic episode. Third, the dichotomy between operational routines and strategic routines potentially underestimates the role that operational routines play in strategy (Eden and Ackermann 2000).

An alternative conceptualisation of a strategic episode is suggested by Maitlis and Lawrence (2003) who argue that the mobilisation of organisational politics and discourse, towards the production of a specific strategic object, signify a strategic episode. Four distinct, but interrelated, and not necessarily sequential, stages are proposed: engaging with and taking positions on the issue; defining the concept; assigning responsibility and accountability; and constructing the strategic object. Although the authors develop their concept of a strategic episode from a longitudinal field study of a British symphony orchestra, their criteria for circumscribing a strategic episode are not clear. One of these criteria relates to what counts as a strategic object. While an artistic strategy for the orchestra is classed a strategic object, a strategic framework and a view of “where the Orchestra should be in the medium term” (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003:120) are not; what is not clear is by what criteria the distinction is made. A second criterion relates to identifying when one strategic episode ends and another one begins. In their paper, the strategic episode concerns the development of an artistic strategy over a period of approximately two years. However, what is not clear is which, if any, of the away-days and meetings over that period could also be classified as strategic episodes, and again, by what criteria the distinction is made.

Thus, while the concept of a strategic episode may provide a useful focus for studying the relationships between those doing strategy, the activities they undertake and strategic outcomes, the empirical application of the concept may prove problematic. In particular, there are difficulties in circumscribing a strategic episode and developing criteria to make distinctions between strategic episodes and other phenomena. The extent of this difficulty is perhaps illustrated by the application of the concept of an episode by Eden and Huxham (2001) in their research into organisational collaboration. Despite having a relatively specific focus for their research and a more precise definition of an episode than is the case for strategic

episodes, they find that circumscribing an episode is still difficult. The situation is perhaps analogous to organisational decision making where, what appears to be a relatively straightforward concept, a decision, is, after three decades of research, still contested (Cohen et al. 1972; Hendry 2000; Langley et al. 1995; Laroche 1995). Hence, the concept of a strategic episode is perhaps more appropriate where there is an explicit consideration of an issue and less appropriate where studying strategy based on habitual routines and templates (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Quinn 1978; Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004).

In summary, for this research, the classification of strategy as a definitive concept would appear to be inappropriate since it lacks the necessary clarity, stability and connection to empirical data. The attributes associated with the strategy concept differ with different parts of an organisation and with different types of organisations. Attributes also change with time, either because of attempts to improve organisational effectiveness or management fashion. The connection to empirical data is also uncertain because of the potential obfuscating role of managerial rhetoric and the risk of imposing a more precise definition of the concept than is prevalent in organisations, so called “procrustean science” (Gummeson 2000). More recent developments in a conceptualisation of strategy as practice are, as yet, indefinite about what activities constitutes doing strategy, who is involved in doing strategy, the relationship to strategic outcomes, and the precise nature of relevant empirical data. That is not to say that the conceptualisation of strategy as practice is not a valuable or potentially fruitful one rather that for the specific purposes of this research, at this stage, it does not appear to have great utility. However, these conclusions refer to the topic of strategy and focusing more narrowly on strategic thinking may provide concepts that are more definitive.

## **2.3 Evaluating the Conception of Strategic Thinking**

Certainly, for some authors the term ‘strategic thinking’ is, apparently unproblematic and they do not define the term, presumably assuming the reader has sufficient understanding. For example the concept of strategic thinking has been invoked, without any definition, in relation to: the application of force-field analysis



for problem solving (Ajimal 1985); as an essential way to improve business competitiveness (Altier 1991); recommending a Business and Information Analysis Function (Millett and Leppanen 1991); applying decision modelling techniques (Reagan-Circincione et al. 1991); a two year project to make more effective use of information systems (Finlay and Marples 1998); external drivers of change (Aggarwal 1999); studying the interpretation of industry recipes (Ostergren and Huemer 1999); recommending quantitative guidelines to simplify management practice (West and Wolek 1999); and drawing conclusions about the skills needs of managers (Watson and McCracken 2002).

Other authors imply what the term strategic thinking means rather than providing an explicit definition. In some instances, this is by stating what strategic thinking is not rather than what it is. While defining a concept in terms of what it is not is an improvement over not defining it at all, it is not as useful as defining a concept as what it is. For example strategic thinking is not: business planning (Aggarwal 1999); strategic planning (Harari 1995); operational thinking (Bates and Dillard Jr 1993); mechanistic (Howard 1989); nor routine thinking (Schoemaker 1995). In other instances, the implication appears to be that strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, usually associated with a particular approach to strategy. For example: an approach to strategy based on analysis, planning and implementation (Mason 1986); finding areas for business growth by understanding customers, markets and competitors (Millett 1988); coming up with long-term objectives by a three stage process involving thinking about mission, analysis and direction (Morissey 1990); applying Sun Tzu's ideas of military strategy to contemporary business (Chen 1994; Low and Tan 1995); thinking about purpose, uniqueness and values (Harari 1995); thinking about scenarios (Schoemaker 1995); in applying strategic management tools to international development (Goldsmith 1996); or creating the future (Franklin 2001).

Strategic thinking is also described in terms of its relationship to strategic planning, but this relationship is open to different interpretations (Heracleous 1998; Wilson 1994; 1998). In one expression of the relationship, strategic planning is of primary importance, and the role of strategic thinking is to inform and improve a

strategic planning process (Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Steiner et al. 1983; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991). In a different expression of the relationship, strategic thinking is of primary importance (Bonn 2001) and is supported by strategic planning, either by providing data for strategic thinking (Mintzberg 1994) or by providing the opportunities for strategic thinking (Porter 1987b). More recent interpretations of the relationship propose a balanced reciprocal relationship between strategic planning and strategic thinking, in which both contribute to strategic management (Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Liedtka 1998a; O'Shannassy 2003).

A more explicit conceptualisation of strategic thinking is presented where strategic thinking is considered to be thinking with a particular structure. Weber (1984) discusses strategic thinking in relation to uncertainty about objectives and actions to meet those objectives. He presents a structure for thinking involving assessment of the situation, analysis of the problem and synthesis of considerations about how to solve the problem. Eden (1990) describes a strategic options development and analysis project that is structured in terms of thinking about issues, goals, and actions. Klayman and Schoemaker (1993) propose strategic thinking as a way of thinking about the future that involves a knowledge base, a problem representation, and linkages between these two.

The most common way of conceptualising strategic thinking in the literature is as thinking that has particular characteristics. For example, strategic thinking has been associated with characteristics that could be broadly classified creative (Howard 1989; Mintzberg 1994) or analytical (O'Shannassy 2003; Stumpf 1989) and with both analytical and creative characteristics (O'Shannassy 2003; Porter 1987b; Weber 1984). However, a wide and diverse range of characteristics have been associated with strategic thinking and while some characteristics, for example creativity, are frequently cited they are not universally so. A summary of characteristics associated with strategic thinking and citing authors is shown in Table 2-1.

**Table 2-1 Characteristics of strategic thinking and citing authors**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Authors citing the characteristic</b>	<b>Number publications citing the characteristic</b>
1 Creative	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Bonn 2001; 2005; Goldsmith 1996; Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Howard 1989; Liedtka 1998a; Mintzberg 1994; O'Shannassy 2003; Porter 1987b; Weber 1984)	12
2 Vision of the future	(Bonn 2001; 2005; Howard 1989; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Mintzberg 1994; Stumpf 1989)	7
3 Holistic	(Bonn 2001; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Mintzberg 1994; Singer 1996; 1997; Steiner et al. 1983)	7
4 Complex or systems thinking	(Bonn 2001; 2005; Dickson et al. 2001; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Reagan-Circincione et al. 1991; Stumpf 1989)	7
5 Rational and analytical	(Linkow 1999; O'Shannassy 2003; Porter 1987b; Stumpf 1989; Weber 1984)	5
6 Longer time perspective	(Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Howard 1989; Reagan-Circincione et al. 1991; Steiner et al. 1983; Stumpf 1989)	5
7 Questioning taken for granted assumptions	(Bonn 2001; Eden 1990; Heracleous 1998; Howard 1989; Linkow 1999)	5
8 Divergent	(Goldsmith 1996; Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; O'Shannassy 2003)	4
9 Synthetic	(Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Mintzberg 1994; O'Shannassy 2003)	4
10 Broader context	(Bonn 2001; Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Goldsmith 1996)	3
11 Intuitive	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Graetz 2002; Mintzberg 1994)	3
12 Connecting past, present and future	(Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; O'Shannassy 2003)	3
13 Problem solving	(Bonn 2005; O'Shannassy 2003; Stumpf 1989)	3
14 Intent focussed	(Liedtka 1998a; Steiner et al. 1983)	2

15 Abstract or conceptual	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Stumpf 1989)	2
16 Tolerant of risk or ambiguity	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Stumpf 1989)	2
17 Curious, experimental or exploratory	(Howard 1989; Liedtka 1998a)	2
18 Active in shaping circumstances	(Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983)	1
19 Focusing on most significant forces	(Steiner et al. 1983)	1
20 Involving values	(Linkow 1999)	1

Thus, there is no agreed or definitive concept of strategic thinking in the literature (Bonn 2001; Heracleous 1998; O'Shannassy 2003) and strategic thinking is variously considered to be an individual (Crouch 1998; Crouch and Basch 1997; Dickson et al. 2001; Pellegrino and Carbo 2001; Stumpf 1989) and collective (Bonn 2001; 2005; O'Shannassy 2003) phenomenon, undertaken by either executives (Porter 1987b) or organisational members from multiple levels (Harari 1995; Liedtka 1998a; O'Shannassy 2003).

Hence, using the literature concerning strategic thinking as a basis to progress the research is problematic. The literature that offers no definition or implies a definition by describing an approach to strategy is of little use in conducting deductive research. To adopt a definition of strategic thinking implied by a particular approach to strategy requires acceptance of that approach, and as discussed above the conceptualisation of strategy is itself problematic. One approach to overcoming the lack of an agreed or definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking would be to give precedence to certain literature based on justified criteria. One criterion for precedence might be how widely cited the literature is by academic sources, essentially privileging academic conceptualisations. However, the concepts in published academic literature may be highly abstract, in contrast to the concrete

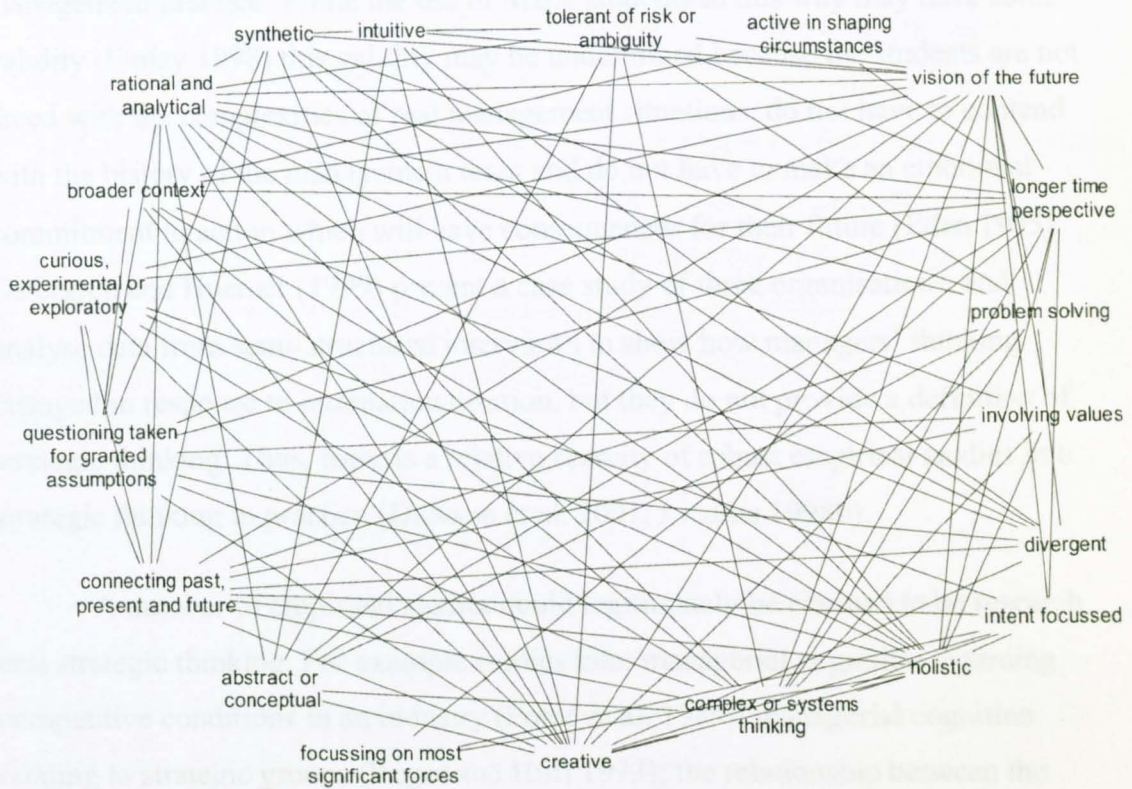
world which is to be studied (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) and hence it may be difficult to connect theory to empirical data. Additionally, theory may be unreasonably favoured over data with the risk of procrustean science (Gummesson 2000). Alternatively, literature from practitioner-oriented journals might be given precedence on the basis that it would connect better to the world of practice, essentially privileging practitioner conceptualisations. However, the research methodologies employed in practitioner-oriented literature are rarely fully described and so may not be robust, which calls into question the reliability and validity of what is published. A third criterion might be give precedence to the most recent literature as this indicates the most up-to-date thinking on the subject. However, this may reflect a transient management fashion and the ideas may not stand the test of time. A final criterion might be how frequently a particular conceptualisation occurs in the literature, indicating its influence. The most frequent conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature is as a way of thinking with certain characteristics and hence warrants further consideration.

Giving precedence to literature that defines strategic thinking in terms of thinking with particular characteristics produces a tighter conceptualisation, but not one that could be described as definitive in Blumer's (1940; 1954) terms. Table 2-1 contains some twenty characteristics, each cited by differing numbers of authors, from which a definition of strategic thinking could be derived. There are over one million possible combinations of these characteristics. What is not evident is on what basis to include or exclude specific characteristics from a definition of strategic thinking. An instinctive response to include the most frequently cited characteristics still requires a justification of how frequently a characteristic needs to be cited in order to be included. An indication of the difficulty in justifying certain characteristics as central to strategic thinking is provided by Figure 2-1. In this figure lines are drawn between each characteristic and the other characteristics with which it is associated in the publications summarised in Table 2-1. Drawing connections in this way would suggest whether certain characteristics were most commonly associated with other characteristics. A Decision Explorer cluster analysis of this data produces the result of a single cluster. Additionally, whilst it may intuitively appear that some characteristics are more "central", that is more often linked to other

characteristics, there is no clear demarcation between “central” and “non-central” characteristics. Thus, on this basis it is difficult to suggest which characteristics are central to strategic thinking.

**Figure 2-1 Mapping of characteristics of strategic thinking from Table**

2-1



Perhaps more importantly, using characteristics to define strategic thinking does not necessarily make the concept more definitive. Labels attached to characteristics such as creative, synthetic, holistic or intuitive do not represent definitive concepts themselves. Thus, in using these labels, the indefinite concept of strategic thinking is defined in terms of a number of other indefinite concepts. Further, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the same label for a characteristic, used by different authors, has the same meaning in empirical terms because there is a doubtful connection to empirical data.

This doubtful connection to empirical data is illustrated by the deficiencies in published empirical research into strategic thinking in practice. For example, Linkow

(1999) proposes a set of characteristics for strategic thinking from a study of twenty gifted strategic thinkers, but provides few methodological details. Attempts to obtain further details by contacting the author proved unsuccessful. Crouch and Basch (1997) apply content analysis to the journals of managers to identify what the managers thought about when thinking about strategic purpose, but the managers were MBA students involved in a management simulation rather than involved in management practice. While the use of MBA students in this way may have some validity (Finlay 1998) this validity may be undermined because the students are not faced with the complexities of real management situations, do not have to contend with the history of the management team and do not have to make an emotional commitment to action which will have consequences for their future (Eden 1995). Ostergren and Huemer (1999) present a case study of three organisations, and analyse data from semi-structured interviews to show how managers' thinking changed in response to internationalisation, but they do not provide a definition of strategic thinking. Thus, there is a relative scarcity of robust empirical studies into strategic thinking in practice (Dickson et al. 2001; Liedtka 1998b).

A number of empirical studies could legitimately be claimed to be research into strategic thinking. For example studies into: managerial cognition regarding competitive conditions in an industry (Porac et al. 1989); managerial cognition relating to strategic groups (Reger and Huff 1993); the relationship between the cognitive complexity of Chief Executive Officers and the scope of the organisation (Calori et al. 1994); the relationship between managerial cognition and organisational performance (Jenkins and Johnson 1997); and changes in cognition in relation to environmental changes (Hodgkinson 1997) would all intuitively appear to concern strategic thinking. However, to accept these studies as research into strategic thinking would require the adoption of a conceptualisation of strategy, or strategic thinking that is quite specific. As discussed previously, adopting a conceptualisation of strategy may be problematic. For example, the study of Porac et al (1989) was specifically about cognition in relation to competitive conditions and a conceptualisation of strategy as competitive might not be relevant under circumstances of collaboration. Hence, the significant research into managerial and

organisational cognition is of questionable value in helping to develop a definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking for the purpose of this research.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature relating to strategic thinking does not provide a definitive conceptualisation that has clear and stable attributes, or that connects well to empirical data. Clearly, the literature that does not provide or only implies a definition is unsuitable as a basis for deductive research. The literature relating to managerial cognition is typically related to particular aspects of strategy, for example strategic groups or competition conditions. Those conceptions of strategic thinking that involve thinking with a particular structure or thinking with particular characteristics show a degree of diversity which makes it difficult to justify the choice of one set of literature over another. Similarly, the literature relating to strategy does not provide a definitive conceptualisation because: the attributes associated with the strategy concept differ with different parts of an organisation and with different types of organisations; attributes also change with time, either because of attempts to improve organisational effectiveness or management fashion; the connection to empirical data is also uncertain because of the potential obfuscating role of managerial rhetoric and the risk of imposing a more precise definition of the concept than is prevalent in organisations; and more recent developments in a conceptualisation of strategy as practice are, as yet, indefinite about what activities constitutes doing strategy, who is involved in doing strategy, the relationship to strategic outcomes, and the precise nature of relevant empirical data. Hence it is not possible to produce a more definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking by reference to conceptualisations of strategy. Consequently, a highly deductive approach to research into strategic thinking would be inappropriate since a definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking is not available.



# 3 Connecting with empirical data

## 3.1 Introduction

Making progress in this research requires connecting the abstract world of theory and the concrete world of empirical data, and hence some starting point, either with the literature, with empirical data or some point between the two. A justified starting point could be the extant literature, since there is an existing body of academic knowledge on strategic thinking, and this research should relate to that existing knowledge in some way. This approach would be essentially deductive (Camerer 1985) and connect to relevant empirical data by employing constructs derived from concepts in the extant literature. However, in chapter 2 it was concluded that it would be inappropriate to classify either strategy or strategic thinking as definitive concepts suitable for highly deductive research. A highly deductive approach also runs the risk of procrustean science (Gummesson 2000).

Alternatively, an inductive approach (Eisenhardt 1989a) could be taken that would start from empirical data and generate constructs from that data, with the ultimate aim of relating these constructs to concepts in the extant literature in some way. Chapter 2 demonstrated that there is a substantial and well established literature concerning both strategy and strategic thinking. Hence, this approach is likely to be inefficient, since it would disregard the insights of previous research, and may result in constructs that do not add value since they are well-known, or that do not relate well to concepts in existing literature (Miles and Huberman 1994). While relating to extant concepts is not essential for inductive research, doing so provides greater potential for external validity and generalisability (Eisenhardt 1989a). Hence, at this stage of the research there was no decisive justification for either a highly deductive or a highly inductive approach. However, connecting theory and data can involve both deductive processes driven by theoretical concepts, and inductive processes driven by empirical data, together with a degree of inspiration driven by creativity and insight (Langley 1999).

Thus, to progress the research two relatively small scale exploratory studies were undertaken, one employing deductive processes and the other employing

inductive processes. In Study 1 four constructs were derived from the characteristics in the literature that are commonly associated with strategic thinking. These constructs were used to analyse the transcripts of interviews with two executives, one in the private sector and one in the public sector. Study 1 was essentially deductive. Study 2 was more inductive and started with a simple conceptualisation of strategic thinking as thinking about strategy. The six members of the senior management team of a UK National Health Service (NHS) Primary Care Trust (PCT) were interviewed about what they considered to be the most strategic issue facing the Trust. Data about what they had been thinking about this most strategic issue was generated using a causal mapping technique. The data was analysed in two ways. First, to generate reasons why an issue was considered to be the most strategic and second, to generate themes that were associated with thinking about that most strategic issue. An evaluation and synthesis of the findings of these two exploratory studies resulted in the development of a tentative framework for strategic thinking comprised of goals, issues and actions, and their interrelationships.

### **3.2 Constructs from the literature: Study 1**

Study 1 was essentially deductive and used constructs derived from the literature on strategic thinking. The guiding research question behind Study 1 was “To what extent can constructs derived from the literature be used to suggest evidence of strategic thinking in empirical data?” In this research strategic thinking is viewed as an everyday activity involving the utilisation of everyday knowledge that managers carry around in their heads. The most common way of defining strategic thinking in the literature is as a way of thinking with particular characteristics and so a limited number of tentative constructs were derived from the literature relating to those characteristics. As this was an exploratory study by nature, a set of constructs to define strategic thinking fully was not necessary. Rather, a limited but indicative set of constructs would be sufficient. Remembering that the purpose of these constructs is to provide a conceptual bridge between the existing body of knowledge and empirical data, two principles were employed in deriving these constructs from the literature. First, they should relate to existing literature. This does not mean that they should map directly onto that literature but the connections should be explicit,

that is, it should be clear which constructs relates to which characteristic(s). Second, they should be an improvement over the characteristics in the literature in terms of identifying relevant empirical data, that is, the researcher could see more easily how to operationalise the characteristic.

Certain characteristics were considered better than others for this purpose. In particular the characteristic most often mentioned in the literature is strategic thinking as creative thinking and this characteristic was not included in the constructs for Study 1 because creativity itself is a complex concept. The literature concerning creativity in an organisational setting addresses different levels of analysis, units of analysis and has a distinct focus on either creative outputs or creative process (Drazin et al. 1999). Thus, this characteristic was omitted because its complex nature would have made the identification of relevant empirical data problematic. Bearing the principles in mind, the following tentative constructs were derived from the characteristics in Table 2-1 for use in the study

- **Consequences beyond the immediate.** This relates to the characteristics in the literature “2 Vision of the future” and “6 Longer time perspective”. These are two of the characteristics mentioned most often in the literature. Both of these characteristics were considered to contain terms that indicate a relatively indefinite time dimension. The term “future” in “2 Vision of the future” is imprecise with respect to how far into the future. The term “Longer” in “6 Longer time perspective” is imprecise with respect to how much longer is the time perspective. Using the construct “Consequences beyond the immediate” improves the identification of empirical data because the time dimension in “Consequences beyond the immediate” is more definite. That is, “immediate” is a more absolute term than either “future” or “Longer”.
- **Consideration of interrelationships.** This relates to the characteristics in literature “3 Holistic” and “4 Complex or systems thinking”. These two characteristics themselves are defined in terms of a number of characteristics (Senge 1993). Hence, they provide little or no improvement over the concept of strategic thinking itself in identifying relevant empirical data. However,

both “Holistic” and “Complex or systems thinking” involve thinking that considers interrelationships and “Consideration of interrelationships” relates to this fundamental aspect of these characteristics. No attempt is made to distinguish between different types of interrelationships, for example causal or temporal. Emphasising this single fundamental aspect of these characteristics provides an improvement in identifying relevant empirical data.

- **Purposeful in organisational terms.** This relates to the characteristics in the literature “13 Problem solving” and “14 Intent focussed”. These two characteristics are mentioned less often than some in the literature, but that strategic thinking is thinking with some purpose rather than “mindwandering” (Antrobus et al. 1970) would appear to be fundamental. Indeed, this may be so fundamental that the majority of the literature implicitly presumes the purposeful nature of strategic thinking. To aid identification of empirical data relevant to an organisational setting the term “organisational” was added.
- **Consideration of boundaries.** This relates to the characteristic in the literature “10 Broader context”. The notion of a broader context implies a narrower context and hence a probable boundary between the two. The term “Broader” in “10 Broader context” was considered to be a relatively imprecise term with respect to what extent of breadth counted as “Broader”. Identification relevant empirical data is improved because “boundaries” has a less pronounced comparative dimension than “broader”.

Clearly, combining and operationalising the characteristics in this way does to some extent reduce their validity with respect to the original literature from which they were derived. This is considered reasonable given the exploratory nature of Study 1.

### 3.2.1 Methodology

A fundamental assumption in this study is that a phenomenon, labelled strategic thinking, exists beyond the specific conditions pertaining at a particular

point in time, in a particular context, with a particular individual. Consequently, strategic thinking has attributes that are to some extent stable across time, context and individuals. This concurs with considering strategic thinking to be a day-to-day activity occurring in organisations (Johnson et al. 2003). Hence, it was assumed that relevant empirical data could be obtained from studying managers in their everyday work setting, and that the majority of managers would undertake this activity in the course of their work. In Study 1 the term manager is used in its most inclusive sense to imply an individual with managerial responsibilities. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the choice of interviewees was guided more by access considerations than systematic sampling considerations.

Senior managers from two different contexts were interviewed in a work setting, both in their offices. One was the Sales Director of a small privately owned firm employing thirty-three people (referred to as Small). The other was a Director of Nursing and Operations in a Primary Care Trust (referred to as Health). Each of the managers was posed the question “What have you been thinking about during the last hour?” and their responses tape-recorded. The responses to this question are assumed to be a valid indication of the managers’ thinking during the specified time period. This assumption is consistent with viewing strategic thinking as an everyday activity involving the use of everyday knowledge. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and the respondents were allowed to describe their thoughts with minimal further prompting. In the case of Small, three further questions were asked when he began to describe activities he had undertaken, rather than his thoughts during the last hour. In the case of Health, seven further questions were asked, again to focus her on what she had been thinking rather than what she had been doing. In both interviews the social process aspect of the interview (Mason 1996) was maintained by verbal cues such as “OK” and “right”, and by non-verbal cues such as eye contact, smiling and head-nodding. Health appeared to find describing what she had been thinking more difficult than Small, judging by longer pauses and more facial tension.

The interview tapes were transcribed within forty-eight hours of the interviews and examined for phrases that appeared to indicate thinking corresponding to the tentative constructs derived for the study. These phrases were

colour coded in the transcripts of the interviews. The transcript of the interview with Small ran to 147 lines and that with Health to 257 lines. To assess validity, the colour-coded transcripts were discussed with the interviewees to ascertain if the interviewee agreed with coding of the phrases after being given a brief description of the tentative constructs. For example, where a phrase had been coded as “Consideration of interrelationships” did the interviewee agree that they had been thinking about interrelationships at that time? To assess reliability, a second person, not involved with the research but qualified to Master’s level in management, coded the transcripts, after being given a description of the constructs.

### **3.2.2 Findings**

In the transcripts of both interviews, phrases could be identified that suggested thinking corresponding to the constructs. Interviewees confirmed that the coding of those phrases were a valid interpretation of their thoughts. For example, if a phrase had been coded as “Consideration of interrelationships”, then the interviewee confirmed that their thoughts had been about interrelationships. Coding of the transcripts by a second person, who was educated in business to Master’s level but not directly involved in the research, resulted in approximately seventy percent agreement.

#### **3.2.2.1 Consequences beyond the immediate**

The interview with Small suggested thinking of consequences beyond the immediate by the use of the phrases “long-term aspects” (22), “longer term implications of it because its not only an immediate thing” (24), “where I want the company to go” (133) and “long term goal” (134). A significant issue for Small was the development of “new products” (52) and the issues of “what new materials do we need for those new markets” (138). (Numbers in brackets refer to line numbers in the transcripts)

When discussing future changes in service provision in the local health economy, Health talked about “a big issue for all of us come September” (33), and

“are they going to do it after September and if they’re not going to do certain bits of it who is because these babies still need this erm particular intervention” (51).

### **3.2.2.2 Consideration of interrelationships**

At several points in the interview, Small suggested that he was thinking about interrelationships by using the phrases “whole kind of raft of things” (63), “the whole thing is interwoven. You can’t you can’t actually break them into separate roles” (140) and “they’re all interlinked” (123). This thinking appeared to be related to Small’s role in coordinating sales, manufacturing and purchasing activities as in “stock control relative to quality, relative to production, relative to sales and the costing side of things” (87), “A phone call, an email from a sales point of view but then at the same time I’ve also got the be thinking, well hang on, we need such and such a raw material for that. I’ve got to order that, you know, how do we fit that into the schedule, how do we.” (108), and “then that impacts on my sales thoughts in terms of the strategy of how we’re going to sell that, how we’re going to go into new markets, it then inputs into the buying side” (135).

The interview with Health took place after a meeting whose purpose was to coordinate several organizations in the local health economy. Thinking that involves a consideration of interrelationships is suggested by phrases such as “whole group needs to do” (215) and “all the organisations, so all six trusts, social services departments” (243).

### **3.2.2.3 Purposeful in organisational terms**

During the interview Small made what appeared to be a clear statement related to organizational purpose, “the business is selling things” (43). At other times he talked about things being “critical” (10) and needing to “prioritise” (16, 43), presumably with respect to some purpose.

Health made what appeared to be a clear statement of organizational purpose, to “make a difference to those four people, and people like them” (133). One interesting aspect of this particular statement is that in addition to suggesting an organizational purpose it might also suggest the expression of a personal purpose.

Later in the interview, a sense of frustration appeared with the comment “we say something needs to happen, we recommend to Chief Execs and it doesn’t happen” (218).

#### **3.2.2.4 Consideration of boundaries**

In the interview with Small the use of phrases such as “wider implications” (51), “bigger picture” (62) suggested thinking that considered boundaries. If there are wider implications, then that presumably suggests implications beyond a boundary that defines “narrow”. Thinking about boundaries was suggested in terms of functions within the organization, “We have the problem, potential problem, that Tony’s booking in material in linear meters, Julie’s potentially inputting it into the computer in square meters and I’m ordering it and costing it in kilos” (85), and in terms of external markets “develop the number of areas that the company is active in” (134).

Health suggests an awareness of boundaries between organizations by the comment “find out whether we are going to have the same problems in the area that the other PCTs are going to have” (54). Further comments suggest that Health is considering the effect those boundaries have on patients in general “transferred from one hospital to another” (126) and for a particular category of patient “they get into the acute trust and they do what they need to do for their acute illness and then they get stuck because they’ve got intermediate care needs but intermediate care team don’t look after EMI, and we’ve got EMI needs but they don’t do physical bits” (171).

### **3.2.3 Discussion**

Analysis of the transcripts would appear to indicate, in this very limited study, that constructs derived from the extant literature could be used to identify strategic thinking in empirical data. However, this conclusion must be considered with due regard to the limitations of the interview and coding processes. Further, the findings may be significantly influenced by the context of the hour that the



interviewees were considering and the role of the interviewee. Had the circumstances of the hour been different, different findings may have resulted.

The validity of the data generated during the interview process is related to the assumption that in response to the question “What have you been thinking about during the last hour?” interviewees were able and willing to do just that (clearly this refers to conscious thoughts). This assumption is naïve for a number of reasons. First, the interviewees will have forgotten some of their thoughts from the previous hour. Second, if they could not remember what they had been thinking about, they might invent something to say, to avoid an embarrassing silence, or to avoid appearing inadequate. Thus, what was recorded might have been invention or construction rather than recollection. Third, understandably, they may have had thoughts that they were not prepared to divulge, particularly as the interview was tape-recorded. Fourth, although the interviews were unstructured and used minimal prompts to avoid imposing pre-determined categories on the managers’ accounts, the interview process might have distorted the managers’ recollections since asking someone to explain their thoughts can change those thoughts (Ericsson and Simon 1998). Fifth, cues given by the interviewer may have changed what the interviewee said from what they would have said without the cue. Some of these cues will have been given knowingly. For example, saying “OK” and head-nodding were considered necessary on occasion to maintain the social process aspect of the interview. However, these actions were likely to reinforce the acceptability of what the interviewee was saying at that point, potentially leading the interviewee to say more in a similar vein. Other cues will have been given unknowingly with uncertain effects.

These threats to validity can be to some extent offset by checking with the interviewee that the researcher’s interpretations are valid, as was done in this research. However, although both interviewees confirmed the validity of these interpretations, this did involve a double time shift in thinking for the interviewees. In being asked to confirm the interpretations as valid, they were not only being asked for confirmation regarding the interview but also for confirmation regarding the thoughts that the interview was about. Thus, they had to remember not only what

they had said at the interview, but also to remember what they were thinking in the specified hour, about which the interview was generating data. While it is improbable that the interviewees were able to do this fully and in detail, it is possible that they were able to do this to a limited extent or in a general sense. It is possible, of course, that the interviewees were merely providing confirmation to avoid upsetting the researcher, to avoid further discussion of something in which they had little interest, or for some other reason, and respondent validation should be used with due regard to its limitations (Silverman 2001).

Reliability of the coding of the transcripts was indicated by an inter-coder rating of approximately seventy percent. The main areas of difference arose because certain phrases in the transcript could be interpreted as indicating more than one of the constructs, which were found not to be mutually exclusive. For example, the phrase from the transcript of the interview with Small "...how we're going to go into new markets..." (136) was interpreted as indicating both "Consequences beyond the immediate", and "Purposeful in organisational terms".

### **3.2.4 Conclusion**

Study 1, although a very limited study supports tentatively a suggestion that constructs derived from the extant literature can be used to identify strategic thinking in empirical data with an acceptable degree of reliability. However, there are a number of limitations to any conclusions drawn with regard to strategic thinking from this study.

- Study 1 only employed seven of the twenty characteristics contained in Table 2-1 and hence, the set of constructs used in this study do not reflect fully the characteristics of strategic thinking in the literature. In order to do this, additional constructs would need to be derived to extend the set of constructs. In particular the most frequently cited characteristic, creativity, was not included.
- While the constructs may relate to characteristics of strategic thinking in the literature, the literature would appear to suggest that strategic

thinking requires them in combination rather than individually. This study gives little insight into which constructs, and in what combination, need to be identified in a set of empirical data to identify of strategic thinking.

- Related to this is the important issue of what is an appropriate unit of analysis for strategic thinking. In this study, the whole of the one-hour interview was analysed, since this was the data available. Mere availability is not a particularly robust criterion for circumscribing a valid empirical data set.
- The validity checking was related to the individual constructs, and not strategic thinking. Thus, while the interviewees confirmed the researcher's interpretations with respect to individual constructs, they did not confirm that they considered their thoughts, during the hour that was the focus of the study, as strategic thinking.
- Only two people were involved in the study and so any conclusions draw must be very limited.

### **3.3 Emerging themes from empirical data: Study 2**

Study 2 was based on what is perhaps the simplest conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the extant literature, that is, strategic thinking as thinking about strategy. As in Study 1, it was assumed that a manager would engage in strategic thinking during the course of their everyday working life. Although Study 1 was a very limited study, its findings would appear to offer tentative support this assumption. Since a manager's role involves dealing with issues (Dutton and Ashford 1993) insight into a manager's thinking about strategy, and hence their strategic thinking, might be obtained by understanding which issues a manager considered to be strategic and why (Eden 1990). This approach was considered to be fruitful because it potentially gave access to a manager's thinking about strategy without becoming distracted by the possible of confusion and complexities of what strategy is, as discussed in section 2.2. Further, data obtained in this way might have

enhanced validity since strategic issues are linked to organisational action (Dutton and Jackson 1987).

### 3.3.1 Methodology

To elicit which issues a manager considered strategic, why they were considered strategic and the manager's thinking about the issue, an interview protocol was developed. The development was a gradual refinement process involving discussions with the supervisory team, drafting interview protocols, undertaking pilot interviews using those draft protocols, and revising the protocol in light of the experience of the pilot interviews. Five versions were piloted before the final version shown in Table 3-1 was established.

**Table 3-1 Study 2 interview protocol**

The opening question was "What is an issue that may have significance for the organisation that you have been thinking about in the last week?"

Immediately following this was added "And there may be none"

Once the interviewee had provided an issue the opening question was repeated as "What is another issue that may have significance for the organisation that you have been thinking about in the last week?"

Immediately following this was added "And there may be none"

The opening question was repeated a number of times until the interviewee offered no more issues.

Each of these issues was written onto separate "Post-it" notes and the interviewee was asked to arrange them in order from most strategic to least strategic.

When the interviewee had identified the most strategic issue they were asked "What makes this the most strategic?"

The interviewee was then asked "What have you been thinking about [the

name of the issue] recently?"

A number of factors were given consideration in the design and development of the interview protocol. One of these relates to the term strategic, since a manager's interpretation of the term has important implications for conclusions about their thinking about strategy, and hence strategic thinking. A manager's interpretation of what is a strategic issue may or may not agree with any general consensus (Summer et al. 1990; Thomas and Pruett 1993) in the extant literature. Privileging a manager's interpretation would make a stronger link to practice, but the interpretation offered by a manager may be ill informed with respect to extant literature. However if that is the interpretation used in practice, although ill informed, it will have a degree of validity nonetheless, since a manager would act based on that interpretation.

Related to the manager's interpretation of the term strategic is awareness that the term could be applied to different entities. A typical classification of such entities might include an individual, a team, a department, an organisation or a supra-organisational entity such as an intuitional field or a society. These classes of entity are not necessarily mutually exclusive with regard to the application of the term strategic to a particular issue. Thus, while a given issue may be strategic for only a single entity, for example an organisation, another issue may be strategic for more than one entity simultaneously, for example an individual and an organisation. With the possibility of a manager applying the term strategic to different entities, some guidance was necessary at the start of the interview and since a core theme in strategy research concerns organisational performance (Ketchen et al. 1996) the term "organisation" was included in the opening question. However, the term organisation itself is open to different interpretations and having been given this guidance, how an individual interpreted the term organisation, and to what extent individuals then talked about other types of entity would emerge from the data.

A further consideration was the orientation of a manager's thinking in relation to time, and how the interview protocol might affect that orientation. While it is generally accepted that strategy has a future orientation, in relation to a strategic

issue a manager might talk about the past (possibly indicating retrospective sensemaking), the present (which might be linked to contemporary action) or the future (possibly indicating foresight and prediction), or some combination of these. A temporal orientation in the interview questions may influence the temporal orientation of the answers given by the interviewee. For example, “What has been an issue of significance for the organisation”, “What is an issue of significance for the organisation” and “What may be an issue of significance for the organisation” are likely to orientate the interviewee to past, present and future respectively. Acknowledging that a question with a temporal orientation might impose a temporal orientation on the interviewee, the phrase “may have significance” was incorporated because of the centrality of the future orientation of strategy.

In addition to the temporal orientation in the questions, it was also considered necessary to provide guidance to the interviewee about the time period that they should consider when answering the questions. Setting a more recent time limit, for example the last hour as in Study 1, may produce recollections that are more accurate because the interviewee has had less time to forget. However, a shorter time limit increases the chance that the interviewee has not been thinking about “an issue that may have significance for the organisation” during that time period. Consequently this increases the risk that the interviewee may invent something to say in order to appear credible. Thus, the interview protocol reflects the balance between setting a time limit that would support accurate recollection and minimising the risk that the interviewee will invent an issue in order to appear credible. This was done by setting the time limit to the previous week in the opening question, by asking what the interviewee has been thinking about the issue “recently” and by including the phrase “And there may be none” which was intended to allow the interviewee to not offer an issue and still appear credible.

The term significance was used in the opening question because while a number of issues may call for a manager’s attention (Dutton and Ashford 1993) those that are strategic issues will be significant issues. However, all significant issues are not necessarily strategic issues. Therefore, the use of the term significance would

enable the elicitation of why a given issue was strategic by comparison to other issues that, while significant, were not strategic.

As part of the interview protocol “Post-it” notes were used to record the issues that may have significance for the organisation for two reasons. First, the interviewee was asked to rearrange the Post-it notes to indicate the most strategic issue, enabling the interviewee to engage with a physical representation of their ideas which may be useful when considering complex issues (Sims and Doyle 1995). The interviewee was able to evaluate the extent to which issues were more or less strategic in relation to other issues by physically moving the Post-it notes. A second reason was that recording each issue on a Post-it note at the start helped to control the interview process by eliciting all the issues before beginning to explore the issues in detail. Although Post-it notes were used in this way to help the interviewee identify the most strategic issue, the arrangement of Post-it notes tended to display some spatial structure other than a simple equidistant ranking. For example, bigger gaps between some Post-it notes than others and some issue grouped as equally strategic. However, this apparent structure within a set of strategic issues was not explored.

The interview protocol was used with the members of a UK National Health Service Primary Care Trust (PCT) senior management team (SMT). The members of the SMT were the Chair, Chief Executive, the Chair of the Professional Executive Committee, Director of Public Health, Director of Finance, Director of Service Development and Director of Operations.

### **3.3.1.1 Cause Mapping**

As Study 2 was intended to explore managers’ thinking about strategic issues, an appropriate method of generating data was a method of cognitive mapping, based on Kelly’s (1955) theory of personal constructs. Cognitive mapping was used to generate data from the interviewee’s responses to the question “What have you been thinking about [the name of the issue] recently?” A number of different techniques to produce cognitive maps have been developed, some more ideographic and some more nomothetic. However, evaluations of the relative advantages and disadvantages

of the different techniques are rare in the literature (Hodgkinson et al. 2004). It is claimed that ideographic cognitive maps provide a more valid representation of managerial cognition (Daniels et al. 2002) and a number of methods, including visual card sorting (Daniels et al. 1995) and repertory grids (Brown 1992) have been used to produce ideographic cognitive maps. However, ideographic methods can make comparisons between maps more difficult, since each individual may produce maps containing different constructs. Nomothetic mapping methods have been proposed as an alternative (Hodgkinson 2002) which allow better comparison between maps (Langfield-Smith and Wirth 1992). However, the use of nomothetic methods risks imposing a predetermined set of constructs on data generation and analysis. An approach that combines elements of ideographic and nomothetic methods has been described that involves developing of a pool of constructs from a number of individuals prior to the mapping procedure (Markoczy and Goldberg 1995). Thus, a range of mapping techniques are available and the method(s) employed need to be tailored to specifics of the research (Daniels and Johnson 2002).

Since Study 2 was essentially inductive in nature, a form of cognitive mapping known as cause mapping was appropriate because it captures idiosyncratic ways of seeing the world (Eden and Ackermann 2004) in relation to specific phenomena rather than generalisations (Nelson et al. 2000). This method was consistent with the overall interview protocol since cause mapping interviews tend to be semi-structured in the sense that the purpose and structure (indicated by the formalities of the mapping technique) are predetermined (Ambrosini and Bowman 2002) but there are few preset questions. Although there is no consensus on how to elicit cause maps in strategy research, the method generally uses open structures (Eden et al. 1992) with laddering questions to generate causal links (Eden 1988; Eden et al. 1979; Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Laddering questions were used following the question "What have you been thinking about [name of the issue] recently?" to explore the most strategic issue.

A freehand drawing method was used to capture data during the interview since it has been suggested that mapping techniques that produce visual representations help interviewees to make explicit taken for granted aspects of their



thinking (Balogun et al. 2003) and interviewee engagement is higher than with some other techniques (Brown 1992). One reason for this higher engagement may be the greater potential to facilitate reflection by the participant, although this very process of reflection may change the map itself (Cossette and Audet 1992; Eden 1992a).

Cause maps can be analysed in terms of content and structure (Eden and Ackermann 2004; Langfield-Smith and Wirth 1992). The structure of a cause map is composed of nodes and the links between nodes (Huff and Fletcher 1990). A number of structural analyses are possible including complexity analysis (indicated by the number of nodes and links or the ratio of links to nodes), centrality analysis (using a simple or preferably a weighted calculation of links to each node) and cluster analysis (Cossette and Audet 1992; Eden et al. 1992). For all but the simplest maps structural analyses of this type are usually undertaken using appropriate software (Eden 1990). However, it is important to remember that the structural properties of a cause map are influenced by the skill of the interviewer, the duration of the interview and whether a predetermined interview schedule is used (Eden et al. 1992). Although the researcher was relatively inexperienced at mapping, the effect of that inexperience on the quality of the maps was reduced by the researcher undergoing training in causal mapping and generating twenty one maps from interviews in a research setting before producing the maps on which the analysis is based.

Various methods for enhancing the reliability of cause maps have been suggested, including developing a taxonomy of causal relationships and elaborate coding protocols (Huff et al. 1990) which facilitate inter-coder reliability testing (Huff and Fletcher 1990). However, other researchers place greater emphasis on the purpose of the map, consequently arguing that coding is an idiosyncratic activity and that inter-coder reliability is of little significance since the cause map is a product of both an individual's causal structure and the elicitation process (Eden 1992a; Eden et al. 1979). In keeping with this view, the data in Study 2 was not tested for inter-coder reliability.

To support validity, and in accordance with the inductive approach to Study 2, the interviewer avoided using terms that the interviewee had not used, thus minimising the risk of the interviewer's constructs contaminating the interviewee's

(Cossette and Audet 1992). The aim was to capture the interviewee's meanings to provide a more valid representation of the interviewee's subjective experience (Huff et al. 1990). The cause map was reviewed with the interviewee both during the mapping process and when the final map was drawn to further support validity (Eden and Ackermann 2004; Nelson et al. 2000). However, the validity of cause maps can be questioned on several grounds. The underlying causal beliefs of the interviewee are not accessible, only the revealed cause maps (Nelson et al. 2000) and hence assessing the correspondence between revealed and underlying causal structures is problematic (Fahey and Narayanan 1989). Further, revealed cause maps are only partial depictions of the underlying causal beliefs (Markoczy and Goldberg 1995) and the process of elicitation may change the underlying causal beliefs. Even the ability of individuals to accurately assess the similarity of elicited cause maps to their own underlying causal beliefs has been questioned (Hodgkinson 2002). However, Study 2 does not aim to accurately assess an individual's causal beliefs but rather to gain sufficient degree of insight to support the development of a connection between the conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature and in management practice.

### **3.3.2 Findings**

Two sets of data were analysed to produce the findings for Study 2. The first set was the reasons that the individual members of the PCT SMT gave for an issue to be the most strategic. The second set was composed of cause maps generated from what individual members of the PCT SMT said they had been thinking about that most strategic issue recently.

#### **3.3.2.1 What makes an issue strategic?**

Which issues were considered most strategic and the reasons interviewees gave for those issues being the most strategic are shown in Figure 3-1. Of the seven members of the PCT senior team, two offered three issues, two offered four issues, two offered five issues and one offered six issues. The phrases in the centre of Figure 3-1 surrounded by an oval show the issues that were considered most strategic for each interviewee. Colour coding is used to indicate which member of the team

provided the issue and the reasons why that issue was the most strategic. In Figure 3-1 the reasons for an issue being most strategic are grouped together in what appear to be emergent themes and these themes are discussed below.

Figure 3-1 The most strategic issues and why they were the most strategic



A follow-up interview approximately one month later was undertaken to check if the issues identified as the most strategic were still considered to be so. All seven members of the SMT confirmed that the issue was still the most strategic and for the same reasons. Three interviewees said there had been changes in how they thought about the issue. IA (the researcher's designation for the individual interviewee) thought that the most strategic issue had become more "polarised" from the other issues, IN thought that there was now "more emphasis" on the most strategic issue, and RZ thought that the "gap had narrowed" between the most strategic issue and the next. This appears to indicate that there was a degree of stability to the data gathered in the first interview.

In Study 2 the assumption is that strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, and that some insight can be gained into an individual's thinking about strategy by understanding the reasons an individual gives for an issue to be strategic. Hence, why an issue was considered strategic is of greater interest to the researcher than the issue itself. These reasons were grouped into a number of themes and broad labels assigned to each theme. Clearly, the set of themes proposed for the grouping of reasons is only one of a number of possible alternative sets, and another researcher might well group these reasons differently. Having a second person conduct the same analysis and grouping into themes might be a valuable exercise, providing a dialectic with the researcher's grouping or possibly a verification of that grouping. However, there are potential difficulties with deciding who would be an appropriate second person and what weight to give to their opinions. Given the nature of the PhD, the researcher is a sole researcher and one is left with choosing someone who is knowledgeable in a more general sense than in the specific detail of this particular research. Even someone who was knowledgeable about the research topic in detail would still not have been present at the interviews and so their interpretation might be given less weight than the researcher's. Given that only the researcher and the interviewee were present at the interviews it was decided to seek verification of the themes from the interviewees. This verification was across all themes from all interviewees, with interviewees given the opportunity to comment on themes even if they had not contributed to that theme. The themes were discussed with the SMT to check that they covered the range of reasons provided. The labels assigned to the

themes were also discussed with the SMT to check that they were an appropriate label for the reasons allocated to that theme. The themes were not necessarily mutually exclusive and although each reason is presented in Figure 3-1 only once, some reasons could have been allocated to more than one theme. The purpose of this stage of the analysis was not to definitively allocate reasons to themes but rather to generate a parsimonious set of themes that sufficiently represented the range of reasons provided by interviewees. The themes generated from the data are discussed below.

**People.** This was a common theme being mentioned by five of the seven interviewees. Since a PCT is an organisation in the UK National Health Service (NHS) it is perhaps not surprising that when thinking about strategy, members of the PCT team would think about people as in “Help local people’s health”. However, some of the reasons why an issue was the most strategic were because of the personal impact on the interviewee, “Getting my attention and time” and “Impact on my working life”. In one of the pilots prior to Study 2, a member of the NHS Confederation offered “The future of PCTs” as the most strategic of five issues for a number of reasons, one of which was “If we get this wrong I may lose my job”. This theme does not appear to be represented in Table 2-1 other than perhaps in the single citation, “20 Involving values”. Although the theme of a personal aspect to strategy is present to some extent in the strategy literature there are suggestions that it has lost some of the emphasis that it once had (Hambrick 2004; Hoskisson et al. 1999). This may suggest that the highlighting of the people oriented or personal aspects of strategic thinking is a notable contribution from this research.

**Time.** Time was mentioned by five of the interviewees with long time scales being mentioned or implied by four of these five. Two of these four also mentioned a range of time scales, rather than just implying a long time scale. One interviewee indicated that the issue was most strategic because it was “Immediate” and “Short to medium term”. This is perhaps an example of where an interpretation by a manager differs from that in the extant literature. Since this interpretation was also different from the other four interviewees, this reason was disregarded. The theme of time is

represented in Table 2-1 in two characteristics, “2 Vision of the future” and “6 Longer time perspective”, both of which have a number of citations.

**Scope.** The label scope was used for those reasons that implied the issue has implications or consequences that were not tightly circumscribed. Four of the interviewees mentioned reasons that were grouped under the broad heading of Scope. The reasons “Across widest spectrum – national and local”, “Breadth of organisational involvement”, “Range of changes needed to make it happen” and “Number of levels”, were all interpreted as indicating the issue was strategic because of its scope. Thus, the label scope covers reasons that might be described as indicating not only breadth but also depth, as in “Number of levels”. The reasons “Implications for organisation, patients and services” and “Implications for other issues” were also interpreted as indicating scope since they clearly indicated implications that were not tightly circumscribed. The theme of scope is represented in Table 2-1 in the characteristic “10 Broader context”.

**Purpose.** Three reasons were interpreted as indicating organisational purpose “It’s what we are set up to do”, “Heart of what the organisations about” and “Help local people’s health”. This final reason was also included in the People theme. The theme of purpose may be related to the characteristics “14 Intent focussed” and possibly “2 Vision of the future” in Table 2-1.

**Impact.** The impact of an issue was given as a reason by two interviewees and a third mentioned “Impact on my working life”. Those reasons that indicated implications could also be included in this theme, that is, “Implications for organisation, patients and services” and “Implications for other issues”. The theme of impact may be related to the characteristic “19 Focusing on most significant forces” in Table 2-1, which has a single citation.

**Unknowns.** That there were “Unknowns associated with the issue” was mentioned by only one interviewee. The theme of unknowns may be related to the characteristic “16 Tolerant of risk or ambiguity” in Table 2-1.

**Social.** The same interviewee considered the issue to be most strategic because it “Involves politicking, persuasion and trust”. Politicking, persuasion and trust might be treated as three separate items but when asked about these three, the interviewee said that they were essentially all part of the same thing rather than three separate items. The label social was used to indicate the apparent social nature of this reason. This theme does not appear to be explicitly represented in Table 2-1 and may be related to the **People** theme above. This social theme would appear to reinforce the importance of the people oriented or personal aspects of strategy in a conceptualisation of strategic thinking.

### **3.3.2.2 What managers were thinking about in relation to the issue**

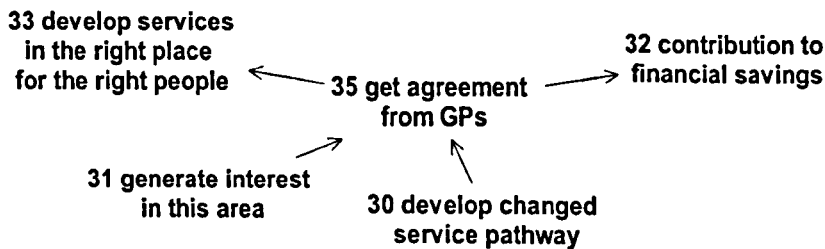
Seven cause maps were produced, one from each member of the PCT SMT, although only six were included in the subsequent analysis because of concerns for the quality of the data in the seventh map. This seventh interviewee did not appear to be engaged with the process, appearing to give information without any interest or due consideration. The largest number of nodes in a map was 49, the smallest was 27 and the average number of nodes per map was 38. The interviews that produced these maps varied from between 25 minutes to 65 minutes with an average of 41 minutes. Since each map was idiosyncratic, some form of categorisation was necessary to enable analysis and comparison between maps. As with the emergent themes discussed above, the aim at this initial stage of the analysis was to generate a parsimonious set of categories that sufficiently represented the data. The intention was not to generate tightly defined categories but rather ones that, whilst mutually exclusive, would be sufficiently flexible to enable elaboration of the category by further consideration of the data. Thus, rather than producing conceptual closure this approach was intended to facilitate further exploration and development of the categories. Moving from qualitative data to categories is usually difficult because the methods of analysis are not well formalised in comparison to methods for analysing quantitative data (Miles 1979). Thus, this stage of the analysis involves interpretation and judgement by the researcher, reflecting the researcher’s preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000) and a degree of insight and creativity (Langley 1999). In this instance the three categories of goals, issues and actions were initially proposed to



represent the data, drawing on the work of Eden (1990) and these categories are discussed below.

**Goals.** The cause maps were examined and certain nodes were interpreted as indicating goals. The category goal was given a broad interpretation to include nodes that suggested objectives or aspirations, termed “positive goals”, and also undesirable consequences or outcomes to avoid, termed “negative goals”. All the maps contained nodes that were interpreted as indicating goals. This is not surprising since the mapping process, in particular laddering questions, would tend to lead to the elicitation of goals. The largest number of goals in a map was 9, the smallest was 4 and the average number of goals per map was 6. Thus, multiple goals were associated with a single strategic issue. In all the maps, there was some degree of connection between the different goals. As shown in Figure 3-2 from IG’s map, some goals were closely interlinked. (Numbers in the figure refer to node number in the cause map which indicates the order in which the node was added to the map)

**Figure 3-2 Example of interlinked goals**



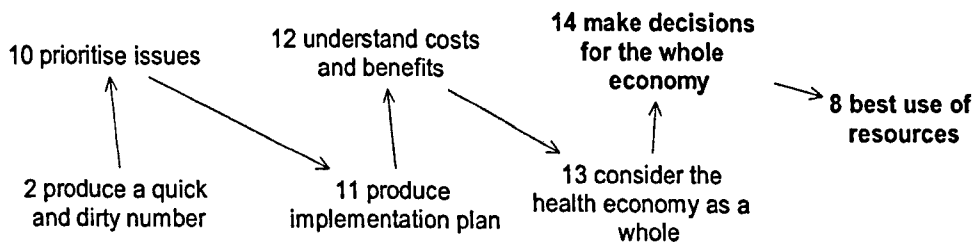
Within individual maps, multiple goals were often of different types. For example, the map from the interview with IA contained nodes that were interpreted as indicating positive goals, “32 quality of service” and “36 delivering a consistent health message”, and nodes that were interpreted as indicating negative goals, “20 avoid disasters” and “7 so we won’t be heard”. Similarly, RZ’s map had the node “45 rift in corporate responsibilities”, indicating a negative goal and “28 non-execs and non-clinical managers handing over a stable organisation”, indicating a positive goal.

In addition to containing positive and negative goals, individual maps contained goals relating to different entities. For example, HL’s map contained goals

that were personal “31 important for my success”, organisational “24 survival of the organisation” and “8 best use of resources”, supra-organisational “14 make decisions for the whole economy”, and important for other stakeholders “7 best fit for patient”. Similarly, IF’s map had goals that were organisational “36 meet the legal requirements”, personal “14 time for me to think about something else”, relevant to other organisational members, “1 people get a new job”, and important for other stakeholders, “15 patients get treated”. SA’s map contained both organisational goals, “12 achieving clarity and stability of chairman and chief exec roles”, and personal goals “14 discharged my professional responsibility”.

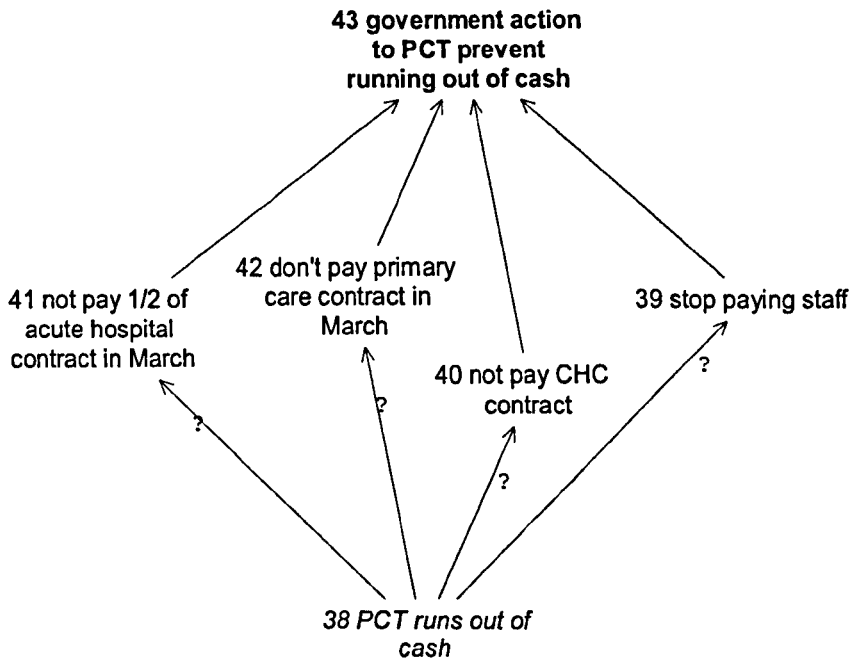
**Actions.** Certain nodes were interpreted as indicating actions, on the part of either the individual or the organisation. In some instances a sequence of actions were indicated that led to a goal. For example, Figure 3-3 shows such a sequence from HL’s map with actions shown in plain text and goals in bold text.

**Figure 3-3 Example of a sequence of actions leading to a goal**



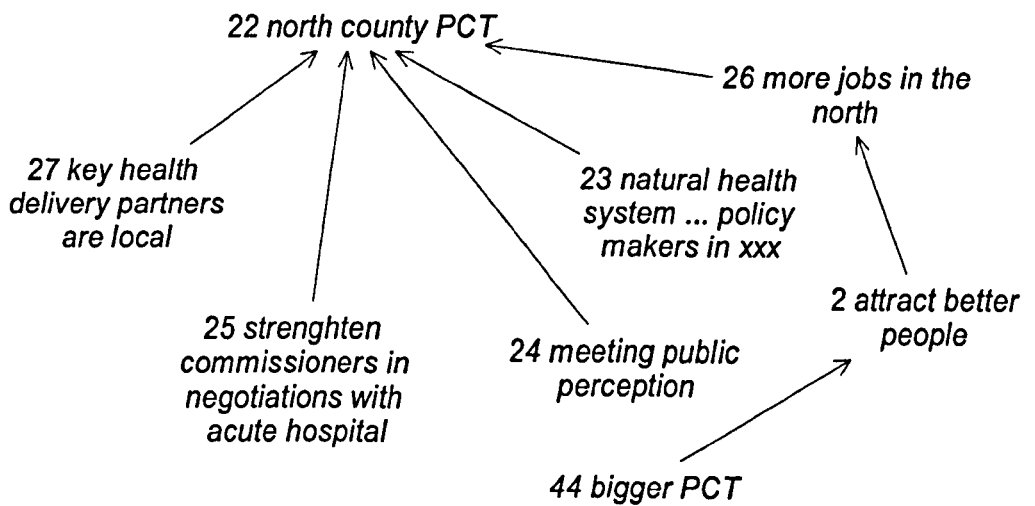
However, this type of linear sequence was uncommon in other maps. In other instances alternative actions were indicated which led to a goal, as shown in Figure 3-4 from SA’s map, again with actions shown in plain text and goals in bold text. Most often actions were in combination with the third category, issues, as discussed below.

**Figure 3-4 Example of alternative actions leading to a goal**



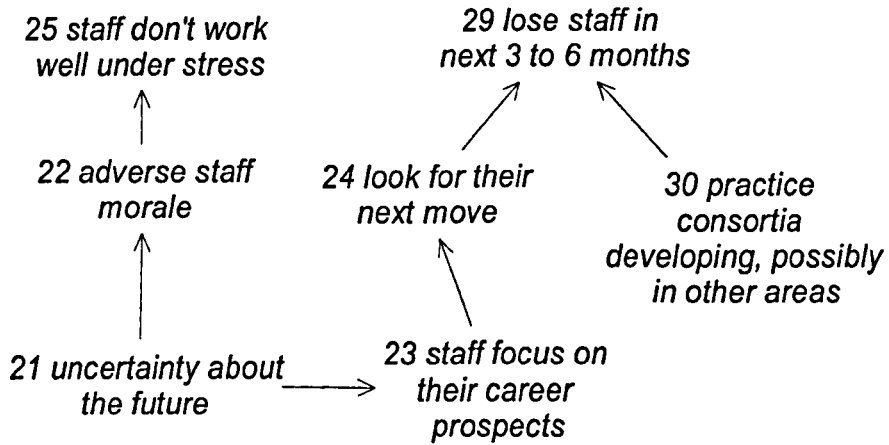
**Issues.** The remaining nodes that were not interpreted as either goals or actions were categorised as issues. Issues tended to occur in combinations as shown in Figure 3-5 from SA's map.

**Figure 3-5 Example of a combination of issues**



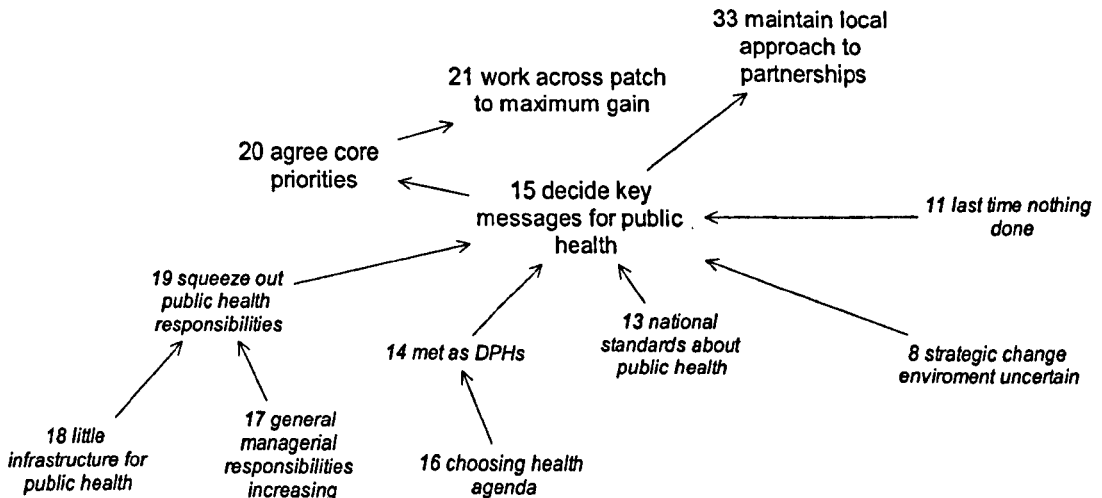
In certain of these combinations of issues some could be interpreted as internal whilst others external as shown in Figure 3-6 from RZ's map.

**Figure 3-6 Example of a combination of internal and external issues**

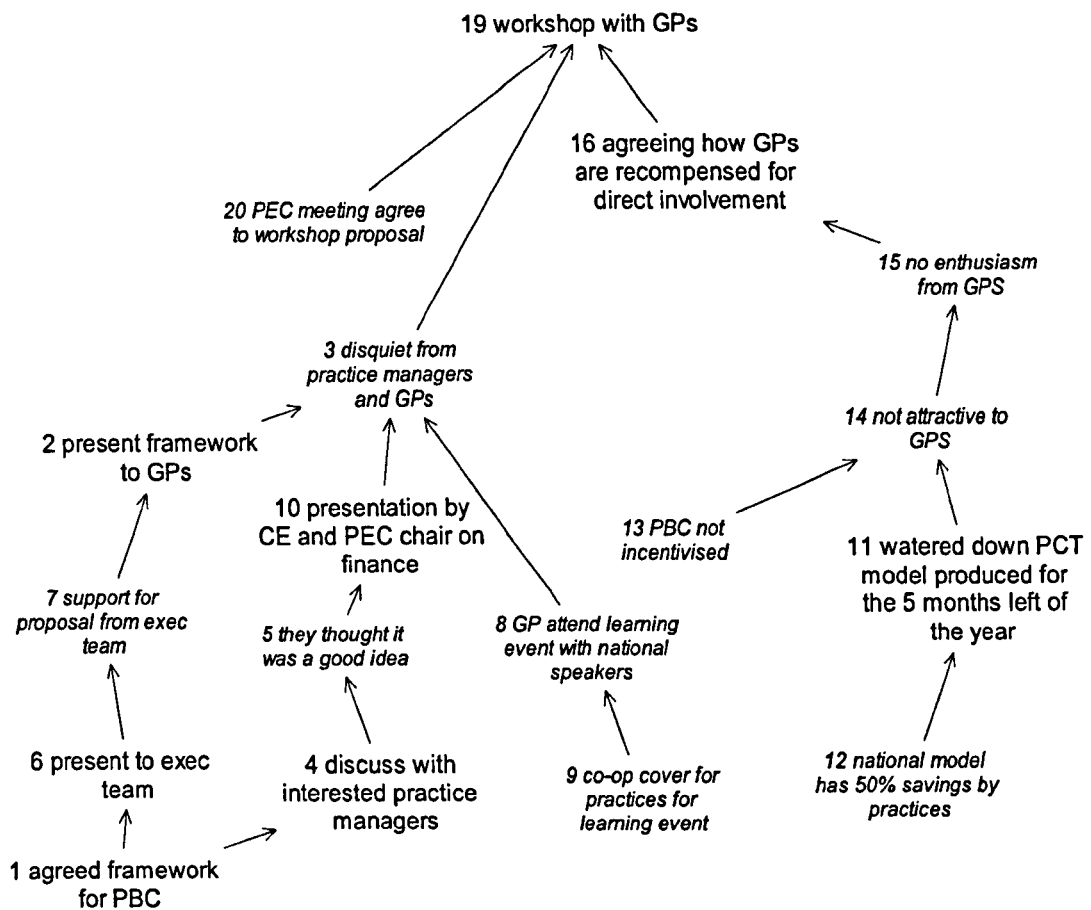


Typically, combinations of issues were associated with combinations of actions as shown in Figure 3-7 from IA's map and Figure 3-8 from IG's map with actions shown in plain text and issues in italic text.

**Figure 3-7 Example of combinations of issues and actions**

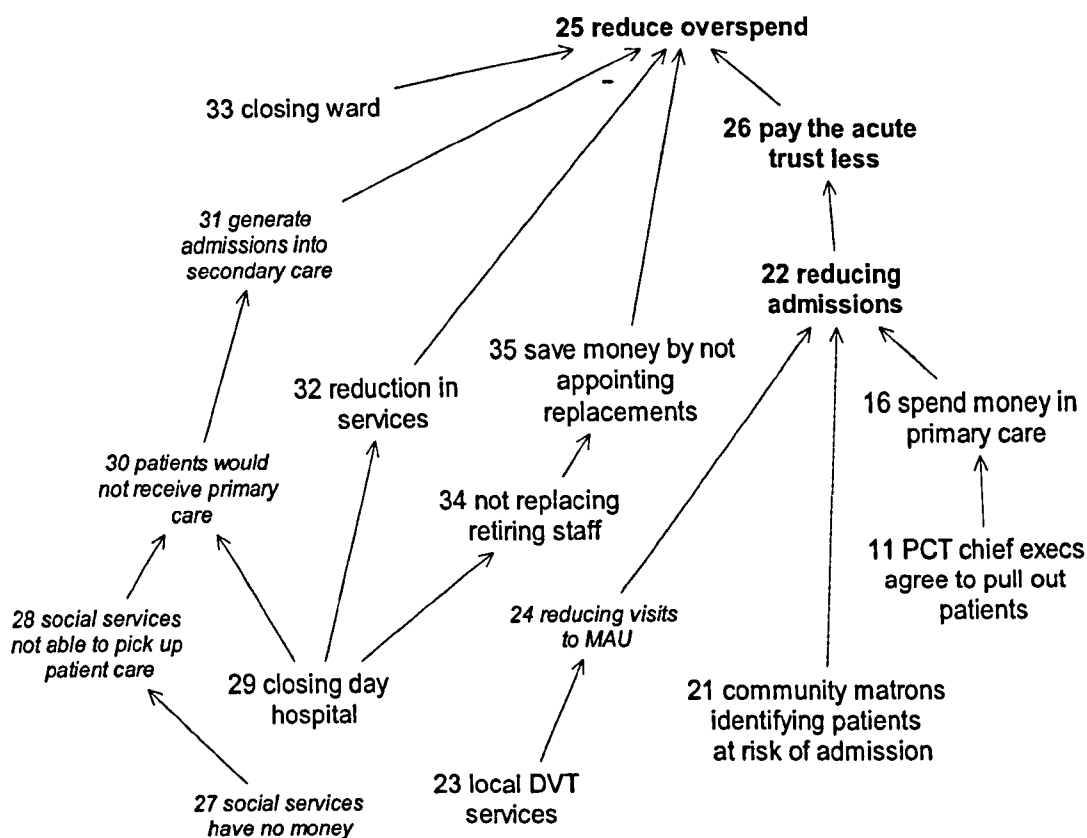


**Figure 3-8 Example of combinations of issues and actions**



Combinations of issues and actions were related to goals, as is shown in Figure 3-9 from IF's map with actions shown in plain text, issues in italic text and goals in bold text.

**Figure 3-9 Example of combinations of issues and actions related to goals**



### 3.3.3 Discussion

Study 2 is based on the premise that strategic thinking was thinking about strategy and that insight into strategic thinking could be gained by understanding why a manager considered an issue strategic, and their thoughts about that strategic issue. Analysis of the reasons given for an issue to be strategic produced seven emergent themes, **Purpose, People, Scope, Social, Unknowns, Time, and Impact**. Analysis of the nodes in cause maps generated from interviews about the strategic issue could be placed into three categories, **Goals, Issues and Actions**. A consideration of these themes and categories, and their interrelationships, provides an insight into strategic thinking within the assumptions and limitations of this study.

The findings of Study 2 suggest that one aspect of strategic thinking involves thinking about purpose in relation to the organisation. This is in accord with the construct “Purposeful in organisational terms” from Study 1 and is reflected in some

of the goals, for example “survival of the organisation HL20”. (HL20 refers to the interviewee reference code and map node number). Other goals relate to people, either the interviewee, as in “important for my success HL31”, or others, for example, “patients get treated IF15” and “people get a new job IF1”. Certain other goals might be described as supra-organisational, for example “make decisions for the whole economy HL14” or “delivering a consistent health message IA36”.

The diversity indicated by personal, organisational and supra-organisational goals reflects the theme of scope. This theme of scope is in accord with the construct “Consideration of boundaries” from Study 1. The theme of scope was indicated not only in goals but also in issues. Issues were, for example, organisational “difficult financial situation IA3”, regional “senior STHA people gone IA1” and national “national standards for public health IA13”. Some issues were external, for example “practice consortia developing, possibly in other areas RZ30” and others internal, for example “adverse staff moral RZ22”.

A number of issues reflected the social theme, for example, “external players making noise SA5”, “meeting public perception SA24”, “nothing to argue with against what fellow managers have proposed SA10”, “tension between clinicians and non-clinicians RZ43”, “my future not determined by the CE of STHA RZ47”, “only effective mechanism is a political one RZ2” and “disquiet from practice managers and GPs IG3”. The apparent preponderance of the social theme in cause maps is interesting given that the social theme was derived from only one member of the SMT.

The social theme was also reflected in some actions. Some actions were described as “managerial”, for example, “set KPIs HL35”, “capture data for control HL36” and “monitor plan HL34”. Other actions suggested a social dimension, for example, “ensure we are holding hands across the economy HL21”, “make case to MPs RZ3”, “maintain local approach to partnerships IA33” and “involve local politicians IA38”.

Other actions suggested the theme of unknowns, in particular the alternative actions shown in Figure 3-4 which indicate different actions that would lead to a

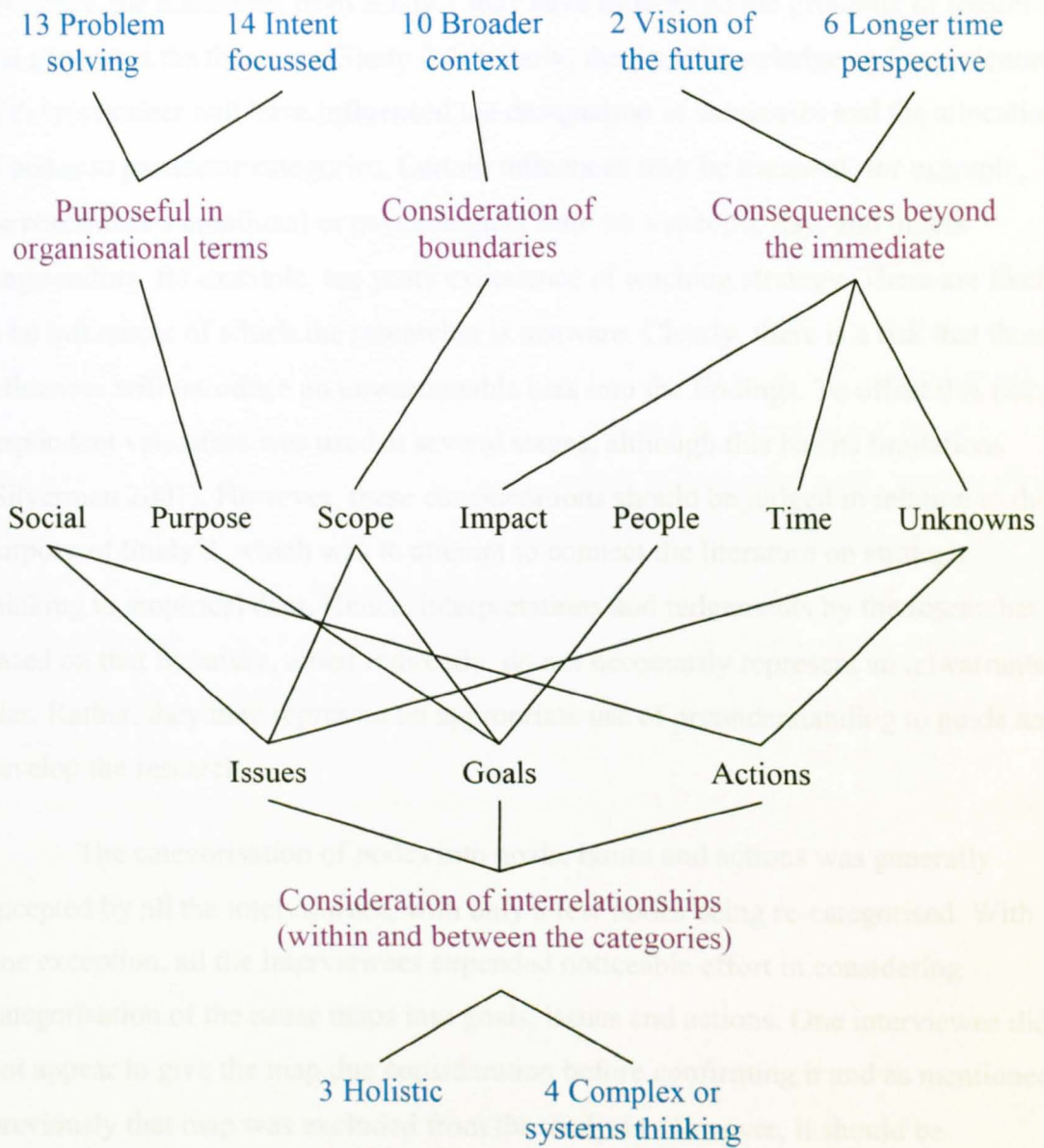
goal. The theme of unknowns was also suggested in a number of issues, “test the assumptions of PCTs HL30”, “uncertainty about the future RZ21”, “unless revolt by backbench MPs RZ34” and “strategic change environment uncertain IA8”.

The theme of time was not well represented in the cause maps, perhaps because the maps did not indicate timings, delays or durations. Similarly, the theme of impact was not well represented in the cause maps. For example, for the four goals “survival of the organisation HL24”, “important for my success HL31”, “best use of resources HL8” and “best fit for the patient HL7” there is no indication of their relative impact. However, the themes of time and impact are in accord with the construct “Consequences beyond the immediate” from Study 1 which would also relate to the theme of unknowns in that consequences that are not immediate are likely to have a degree of uncertainty.

That goals were multiple and linked, that issues and actions occurred in combinations, and that these were linked to goals is in accord with the construct “Consideration of interrelationships” from Study 1. The possible links between the characteristics in Table 2-1, the constructs used in Study 1, the seven reasons given for an issue to be strategic and the three categories found in Study 2 are shown diagrammatically in Figure 3-10.



**Figure 3-10 Links between literature characteristics, Study 1 constructs and Study 2 themes and categories**



Blue: characteristics from the literature

Purple: constructs derived from the literature used in Study 1

Black: themes and categories from Study 2

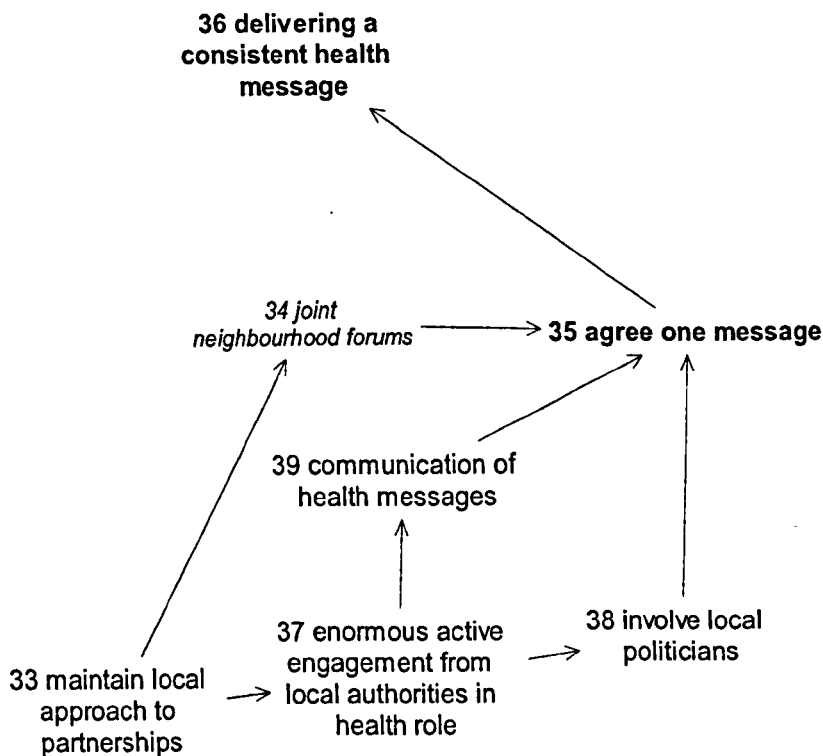
The findings of Study 2 are dependent on the judgement and interpretation of the researcher, and clearly, alternative interpretations are possible. The judgement and interpretations of the researcher are influenced by a number of things. In particular, the constructs from Study 1 may have influenced the grouping of reasons that generated the themes in Study 2. Similarly, the prior knowledge and experience of the researcher will have influenced the designation of categories and the allocation of nodes to particular categories. Certain influences may be transient, for example, the researcher's emotional or psychological state on a specific day, and others longstanding, for example, ten years experience of teaching strategy. There are likely to be influences of which the researcher is unaware. Clearly, there is a risk that these influences will introduce an unwarrantable bias into the findings. To offset this risk, respondent validation was used at several stages, although this has its limitations (Silverman 2001). However, these considerations should be judged in relation to the purpose of Study 2, which was to attempt to connect the literature on strategic thinking to empirical data. Hence, interpretations and judgements by the researcher based on that literature, albeit indirectly, do not necessarily represent an unwarranted bias. Rather, they may represent an appropriate use of preunderstanding to guide and develop the research.

The categorisation of nodes into goals, issues and actions was generally accepted by all the interviewees, with only a few nodes being re-categorised. With one exception, all the interviewees expended noticeable effort in considering categorisation of the cause maps into goals, issues and actions. One interviewee did not appear to give the map due consideration before confirming it and as mentioned previously that map was excluded from the analysis. However, it should be remembered that this validation was retrospective and of course, the research may have had a low priority for the interviewees. What was happening in their lives will affect their engagement with the research and their responses. For example, for one interviewee at the time of an interview, their partner, their son and the interviewee all had significant health problems. These concerns were in addition to those about the future of the organisation and the implications for their employment. With another interviewee, the interview was delayed by thirty minutes because they were engaged in an intense discussion with a member of their staff, with whom they were having

difficulties. When the interview commenced the first thirty minutes involved the interviewee “getting off their chest” the issues to do with the member of staff before the research interview could be conducted. Despite these potential distractions though, most interviewees appeared to be genuinely interested in the research and in providing genuine answers. Feedback from the individual members of the PCT SMT was that they had found the process interesting and useful. Three of the six PCT members commented on the categorisation of cause maps into goals, issues and actions.

IA commented that the categorisation of the map into goals, issues and actions did not reflect “processy stuff” well. IA did not disagree with categorisation of individual nodes, and only asked for three nodes out of forty eight nodes to be re-categorised, but talked about some groups of nodes as “processy stuff” as shown in Figure 3-11. This label seemed to cover a combination of nodes including goals, issues and actions. When asked to elaborate on “processy stuff”, IA said they involved things to be achieved (which would fit the broad interpretation of goals used in Study 2) and tasks (which would fit the broad interpretation of actions used in Study 2). Thus, the comments of IA in relation to the categorisation of nodes suggests that a level of analysis above individual nodes into combinations of nodes would have been appropriate.

**Figure 3-11 Example of "processy stuff" from IA's map**



IG asked for two out of forty one nodes to be re-categorised and commented that a node that was coded as a goal he thought of as an operational milestone towards achieving a goal. This is in accord with the broad interpretation of goal used in the study. IG also commented that some actions have significant duration, for example, twelve months and some goals may extend over time so there may be overlap between actions and goals. This appeared to indicate that the cause maps had not captured some temporal features and reflects the finding that the time theme was not well supported in the cause maps.

SA commented that the cause map divided into two halves. One half he considered as “managerial” with actions leading to goals and involving “planning”. The other half he considered as “political” with issues that need to be navigated through. These political issues and potential associated political actions might not be openly discussed (and hence might not be elicited in research interviews). This difference appeared a revelation to SA. He commented that before the discussion he thought he thought about strategy as “managerial” but now realised he also thought

about strategy as political. Although SA did not ask for any nodes to be re-categorised SA commented that two nodes coded as issues could be interpreted as interim goals or descriptors of steps along the way or as indicators of success.

### **3.3.4 Conclusion**

This research aims to develop an insight into strategic thinking guided by two fundamental questions, “What is strategic thinking?” and “What guidance might a management educator offer to improve strategic thinking?” From a synthesis of the findings of Studies 1 and 2 a tentative framework for strategic thinking can be proposed that is related to the relevant literature but that is also derived from empirical data that has meaning for management practitioners. While based on the findings of Studies 1 and 2, this framework is an elaboration of those findings. Study 2 focussed on a single strategic issue and it is reasonable to assume that a manager will consider more than one strategic issue and that thinking about more than one strategic issue will lead to a greater degree of complexity. Therefore, the tentative framework is elaborated to reflect this greater degree of complexity. Thus, as a tentative framework it is proposed that strategic thinking consists of the following elements:

- Consideration of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or a simple sequence of goals. A goal can be an end in its own right, and also a means to an end within the goal system. A goal system can contain negative goals, which are ends to be avoided. Goals within a given goal system may relate to different entities, for example, supra-organisational, organisational, departmental and personal goals.
- Consideration of a number of patterns of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple list of actions or a single pattern of actions. Patterns of actions have multiple impacts on a number of goals, rather than an impact on a single goal. Patterns of actions may differ because they contain different actions or because they contain the same actions in different arrangements.

- Consideration of combinations of issues rather than single issues. This consideration extends to a diversity of issues, which may be internal or external, and may include supra-organisational, organisational, and personal issues, some of which may have a social dimension. Consideration of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. A combination of issues determines the context for the goal system and context is likely to be related to role. Consideration of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions, including social and political awareness.

As a consequence of the three elements above it follows that strategic thinking will have the additional aspects:

- Consideration of a set of consequences beyond the immediate, which might also be multi-stranded. Immediacy here includes not just a temporal interpretation but also a causal one. Thus, a consequence beyond the immediate might indicate a consequence that occurs a relatively long time after the cause or a consequence that occurs a relatively large number of steps away from the cause.
- Consideration of dilemmas, revealed by considering the goal system, patterns of actions and combinations of issues, and the interrelationships between these, such that there is uncertainty about the right pattern of action.

Studies 1 and 2 were exploratory studies intended to progress the research by developing connections between the literature on strategic thinking and empirical data. The tentative framework outlined above achieves this to an extent. The literature on strategic thinking has three main themes. One literature theme is that strategic thinking is thinking with particular characteristics. The tentative framework connects to this literature to an extent because it is in accord with the tentative constructs in Study 1, which were derived from that literature. A second literature theme is that strategic thinking involves thinking about strategy. The tentative

framework connects to this literature through Study 2, in which insight into an individual's thinking about strategy was gained by generating data about strategic issues. The third literature theme is that strategic thinking is thinking with a particular structure. The tentative framework connects to this literature theme since it suggests strategic thinking as thinking that is structured in terms of goals, issues and actions, and their interrelationships. Since the tentative framework was developed from two empirical studies, it also has clear links to empirical data.

Thus, the tentative framework represents progress in the research in that it provides a tentative answer to the guiding question "What constitutes strategic thinking?" The establishment of the tentative framework also suggests what might be one possible answer to the second guiding question, "What guidance might a management educator offer to improve strategic thinking?" At this stage of the research, having evaluated relevant literature and completed two, exploratory studies what is clear is that this research will not stress the *thinking* element of the term strategic thinking. Accurate access to cognitive processes is difficult but methods such as verbal protocol analysis have been accepted as providing some representation of such processes (Isenberg 1986) and psychometrically robust procedures to research the cognitive processes of strategizing have been proposed (Hodgkinson and Clarke 2007). However, this research is not into managerial cognition with the aim of understanding the mental structures and processes of managers. Rather it focuses on the ways in which the term is represented in the literature and is understood and used by practitioners. While the data generated is considered not to be unrelated to managers' mental structures and processes it is not considered to approach an accurate representation of them (Johnson and Johnson 2002).

An analogy can be drawn with research into systems thinking where the identification of structurally similar systems in different contexts has led systems thinking researchers to consider whether systems thinking can be transferred across contexts (Cavaleri and Sterman 1997; Doyle 1997; Maani and Maharaj 2004). Research into systems thinking encounters tension between studies that involve many dynamic variables that have high external validity but generate limited

understanding and controlled experimental research conducted by psychologists that generate clearer understanding but lack external validity (Doyle 1997; Neisser 1976).

Given that this research aims to develop a bridge between the literature and empirical data, and the substantial inductive aspect of Study 2 in the development of the tentative framework, it would appear appropriate to assess to what extent the tentative framework connects with the literature. Evaluating to what extent the main elements of the framework reflect significant themes in the literature would provide an indication of the framework's external validity and generalisability (Eisenhardt 1989a) and is likely to be an efficient method of progressing the research. This evaluation is undertaken in chapter 4.



## **4 Connecting back to the literature**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In chapter 3 a tentative framework for strategic thinking was proposed following the conclusion of two relatively small empirical studies. Study 1 was more deductive, employing tentative constructs derived from the literature that describes strategic thinking in terms of thinking with particular characteristics. Study 2 was more inductive and considered what managers said in relation to what they considered to be a strategic issue, employing a notion of strategic thinking to be thinking about strategy.

The tentative framework described above is not claimed to be a theory, but it is claimed to be more than a collection of references, data or concepts (Sutton and Staw 1995) and represents a set of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) at an interim stage in theory development. The elements of the framework, goals, issues, and actions are loosely defined and linked by unspecified relationships. The elements of the framework are loosely defined since they are derived from Study 2, which developed a parsimonious set of categories to represent adequately the data in that study. Additionally, the data in Study 2 did not readily permit finer distinctions of categories or relationships between the elements to be established. The intention here is to engage in theory development by a process of attempting to connect the empirical and conceptual worlds (Dubois and Gadde 2002) and hence gain insight from data without neglecting previous research (Denis et al. 2001).

Thus, this chapter has two aims. First, to assess to what extent the framework reflects themes in the strategy literature which will provide an indication of the framework's external validity and generalisability (Eisenhardt 1989a) and by doing so aid cumulative knowledge by building on prior research (Hart 1992). Second, to develop the framework further by considering what finer distinctions or alternative interpretations might be made regarding the elements and what relationships might be suggested between the elements. Consequently, this chapter does not set out to conduct a comprehensive and systematic review of literature (Tranfield et al. 2003) but rather to explore themes in the strategy literature that appear to reflect the

elements of the framework. Each of the elements of the framework, goals, issues and actions, are considered in turn and the chapter concludes by revising the framework as a result of evaluating the literature.

## 4.2 Goals

Goals, as interpreted in the framework in its widest sense to include intentions, aspirations, objectives, targets, vision, and mission, have been a central theme in the strategy literature since the strategy concept's earliest application to modern organisations. As Chandler (1962:13) stated, strategy is concerned with "the long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise" and one of the basic properties of strategy is that it is goal directed (MacCrimmon 1993). Bracker (1980) in his review of the historical development of the strategic management concept discusses strategic management as relating to goals and objectives. Goal formation has been suggested as a central element of strategic decision making (Schwenk 1984), whether decision makers are involved in a systematic process or a more incremental one (Schwenk 1995). Over forty years after Chandler, Jarzabkowski and Fenton (2006) give an emphasis to goals in strategizing. Thus, the centrality of goals to strategy has persisted from the early days of organisational strategy to contemporary literature (Chakravarthy and White 2002). The use of different terms, strategy, strategic management, strategic decision making, and strategizing, illustrate how over this period a number of different conceptualisations of strategy have developed, but goals, as used in the broad sense in this research, have remained a central feature. The persistence of goals as a central theme is perhaps not surprising since the majority of the strategy literature assumes humans are purposeful and employ choice in attempting to realise their goals (Child 1997; Garud and Van de Ven 2002).

This purposeful nature finds clear expression in the strategic planning literature. Strategic planning is related to organizational purpose (Mintzberg 1978) and is concerned with the mission, objectives and aims of the organisation (Pearce et al. 1987). From this perspective, strategy is essentially a way for the organisation to achieve its goals (Anderson 1982) and the primary purpose of the organisation is usually assumed to be related to its financial performance (Anderson 1982; Miller

and Cardinal 1994; Schoeffler et al. 1974). Thus, goals are central to the strategic planning process (Anderson 1982), and adopting a planning approach to strategy requires planning how goals will be achieved (Mintzberg 1994). Within the planning process a goal hierarchy is established in advance of taking action, with the achievement of more clearly defined specific goals leading to the achievement of less clearly defined, broader goals (Quinn 1978).

The notion of less clearly defined, broader goals rather than specific goals finds expression in the entrepreneurial strategy literature. In this literature, strategy is related to vision and direction, and is less about specific goals and more about general direction for the organisation (Mintzberg 1978; 1994). Typically in this view there is a vision, a single shared organisation wide intention (Stacey 1993), and the goals of the organisation are those of the entrepreneur (Simon 1964). Broad visions may be more useful than specifically articulated goals in accommodating environmental changes (Mintzberg 1994). The value of broader goals also finds expression in the notion of strategic intent (Hamel and Prahalad 1989) in which long-term organisational obsessions inspire employees to personal effort and commitment in the pursuit of ambitious goals. However, although achieving the goal hierarchy of a corporate planning system and setting conservative goals are disparaged, these authors still attach importance to establishing specific ends. Both the planning and entrepreneurial approaches could be described as teleological (van de Ven 1992) in which "Changes in organizations are viewed as movements towards a desired purpose, goal, function, or aspiration" (Garud and Van de Ven 2002:211). Thus, the overall direction is specified but goals can change as the vision is pursued.

Both the strategic planning and entrepreneurial literatures assume a degree of consensus on organisational goals and while some literature suggests that goal consensus is important, other literature suggests that a degree of goal diversity may serve the organisation (Bourgeois 1980). Indeed, while the normative strategic planning literature typically recommends goal consensus among the senior management team, goal diversity rather than consensus may be related to higher economic performance (Bourgeois 1985). Further, attempts at developing goal consensus may be counter productive for organisational performance under certain

circumstances (Dess 1987). However, assumptions of goal consensus with the senior management team and the organisation as a whole persist. Even where a diversity of goals from a range of organisational perspectives is acknowledged (Kaplan and Norton 1992), it is assumed that these goals can be integrated coherently (Kaplan and Norton 1993) and that this “integrated set of objectives” be “agreed upon by all senior executives” (Kaplan and Norton 1996:76). Additionally, this perspective has a goal hierarchy of organisational, departmental and individual goals with any lack of agreement resolved by non-political processes of discussion and communication (Kaplan and Norton 1996), underlining the assumption of consensus.

An adaptive (Mintzberg 1978) or dialectic (Garud and Van de Ven 2002; van de Ven 1992) perspective acknowledges the conflicting goals of organisational actors (Mintzberg 1978), the multiple goal structures of organisations (Quinn 1978) and the multiple aspirations of organisational actors (Stacey 1993). Thus, even when strategy develops incrementally it is still purposeful and includes decisions about goals, although the degree to which those goals are specific, fixed and articulated may vary (Quinn 1978). From this perspective, organisations are collectives in which individuals are instrumental in goal formation (Daft and Weick 1984) and disagreement about goals, and the means of achieving those goals are a source of conflict (Schwenk 1995). Strategy therefore, is about attempting to achieve objectives in interaction with or against others (Child 1997). Consequently, goals emerge as a result of constraints and political processes between organisational actors (Ocasio 1997). Thus attempts to describe organisational goals as being unitary either in terms of reflecting a single individual or a group consensus are misguided, presenting an unrealistic description of goals and goal formation in organisations (Cyert and March 1992). These political processes are one factor that prevents organisational actors from establishing a consensus about comprehensive long-term outcomes (Stacey 1995). In addition to the goals of organisational members, dialectic perspectives acknowledge that the organisation reflects the goals of many groups and individuals (Jones 1995), both inside and outside the organisation (Donaldson and Preston 1995), although the external-internal distinction may have limited relevance under certain circumstances (Løwendahl and Revang 1998; Starbuck 2004). Hence, to achieve organisational goals, organisational actors must pay attention to the extent

of the power, legitimacy and urgency of stakeholder interests in the dynamic relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders (Mitchell et al. 1997). Where organisations are working in collaborative groups this may present an extra degree of difficulty (Eden and Huxham 2001).

While tensions over conflicting goals are typical of public sector organisations in general and health care organisations in particular, such conflicts are present to some extent in all organisations (Denis et al. 2007). As more organisations work collaboratively, change their internal arrangements and their relationships to external structures, organisations must increasingly accommodate conflicting goals (Denis et al. 2001). Hence, while this pluralistic view finds little emphasis in the traditional strategy literature it may better reflect the circumstances increasingly faced by modern organisations (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006).

However, while goals, in various manifestations, are reflected in the majority of strategy literature there are other perspectives on strategy in which an emphasis on goals is considered misplaced. An evolutionary perspective recognises that organisations are often slow to change in the face of environmental factors and environmental selection process might better explain organisational change than goal directedness (Hannan and Freeman 1989). Clearly, in an extreme interpretation, this perspective would suggest that the future of an organisation was determined by environmental factors with the intentions of organisational actors having little or no influence. Complexity perspectives on strategy offer perhaps a more balanced view in which the organisation and its environment form a complex and unpredictable system. Hence, organisational actors cannot direct the organisation to its long-term future. However, even from this complexity perspective, goal directedness will play a role in the evolution of the system, and long-term outcomes will be the result of both intention and emergence (Stacey 1995), with goal directedness bringing a degree of stability to the evolutionary process (Chakravarthy and White 2002). A cybernetic critique of goal directed strategy argues that organisations act to avoid negative outcomes, with no clear conception of a future organisational state, rather than to achieve positive goals (Morgan 1983). In this view, apparent patterns of action in support of goals are attempts to work within a set of organisational

constraints (Simon 1964). However, this critique acknowledges that organisational actors act as if they could pursue positive goals (Morgan 1983). Even when strategy is recast as a narrative discourse, the directed nature is retained, “a narrative view of strategy stresses how language is used to create meaning; consequently, it explores ways in which organizational stakeholders create a discourse of direction (whether about becoming, being, or having been) to understand and influence one another’s actions” (Barry and Elmes 1997:432).

Clearly, goals form a central element of the planning, entrepreneurial, adaptive, incremental and dialectic literatures with less importance attached to goals in the evolutionary and complexity literatures. However, even the evolutionary, complexity and narrative discourse literatures acknowledge that even though such intentionality may be misplaced, organisational actors act with intentionality. Thus, whether strategies are deliberate or emergent, some degree of intentionality by organisational actors appears to be present (Wensley 2003), although this intentionality might not be that of the senior management team (Mintzberg and Waters 1985). Even where there is no clearly articulated strategy the intentions of organisational actors are still relevant (Pascale 1984) and strategies may emerge from individuals following their own personal agendas and aspirations (Araujo and Easton 1996).

Consequently, it can be concluded that the goal element of the framework reflects an important, central theme in the literature. Organisational actors act with intentionality, even if this is misguided. Based on a consideration of the literature a number of observations and elaborations with respect to goals can be made. First, goals in a goal system may be quite broad and general or more narrow and specific. Second, goals can be positive, in terms of something to achieve, or negative, in terms of something to avoid. Third, goals are likely to be multiple, and reflect the interests of a number of stakeholders. Hence, goals may be consensual or conflicting. Consensual goals may lead to support from other stakeholders while conflicting goals may lead to resistance from other stakeholders. Thus, an important aspect of the goal element of the framework is an appreciation of the goals of other stakeholders. Fourth, goals may differ in the extent to which they are predetermined

or emergent as a result of constraints and political processes between organisational actors.

However, there is a relationship between goals and issues since which goals might be achieved and how those goals might be achieved changes as attempts are made to resolve issues (Dutton 1986). Thus, organisational performance and outcomes are influenced by the interpretations of issues (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton 1993; Mittal and Ross 1998; Thomas et al. 1993) and intention influences the interpretation of issues (Gioia and Thomas 1996).

### **4.3 Issues**

The most visible discussion of issues in the strategy literature concerns strategic issues. Strategic issues are those trends, developments and events that have significant implications for organisational objectives (Ansoff 1980; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Fox-Wolfgramm et al. 1998) or performance (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton and Ashford 1993; King 1982; Mittal and Ross 1998). Although strategic issues are often considered to be environmental factors (Fox-Wolfgramm et al. 1998) they can originate from both inside and outside the organisation (Ansoff 1980; Dutton and Ottensmeyer 1987; Dutton et al. 1989). An organisation's strategy may develop as the pattern of responses to these internal and external issues over time (Dutton 1986; Dutton and Duncan 1987). Given their potential impact, awareness of strategic issues should be an important concern of strategists (King 1982) and is central to strategic decision making (Dutton et al. 1983).

Although awareness of a strategic issue is likely to be triggered by some inconsistency, imbalance or anticipated performance gap, there are different perspectives on how strategic issues should be incorporated into a strategy process, with both formal and informal mechanisms for dealing with strategic issues (Dutton and Duncan 1987). From one perspective strategic issues should be incorporated into strategic planning processes (King 1982). Alternatively, taking a more adaptive perspective, organisations lacking the necessary resources for strategic planning or whose environments are highly turbulent should employ an ongoing process of managing strategic issues rather than strategic planning (Ansoff 1980). From an

incremental perspective, effective strategies emerge from strategic subsystems that address specific strategic issues (Quinn 1978). From a complexity perspective strategy should be driven by the management of dynamic agendas of strategic issues (Stacey 1993). Thus, a variety of perspectives on strategy incorporate strategic issues into the strategy process.

However, although these different perspectives on strategy acknowledge the importance of strategic issues, it is difficult to identify strategic issues from characteristics other than their impact on organisational goals or performance. Strategic issues are variously described as being controversial, ambiguous, uncertain, incomplete, equivocal, ill defined and conflicting (Bansal 2003; Dutton 1986; Dutton et al. 1983; Dutton and Ottensmeyer 1987; Dutton et al. 1989; King 1982). They are also usually found in combination with and interconnected to other issues (Dutton 1986; Dutton et al. 1989; Thomas et al. 1994). Indeed, it may be that strategy development in organisations is about complex “sets of interconnected issues evolving dynamically over time” (Langley et al. 1995:274) with simple linear models providing a poor description of how issues are addressed (Bansal 2003). Thus, it may be more meaningful to talk about issue combinations being strategic rather single issues. However, appreciating an issue combination containing a large number of issues is difficult since individuals can only pay attention to a limited number of issues (Miller 1956) and their information processing capacity is limited (Dutton et al. 1989). Hence, strategic issues are rarely clear to decision makers, with a high degree of indeterminacy and nonlinearity (Dutton et al. 1983).

Thus, strategic issues are complex and open to multiple interpretations (Bansal 2003; Thomas et al. 1994). Indeed, presented with the same set of circumstances, individuals may interpret an issue differently (Dutton et al. 1983) or even perceive different issues (Eden et al. 1981). Hence, rather than involving objective facts, issues involve individual interpretation (Dutton 1993) influenced by individual interests, beliefs, values, roles, and political and social interactions (Eden et al. 1981). The influence of social interactions means that issue interpretation takes place in a social context (Dutton 1993) with issues being socially legitimised (Dutton and Duncan 1987). Thus, strategic issues have a political dimension (Dutton et al.



1983; Thomas et al. 1994), and political and social interactions may themselves be issues (Eden et al. 1981). A further dimension to the interpretation of issues is that an interpretation of an issue is not fixed and may be reinterpreted over time by individuals (Dutton et al. 1983) and groups (Eden et al. 1981).

However, reinterpretation of an issue might be limited by the categorisation (Rosch 1975; Rosch and Mervis 1975; Tversky and Hemenway 1983) of an issue, for example, as a threat or opportunity (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton and Jackson 1987), or as crisis or non-crisis (Dutton 1986). Classifying an issue into a pre-existing category provides a mental economy (Smith 1995) resulting from automatic processing involving less resource and energy (Dutton 1993). Categorisation is significant because how issues are labelled affects their interpretation (Dutton 1993; Thomas and McDaniel 1990), the categorisation of issues is related to organisational action (Dutton and Jackson 1987), and issues labelled as different types may be processed in different ways (Dutton 1986). Managers tend to employ categories derived from their experience of managerial life and hence the categories found in the literature may not correspond to those found empirically (Dutton et al. 1989; Smith 1995). For example, while strategic issues might be considered to have a political dimension, an empirical study of strategic change in academia found political issues to be a discrete category from strategic issues (Gioia and Thomas 1996).

However, the categorisation, and hence the interpretation of an issue does not occur in isolation and is influenced by the framing of an issue (Dutton et al. 1983) for example as positive or negative (Mittal et al. 2002). Although in the literature the classification of opportunity or threat has been used to describe the *categorisation* of issues (Dutton and Jackson 1987), and also the *framing* of issues (Highhouse et al. 1996; Mittal and Ross 1998) there is an important distinction to be drawn between categorisation and framing. Categorisation refers to the assignment of an issue to a particular cognitive group based on its resemblance to the prototypical member of that group (Rosch and Mervis 1975). Framing refers to the way in which the issue is presented and the background against which the issue is categorised and interpreted

(Tversky and Kahneman 1981). Thus, framing results from not only the content of the issue but the context of the issue (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton and Jackson 1987).

Contextual influences on issue framing can be considered at three levels: institutional; organisational and individual. At the institutional level (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Greenwood and Hinings 1996) there are pressures for isomorphism arising from “political influences and the problem of legitimacy”, “standard responses to uncertainty” and “professionalization” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:150). At the organisational level, influences include organisational strategy, beliefs, ideology, structure, size, inertia, resources, processes, culture, composition of the group, social relationships and prior experience with the type of issue (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton and Duncan 1987; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Ocasio 1997; Thomas et al. 1994). At the individual level, influences include values, education, nationality, role, functional background, affective state and organisational experience (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Thomas et al. 1994). For individuals this context may have quite a transient nature, with their affective state (Mittal and Ross 1998) and their immediate experience before being exposed to the issue (Highhouse et al. 1996) influencing their interpretation of the issue. Hence, because interpretation of an issue is influenced by context (Thomas et al. 1994) it has been suggested that it is beneficial to consider alternative interpretations of an issue (Highhouse et al. 1996) and attempt to avoid interpretations that are highly context dependent (Denison et al. 1996). This may be difficult to achieve since the prominent form of issue diagnosis in strategic decision making is automatic, involving little reflection, rather than involving a conscious search for information and multiple interpretations (Dutton 1993).

Thus, understanding how issues are dealt with by organisations requires not just an appreciation of the structural influences on how issues are attended to by individuals (Ocasio 1997) but also individual concerns and perspectives on issues (Bansal 2003; Thomas and McDaniel 1990; Thomas et al. 1994). This is especially so since perceptions of identity are related to issue interpretation (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Gioia and Thomas 1996) and responses to strategic issues can have personal consequences (Dutton 1986). Consequently, while the categories of

institutional, organisational and individual might be a useful analytical device, what is perhaps more relevant to a situated individual is the interpretive setting that is formed by the interaction of these different levels of context, the content of a specific issue (Thomas et al. 1994) and the network of issues that evolve dynamically (Langley et al. 1995). Attempts to categorise as either issue or contextual factor that frames an issue may be misguided since for a situated individual the distinction may not be meaningful. Any particular item may at the same time be an issue and also be part of the issue combination that frames the interpretation of this and other items. This is not to say that a situated individual cannot reflect on the source of the issue, say from the institutional, organisational, or individual context, or that an observer might not apply different contextual levels as a useful analytical device. Rather it is to suggest that the interpretive setting for issue framing is the combination of issues themselves.

In responding to an issue an individual can only invest time, energy and resources in a limited number of issues, and in which issues an individual will invest will be influenced by an assessment of the characteristics of an issue (Dutton et al. 1989). These characteristics may include: importance, immediacy and uncertainty (Dutton 1986); feasibility and urgency (Dutton and Duncan 1987); immediacy, magnitude, locus and controllability (Dutton et al. 1989); value, legitimacy and relevance (Ocasio 1997); and capability to address the issue (Mittal et al. 2002). Making a commitment to respond to a given issue may result in actions to block or support other issues (Dutton and Webster 1988).

Consequently, it can be concluded that the issues element of the framework reflects an important, central theme in the strategy literature. Whether issues are formally incorporated into a strategic planning approach or informally incorporated as the organisation responds to a dynamic agenda of issues, issues and their resolution are a significant aspect of strategy development. Based on the literature a number of observations and elaborations with respect to issues can be made. First, issues can arise from either the external or internal context. Second, since strategic issues are ill defined it may be more practical to focus on issues that have impact on the goal system rather than to attempt to identify strategic issues in isolation. Third,

strategic issues do not occur in the singular but rather in combination with interconnections between issues in the combination. Fourth, issues are not fixed and objective but may change and be reinterpreted over time. Fifth, categorisation of issues is a significant process and categories found in the literature may not be those found empirically. The categorisation of an issue may lead to automatic, unreflective processing of the issue and hence it may be beneficial to minimise the unreflective categorisation of issues. Sixth, framing of issues is also significant and is influenced by affective state, experienced immediately prior to exposure to the issue, and the context. However, for the situated individual, the context that frames an issue is the combination of issues themselves. Thus, since highly context dependent framing may lead to unreflective processing of issues it may be beneficial to consider alternative interpretations of issues. Seventh, individual, as well as organisational concerns are important in understanding responses to issues since such responses require personal investment of time, energy, and resources. Eighth, issue characteristics influence responses to issues and those characteristics found in the literature may not be those found empirically.

However, there is a relationship between issues and action since the commitment of managerial and organisational resources in responding to issues (Dutton and Duncan 1987; Dutton et al. 1989) produces a pattern of actions that can be interpreted as a strategy (Dutton 1986; Langley et al. 1995). The actions taken, and hence the strategy, will be influenced by those issues to which attention is paid (Ocasio 1997), how those issues are categorised (Bansal 2003; Dutton and Jackson 1987), how those issues are framed in terms of the interpretation of the situation in which organisational actors find themselves (Denison et al. 1996; Dutton et al. 1983; Thomas et al. 1993), and any patterns of action that might be already legitimised in the context (Ocasio 1997).

## 4.4 Actions

Action is an important aspect of strategy since organisations are a nexus for human action (Starbuck 1983; Tsoukas and Chia 2002) which may be collective action in pursuit of a common purpose (Mintzberg and McHugh 1985; Ocasio 1997).

Where such action forms patterns with coherence or consistency over time it may be interpreted as a strategy (Araujo and Easton 1996; Chakravarthy and White 2002; Mintzberg and Waters 1985). Indeed, “There is near unanimity that whatever else strategy may be thought to be, it certainly is *consistent corporate action over time*” (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002:422) (Emphasis in the original). That organisational performance is influenced by the actions of organisational actors (Dutton and Jackson 1987; Thomas et al. 1993) and that a manager’s role involves taking action and facilitating action by others (Brunsson 1982; Isenberg 1984) are central assumptions in the strategy literature. In keeping with this, one focus for the study of strategy is actions taken and the processes by which those actions come about (Chaffee 1985; Dess 1987; van de Ven 1992). A pattern of actions can be envisioned as arising in a number of ways. From a deliberate overarching intention that is realised, emerging as a consistency of actions over time with no overarching intention (Mintzberg and Waters 1985), or even as the result of “habituated tendencies and internalized dispositions” without requirement for the intentions of organisational actors (Chia and MacKay 2007:217). Hence, an emphasis on actions rather than decisions is more valid because actions may not be the result of decisions, decisions could be interpreted as part of a larger set categorised as actions, and decisions are more difficult to identify and trace empirically (Brunsson 1982; Chakravarthy and White 2002; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985; Mintzberg and Waters 1990).

If strategy is the result of the actions and inter-actions of organisational actors, then an important focus for the study of strategy should be those actions and inter-actions (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). However, the notion of action is poorly defined in the strategy literature (Bouchikhi et al. 1997) and can include speaking (Weber and Glynn 2006) or even inaction in response to events (Starbuck 1983). Thus, there remains a difficulty in establishing which actions of which organisational actors are consequential for strategy (Burgelman and Grove 1996; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). One notable contribution classifies the action of managers as either symbolic or instrumental in responding to strategic issues (Dutton 1986). In this view instrumental action involves, for example, the allocation of resources, while symbolic action demonstrates to stakeholders managerial competency in dealing with

issues, thus preserving the illusion of control and meaningful action (Dutton 1986). However, if symbolic action can be used to initiate strategic change (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991) then symbolic action could be considered to be instrumental in certain instances. Hence, the distinction between instrumental and symbolic action might be difficult to maintain empirically. Thus, the traditional strategy literature has provided limited insight into the nature of such action and how such action relates to organisational outcomes (Johnson et al. 2003).

While there is general agreement that the actions of organisational actors are consequential for strategy and organisational outcomes, there is debate regarding the processes by which actions come about, in particular the extent to which thought or decision making precede action (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002; Weber and Glynn 2006; Weick 1983). Actions may be driven by the intentions of organisational actors (Dutton and Jackson 1987), for example in the linking of individual actions to corporate goals (Kaplan and Norton 1993), or may be the result of action programmes continuing “on automatic” (Starbuck 1983). At one extreme actions are seen as deliberate, methodical and sequential as in a linear, planned approach to strategy (Andersen 2000; Chaffee 1985). At the other extreme organisational systems and procedures are seen to generate action in an automatic and unreflective way, with the benefits of those actions poorly articulated, understood or even considered (Cohen et al. 1972; Starbuck 1983). However, accepting that action occurs without a thorough consideration of alternative actions and their relative impact on goals (Brunsson 1982) does not necessarily mean accepting that all human action in organisations lacks intention. For example, although Chia and MacKay (2007) argue that most human action takes place in a form of *mindless coping*, they still consider such mindless coping to be purposive, but not necessarily with an overall goal in mind. Similarly, although Cohen, March et al (1972:1) emphasise the random and emergent nature of action in organisations, the use of phrases such as “trial and error” and “discovering preferences” suggests a degree of purposefulness in action. Thus, patterns of action can form despite managerial intentions but reflecting the intentions of some organisational actors (Andersen 2000; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985). Hence, it may be that in practice, action occurs in both a routine, habitual and unreflective way and also in a more considered, reflective way (Ocasio 1997) and

that strategy is developed via both emergent and planned actions (Chaffee 1985; Chakravarthy and White 2002) with the relative importance of each being influenced by context (Andersen 2000).

So strategy may emerge through mindless coping, a dwelling or being in the world with an absorbed intentionality that has no prior mental representation (Chia and Holt 2006); through actions arising from habituated tendencies and internalized dispositions rather than from deliberate, purposeful goal-setting initiatives (Chia and MacKay 2007). The primary mode of strategy may be a purposive mode with the purposeful mode becoming more prominent when there is a dislocation of expectations (Chia and Holt 2006) which may cause a switch from automatic processing to more conscious engagement (Louis and Sutton 1991; Ocasio 1997).

In one interpretation, approaching action in a reflective way involves charting a course of action (Peteraf and Shanley 1997) from a repertoire of available action alternatives (Ocasio 1997). To do this requires making sense of complex situations in order to begin to formulate alternative courses of action (Dutton et al. 1983; Thomas et al. 1993) which may be evaluated against criteria, including goals (Brunsson 1982). Attempting to identify the correct course of action may present something of a dilemma, since adopting one course of action may rule out alternative courses of action (Ocasio 1997) but the potential for action is dissipated by considering alternatives. This is because considering alternatives increases the uncertainty of any one choice and will tend to reduce commitment to any given alternative (Brunsson 1982). However, it may not be necessary to attempt to identify a single, correct course of action since a number of alternative courses of action may lead to the achievement of the desired outcome (Dess 1987; van de Ven 1992).

Further, given that action requires motivation and commitment (Brunsson 1982; Mintzberg 1994), what may be more important than identifying a single, correct course of action is a recognition of political factors and how powerful stakeholders might respond to a course of action (Child 1997). In order to do this an organisational actor would require an appreciation of the actions of others and how their own actions relate to the actions of others, whether they are supportive or antagonistic (Weick and Roberts 1993; Wensley 2003). Hence, a course of action

may be determined by the elimination of alternatives as a result of political and other constraints (Morgan 1983).

However, the extent to which an individual can consider alternative courses of action and the constraints on those courses of action, is limited by individuals' bounded capacity to be rational (Cyert and March 1992) and limits to attention (Miller 1956) which constrain the number of alternative actions they consider, the understanding of the consequences of their actions and how the consequences will be valued (Ocasio 1997). Thus, action may be taken to increase understanding (Isenberg 1984; 1986) rather than from the confidence of understanding, since taking action creates new data which may increase understanding (Dutton and Duncan 1987; Weick et al. 2005). For example, action may be taken to explore and experiment rather than implement a preconceived, fully developed strategy (Johnson 1988). This is perhaps more akin to navigating or even retro-plotting a course of action rather than charting one. From this perspective, action expresses current cause-effect beliefs and tests existing knowledge structures, enabling them to be revised as a result of the interpretation of the outcomes of that action (Barr et al. 1992; Weick et al. 2005). This may be significant since the relationship between means and ends changes as action is taken (Dutton 1986) particularly in pluralistic contexts where the legitimacy of those taking the action may be questioned by powerful constituencies (Denis et al. 2001).

Clearly, although organisational action is influenced by an organisational actor's interpretations (Child 1997; Dutton et al. 1989; Hambrick 2007; Hambrick and Mason 1984), in addition to individual influences such as mindsets, class, occupational background, nationality, competence and education (Child 1997), the characteristics of a situation will influence action. For example, when time pressure is high, individuals may opt for swift action and limit the amount of analysis of a situation (Dutton et al. 1983). Thus, actions are not predictable from just individual characteristics but are influenced by specific organisational context, the environmental context and the particular situation (Dutton 1986; Ocasio 1997).

These contextual influences can be considered at different levels. A number of influences can be identified at a supra-organisational level. These include inter-



organisational imitation (Haunschild 1993), the institutional field (Araujo and Easton 1996; Barley and Tolbert 1997), strategic group membership (Peteraf and Shanley 1997), the history of the organisation's environment (Ocasio 1997) and the membership of networks (Madhavan et al. 1998). However, there are differences in the actions that organisations take when exposed to similar circumstances (Barr et al. 1992) and hence there must also be influences at the organisational level. At the organisational level, influences that guide interpretation and hence action include the organisational paradigm (Johnson 1992), organisational routines and shared mindsets (Amburgey and Miner 1992), internal selection processes (Burgelman 1994), organisational culture (Araujo and Easton 1996) and organisational history (Ocasio 1997). Thus, action is bounded by the cognitive, material and relational structures within organisations (Child 1997) and the institutional context makes some actions unthinkable and others self-evident (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Weber and Glynn 2006).

However, the relationship between context and action has been under-researched (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Weber and Glynn 2006) and two aspects in particular. First, contexts are typically viewed as constraining action but by providing the resources and rules for action, contexts can be enabling in terms of actions (Whittington 1988; 2006). Second, the recursive nature of the relationship, such that action is influenced by context but that action in turn influences context (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Child 1997; Ghoshal and Bartlett 1994; Whittington 2006). The influence of action on context may extend to intentions to change context (Lawrence 1999) or to produce contexts that are more conducive to future action (Madhavan et al. 1998).

Thus, a number of factors, individual and contextual, are likely to have consequences for managerial discretion or latitude for action (Hambrick 2007) and action is not explainable in terms of either the context nor the individuals interpretation but some combination of the two (Child 1997; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). Thus, action is neither purely voluntary nor determined and in practice courses of action may be the result of exogenous structural factors that dispose individuals to particular courses of action (Chia and MacKay 2007) and individual

mechanisms which give preference to particular courses of action (Whittington 1988).

Consequently, it can be concluded that the actions element of the framework reflects an important theme in the strategy literature. A fundamental assumption is that although a pattern of actions over time can develop by different mechanisms, that pattern of actions can be interpreted as a strategy. Based on the literature a number of observations and elaborations with respect to actions can be made. First, literature that classifies actions is relatively scarce and those classifications found in the literature, for example, symbolic or instrumental, may not be empirically valid. Second, patterns of actions can arise in a number of ways. This may be as a premeditated sequence of actions that is realised or as an emergent sequence of actions without premeditation of the whole sequence. In both instances intentionality plays a part, either as an overarching intention of senior management or as the more localised intention of organisational actors. Third, action may occur in a habitual, unreflective manner or in a more considered, reflective manner. A reflective manner may involve formulating and evaluating alternative courses of action. There may not be a single correct course of action and a number of alternative courses of action may lead to the same outcome. Fourth, to be successful a course of action requires commitment and motivation. Fifth, consequently, courses of action should reflect political and other constraints and the responses of stakeholders, in particular to what extent stakeholders will be supportive or antagonistic. Sixth, action may be taken to explore and increase understanding because of individuals' cognitive limitations, uncertainty of stakeholder responses and information scarcity. In such instances reflective thinking may occur as action is taken or retrospectively. Seventh, there will be both individual and contextual factors that influence action but the relationship is recursive such that action may change both individual and contextual factors.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

The elements of the framework reflect important themes in the strategy literature and a number of examples of relationships between these themes are evident in the literature. Ends (goals) and means (actions) are interactive components

of strategy (Bourgeois 1980; Dess 1987; Mintzberg and Waters 1985). The interpretation of strategic issues has consequences for patterns of action and organisational performance (Denison et al. 1996) and the achievement of organisational goals. Interpretation is constrained by the context of goals human actors attempt to achieve and thus action derives from the framework of meaning ascribed by organisational members (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Strategy is concerned with goals, issues and actions (Eden 1990) or ends, means and conditions (MacCrimmon 1993).

The framework as developed thus far consists of three elements with relationships between the three elements. While relationships between the elements are proposed these relationships are not tightly specified. For example, goals may be set before action is taken or may emerge as a consequence of action. Similarly, issues may arise as action is taken or may determine what action is taken. A particular combination of issues may result in the setting of certain goals or particular goals may result in the highlighting of certain issues. What is suggested is that the nature of the three elements and the nature of the relationships between the elements will vary from setting to setting. The framework is therefore proposed as a framework for strategic thinking since it contains the appropriate elements and relationships. The framework is also proposed as framework for exploring strategic thinking since the nature of those elements and relationships will vary from setting to setting.

Based on a consideration of the strategy literature a revised provisional framework for strategic thinking can be suggested:

- Appreciation of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or a simple sequence of goals. A goal can be an end in its own right, and a means to an end within the goal system. A goal system can contain negative goals, which are ends to be avoided. Goals within a given goal system may relate to different entities, for example, supra-organisational, organisational, departmental and personal goals. Goals may be broad and general or more narrow and specific. Goals may be consensual or

conflicting. Hence, an appreciation of a goal system involves an appreciation of the goals of other stakeholders.

- Appreciation of a number of patterns of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple list of actions or a single pattern of actions. Patterns of actions have multiple impacts on a number of goals, rather than an impact on a single goal. Patterns of actions may differ because they contain different actions or because they contain the same actions in different arrangements. Patterns of actions may be premeditated or emergent and action may be taken to explore and increase understanding. Appreciation of patterns of action may involve formulating and evaluating alternative courses of action or reflecting on the consequences of actions taken.
- Appreciation of combinations of interrelated issues rather than single issues. This appreciation extends to a diversity of issues, which may be internal or external, and may include supra-organisational, organisational, and personal issues, some of which have a social dimension. Appreciation of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. A combination of issues determines the context for the goal system and patterns of action. Appreciation of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions, including social and political awareness. This appreciation also involves reflection on how issues might be framed, categorised and reinterpreted over time.

As a consequence of the three elements above it follows that strategic thinking will have the additional aspects.

- Appreciation of a set of consequences beyond the immediate, which might also be multi-stranded. Immediacy here includes not just a temporal interpretation but also a causal one. Thus, a consequence beyond the immediate might indicate a consequence that occurred a

relatively long time after the cause or a consequence a relatively large number of steps away from the cause.

- Appreciation of dilemmas, revealed by considering the goal system, patterns of actions and combinations of issues, and the interrelationships between these, such that there is uncertainty about the right pattern of action.
- Motivation to take action since this may be necessary to resolve uncertainty as a result of cognitive limitations, uncertainty of stakeholder responses and information scarcity.

Using the tentative framework as a guide this chapter has evaluated three major themes in the strategy literature, relating to goals, issues and actions. These are principally discrete themes in the extant literature and the synthesis of them in this chapter represents a notable contribution to the field. This contribution is doubly notable because the conceptual integration achieved in this chapter is directly related to earlier empirical studies. Thus, the provisional framework achieves not only a valuable conceptual integration but also a connection between the academic world of literature and the empirical world of management practice that is lacking in much published work on strategic thinking. The next chapter considers how to further develop the research by connecting this provisional framework with empirical data.

# 5 Connecting back to the empirical: Study 3

## 5.1 Introduction

This research is guided by two questions, “What is strategic thinking?” and “What guidance might a management educator offer to improve strategic thinking?” In addressing these questions this research attempts to connect the conceptual world of academic literature and an empirical world of practice employing the development of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) as a bridging mechanism. It attempts to do this by taking relatively small, incremental steps in theory development which is grounded in both the literature and empirical data. Thus, the research developed in a number of stages, each of which had an orientation primarily towards either an empirical or theoretical world. The first stage involved an evaluation of the literature relating to strategy and strategic thinking. The second stage involved a small deductive empirical study (Study 1) using a number of constructs derived from the strategic thinking literature to analyse the transcripts of interviews with two directors. The third stage involved a larger, more inductive empirical study (Study 2) based on what issues the individual members of a senior management team of a Primary Care Trust considered to be strategic and why, and what they had been thinking individually about the most strategic of those issues. A consideration of the findings from Study 1 and Study 2, in particular apparent similarities, led to the development of a tentative framework for strategic thinking comprising an appreciation of goals, actions, issues and their interrelationships. The framework at this stage was considered tentative because the elements of the framework were loosely defined and the relationships between the elements were unspecified. The fourth stage involved using the labels attached to the elements of the framework to review the strategy literature. This fourth stage had three purposes: first, to assess to what extent the elements of the framework reflected themes in the strategy literature and hence to what extent the tentative framework might have validity beyond the contexts from which it was developed; second, to identify what finer distinctions or alternative interpretations of the elements of the framework might be suggested by the literature; and third, to assess what relationships between the elements might be suggested by the literature.

At the end of the fourth stage the tentative framework was modified as a result of reviewing the literature and the modified framework suggested as a provisional framework for strategic thinking. This is not in a highly definitive sense, since precisely what the terms goals, issues and actions mean, and the relationships between these elements may differ from setting to setting. Rather, as a result of considering the literature, the provisional framework is argued to be an instrument for exploring strategic thinking in different settings that while synthesising major themes in the strategy literature is also sensitive to how those themes might be interpreted by different individuals and in different settings. Thus, a fundamental consideration at this stage of the research is how best to employ the provisional framework to connect back to empirical data to explore strategic thinking in a different setting from the ones in which the framework was developed.

This chapter reviews and evaluates possible alternative ways of connecting with empirical data, and the issues associated with those alternatives, to justify a way to progress the research. In particular it considers to what extent theory testing would be appropriate and concludes that it would be inappropriate at this stage of the research because the framework represents an interim stage of theory development. The chapter also draws attention to the fact that theory testing is usually in the context of naive empirical or scientific realism and that because management research is pluralist and relativistic in nature it need not conform to this type of positivist epistemology. One result of the rejecting a positivist epistemology is an acceptance that the findings may reflect part of a larger discourse of strategy rather than representing phenomena that have an existence independent of that discourse. However, this acceptance is not problematic since one aspect of this research is to study how the term strategic thinking is understood and used by practitioners, essentially to accept that discourse as legitimate. The chapter concludes by arguing that theory building is the appropriate way to progress the research at this stage. Claims to generalise from the research will be in terms of highlighting relevant concepts that might have wider applicability rather than with reference to a universal realist ontology.

## 5.2 Evaluating the option of testing the provisional framework

One way to progress the research would be to treat the provisional framework as a provisional theory and subject that theory to empirical testing, in a form of deductive research. Empirical testing of theories is important to distinguish scientific knowledge from unsubstantiated beliefs. For example, it is argued that theories of competitive advantage that are not empirically testable are more a matter of unsubstantiated belief than scientific knowledge (Powell 2001). One method of conducting such testing would be to derive a number of hypotheses and questions relating to the framework, administer a questionnaire based on those questions, and perform a statistical analysis of the results to conclude if the hypotheses were supported. Since measurement and statistical testing are more rigorous criteria than attributes such as plausibility, intuitive appeal, aesthetic appeal and apparent completeness (Camerer 1985) empirical testing that uses statistical methods might produce a theory of strategic thinking that is apparently better substantiated. However, this type of testing assumes that the framework and relevant questions can be operationalised in a way that provides data that is amenable to statistical analysis, which may not be possible. Alternatively, qualitative testing could be conducted involving the derivation of a number of qualitative propositions from the framework, collection of relevant qualitative data, through for example interviews, and subsequent analysis of the data to assess to what extent the propositions are supported.

However, while theory testing is important (Hodgkinson et al. 2001) it is important to appreciate that a theory cannot be proven by empirical testing. Irrespective of the outcome of any test it is impossible to conclusively prove a theory since it is logically impossible to generalise universally from a finite number of test results (Johnson and Duberley 2000). Further, empirical data may be consistent with a number of alternative theories (Godfrey and Hill 1995; Seth and Zinkhan 1991) and even when data is inaccurate, plausible theories can be offered to explain the data (Starbuck 2004). Testing the provisional framework would not therefore prove it as a theory of strategic thinking.



Hence, because of the impossibility of proving theories, theory testing involves a hypothetical-deductive method and a principle of falsification as expounded by Popper, which involves refutation rather than affirmation of theories (Crotty 1998). It is argued that the better strategy theories, and presumably theories of strategic thinking, are those that can be refuted by empirical testing (Montgomery et al. 1989) in contrast to those that are un-testable or tautological (Powell 2002). That is, a set of conditions can be envisaged and realised under which a propositional statement derived from a theory can be tested against the behaviour of the empirical referents of that propositional statement. If the behaviour of the empirical referents agrees with the propositional statement then, while the theory is not proven, it can be considered valid to the extent that it has not been refuted. If the behaviour of the empirical referents does not agree with the propositional statement the theory may be refuted by this single test. Thus, it could be argued that the provisional framework would represent a better theory of strategic thinking if it were subject to and passed a test of empirical refutation.

However, when considering empirical refutation it is important to appreciate its limitations. Refutation of a theory by empirical testing is fallible since operationalisation of the propositional statement may be invalid (Seth and Zinkhan 1991). For example, proxy variables may be used (such as prior involvement in complex projects as a proxy for knowledge based resources) that may not be valid measures for the underlying constructs (Hoskisson et al. 1999). Additionally, the empirical referents of theories may be unobservable because either the research instrumentation does not have the necessary sensitivity or the research process changes the behaviour of the empirical referents (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992; Godfrey and Hill 1995; Thorngate 1976). Further, the empirical conditions may be sufficiently open that mechanisms and structures, other than the one reflected in the theory under test, affect the behaviour of the empirical referents (Bhaskar 1978; 1989). Thus, while theory testing is important, neither conclusive confirmation nor refutation of theory is possible (Kwan and Tsang 2001; Mahoney 1993). Given that the provisional framework is proposed as an interim stage in theory development and that neither conclusive theory confirmation nor refutation is possible, empirical testing of the framework would appear inappropriate, at least at this stage.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that discussion of theory confirmation and refutation are usually in the context of a naive empirical or scientific realism, in which theory-independent sense data are observed by value-neutral researchers (Reed 2005b). This type of positive epistemology has influenced a strong theme in traditional strategy research (Bettis 1991), which presents a world composed of second-order constructs (for example markets and strategies) that are detached from the subjective experience of the inhabitants of that world (Knights 1992; Knights and Mueller 2004). For example, the argument that the deductive use of mathematics and economic concepts is the best way to answer (and ask) corporate strategy questions and that research should aim to understand causal relationships has been made (Camerer 1985). This influence may have arisen as a move towards more deductive, positivist studies based on Industrial Organisation theory and related economic theories gave strategy research a more scientific appearance and hence more credibility as an academic subject (Hoskisson et al. 1999).

However, the philosophical basis of strategy research and intellectual foundations of the field are not unitary (Arend 2003; Powell 2002; 2003) resulting in fragmentation and a lack of consensus, considered an obstacle to the advancement of knowledge (Pfeffer 1993). It is even suggested that fragmentation may lead to the disintegration of strategy as a field of knowledge (Hambrick 2004). Proposals have been made to remedy this situation, for example the formation of an elite group to police quality standards (Pfeffer 1993), the use of systematic literature reviews (Tranfield et al. 2003), or the production of integrative frameworks to reduce fragmentation (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006).

### **5.3 Implications of the pluralist and relativist nature of management research**

On the other hand, a lack of consensus on the basis for research and its conduct may be an inevitable consequence of the nature of the object of study, which is unstable and open to multiple interpretations (Pettigrew 2001; Whitley 1984a). Instability arises from the difficulty in generating closed systems in social research (Whitley 1984b) and the likelihood that the research process changes the behaviour

of the persons being studied or the social structures in which they operate (Tsang and Kwan 1999). Multiple interpretations are a consequence of historical and social factors concerning the production and validation of knowledge, which produce a lack of consensus on what constitutes scientific knowledge and the basis for research and its conduct (Starbuck 2004; Tranfield et al. 2003; Tranfield and Starkey 1998; Whitley 1984a). As a result of these historical and social factors the application of the natural science model of the advancement of knowledge to management research is argued to be untenable (Susman and Evered 1978; Tsang and Kwan 1999; Whitley 1984b).

Consequently, since there is no absolute foundation for truth in the social sciences (Pettigrew 2001), it has been argued that strategy research need not conform exclusively to a positivist philosophy of science (Powell 2002) and that a plurality of philosophical positions enables new knowledge to be generated from the insights gained from multiple perspectives, rather than being constrained by a single perspective (Cannella Jr. and Paetzold 1994; Inkpen and Choudhury 1995). For example, it has been argued that traditional strategy theories misrepresent the pluralist nature of organisations and alternative theoretical foundations for the study of strategy have been suggested (Denis et al. 2007). This argument is in essence that while progress may be achieved by paradigmatic “normal” science (Kuhn 1996) it may also be achieved in a field of knowledge where there is no single accepted paradigm for science (Mahoney 1993). Thus, developing further the connection between a theoretical description of strategic thinking and its empirical occurrence need not adopt a positivist model of the advancement of knowledge since there are a number of alternative philosophical positions that are acknowledged. Even so, what is important is recognition that alternative positions carry with them different assumptions on which research is based, imply different consequences for the claims that can be made about knowledge from research and may be to some degree mutually incompatible (Deetz 1996; Willmott 1993). Thus, to ensure that this research can justifiably claim to produce warranted knowledge it is important that the research overall has a consistency and coherence and that the assumptions underlying the research are made explicit, since these assumptions vary with different positions taken towards the conduct of research.

Hence, although the notion of rational, objective knowledge is appealing (Blackler 1993) scientific knowledge cannot be authoritative or absolute, since it is itself an outcome of social practices, incorporating presuppositions about the nature of the world (Whitley 1984b). Management knowledge is relativistic and political (Reed 2005b), is driven, to a greater or lesser extent, by theory (Montgomery et al. 1989; Siggelkow 2007), and is influenced by the values of the researcher, even to the extent of what topics are worthy of study and how those topics are framed (Mir and Watson 2000; Pettigrew 1997; Pozzebon 2004; Starbuck 2004; Whitley 1984b). For example, a strategy discourse in organisations, business schools, consultants and wider society leads to both problems and solutions conceived with reference to that discourse (Knights and Morgan 1991). Strategy is seen as a natural part of managerial life (Knights and Morgan 1991) and organisations are assumed to have a strategy (Inkpen and Choudhury 1995) even if it is an unrealised one (Mintzberg and Waters 1985). Clearly, as a strategy scholar, the researcher is embedded in a strategy discourse which includes assumptions which are manifest in this research. For example, in both Study 1 and Study 2 it is assumed that the individuals involved will exhibit the phenomenon of strategic thinking. Similarly, when attempting to generate categories to code the constructs in Study 2, the final constructs are influenced by the previous knowledge and experience of the researcher, their preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000).

If the values and preunderstanding of the researcher, and the discourse within which the research is embedded are highly influential, it could be argued that the objects of study are mental and social constructions rather than real phenomenon (Starbuck 2004) and that phenomena do not exist independently but are constructed by researchers and the research process (Contu and Willmott 2005; Mir and Watson 2000). Thus, strategy researchers are not objective observers of phenomena but through their research interactions with practitioners, their publications and teaching they influence the process of institutionalising a strategy field which influences the very phenomena they wish to study, indeed they are part of the phenomenon itself (Knights 1992; Mir and Watson 2000). In this research using the provisional framework as a basis for exploring strategic thinking, while not determining the findings, will influence what data will be generated and how it will be interpreted.

Additionally, merely disclosing the topic of the research to a participant is likely to influence the data the participant provides. Thus, the findings of this research will be in part constructed by the researcher and the research process.

However, whether the phenomena of management research have an independent existence or only have existence as social constructions within a discourse (Contu and Willmott 2005; Reed 2005b) does not deny some form of existence. For example, even if the phenomenon of competitive advantage has no independent existence it has a social reality because of its consequences in terms of research, teaching and practice (Powell 2001). Similarly, a particular strategy is a social reality in so far as organisational actors behave as if it were real (Denis et al. 2007). This is not to argue necessarily that there can be no reference to a reality that exists independently of social practices (Reed 2005b) or that we cannot hope to achieve a progressively better understanding of organisational reality (Mir and Watson 2001; Tsang and Kwan 1999) and the nature of structures and mechanisms that might account for organisational phenomena (Reed 2005a; 2005b). The acknowledgement of a transitive dimension of knowledge does not necessarily exclude an intransitive dimension (Bhaskar 1989). What is contended is that for the purpose of this research it may be irrelevant whether the phenomenon of strategic thinking exists outside the discourse that contains it. What is relevant is that those involved in the discourse behave as if the phenomenon of strategic thinking existed, as if it is of importance and that it has consequences; "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572) cited in (Merton 1995).

Thus, although modernist perspectives on management research are still evident, more relativist perspectives which suggest that our knowledge about a possible intransitive reality is uncertain and open to an indefinite number of fallible representations (Allard-Poesi 2005; Contu and Willmott 2005; Thomas and Thomas 1928) are also acknowledged (Pettigrew 2001). Particularly in a world of increasing complexity in which knowledge is increasingly local, unique and transient (Løwendahl and Revang 1998), modernist perspectives on management research

would appear to be of limited relevance (Huff 2001) and valid management research may be explanatory or interpretive, rather than predictive (Tsang and Kwan 1999).

Hence, if there is no uncontested basis for the conduct of management research then valid research does not necessarily entail the search for predictive general laws with universal applicability as is the case for natural science. For example, single case studies with minimal claims to generalisation can highlight relevant concepts and hence offer normative suggestions without precise prescription (Hoskisson et al. 1999). Similarly, description of organisational phenomenon, identification of patterns in data, understanding what managers do and how they do it may constitute valid research without the need for theoretical explanation (Hambrick 2004).

However, rejecting the positivist notion of progress towards an understanding of universal laws should not lead to extreme relativism which gives all descriptions equal credibility and limits conclusions of research to specific contexts (Tsang and Kwan 1999). Transparency and reflection on the underlying foundations for research should enable the research to be contested, evaluated for quality and placed in its context such that any claims to generality can be evaluated (Mir and Watson 2001; Pettigrew 2001) and reducing the risk of overstating the generality of the findings (Starbuck 2004; Tsang and Kwan 1999). Claiming that the provisional framework is a general framework for strategic thinking could be considered to be overstating the generality of the framework, given that it was developed from small data sets in three specific contexts. It is important to recognise though that a claim for generality is supported by the use of literature both before and after the empirical stages of the research. It is also important to recognise that while the provisional framework is argued to be a relatively simple and general framework for strategic thinking it is not claimed to be accurate to specific settings (Starbuck 2004; Thorngate 1976; Weick 1999). To increase the accuracy of the framework while maintaining its simplicity would involve establishing tighter specifications for the meanings of the elements and relationships between the elements in a specific setting, hence making the framework less general.

Evaluating the generality of the provisional framework would involve evaluating to what extent the findings were common to different settings, by reference to the literature or by further empirical work. Since in the social sciences many conditions are impossible to control it is reasonable to argue that no two social settings are identical. However, it is also plausible to argue that when two social settings have a substantial degree of conditions in common (Tsang and Kwan 1999) such commonality can be considered to be “good enough” as a basis for accumulating knowledge (Singh et al. 2003). In this research a view is taken that strategic thinking is an everyday activity that is likely to be undertaken by an individual with managerial responsibilities as part of their day to day work. This view imposes quite lenient conditions on what circumstances would count as good enough as a basis for accumulating knowledge.

It should be remembered of course that management in action is complex, cause effect relationships difficult to establish and predictive validity of theory is low (Starkey and Madan 2001). Indeed, if knowledge is seen as increasingly context specific (Tranfield 2002b) the search for general frameworks may become less relevant than emphasising pragmatic concepts that help to focus management attention and action (Løwendahl and Revang 1998). This may present a significant challenge for management education in providing knowledge to managers that relies on a generalist perspective (Løwendahl and Revang 1998), assuming real phenomena (Godfrey and Hill 1995) with an aim to inform action such that it makes action more effective (Starkey and Madan 2001). One solution may be the highlighting of relevant ideas that individual managers can interpret in their own contexts and evaluate their value rather than macro generalisations or definite prescriptions (Hoskisson et al. 1999) and the development of the framework is in this spirit.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

Given the pluralist and relativist nature of management research a number of approaches to progress the research by connecting the provisional framework with empirical data are possible. What is important is that the approach is adapted to the topic of study, the stage in the research and desired research outcomes. For example,

deductive research into industry level phenomena might employ instrumental theories with quantitative secondary data and statistical generalisation, while studies of the actions and context of strategy process (Chia and Holt 2006) or the idiosyncratic and intangible endowments of individual firms might be more suited to single inductive case studies (Hoskisson et al. 1999). As argued in section 5.2 empirical testing of the provisional framework as a theory would appear inappropriate. Similarly, since the provisional framework is already established, highly inductive theory generation would also be inappropriate. As this research attempts to build a connection between the theoretical description and empirical occurrence of strategic thinking in an incremental way, an approach that engages with practitioners and builds theory as a result of that engagement would appear appropriate as a next stage of the research. Within management research there is an established tradition of research that reflects this orientation employing a range of methodologies (Elden and Chisholm 1993; MacLean et al. 2002; van de Ven 1992).

However, it is important to justify why theory building is necessary, rather than theory testing, by signifying the inadequacies of the extant literature (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) or the inadequacies of empirical substantiation (Eisenhardt 1989a). In this research it has been demonstrated that the extant literature is indefinite with regard to strategic thinking and examples of robust empirical studies are rare, and hence that theory building is necessary.

Theory building research involves ongoing processes of deduction and induction combined with a degree of creativity, insight and inspiration that cannot be readily codified as part of a research design (Langley 1999; Pettigrew 1997). Such a mixture of deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data driven) research is fruitful because it maintains a theoretical sensitivity, not denying or reinventing concepts that have previously proved useful, while allowing a detailed examination of the particulars of a phenomenon and opportunities for insight from the data (Denis et al. 2001; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Orton 1997). The development of the provisional framework is an example of this fruitful combination of deductive and inductive approaches.



However, the outcomes of any theory building process must be capable of being contested and evaluated for quality (Mir and Watson 2001; Pettigrew 2001). Given that it may be impossible to demonstrate that a particular theory is close to the truth (Cannella Jr. and Paetzold 1994; Powell 2001) it is argued that strategy theories should be tested against competing theories (Camerer 1985) ideally by the use of critical experiments (Godfrey and Hill 1995). Unfortunately, in management research, and strategy research in particular, such critical experiments may be difficult if not impossible, and evaluating competition between ideas in relation to the problems facing researchers and practitioners may form a basis for defending the academic rigour and practical relevance of management research (Powell 2001). Thus, the ability to generate effective action in response to human problems (Mahoney 1993; Powell 2001) or generate better teaching and practice (Powell 2002) may be a more important criterion for validity than accurately accounting for reality. The basis for evaluating alternative theoretical descriptions should not be correspondence to reality or consensus between observers but their usefulness for particular purposes (Butt 2001) or instrumental value in explaining or predicting empirical phenomena (Godfrey and Hill 1995; Powell 2002).

This basis for evaluation may reflect a practical rationality employed by managers (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) that is rooted in the concrete detail of daily life and embedded in a wider socio-historical context (Denis et al. 2007). One aspect of practical rationality may be a type of competition between theories as an ongoing process as managers “act thinkingly” in applying their trusted theories while simultaneously testing those theories for pragmatic utility against alternatives and new interpretations (Weick et al. 2005). This may help to improve managerial practice by helping managers to become more reflective practitioners and facilitating critical reflection on the mental models that guide action (Denis et al. 2007; Starkey and Madan 2001). Thus, one aspect of assessing the validity of the provisional framework is the extent to which it has meaning for practitioners.

In summary this chapter has considered alternative ways of connecting with empirical data, and the issues associated with those alternatives, to justify a way to progress the research. Neither theory testing nor theory generation are appropriate

but theory building is because the provisional framework represents an interim stage of theory development. Given that management research is pluralist and relativistic in nature it need not conform to a positivist epistemology nor be with reference to a universal realist ontology. Thus, theory building as part of a wider discourse of strategy is legitimate even if strategic thinking does not have an existence independent of that discourse. Claims made from the theory built in this way will be in part with reference to the practical rationality of management practitioners. While theory building is the most appropriate next step, the details how to take that next step need to be considered. These details form the substance of chapter 6 which describes empirical Study 3.

# 6 Methodology for Study 3

## 6.1 Introduction

The discussion in chapter 5 concluded that the most appropriate way to connect back to empirical data was to undertake theory building as the next step, considering the provisional framework as an interim stage in theory development. This theory building had two aspects. First, to evaluate what meaning the framework has for practitioners, with the structure of the data generation and subsequent analysis largely determined by that framework. This was theory testing to the extent that it employed ideas developed from the literature and earlier research but was of a tentative nature aimed at gaining a greater insight into strategic thinking rather than strict empirical confirmation or refutation of a theory. Agreement or lack of it created opportunities to explore the differences and hence develop the framework further. Second, to explore the framework, in terms of how practitioners might interpret the framework, and how practitioners might indicate it be modified, extended or elaborated. To represent the practitioners' perspective, this exploration of the data aimed to identify emergent categories in the data by inductive analysis. These two aspects taken together constitute theory development because of the intention of understanding to what extent the framework as it stands makes sense to practitioners while also allowing the framework to be changed based on an inductive analysis of practitioners' comments.

This chapter discusses the methodology of Study 3 in detail. It establishes the individual as the focus of the study and discusses possible concerns with that focus, in particular the risk of overemphasising the individual rational thinker, ignoring the social aspect of strategy, and giving undue weight to managerial agency and choice. It also describes the participants in Study 3 and issues associated with the data from these participants, in particular the accuracy and reliability of that data. The chapter subsequently outlines the employment of the provisional framework in Study 3 and the related interview protocol. It concludes by describing the methods of analysis of the data from Study 3, including the inductive analysis and associated coding procedures.

## 6.2 Establishing the individual as the focus of Study 3

A focus on the individual is a valid theme in strategy research (Hambrick 2004; Hoskisson et al. 1999; Johnson et al. 2003; Whittington 1996) and this research in particular since: issues are interpreted against the values and goal systems of individuals (Eden 1992b); change or continuity is brought about by the behaviour of individuals (Bowman and Ambrosini 2000); individual perceptions play a critical role in management (Das 2003; Mezias and Starbuck 2003a); strategic choice entails some judgement at the individual level (de Rond and Thietart 2007); and the individual's involvement in activities are consequential for organisational outcomes (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). A focus on individuals reflects a shift towards management theories which place an emphasis on the active role of managers (Partington 2000). For example, in strategy process research (Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst 2006) and micro strategising (Bourne and Jenkins 2005), often including a subjectivist view of performance (Denis et al. 2007). Thus, in Study 3 the focus on strategic thinking as an individual phenomenon, assumed in the earlier stages of this research, is maintained.

Clearly, an important aspect of designing Study 3 was specifying with which individual practitioners to engage. As Study 3 did not involve statistical testing it was not necessary to justify a sampling frame and rigorous sampling procedure as would be demanded by quantitative theory testing (Johnson and Duberley 2000). Each participant was treated as an individual case of a strategic thinker, situated in their day to day work setting, and not as a member of a population for the purposes of statistical generalisation.

However, specifying a population from which cases are drawn constrains extraneous variation and supports external validity with regard to that population (Eisenhardt 1989a). External validity can be improved by multiple case research designs, employing a version of replication logic, in which comparisons between cases provide opportunities to confirm or disconfirm inferences from one setting to another and hence to extend or refine theory (Eisenhardt 1989a; 1989b; 1991). Multiple case research designs therefore provide a stronger basis for theory building where there is an aim to produce theory with some generality beyond the immediate

research setting (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). The type of comparative method in multiple case study research is used to develop conceptual rather than statistical generalisation beyond a specific set of local conditions (Tsoukas 1989). Thus, theory built from case studies, is situated in and developed by the recognition of patterns of constructs and relationships within and across cases and the underlying logical arguments that support and explain those patterns (Doktor et al. 1991; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

Having established the potential benefits of multiple case research designs it is important to make clear that Study 3 is informed by these ideas rather than claiming to meet the requirements for depth and complexity of case study research as it is generally understood (Stake 1995; Yin 2003). Considering each participant to be an individual case of a situated strategic thinker allows comparisons between cases to provide opportunities to confirm or disconfirm inferences from one individual or setting to another, and hence opportunities for further development of the framework.

### **6.2.1 Concerns with focusing on the individual**

While a focus on the individual strategic thinker may be valid, there are a number of concerns with this focus. A focus on the individual risks placing an undue emphasis on the individual rational thinker (Chia 2004; Cook and Brown 1999) and may reflect a bias towards rational thinking and deductive reasoning over action that is predominant in Western society (Butt 2001). An emphasis on thought over action finds expression in strategy literature where the orthodoxy of strategy research is based on a Cartesian dualism of mind and body (Calori 1998; Powell 2002) and where the solution to strategy problems is often seen as analysis (Bowman and Ambrosini 2000). For example, the best way of understanding what makes a leader successful is to understand their cognitive processes, since their thoughts are antecedents to their actions (Martin 2007). A methodological individualism that emphasises the purposeful activities of conscious agents, may be unwarranted and strategy may emerge through “mindless coping” (Chia 2004; Chia and Holt 2006; Chia and MacKay 2007). However, based on the conclusions of section 4.2 that

reviewed the strategy literature regarding goals, this research takes the position that while strategy may emerge through mindless coping, strategic thinking is a mindful rather than a mindless activity and that organisational actors act with intentionality, even if this is misguided.

Additionally, since strategy is a social process (Eden 1992b; Hambrick and Mason 1984) a focus on the individual rational thinker might be considered to unjustifiably neglect the role of social practices and relations in strategy (Chia and Holt 2006). Focussing on the individual though does not necessarily indicate an overemphasis nor exclude a social dimension (Butt 2001) since, although individuals may have idiosyncratic constructions of events, they may also employ constructions that are similar to the constructions of other individuals (Kelly 1955). Indeed, social action requires construing the constructions of others, acting in light of that construing and consequently validating that construing against a social reality (Butt 2001). Thus, a focus on the individual may provide insight into the social and interpretive processes of the collective (Dutton 1993). In the analysis of Study 2 for example, people and social oriented themes emerged and this may be the case in Study 3.

An additional assumption established in the orthodoxy of strategy research is that management, through processes of organisational adaptation, can influence success or failure (Barley and Kunda 1992). Despite certain strategy literature, for example the population ecology, industrial organisation and resource dependence literature, that implies or assumes a determinism that would remove or significantly constrain managerial agency, managerial choice and action are assumed to make a difference (Bourgeois 1984; Powell 2002; Whittington 1992), even if the long-term outcomes of managerial action are unintended, unanticipated or unknowable (Stacey 1995). For the notion of managerial choice to make sense there must be causal mechanisms operating that will lead to outcomes as a consequence of that choice (de Rond and Thietart 2007). Thus a sensible notion of managerial agency and strategy requires both a degree of determinism in terms of underlying structures that lead from causes to effects and a degree of free will in which managerial choice can make a difference (Bourgeois 1984; de Rond and Thietart 2007; Pozzebon 2004; Reed

2005b; Whittington 1988). Thus, in this research it is assumed that organisational members have a degree of free will and believe that the exercise of this will through the actions they take will have consequences for themselves and their organisations.

Given an inherent assumption of managerial agency, even if it persists only because it provides existential comfort to practitioners and academics by generating a rationale for action, and demonstrating rationality to outsiders (Knights 1992) this assumption may unduly pervade the responses of participants. Thus, a risk to validity when researching managers is that of imposing a rational, logical reasoning to their actions that distorts the true nature of their practice, and this imposition may be by the practitioners themselves in their self-reporting (Chia 2004). This would produce research that, whilst expressing first order rather than second order constructs, had an overemphasis on logical rationality with echoes of the orthodoxy of strategy research (Calori 1998). Further, while accepting the validity of managers' own descriptions of their problems and social realities, a deeper understanding of these problems and social realities may require questioning these descriptions (Whitley 1984b) rather than neglecting structures beyond actors' immediate experience or understanding (Whittington 1988). In particular retrospective explanations may be more a reflection of the creativity of those constructing the explanation than the reality of the phenomena that are being explained (Starbuck 2004).

In summary caution must be exercised that the findings from Study 3 by focusing on the individual, do not overemphasise the individual rational thinker, ignore the social aspect of strategy, and give undue weight to managerial agency and choice.

## **6.2.2 The participants in Study 3**

In total 25 participants were involved in Study 3. All had executive roles in the UK National Health Service and worked for a number of different organisations. Individuals in executive roles are more likely to engage in strategic thinking as part of their everyday work than individuals in less senior positions; they are more likely to be more involved in discussions about strategy and strategic issues. Often the role specifications for executives include a requirement that the person should be a

strategic thinker. Clearly, any claims to generalise from these findings will be limited by the sector specific nature of the participants.

The organisations for which the participants worked were classified as follows: 4 Mental Health Trusts (of 74 in the country), 5 Primary Care Trusts (of 152 in the country) and 6 Acute Trusts (of 171 in the country). (Classifications by the NHS Choices website - <http://www.nhs.uk/> accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2008.) Participants were classified by their primary function in the organisation. The combinations of organisation and role are summarised in Table 6-1. The codes in the cells of Table 6-1 provide a reference to the organisation and role of the participant, and provide a unique identifier for the participant.

A number of titles were found to be common to a number of trusts, for example, Chief Executive, Director of Finance and System Reform, and Director of Quality and Performance. In other instances roles were classified together because although the titles were not identical the main function and responsibilities of the role were equivalent. As role was not used as a basis for analysis in the findings presented in this document (chapter 7 and chapter 8) these classifications were indicative rather than analytic. The classifications were: **Development:** Director of Clinical Services Development, Director of Business Development, Turnaround Director. **Medical:** Medical Director or Chief Medical Officer. **Nursing:** Director of Nursing, Director of Nursing and Performance, Director of Nursing and Operations. **Strategy:** Director of Strategy, Director of Strategy and Redesign, Director of Strategy and Planning.



**Table 6-1 Roles and organisations of participants in Study 3**

	Chief Executive	Development	Finance and System Reform	Human Resources and Organisational Development	Medical	Nursing	Chief Operating Officer	Managing Director of Provider Services	Director of Public Health	Quality and Performance	Strategy
Acute1	CA1										
Acute2							OA2				
Acute3											SA3
Acute4	CA4	DA4				NA4					SA4
Acute5					MA5						
Acute6						NA6					
Mental Health1						MN1					
Mental Health2					MM2	NM2					
Mental Health3	CM3										
Mental Health4		DM4		HM4							
Primary Care1											SP1
Primary Care2			FP2					PP2			
Primary		DP3									

<b>Care3</b>											
<b>Primary Care4</b>										QP4	
<b>Primary Care5</b>	CP5		FP5					PP5	UP5	QP5	

As can be seen from Table 6-1 the participants represent a range of roles and organisations in the UK NHS, and as such could be considered to be to some extent representative, although not in a statistical sense. It might be argued that a more systematic sampling method would have produced a set of participants that were more representative. For example, quota sampling that matched the proportion of types of NHS trust or that sampled NHS executive roles in equal proportion. However, it must be remembered that while the study of practicing executives may be important in strategy research (Starbuck and Mezias 1996), access difficulties are a significant methodological issue (Norburn 1986; 1989) and, while there are exceptions (Eisenhardt 1989b; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven 1990; Pettigrew and McNulty 1995), the majority of such studies have tended to rely on secondary and demographic data rather than primary data about managerial process and issues (Pettigrew 1992b). Thus, attempts to use a more systematic sampling procedure, for example quota sampling that matched the proportion of types of NHS trust and NHS executive role, may have been unsuccessful because of access difficulties.

Perhaps more importantly, attempts to obtain a sample that was in some sense statistically representative is fraught with difficulties since the participants were self selecting to a degree, simply by their agreement to take part in the research. Gaining access to executives often requires incentives for them to engage in the research with some degree of authenticity (Golden 1992) particularly since managers and academics may differ significantly about what are important issues (Gopinath and Hoffman 1995). Given the pressures on executives' time and without an overt incentive offered by the researcher, it is interesting to speculate on the motivation for the participants to devote time to the research. Other than a basic motivation to be helpful, one possible motivation may be that the participants had an interest in the topic. Clearly, this may suggest that the findings of Study 3 only relate to individuals who have an interest in this topic. However, there was a relatively high rate of agreement from executives to take part in the research. Of 36 executives approached, 30 expressed an initial interest. Of that 30, 3 failed to respond further, making it impossible to conduct the interview and 2 cancelled because of illness. This apparently high level of interest suggests that the topic is of common rather than

esoteric interest, which is in agreement with the arguments made for the topic as an important challenge facing executives (page 1).

Ultimately, if a phenomenon can be studied in a potential number of different settings, then often the setting that offers the easiest and best quality access may be chosen on these grounds rather than more abstract or theoretical grounds. In Study 3 accessibility was a key criterion in the selection of participants and there is a degree of opportunism in the inclusion of participants in the study. One prosaic aspect of accessibility was physical location, with all the participants being no more than one hour's travel from the researcher's home. A second aspect was that the researcher had direct or indirect access to the participant through existing contacts in the NHS.

### **6.3 Issues associated with data**

This research takes a view that strategic thinking is an everyday activity and which involves the everyday utilisation of knowledge (Denis et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007), that the knowledge that managers utilise is often carried around in their heads (Eisenhardt 1989b; Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) which may be essentially idiosyncratic and unstable (Allard-Poesi 2005). The data in Study 3 is therefore generated from that everyday knowledge.

However, this knowledge may be inaccurate because of inaccurate perceptions of organisational circumstances (Starbuck and Mezias 1996; Sutcliffe 1994). This potential inaccuracy calls into question the use of questionnaires and interviews as data collection instruments, particularly as managers may readily use terminology that they do not understand (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a). The potential threats to the validity of data generated from interviews have been discussed previously in conjunction with Study 1 (page 38) and will not be repeated here. The accuracy of data generated may be influenced by respondents inability or unwillingness to report accurately and by incentives or disincentives to engage authentically that are inherent in the research design (Golden 1992; Miller et al. 1997). Even with respondents who are willing and have incentives to report accurately, the necessary data may be tacit, embedded in practice and not easily

accessible in an explicit understandable form, by either the researcher or the practitioner (Balogun et al. 2003).

One suggestion to increase accuracy is that multiple respondents and multiple sources of data be used (Golden 1992) and that triangulation by multiple methods and types of data provides greater substantiation of constructs and hypotheses (Eisenhardt 1989a). For example, a single case study may use interviews with Chief Executive Officers, semi-structured interviews with the senior management team, questionnaires and secondary data (Eisenhardt 1989b). Inherent in the use of triangulation is the assumption that the different methods and data sets do not share the same shortcomings and that the weakness in one will be compensated by the strengths of another (Jick 1979). However, triangulation may be difficult to achieve meaningfully in practice (Starbuck 2004) since there are few guidelines for systematically treating diverse data other than the researcher's skills in producing a plausible justification of any claimed convergence (Jick 1979). In this research there is also the consideration that if managers' knowledge is idiosyncratic, unstable and inaccurate then agreement in triangulation might be a rare and somewhat surprising artefact.

When discussing accuracy and inaccuracy it should be remembered that what is meant by accuracy has at least three different interpretations: a correspondence with criteria or reality; a coherence or consensus between judgements; and a practical or subjective utility towards some end (Kruglanski 1989). While accuracy would appear important (Kruglanski 1989) and the researcher may strive towards achieving accuracy, inaccurate perceptions may not be a critical deficiency for managers (Daniels 2003). This may be particularly so if they receive and respond to feedback on the accuracy of those perceptions (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a) and are calibrated in terms of how inaccurate their perceptions are and hence what level of confidence to have in their judgments (Maule and Hodgkinson 2003).

Additionally, stability in managerial perceptions should not necessarily be expected since managerial perceptions may be influenced by affective state (Daniels 2003) and human conduct is perpetually in the process of becoming (Pettigrew

1997). Context and action are dynamically interwoven (Calori 2002; Pettigrew 1992a) and change rather than stability may be the natural state of organisational phenomena (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Weick and Quinn 1999).

Further, the accuracy and stability of data generated from participants is likely to be compromised by the research process since as suggested by the action research literature (Cassell and Johnson 2006; Elden and Chisholm 1993; Reason 2006) researching managers in an intrusive way will unavoidably change the phenomenon under study (Chakravarthy and Doz 1992). Simply asking the participant to recount their thoughts about an issue is likely to change those thoughts. However, since in Study 3 participants are asked about “an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation” a degree of validity is introduced by “an involvement with members of an organization over a matter which is of genuine concern to them”(Eden and Huxham 1996:75).

Thus, the data generated from participants in Study 3 is not considered to be a full, stable and accurate account of an organisational reality. Rather the data is considered to be sufficiently complete and accurate to provide an approximation of the participant’s interpretations and meanings with respect to strategic thinking. Simply engaging with the participant may change the data but using an issue of genuine concern should introduce some degree of validity to the data generated. The data generated in Study 3 includes not just that from participants but also fieldnotes made by the researcher which are a commentary and reflection on the process and progress of the research (Eisenhardt 1989a).

In contrast with the analysis of quantitative data, conventions for the analysis of qualitative data are not well established or widely accepted, and hence there is potential for excessive researcher subjectivity and unreliable conclusions (Miles and Huberman 1994). Reliability in this type of research is related to transparency in how sense was made from the raw data. Reliability is to be claimed again in two main ways. First, reliability is indicated by transparency in the methods of data collection and analysis thus enabling other researchers to examine the process and conclusions. Second by reflexivity on the part of the researcher at several levels (Holland 1999) in

paying: “attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer” (Alvesson and Skölberg 2000:5).

## 6.4 Employing the provisional framework

As a guide to generating data the provisional framework was employed. While a priori specification of the elements of the framework, provides a link to extant theory and a basis for guiding data generation (Miles 1979), there is a risk that attempts to order the data lead to the interpretations of the researcher overshadowing the experience of those studied (Goulding 1998). This risk was reduced by not tightly specifying the elements and relationships between them thus allowing flexibility in data generation and interpretation and permitting modification of constructs and the overall framework (Eisenhardt 1989a).

The provisional framework can be considered at two levels of elaboration. At its most simple and fundamental the framework suggests that strategic thinking is about an appreciation of goal systems, patterns of actions and combinations of issues, and the interrelationships between these elements. A more detailed description of the framework would contain elaborations of these elements. Taking the goals element for illustration, the framework suggests that one element of strategic thinking *is* an appreciation of a goal system. The more elaborate description of the goals element suggests that the goal system *may* contain positive and negative goals, core and facilitative goals, goals for different entities (for example individuals, groups, organisations, etc.), broad and narrow goals, and conflicting and consensual goals. This different level of elaboration may arise as specific details are included in the interpretation of what goals, actions and issues mean in specific contexts or to specific individuals. This different level of elaboration may also indicate a more sophisticated degree of strategic thinking. For example, it is possible to envisage that a goal system that includes only organisational goals could be considered to suggest less sophisticated strategic thinking than one that includes both organisational and personal goals.

However, it should be remembered that as a conceptual framework the provisional framework contains a degree of abstraction and simplification, and is essentially an analytic and heuristic device. In particular the apparent straightforwardness with which the categories of goals, issues and actions are used suggests a degree of simplicity and neatness that might misrepresent the very essence of the phenomena under study, strategic thinking. For example in Study 2, IA commented that the categories of goals, issues and actions did not reflect “processy stuff” (page 64) but that “processy stuff” might be some combination of these. Also, IG suggested that some actions have significant duration and some goals may extent over time and so there may be an overlap between actions and goals (page 65). Similarly, the elaborations may appear to suggest a degree of simplicity and neatness that is in fact the opposite of their implications. Taking the goals element again for illustration, the categorisation of a goal as consensual or conflicting could be seen as a simplification. However, this fails to appreciate the implication that this categorisation not only prompts questions about whether a goal is consensual or conflicting but also with what or whom, to what extent, for what reasons and with what consequences. Indeed it is these types of questions which the term appreciation implies, since it implies more than just awareness. Similarly, the elaboration that categorises goals as positive or negative not only prompts questions about whether a goal is positive or negative but also for whom, for what reasons and with what consequences. Clearly, the elaborations of consensual or conflicting, and positive or negative (and the other suggested elaborations to the goals element of the framework) are applied to each goal in the goal system. Thus, while making more explicit some of the complexity of the phenomenon of strategic thinking the framework does not necessarily remove that complexity by simplifying it through neat categorisation and subcategorisation.

Using the suggestion that the framework contains fundamental elements and elaborations of those elements, the framework can be coded to indicate fundamental elements with **bold text** and elaborations with *italic text*.

- **Appreciation of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or a**



**simple sequence of goals.** *An appreciation of a goal system involves an appreciation of the goals of other stakeholders. A goal can be an end in its own right, and a means to an end within the goal system. A goal system can contain negative goals, which are ends to be avoided. Goals within a given goal system may relate to different entities, for example, supra-organisational, organisational, departmental and personal. Goals may be broad and general or more narrow and specific. Goals may be consensual or conflicting.*

- **Appreciation of a number of patterns of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple list of actions or a single pattern of action.** *Patterns of actions have multiple impacts on a number of goals, rather than an impact on a single goal. A pattern of actions may differ from other patterns of actions because they contain different actions or because they contain the same actions in different arrangements. Patterns of actions may be premeditated or emergent and action may be taken to explore and increase understanding. Appreciation of patterns of action may involve formulating and evaluating alternative courses of action or reflecting on the consequences of actions taken.*
  
- **Appreciation of combinations of interrelated issues rather than single issues.** *This appreciation extends to a diversity of issues, which may be internal or external, and may include supra-organisational, organisational, and personal issues, some of which have a social dimension. Appreciation of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. Appreciation of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions, including social and political awareness. This appreciation also involves reflection on how issues might be framed, categorised and reinterpreted over time. A combination of issues determines the context for the goal system and patterns of action.*

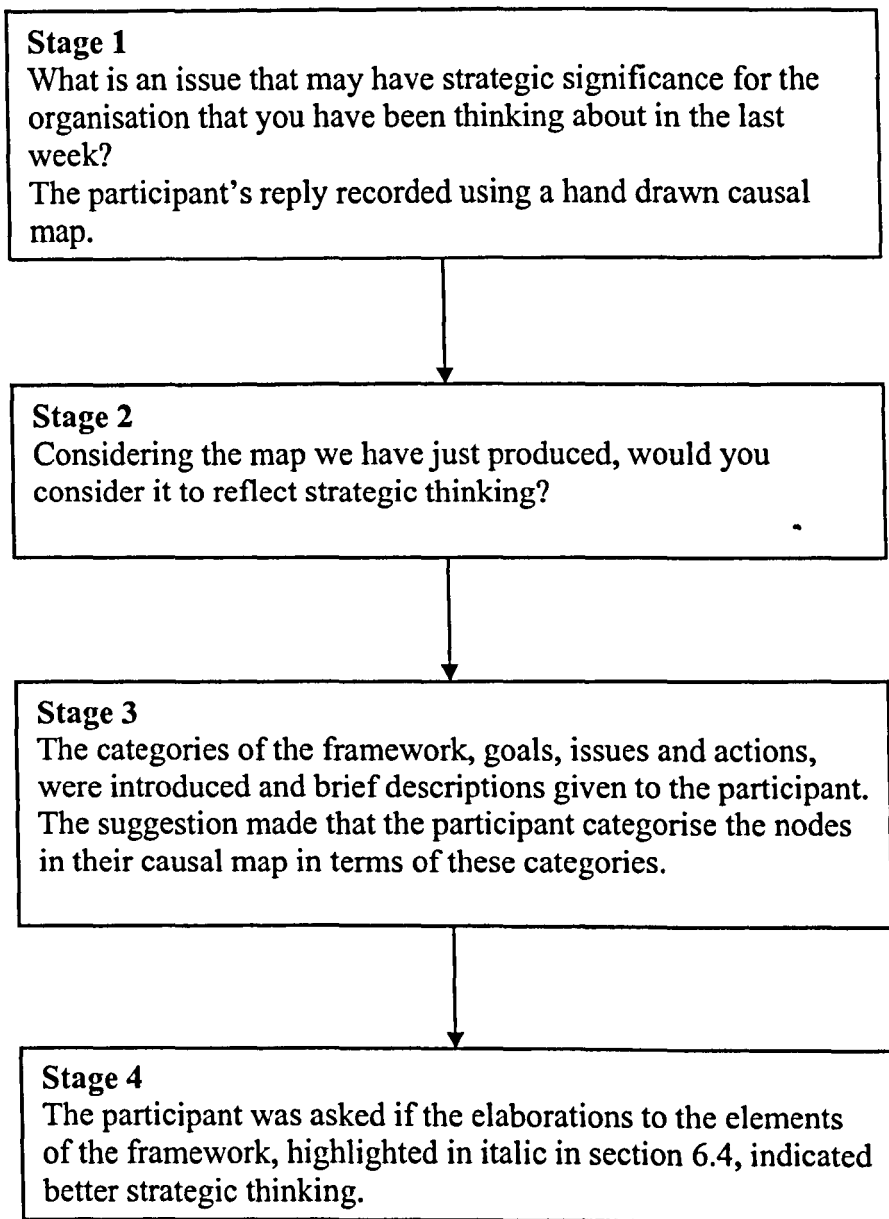
As a consequence of the three elements above it follows that strategic thinking will have the additional aspects.

- **Appreciation of a set of consequences beyond the immediate, which might also be multi-stranded.** *Immediacy here includes not just a temporal interpretation but also a causal one. Thus, a consequence beyond the immediate might indicate a consequence that occurred a relatively long time after the cause or a consequence a relatively large number of steps away from the cause.*
- **Appreciation of dilemmas, revealed by considering the goal system, patterns of actions and combinations of issues, and the interrelationships between these, such that there is uncertainty about the right pattern of action.**
- **Motivation to take action** *since this may be necessary to resolve uncertainty as a result of cognitive limitations, uncertainty of stakeholder responses and information scarcity*

## 6.5 Interview protocol and details

To explore the phenomenon of strategic thinking using the provisional framework as a guide an interview protocol was designed with four stages. An overview of these four stages is shown in Figure 6-1. Qualitative research interviews aim to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of the interviewee and so tend to have little predetermined structure and to use open questions (King 2004). In this interview, the structure suggested by the provisional framework was introduced more explicitly as the interview progressed through the four stages. Thus the early stages used more open questions and the later stages less open questions. To facilitate comparison across cases the researcher attempted to maintain a consistency in the interview protocol between participants. This is likely to have resulted in missed opportunities to explore some of the idiosyncratic parts of some of the interviews but resulted in a greater consistency in the data for analysis.

**Figure 6-1 Overview of interview protocol for Study 3**



The interview was not tape recorded because of concerns that this would inhibit what participants said and so hand written notes were taken. These concerns were based on a commonsensical view that people are more circumspect about what they say when they know they are being recorded and comments made to the researcher by NHS executives, unconnected to this research, about their dislike of being taped in research interviews. The decision not to tape the interviews was also

influenced by the researcher's experiences in Study 2 in which the participants appeared to be quite relaxed and open with the researcher. In particular the impression from SA that he had discussed with the researcher political issues which would not be "openly discussed" (page 65). The absence of an audio record of the interview was considered to be a worthwhile price for this probable greater openness from the participant.

**Stage 1.** The opening question was "What is an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation that you have been thinking about in the last week?" The participant's reply to this opening question was then recorded using a hand drawn causal map. The arrangement of the furniture in the interviews was such that the participant and researcher could both see the map as it was produced. This initial stage draws on the methodology used in Study 2. The methodological issues associated with causal maps were considered in section 3.3.1.1 and will not be repeated here. The causal map served a number of functions, some of which are discussed later, but the focus of the subsequent analysis was the structure of the map rather than the content. The map also served a function by providing a physical artefact around which to base discussions and a connection to the participant's issue (Balogun et al. 2003; Brown 1992). As the issues element of the provisional framework proposes that strategic thinking involves an appreciation of a combination of issues, only one issue was requested since one topic for analysis was the extent to which the participant talks about combination of issues.

In the original design of the interview, laddering questions (Eden 1988; Eden et al. 1979; Reynolds and Gutman 1988) were considered for prompting an exploration of the initial issue. However, in the first interview the participant, immediately after stating the issue, talked about why this was an important issue. This participant had essentially laddered their causal map without prompts from the researcher. It was therefore decided not to use laddering questions but rather general open prompts of the type "tell me more" were used. This had an advantage that any structure developed in the map was not influenced by laddering questions. For nine of the participants no further prompts were needed, they began talking about the issue spontaneously. For the remaining sixteen participants (CA1, CA4, DA4, DM4,

DP3, FP2, FP5, HM4, NA4, NM1, OA2, PP2, PP5, SA3, SA4, SP1) a prompt of “What have you been thinking about that issue in the last week?” was needed for them to begin talking about the issue. For 18 of the participants (CA1, CA4, CM3, DM4, DP3, FP5, HM4, NA4, NA6, NM2, PP2, PP5, QP4, QP5, SA3, SA4, SP1, UP5) a subsequent prompt of “Are there any other thoughts about the issue you’ve had in the last week?” was made. The remaining seven participants did not appear to need this subsequent prompt and appeared to talk quite freely.

The mapping process continued until the participant appeared to have completed talking about what they had thought about the issue. During the time the participants were talking about the issue, the researcher attempted to assess how readily the participant was able to talk about the issue. The researcher was careful to avoid asking for further thoughts when it appeared that the participant was searching for things to say. When the participant appeared to be satisfied with what they had said about the issue and looked at the researcher “expectantly” they were asked “Would you consider the map a valid reflection of your thoughts about the issue?” Interestingly all participants did so. It might have been expected that some might have then proceeded to make further comments but none did. The hand drawn maps were entered into Decision Explorer software for presentation and analysis.

**Stage 2** of the interview protocol involved asking the interviewee if they would consider the map a reflection of strategic thinking. The question was, “Considering the map we have just produced, would you consider it to reflect strategic thinking?” Two participants (MA5, SA4) requested clarification of the question. The approach adopted by the researcher was to refer to a third person perspective and ask “If someone had been listening what you had just been saying would they be likely to say that it sounded like someone thinking strategically?” Three of the participants (CM3, DP3, PP2) did not answer this question clearly, and it was not possible to decide from their response whether they considered the map to reflect strategic thinking or not. In these instances it would have been possible for the researcher to ask the participant for clarification but the researcher chose to consider the response valid for the participant, even if it did not make immediate sense to the researcher. Not asking for clarification from the participant missed an opportunity of

developing a greater understanding of the participant's perspective but also reduced the risk of disclosing or imposing the researcher's perspective. The details of these unclear responses are considered in section 7.2.

**Stage 3.** Stages 1 and 2 of the interview were not structured by the provisional framework. In stage 3 the categories of the framework, goals, issues and actions, were introduced and brief descriptions given to the participant. The categories were defined to the participants as follows. A goal: meant in its broadest sense as something to be achieved and so covering aspirations, objectives, purpose, etc. but which might also cover unwanted outcomes. An action: something that you or your organisation might do. An issue: an influencing factor that might impose constraints or be enabling. The researcher had written copies of these definitions to facilitate a consistent definition between interviews. The researcher then made the suggestion that the participant categorise the nodes in their causal map in terms of these categories. The intention was to assess if the participant would be content with the categories, if they would suggest different categories, or if they would find the categories problematic. A number of participants asked to be reminded of the categories and it was found helpful to write them in the corner of the map as a reminder.

**Stage 4.** In this stage the employment of the provisional framework was most explicit. The participant was asked if the elaborations to the elements of the framework, highlighted in italic in section 6.4, indicated better strategic thinking. The specific questions asked are shown in Table 6-2

**Table 6-2 Interview questions derived from elaborations of the provisional framework categories**

Category	Question relating to the elaboration
Goals	Negative. To what extent does an appreciation of negative goals indicate better strategic thinking?
	Different entities. To what extent does an appreciation of the goals of different entities, for example individuals and organisations, indicate better strategic thinking?
	Consensual or conflicting. To what extent does an appreciation of

	where goals are in agreement or conflict indicate better strategic thinking?
	Stakeholders. To what extent does an appreciation of the goals of different stakeholders indicate better strategic thinking?
<b>Actions</b>	Uncertainty and dilemmas. To what extent does an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas indicate better strategic thinking? (The elaborations with regard to actions had a number of aspects including: alternative patterns of actions containing different actions; alternative patterns containing different arrangements of the same actions; actions that were premeditated or emergent; actions to explore or increase understanding; and formulating alternative courses of action. In initial pilot interviews prior to Study 3 questions were formulated relating to each of these elaborations. However, it was found that the differences between some of these elaborations were difficult explain clearly in a simple question. Additionally, the large number of similar questions relating to actions made the interview process quite tedious for both the researcher and participant. As a result of these considerations, these elaborations were condensed into a single question about uncertainty and dilemmas)
	Reflecting on the consequences of action taken. To what extent does reflecting on the consequences of action taken indicate better strategic thinking?
<b>Issues</b>	Internal and external. To what extent does an appreciation of internal and external issues indicate better strategic thinking?
	Different entities. To what extent does an appreciation of the issues associated with different entities, for example individuals and organisations, indicate better strategic thinking?

Interviews with the 25 participants were conducted in the period between 18<sup>th</sup> October 2008 to 24<sup>th</sup> December 2008. Interviews were restricted to one a day so that the one interview could be written-up before the next one was commenced. All interviews were written-up within 24 hours of the interview taking place. Fieldnotes were written immediately before and after each interview. These fieldnotes contained the researcher's reflections on the interview process and related matters, and captured any comments made by the participant outside the interview protocol. The average length of interview was 63 minutes, with the longest being 87 minutes and the shortest 40 minutes.

Prior to the interview the participants were sent a note briefly describing the research (appendix 13.1). The briefing note gave the topic of the research as strategic thinking, the researcher's background, an indication of the nature of the interview

and an assurance of confidentiality. A few participants asked if it was necessary to prepare in any way but were advised that this was not necessary. The notion of strategic thinking developed in this research is as a day-to-day activity undertaken by managers. Given that the opening question concerns an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation and that the participant has a free choice of issue, it was assumed that minimal preparation on the part of the participant was necessary. Preparation by the participant might produce an interview with more detail or that was more coherent but would also have resulted in responses that were, to some extent prepared, and hence of less validity in terms of reflecting their everyday thinking. That the questions in the interview were undisclosed prior to the interview is likely to have produced more valid responses about the participant's day-to-day thoughts about that issue, that is, bore a closer resemblance to how they might think and act in their day-to-day work. Similarly, although the period of the interview may be quite short in which to consider a strategic issue, this may reflect the time that a participant has to consider a strategic issue in their day-to-day work. Clearly this may not be the case and a participant may have a significantly longer time to consider a strategic issue. Revealing the purpose of the research to some extent may bias participants in a manner consistent or inconsistent with the research purpose (Doyle 1997). Additionally participants may be biased towards a positive perspective on the research if they have invested time and effort in the research (Cavaleri and Sterman 1997).

## **6.6 Analysis of the data from Study 3**

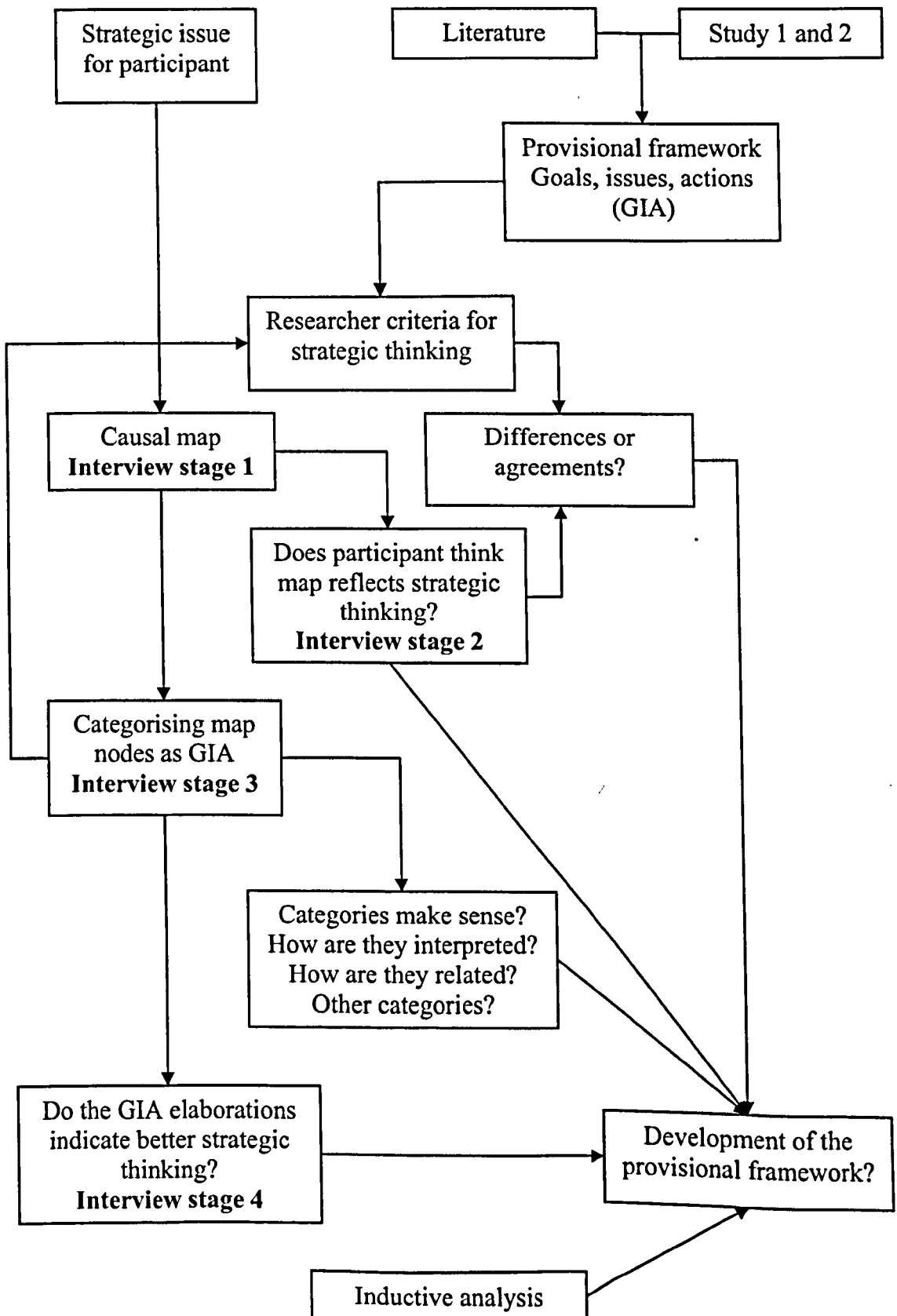
### **6.6.1 Overview of the analysis**

The analysis was intended to support the aims of Study 3, which were essentially twofold. The first to assess to what extent the provisional framework had meaning for practitioners in terms of a framework for strategic thinking. This assessment was undertaken at three levels. The highest level was that of the overall framework. The middle level was related to the category set of goals, issues and actions. The lowest level was related to the elaborations of the categories. The data generated at each level provided information with respect to the framework but these



levels were primarily analytical devices and the intention was to integrate findings across these levels. The second aim of Study 3 was explore what modifications or refinements might be suggested to the provisional framework. The analysis of the data from Study 3 was undertaken in four main stages. A diagrammatic overview of the data analysis in Study 3 is shown in Figure 6-2.

Figure 6-2 Overview of the data analysis in Study 3



The first stage of the analysis involved assessing the provisional framework at the highest level. Assessing the framework at the highest level involved a comparison between whether the participant considered the map to be a reflection of strategic thinking and whether the researcher considered the map to be a reflection of strategic thinking, based on the framework. A participant's assessment was provided by their answer to the question "Considering the map we have just produced, would you consider it to reflect strategic thinking?" in stage 2 of the interview. The researcher's interpretation of the participant's answer involved taking an overall assessment of the response and not a detailed word by word analysis. The aim was to assess if, in overall terms, the participant thought the map reflected strategic thinking. The researcher's criteria are derived directly from the framework and described in Table 7-3 but for these criteria to be applied the map nodes need to be categorised in terms of goals, issues and actions.

The categorisation of map nodes occurred in stage 3 of the interview. After the participant had indicated whether they considered the map to be an indication of strategic thinking they were offered the categories of goals, issues and actions and a suggestion made to code the map nodes in these terms. The categories were defined to the participants as follows. A goal: meant in its broadest sense as something to be achieved and so covering aspirations, objectives, purpose, etc. but which might also cover unwanted outcomes. An action: something that you or your organisation might do. An issue: an influencing factor that might impose constraints or be enabling.

The second stage of the analysis involved assessing the provisional framework at the middle level. Assessment of the framework at the middle level, that of the category set, involved an assessment of to what extent the categories of goals, issues and actions have meaning for the participants. In particular, do the categories make sense to the participants, how are they interpreted, what relationships between the categories are suggested and did the participants suggest any different or additional categories? The mechanism for assessing the meaning of the category set for the participant was to suggest that they categorised the map nodes in terms of goals, issues or actions. This data was generated in stage 3 of the interview.

The third stage of the analysis involved assessing the provisional framework at the lowest level. Assessment of the framework at this lowest level involves assessing to what extent the participants agreed with the suggestion that the elaborations of the categories of goals, issues and actions, indicate better strategic thinking. The data for this level of analysis was generated from **stage 4** of the interview and the specific questions are shown in Table 6-2. The majority of questions took the form “To what extent would an appreciation of [the elaboration] indicate better strategic thinking?” The participants were asked these questions irrespective of their answers to earlier phases of the interview. Clearly, these elaborations assume to some extent that the basic categories are valid and the questions are to that extent leading ones. If the question appears reasonable or if answering in the negative would appear unreasonable then the participant is likely to answer in the positive by default. The leading nature of these questions limits the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn but what is of interest is not only whether the participant agrees with the elaboration or not, but also what they say in relation to the elaboration. Thus, the purpose of the questions at **stage 4** of the interview are as much about developing insight into the categories and elaborations as it is about gaining confirmation or otherwise of the elaborations.

The fourth stage of the analysis involved an inductive analysis of the data. The interview questions and structure, and the analysis undertaken to this point had been largely determined by the framework. This will have imposed, to a greater or lesser extent, the categories and structure of that framework on the experience, interpretation and meanings of the participants as represented in the analysis. This is to some extent justifiable, given that the framework is derived from both the strategy literature and earlier empirical work. However, to aid the development of the framework it is important that the categories and structure of the framework are not the only basis for analysis of the data and that ideas that are at variance with or not explicit in the framework are also represented. To facilitate this development, the data was analysed for emergent themes that were not explicitly part of the framework. The methodological issues associated with the inductive analysis of the data in Study 3 are considered in section 6.6.2.

## 6.6.2 Inductive analysis

The inductive analysis involved a more detailed examination of the data, looking for words, phrases or sentences that might indicate particular themes. Of course the themes identified, and how they were categorised will be influenced by the provisional framework and the researcher's interpretations. However, this inductive analysis does provide an opportunity for themes that are not directly imposed by the framework to emerge.

The analysis of qualitative data in this way has a number of difficulties. Qualitative data does not readily lend itself to systematic analysis (Miles 1979) and the inductive process of developing theoretical insights from cases is not well understood (Eisenhardt 1989a). The analysis can be highly labour intensive and time consuming, potentially leading to data overload (Miles and Huberman 1994). Although not universally accepted, the most widely cited convention for handling qualitative data is the "Grounded Theory" approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and its later developments (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The principles of grounded theory have been used successfully in management research (Douglas 2003; Locke 2001; Turner 1983). Despite its pervasive influence though, providing a definitive account of this approach is problematic for a number of reasons, not least the different developments of the original approach by the originators (Bryman 2001). Since the employment of the framework in Study 3 introduces a relatively high degree of prior theorisation, the rigorous coding procedures of grounded theory are not a suitable approach to the analysis of the data from Study 3 (Parker and Roffey 1997).

While the absence of well established and widely accepted conventions for qualitative data analysis may be problematic, a high degree of formalisation is also considered undesirable because of limitations this might impose on the researcher's freedom to work with the data in creative and meaningful ways (Bryman 2001). What appears to be generally accepted though is that a number of practices are fundamental to qualitative data analysis, principally involving the generation of empirical data, reorganising that data into a different structure and relating that data

in some way to more abstract concepts (Bryman 2001; Dey 1993; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Miles and Huberman 1994; Richards 2005).

Fundamental to reorganising qualitative data and relating those data to more abstract concepts are the practices of coding data. The term coding covers a variety of approaches to organizing qualitative data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) but is typically considered to involve breaking data down into bits, called data items for the purpose of this discussion, which may be of varying size, and associating labels, or codes, with those portions of the data (Bryman 2001; Dey 1993). Coding involves more than labelling though (Richards 2005), since through such labelling, meanings are associated with data items (Miles and Huberman 1994), thus enabling meaningful comparisons between parts of the data and forming the basis for a conceptual interpretation of the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Dey 1993). The code attached to a data item may be taken from the words of the participants themselves, usually referred to as “in vivo” codes in contrast to sociologically constructed codes introduced by the researcher (Strauss 1987).

However, the appropriate size for a data item; a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph, and to what extent the size of data items must be consistent, are questions for the researcher which do not have easy or obvious answers. While consistency in the size of data items may offer benefits in terms of weighing the evidence to support a given code, there is also a need to be flexible to take account of variations from, for example, different sources of data (Dey 1993). Data may include the researcher’s thoughts, interpretations and questions, usually called memos, relating to any aspect of the study, personal or professional, as the analysis progresses (Miles and Huberman 1994; Richards 2005) even if such memos are primarily conceptual in nature (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In Study 3 the fieldnotes of the researcher were considered to be data. If data items are large, they may be associated with a large number of codes leading to a lack of clarity about which data items support which codes, while if the data items are small the overall meaning of the data may be lost (Dey 1993). Although decisions about data item size are to some extent arbitrary, the overriding consideration was that the data item represents something meaningful in itself (Dey 1993) and in relation to the other data items (Silverman 2005).

As the labelling of data items with codes proceeded, categories were identified from the codes and data (Richards 2005; Strauss and Corbin 1998). There is no simple or agreed way of generating categories (Dey 1993). It has been argued that categories should be generated in the first instance from the terms used by the participants, *in vivo* codes, rather than the researcher employing preconceived categories at the start of the analysis (Marshall and Rossman 1999; Silverman 2005; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Other researchers prefer to construct a provisional list of categories prior to the analysis, from various sources, including the existing conceptual frameworks and the preunderstanding of the researcher (Miles and Huberman 1994), provided that these distinctions are not imposed on the data and that options to develop the analysis from the data are retained (Dey 1993). An alternative to using *in vivo* codes or categories from subject specific preunderstanding is to employ generic categories that are content free, for example, settings, relationships, activities, etc. (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Thus, categories can be initially generated from a variety of sources, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and will be subject to modification as the analysis proceeds (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) through a dialectic between categories and data (Dey 1993). In Study 3 existing conceptual frameworks have been introduced by the way in which the data generation was structured and in the earlier stages of the analysis. Given that the purpose of this inductive stage of the analysis is to identify themes that were not present in the provisional framework the generation of *in vivo* codes was considered the most appropriate method of generating categories from the data.

Since there are countless ways of classifying a data item, coding is not a neutral activity (Dey 1993; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Rather, coding is undertaken for a purpose related to the overall research purpose, and categories are heuristic tools constructed by the researcher as an aid to thinking about the data in a systematic and more conceptual way (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Dey 1993). To this extent categories do not emerge from the data, or exist to be discovered by the researcher, but rather are constructed from the researcher's purposeful interaction with the data (Richards 2005). Similarly relationships between categories only

become evident when they are recognised by the researcher (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This purposefulness and the researcher's preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000) brings a degree of sensitivity and insight to the data but it is important that this purposefulness does not intrude unduly into the analysis (Dey 1993; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Thus, in coding the data, the researcher had an ever-present sensitivity, conscious or otherwise, to how the data, codes and categories might relate to the provisional framework and the wider conceptions of strategy and strategic thinking. While this sensitivity is unavoidable, and indeed may be valuable, it is important that the introduction of unwarranted or unrecognised bias is minimised.

One source of bias may lie inherent in the data, unrecognised by the researcher, as a result of the sequence of interviews and a sensitivity developed by the researcher as these interviews progressed. In each of the interviews the participants will have mentioned a number of topics and ideas. Those topics and ideas heard by the researcher in earlier interviews are likely to have made the researcher more sensitive to those topics in later interviews. For example, in one of the earlier interviews a participant mentioned the notion of "balance", which the researcher thought an interesting notion. In subsequent interviews the researcher was then sensitised to hearing any comment that might be related to a notion of balance. Of course, this is an example of which the researcher is aware but there may be others of which the researcher is not aware. Once sensitised to a particular topic, the researcher might then unconsciously have communicated an interest in particular topics and ideas to the participant with non-verbal cues. Although during the interviews the researcher attempted to minimise these effects, clearly they may be present nonetheless.

It is therefore important that in the analysis any bias introduced in the interview sequence is not reinforced, and indeed is counteracted if possible. Thus, in addition to decisions about the source of codes, in vivo or sociologically constructed, the researcher also has decisions regarding which data to analyse first and then how to proceed to the rest of the data. Conducting the analysis in the same sequence as the interviews is likely to reinforce any interview sequence bias. A sequence of analysis



that mirrors the chronological collection of the data may be warranted where there is a sequence of events but that was not the case in Study 3.

Sequencing the analysis in some arbitrary way, for example alphabetically, may also introduce bias because initial categories will be more influential in the development of the analysis and so a random sequence of analysis may be more robust (Dey 1993). However, even if the interviews were analysed at random, those that were analysed earlier would be more likely to influence the development of emerging themes than those analysed later. To avoid this, individual data items could be chosen for analysis at random from the whole data set, in a form of “microanalysis”. Microanalysis involves the detailed examination and interpretation of data, phrase by phrase and possibly word by word, to generate quickly a large number of initial codes as a guide to further analysis (Dey 1993; Strauss and Corbin 1998). There is a danger with this approach that a very large and hence unmanageable number of categories can be generated, especially with the use of software (Richards 2005). Additionally, there are concerns that this type of highly fragmenting approach to data results in a loss of context, narrative and meaning (Bryman 2001; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). This approach is also likely to be highly time consuming and laborious. While time consuming and laborious may not be features that are themselves deleterious to the analysis, the implications for researcher concentration and fatigue are.

Thus, in Study 3 an approach was adopted that reduced the influence of any one interview on the analysis while at the same time retaining a degree of context for the data items. Each interview transcript was broken down into 19 sections. These sections corresponded to natural, readily identifiable breaks in the interview transcripts, for example responses to specific questions or researcher fieldnotes with regard to particular aspects of the interview. In total for the 25 interviews this generated 475 data sections. Each of these data sections was assigned a random number and then analysed in that sequence for words, phrases and sentences that expressed particular themes, thus generating *in vivo* codes. After this random coding each of the transcripts were re-read in alphabetical order of participant identification

code to check for any missed codes, this produced a further 3 codes. This detailed analysis produced in total 845 in vivo codes.

After the detailed in vivo coding, the codes generated were examined and grouped together in emerging categories. As each code was categorised the original section of the interview transcript was re-examined to review the original context of the code. Those categories emerging earlier in this stage of the analysis were likely to influence the researcher, consciously or unconsciously, in developing categories later. The later stages of the interview are more structured by the framework than the earlier stages and hence categorisation of the data is implicit because of the structure of the questions asked. Starting the categorisation with these later stages might carry forward this implicit categorisation into other parts of the data. So the grouping of codes into categories started with the least structured portion of the data (interview stage 2) and subsequently progressed to the more structured portions (interview stage 4). It is considered that this sequence provided maximum opportunity for participants' categories and themes to be represented.

Clearly, a proportion of the in vivo codes generated reflected the categories and elaborations of the framework. That is they reflected participants' comments with regard to goals, issues or actions, or relationships between them. These will have been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the framework depending on the portion of the transcript from which they were taken, with earlier portions being less influenced. Comments that refer specifically to goals, issues and actions, and the relationships between them were analysed in earlier stages of the analysis and hence in vivo codes arising from these were disregarded in this inductive analysis. The intention in this inductive analysis was identify themes that appeared relevant to participants when talking about strategic thinking that were not explicit in the framework. Identifying and exploring these themes provides the possibility to develop the framework further by qualifying or adding further richness to those themes currently present and by incorporating themes not currently present.

As categories were developed the intention was that they should be internally consistent and distinct from each other, not necessarily in terms of absolute mutual

exclusivity, but in terms of their distinctive meanings for the participants (Marshall and Rossman 1999), and in a way which contributes to the analysis (Dey 1993). An additional intention was that a category should have what might be termed both internal and external validity. That is, it was meaningful in relation to the data and also meaningful in relation to other categories, requiring the researcher to think systematically (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A category's conceptual significance was considered at least as important as its empirical reference since while it is essential that categories make sense conceptually they need not be explicitly expressed or recognised by the participants. A category may be empirically relevant if it reveals something important about the data even where there are few empirical instances or the category uses distinctions that are not evident to the participants themselves (Dey 1993). Thus analysing the data involved more than a mechanical adherence to reflecting what is in the data and in Study 3 the data was not only used for substantiation but also instantiation.

While coding breaks up the data, it also integrates it by linking together data items that are associated with the same category because of similarities of characteristics or meanings, and thus links all those data items to a particular idea or concept (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Strauss and Corbin 1998). In practice the activities of coding and linking, of differentiating and integrating, occurred together, reflecting their complementary roles in the analysis (Dey 1993; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The researcher was thus engaged in attempts to both differentiate, and integrate the data to develop a conceptual scheme related to the data (Miles and Huberman 1994). The important feature of the analysis was not a mechanical process of labelling parts of the data but rather conceiving and establishing linkages between data and the researcher's ideas about that data, reflected ultimately in conceptual schemes that are related to that data but transcend them (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

While coding may integrate data items at a given conceptual level it may also enable the researcher to move to a higher conceptual level that is more general by understanding patterns in the data and pulling together data items and ideas into more conceptually meaningful and parsimonious categories (Miles and Huberman 1994)

which may have subcategories of greater resolution and detail (Dey 1993). Combining the differing emerging strands in an analysis that have high conceptual and empirical relevance can produce a more powerful conceptual scheme by virtue of greater conceptual integration and scope (Dey 1993).

Thus, coding the data generated a set of abstract categories to represent the meanings in the data and essentially condensed the data, enabling it to be analysed more conceptually (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Abstract categories provide a powerful means of analysing the salient features of the phenomena under study without becoming overwhelmed by the detail and complexity but it is important to remember they are conceptual abstractions and hence are simplifications (Dey 1993). However, whenever data abstractly represented in this way some meaning is lost (Dey 1993) and so it is important to appreciate the importance of retention of meaning in this process (Marshall and Rossman 1999) rather than merely seeing it as a process of data reduction (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Richards 2005). This is especially important considering that data reduction, in terms of the data to be analysed representing the phenomenon under study, has already occurred as the researcher decides, knowingly or unknowingly, which data to collection with respect to the phenomenon (Miles and Huberman 1994). Thus, the inductive analysis of the data from Study 3 generated conceptual abstractions from data that was meaningful to the study's participants and that contributed to the theory building process.

This chapter discussed the methodology of Study 3 in detail, in particular establishing the individual as the focus of the study and discussing possible concerns with that focus, namely the risk of overemphasising the individual rational thinker, ignoring the social aspect of strategy, and giving undue weight to managerial agency and choice. The sample of participants was described and the basis for the interview protocol used with these participants. The later sections described the structured analysis of the data from these interviews, presented in chapter 7 and the inductive analysis, presented in chapter 8.

# **7 Findings from the structured analysis of Study 3**

## **7.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this structured phase of analysis of the data from Study 3 was to assess to what extent the provisional framework for strategic thinking had meaning for practitioners. The provisional framework is composed of goals, issues and actions, and their interrelationships. It was proposed that each of these elements may have certain elaborations that would indicate better strategic thinking. The interview protocol and this subsequent analysis were designed to investigate the framework at three different levels. The highest, most comprehensive, level considered the integrated framework composed of goals, issues and actions, and their interrelationships taken as a whole. The middle level considered the category set formed by goals, issues and actions. The lowest, most detailed, level considered elaborations of the individual categories of goals, issues and actions. The data generated at each level provide information with respect to the framework but these levels are primarily analytical devices and the intention was to integrate findings across these levels. While the primary orientation of this structured analysis is towards substantiation or otherwise of the provisional framework it is also intended to be sensitive to emerging themes. An overview of the analysis is shown diagrammatically in Figure 6-2.

## **7.2 The highest level – the overall framework**

Assessing the provisional framework at this highest level involves a comparison between whether the participant considers the map to be a reflection of strategic thinking and whether the researcher would consider the map to be a reflection of strategic thinking, based on criteria derived from the provisional framework. The opening question in the interview was “What is an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation that you have been thinking about in the last week?” The participant’s response to this question was recorded as a cause map which was hand drawn at the time by the researcher. The hand drawn maps

were entered into Decision Explorer software for subsequent analysis. Some of the maps were relatively small, with only 17 nodes while the largest had 69 nodes. The average number of nodes was 38. The maps with only a relatively few nodes may have been caused by three main circumstances. One is a shortage of time for the interview, for example, because of a clash of meetings SP1 had only 40 minutes for the whole of the interview. A second circumstance is that participants may have intentionally limited how much they said in order to fit with the time available, and there is some evidence for this in the data from interview notes and fieldnotes as shown in Table 7-1. Additionally a further six participants (CA1, DM4, DP3, QP4, SA3, and UP5) indicated that they were selecting a single issue from a number of issues. Some maps only contain one cluster (see Table 7-13), which might indicate that the participant was restricting the discussion rather than expanding it to be what they might have considered to be unmanageable in the time available. The third circumstance is that the limited number of map nodes was a genuine reflection of their thoughts about the issue.

**Table 7-1 Comments suggesting that participants were limiting the scope of their comments about the issue**

MA5	how deep to you want me to go?
MM2	it depends how far and how deep you want to go
NA4	suitable for discussion in the time we had, that would not be too complicated...not too broad or too big
NM1	something that is quite focussed and that I can keep specific
PP2	there were other things they could say but that was sufficient
SA4	there were so many they could choose from but wanted to select one that could be talked about in the time we had
SP1	something that they could isolate to talk about in the time we had

A participant's assessment of whether the map is a reflection of strategic thinking is likely to be quite idiosyncratic and is provided by their answer to the question "Considering the map we have just produced, would you consider it to reflect strategic thinking?" in stage 2 of the interview. The researcher's interpretation of this answer involved taking an overall assessment of the response and not a detailed word by word analysis. The aim was to assess if, in overall terms, the

participant thought the map reflected strategic thinking. In interpreting the answer the following guidelines were used. There may be a clear statement by the participant, for example, yes or no. In other instances there may be an indication that they think the map reflects strategic thinking by using the word strategic in relation to particular aspects. Some participants might qualify their answer by saying some parts were and some were not. In this instance the relevant parts of the answer were coded appropriately and consequently the response counting as both yes and no. In other instances it may be impossible to decide from the response, in which instances the response were left indeterminate.

Three of the participants (CM3, DP3, PP2) did not answer this question clearly, and it was not possible to decide from their response whether they considered the map to reflect strategic thinking or not. Specifically, the response of CM3 was “There are negatives. People don’t like change and we’ll be introducing different pathways that need new ways of working”. DP3 answered “It has been a revelation in the last year. I have done management and leadership, I’ve run a network, database support and small organisations, I don’t need to prove anything to myself”. PP2 responded “Interesting, what you’re really asking me is what is strategic thinking. They’re about the big picture. I try to think about the whole not the parts. And thinking about a future, say five years”. The answers by these participants did provide useful data, but not for the purpose of this stage of the analysis.

Four other participants suggested that some aspects of the map did reflect strategic thinking while other aspects did not. DA4 said that “Elements of the strategic plan are the strategic bit” but that “The processy bits are not strategic”. NA4 said “Yes because of the interrelationships” but no because “strategic thinking is more the framework in which you do your day to day work”. NM2 said “the aspiration to be a Foundation Trust would be strategic” and “Partnerships are strategic within this though” but that “I’ve automatically given info about operational practicalities and decisions, about delivering it”. OA2 said that “the map did not reflect a great deal of strategic thinking” but that “the right hand side did because this dealt with national policy and had a high public profile”.

In summary, in response to the question of whether they thought their map reflected strategic thinking, the answer from three participants could not be clearly determined, four participants answered both yes and no, eleven participants considered their map to reflect strategic thinking and seven participants considered their map not to reflect strategic thinking. These findings are summarised in Table 7-2.

**Table 7-2 Participants' assessment of whether their map reflects strategic thinking**

Participant response unclear	CM3, DP3, PP2
Participant says map both does and does not reflect strategic thinking	DA4, NA4, NM2, OA2
Participant says map reflects strategic thinking	CP5, FP5, HM4, MA5, MM2, NA6, NM1, QP5, SA3, SA4, UP5
Participant says map does not reflect strategic thinking	CA1, CA4, DM4, FP2, PP5, QP4, SP1

The researcher's assessment of whether the map is a reflection of strategic thinking may also be idiosyncratic to a degree but to signify reliability it is important that it is consistent across the different participants and is based on specified criteria. The researcher's criteria are derived directly from the framework and described in Table 7-3 but for these criteria to be applied the map nodes need to be categorised in terms of goals, issues and actions. The categorisation of map nodes occurred stage 3 of the interview.

After the participant had indicated whether they considered the map to be an indication of strategic thinking they were offered the categories of goals, issues and actions and a suggestion made to code the map nodes in these terms. The categories were defined to the participants as follows. A goal: meant in its broadest sense as something to be achieved and so covering aspirations, objectives, purpose, etc. but which might also cover unwanted outcomes. An action: something that you or your organisation might do. An issue: an influencing factor that might impose constraints or be enabling.

Four participants (CM3, DP3, FP5 and UP5) were not inclined to code their maps in these terms and so the whole of their maps remained uncoded. The reasons



for this are considered later in section 7.3 (page 160). For a further six participants, while they were content to code the majority of their maps in terms of goals, issues and actions, there were a few nodes that they did not feel comfortable in coding that way. The reasons for this are also considered later in section 7.3 (page 162). Map nodes were coded as a goal, issue or action based on the participants' classifications and not the researcher's interpretations of these nodes. In using the participants' classification rather than the researcher's the expectation is that the findings will better represent the interpretations of the participants and provides the opportunity to gain insight by exploring those interpretations. Using the participant's classification also reduces the risk of imposing of categories by the researcher.

After an initial evaluation of five maps against the researcher's criteria none of the maps were classified as reflecting strategic thinking by these criteria. Given the circumstances of the interview, that is, no preparation by the participant and tight timescales, it may be that the original criteria were too stringent for those circumstances. If strategic thinking is considered as a day-to-day activity that managers undertake as they go through their working day, this might suggest that an ideal of strategic thinking as suggested by the provisional framework is unrealistic. It was decided therefore to evaluate the maps using two sets of criteria, one more stringent and one more relaxed, to take into account the interview circumstances. These criteria are shown in the Table 7-3.

**Table 7-3 Researcher's criteria for a causal map to reflect strategic thinking**

	<b>Stringent criteria</b>	<b>Relaxed criteria</b>
<b>Goals</b>	Appreciation of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or a simple sequence of goals. Both sets of criteria are the same for goals since a large proportion of maps met the stringent criteria.	
<b>Issues</b>	Appreciation of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. Appreciation of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions, including social and political awareness. This appreciation also involves reflection on how issues might be framed, categorised and reinterpreted over time.	Appreciation of combinations of interrelated issues rather than single issues.
<b>Actions</b>	Appreciation of a number of patterns of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple list of actions or a single pattern of action. Patterns of actions have multiple impacts on a number of goals, rather than an impact on a single goal.	Appreciation of a pattern of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple sequence of actions.
<b>Whole</b>	Criteria for goals, issues and actions, as detailed previously, plus criteria associated with the interrelatedness of the map. Appreciation of a set of consequences beyond the immediate, which might also be multi-stranded. Appreciation of dilemmas, revealed by considering the goal system, patterns of actions and combinations of issues, and the interrelationships between these, such that there is uncertainty about the right pattern of action. Motivation to take action	Patterns of actions have multiple impacts on a number of goals, rather than an impact on a single goal. Appreciation of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. Appreciation of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions.

Since to meet the stringent criteria for the whole map, the criteria for each of the elements, goals, issues and actions also had to be met, a failure to meet one of these criteria would automatically result in a failure for the map as a whole. None of the maps met the stringent criteria for the action element. Only one of the maps met the stringent criteria for the issues element. Sixteen of the maps met the stringent criteria for the goal element. In the analysis of the data from Study 2 it was suggested that the prevalence of nodes that were interpreted as goals was a consequence of the use of laddering questions in the interview protocol (page 54). These initial findings from Study 3 suggest that this may not be the case and that the prevalence of goals may be a reflection of the phenomena of strategic thinking rather than an artefact of the interview protocol. These results are summarised in the Table 7-4.

**Table 7-4 Number of maps meeting stringent criteria for strategic thinking**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Number of maps meeting criteria</b>
Goals – stringent	16
Issues – stringent	1
Actions – stringent	0
Whole map – stringent	0

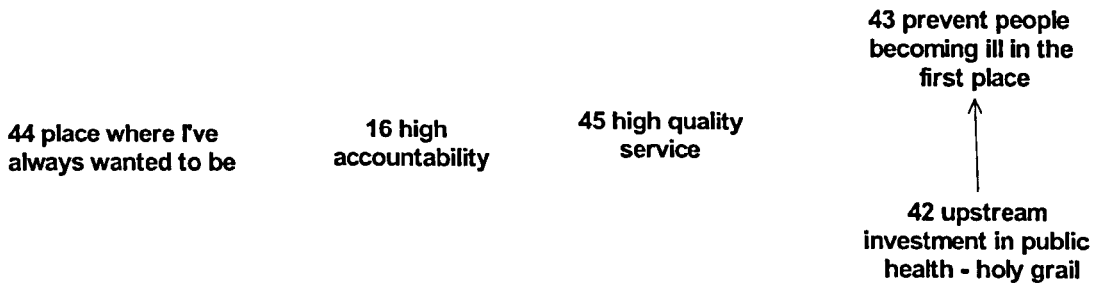
Relaxing the criteria to what might be more realistic under the circumstances of the interview means that approximately half the maps (9 of 21) would be considered to be reflections of strategic thinking as shown in Table 7-5. All the maps met the issues criteria. A large number of maps (10 of 21) failed to meet the actions criteria. The main reason for this was that there were few actions mapped, NA4 had only four actions, CA4, PP2 and NA6 had only three actions and MM2 had no actions. This may indicate that thinking about actions is considered to be too operational or that strategic thinking is considered to be higher level or more abstract than thinking about actions. This finding in itself is of significance. If “There is near unanimity that whatever else strategy may be thought to be, it certainly is *consistent corporate action over time*” (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002:422) (Emphasis in the original.) then it is interesting that when thinking about an issue that may have strategic significance for their organisations a large number of executives gave such little consideration to actions.

**Table 7-5 Number of maps meeting relaxed criteria for strategic thinking**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Number of maps meeting criteria</b>
Goals – relaxed	16
Issues – relaxed	21
Actions – relaxed	11
Whole map – relaxed	9

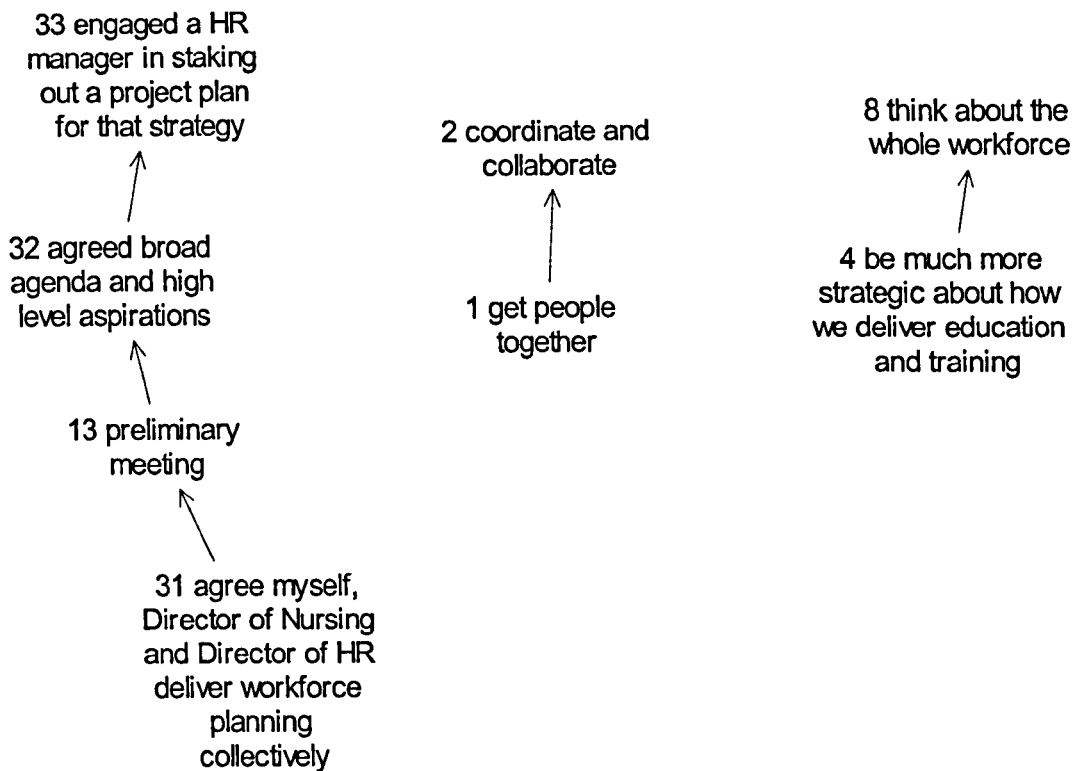
There were two other reasons that maps were considered not to reflect strategic thinking in relation the researcher’s criteria. One was that there was little interlinking between the nodes, as illustrated by the goals element of the map for FP2, shown in Figure 7-1 (numbers in the figure indicate the sequence in which the nodes were entered into Decision Explorer software and have no other significance).

**Figure 7-1 Goals element of map from participant FP2**



The other reason was that the nodes were in a linear sequence of actions or goals, as illustrated by the actions element of the map for MA5 shown in Figure 7-2.

Figure 7-2 Actions element of map from participant MA5



The original data set contained the maps of twenty five participants. For the purpose of the comparison, between the researcher's criteria for strategic thinking and whether the participant considers the map to reflect strategic thinking, the only data that can be used is that where the participant was comfortable with coding the maps in terms of goals, issues and actions, and the participant gave a clear and unambiguous answer to whether their map reflected strategic thinking. These restrictions exclude nine participants from this comparison. The results of this comparison are shown in Table 7-6. As can be seen in Table 7-6, there is an almost equal distribution across the cells, with as much disagreement between participant and researcher as there is agreement.

**Table 7-6 Comparison of whether the participant considers the map to reflect strategic thinking and whether the map meets the researcher's criteria**

		Does the participant consider the map a reflection of strategic thinking?	
		Yes	No
Does the map meet the criteria?	Yes	CP5, HM4, QP5, SA4	CA1, PP5, QP4, SP1
	No	MA5, MM2, NA6, NM1, SA3	CA4, DM4, FP2

Given these initial results it is worthwhile investigating the basis for the agreement and disagreement in these various cases in more detail. The comments made by participants and comments relating to the assessment by the researcher against the criteria are summarised in Table 7-7, Table 7-8, Table 7-9, Table 7-10 and Table 7-11.

**Table 7-7 Criteria and participant agree that the map reflects strategic thinking**

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Participant comments</b>	<b>Comments on comparison</b>
<b>CP5</b>	Goals, issues and actions meet the criteria. Actions have impact on goal system. Issues impact on goals and actions is mapped.	The map is a reflection of strategic thinking throughout most of the NHS.	CP5 did not elaborate why the map reflected strategic thinking but merely stated that it reflected strategic thinking in the NHS
<b>HM4</b>	Goals, issues and actions elements meet criteria and there is a degree on interrelationship in the map	...because it was about purpose. ...it included actions which were needed in implementation to put strategy into practice, make a difference and bring about change.	HM4 provided two reasons related to the criteria, purpose and actions to put strategy into practice.
<b>QP5</b>	Goal, issue and action elements meet criteria. Issues mapped include impact on goal system and issues mapped include impact on actions	Not as strategic as "Fit for the Future" because it is reactive but has some of the same characteristics: it is not just about bricks and mortar; it is longer term; it requires new ways of working; it involves service redesign; has to be sold to GPs and Practice Based Commissioners	Although QP5 considered this issue as less strategic than another one, they provided a list of reasons why an issue would be strategic. What made this issue less strategic was that it was reactive.
<b>SA4</b>	The goals, issues and actions elements indicate that it is. There is a degree of interconnectedness between the 3 elements.	...the map was about me thinking how the organisation reaches objectives, about relationships, how we're influenced by external factors and bodies, understanding how other players might behave, what the options are, how the trust might respond. ...this map was a reflection of strategic thinking to the extent that it was high level and the various things mentioned above	SA4 mentioned objectives, relationships, external factors and players, alternative options, and trust responses. These all relate to the criteria. Additionally there is the notion of high level.

**Table 7-8 Criteria and participant agree that the map does not reflect strategic thinking**

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Comments on comparison</b>
<b>CA4</b>	Does not reflect strategic thinking. The goal and issue elements would indicate strategic thinking but there are only 3 actions and although there are combinations of issues these are not related to the goal system.	You might say it wasn't. I don't think I'm very good at strategic thinking. Others see it differently – all the time you're thinking about what is possible. My bent is to think how to get this to happen and this may constrain my thinking.	CA4 appears to be suggesting that strategic thinking is more about thinking about possibilities and they are thinking about how to get something to happen. There appears to be a contradiction. The criteria suggest that CA4 has not talked enough about actions but they suggest they have talked too much about them. Perhaps the interesting point here is that CA4 considers strategic thinking more about thinking about what is possible and less about how to get things to happen. Did not directly address the question initially but then refocused on the question.
<b>DM4</b>	Issues elements meet the criteria but goals and actions do not. A number of goals are mapped but they are not interlinked. A number of actions are mapped but these are only supporting relatively isolated goals	...strategic thinking was about the longer term, about a plan and objectives whereas this was more about tactics which relate to the shorter term.	DM4 map does not meet the criteria because the goals and actions are relatively simple rather than having the degree of complexity required. In considering what might differentiate the strategic, this degree of complexity is fundamental. So DM4s reason that the map was more about tactics would correspond with this interpretation.



<b>FP2</b>	Goals and issues elements meet the criteria but the actions element does not. The map is quite well interlinked but the majority of nodes are issues with a few actions, the main ones being in a linear sequence.	What I've described is a point of transition – moving to a space where we can start to think strategically about the issue, the entrée Strategic thinking is a group activity and when I get into that position are the people there with me legitimate	FP2 is unique in response to this question in that they described strategic thinking as a group activity. Other than specifying strategic thinking as a group activity they do not specify why the map does not reflect strategic thinking
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**Table 7-9 Criteria indicates that the map reflects strategic thinking but participant does not**

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Comments on comparison</b>
<b>CA1</b>	Goal, issues and actions elements meet criteria. Actions have impacts on more than one goal and issues have impacts on goals and actions	...the map was more of a reflection of how to operationalise the strategic plan.	CA1 is suggesting that thinking about actions to operationalise a strategic plan does not reflect strategic thinking. The criteria would suggest that this type of thinking is strategic. This is particularly interesting because CA1 also said "I have a problem with differentiating strategic from operational"
<b>PP5</b>	Goals, issues and actions elements meet the criteria. The structure of the map such that issues are on one side and actions on the other makes this a marginal case	My comments are probably not strategic but I've talked through some of the more tactical and operational issues – the context is a strategic framework – my comments are more to do with the real world	PP5 is suggesting that there is a degree of disconnection between the strategic and the real world in some sense. Thinking about operational issues and actions to achieve strategic goals is not considered by PP5 to reflect strategic thinking. The criteria would suggest that this type of thinking was strategic

<b>QP4</b>	Goals, issues and actions elements meet the criteria. Actions impact on multiple goals and issues impact on goals and actions	This is not a piece of strategic thinking. This is a reflection of reality. Strategic thinking would be picking out the knowns, spending more time considering them and coming up with the vision with what the workforce needs to be in 5 or 10 years time and working out how that needs to happen.	QP4 is suggesting that there is a degree of disconnection between strategic thinking and reality in some sense. QP4's description of strategic thinking is related to the criteria in terms of identifying knowns (issues?), vision (goals), and working out how that needs to happen (actions) are related to the criteria. The emphasis on knowns is interesting
<b>SP1</b>	Goals, issues and actions elements meet the criteria. Map shows impact of actions on goals and issues on actions and goals in an interlinked rather than linear way.	...the map being a "reflection of reality" ...essentially said NO, because it was reactive.	SP1 gave two reasons for the map not reflecting strategic thinking. The first is suggesting that there is a degree of disconnection between strategic thinking and reality in some sense. The second was that it was reactive. This second reason suggests that strategic thinking cannot be done in reactive way.

**Table 7-10 Participant indicates that the map reflects strategic thinking but criteria does not**

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Comments on comparison</b>
<b>MA5</b>	The goal element does not meet the criteria because they are in a linear sequence. There is little interrelationship between actions on the left hand side of the map and issues on the right hand side of the map.	I think so. Strategy is about understanding your organisation – the place where you work and its environment and trying to imagine what challenges you might find in the future. Strategy is pulling together in a coherent plan that people can understand and is flexible enough and can be implemented. It has to be adaptable. A project plan but one that is iterative.	MA5 talks about strategy rather than strategic thinking. The description they give could meet the criteria, understand the organisation and its environment (issues), challenges in the future (goals and uncertainty), implementation (actions), but the map has little interlinking.
<b>MM2</b>	Goals and issues elements meet the criteria but no actions are mapped. The map is not well interconnected with the left hand side being about goals and the right hand side about issues.	The map reflects the issues that needed to be dealt with at a strategic level.	MM2 appears to focus on issues and these are related to a goal system. While they say that the map reflects strategic thinking because it reflects the strategic issues that need to be dealt with thinking about how to deal with those issues does not appear to be part of strategic thinking. How to deal with the issues in not strategic. This particularly interesting as MM2 also says “It is difficult to separate the operational from the strategic.”

NA6	Goals and issues elements meet the criteria but actions do not with only 3 being mapped, although they are high level.	In respect of both the strategic plan and the development it's a decision we have made around our site and the range of our services and aligned around a package of services and estate development plan. ... you need to understand the strategic context, where your organisation sits so you can shape your priorities... The relationships the organisation has with other bodies such as the SHA are strategic.	NA6 specifically mentions making a decision in relation to strategic thinking about services and an estate development plan. Services and development could be interpreted as relating to actions. Understanding the strategic context, including the relationships with other bodies could be interpreted as being about issues. The organisation's priorities could be related to goals. So in some senses what NA6 is talking about is related to the criteria. What is lacking is the incorporation of actions.
NM1	The issues and actions criteria are met but the goal system is relatively simple, albeit high level. Map is well interlinked with issues influencing actions which in turn impact on goals.	Its about thinking about something in the future that we're not doing now.	The idea of thinking about something in the future that we're not doing now does not necessarily make it strategic but presumably this simplicity is offset by the high level?
SA3	Goals and issues elements meet the criteria but the action element does not. Actions are mapped but they are in a simple linear sequence to support two goals. Issues mapped in relation to impact on goals but not actions	Where the future of the whole organisation is concerned if that isn't strategic thinking then I'm not sure what is. However, in a sense this is more of a problem relating around how we deliver that strategy rather than the strategy.	SA3 clearly identifies scope as an important criterion for strategic thinking. Where they say that the map is more about how to deliver the strategy than the strategy itself may account for the linear sequence of actions and that issues are not related to their impact on goals. Perhaps this has already been considered?

**Table 7-11 Participant indicates that the map both is and is not a reflection of strategic thinking**

	Reasons for	Reasons against	Comments on comparison
<b>DA4</b>	Elements of the strategic plan are the strategic bit	The processy bits are not strategic, they're just about getting through next year, they're not strategic. It's like my Look Up and Look Out – observe what is going on around you, get the context, then formulate the next step and only then move forward.	DA4 appears to be drawing a distinction between the strategic plan, which is a five year formal business plan, and incremental development.
<b>NA4</b>	...because of the interrelationships ...strategic thinking was about understanding the connections, it was forward looking, about how what you do makes a difference and scanning for issues that might help or have an impact	...strategic thinking is more the framework in which you do your day to day work	NA4 is clearly reflecting the connectedness of the criteria and the role of issues. This also sounds quite incremental in nature. In the reasons against, NA4 appears to be drawing a distinction between the day-to-day and the strategic.
<b>NM2</b>	...the aspiration to be a Foundation Trust would be strategic, what we want to be. Partnerships are strategic within this though.	I've automatically given info about operational practicalities and decisions, about delivering it.	NM2 is drawing a distinction between the aspiration of the Trust and the role that partnerships play in that, and the operational practicalities and decisions about delivering that aspiration.
<b>OA2</b>	... the right hand side does because this dealt with national policy and had a high public profile Because if we get this right then patients would choose to come to us if we offered quick and quality treatment, this would maintain a business stream that	...the map does not reflect a great deal of strategic thinking	OA2 gave no reasons why the map did not reflect a great deal of strategic thinking other than to say why the right hand side did. There is perhaps the high level nature because it is national policy. There is also the comment about financial viability from attracting

	would makes us financially stable.		patients. The left hand side of the map, by implication not reflecting strategic thinking is about not being in crisis.
<b>Summary</b>	<p>DA4 strategic plan – 5 year formal business plan</p> <p>NA4 about understanding the connections, it was forward looking, about how what you do makes a difference and scanning for issues that might help or have an impact</p> <p>NM2 the aspiration to be a Foundation Trust would be strategic, what we want to be. Partnerships are strategic within this though</p> <p>OA2 Because if we get this right then patients would choose to come to us if we offered quick and quality treatment, this would maintain a business stream that would makes us financially stable.</p>	<p>DA4 just about getting through next year... formulate the next step and only then move forward</p> <p>NA4 ... the framework in which you do your day to day work</p> <p>NM2 ...info about operational practicalities and decisions, about delivering it</p>	<p>The reasons for the map being strategic appear to be related to the complexity aspect of the map.</p> <p>The reasons for the map not being strategic appear to relate to aspects of the map being operational or day to day.</p>

For each of the classifications, in terms of whether the participant and the researcher’s criteria indicate that the map reflects strategic thinking, in Table 7-7, Table 7-8 Table 7-9, Table 7-10 and Table 7-11, the comments from the comparisons were analysed and the themes that emerge are summarised in Table 7-12.

**Table 7-12 Themes emerging from a comparison of whether the researcher or participant consider the map to reflect strategic thinking**

		Does the participant consider the map a reflection of strategic thinking?	
		Yes	No
Does the map meet the criteria?	Yes	<p>Where the participants gave reasons for why the map was a reflection of strategic thinking a number of these reasons were related to the criteria. HM4 because it was about purpose and actions to put strategy into practice. QP5 gave a list of reasons why an issue would be strategic: it is not just about bricks and mortar; it is longer term; it requires new ways of working; it involves service redesign; has to be sold to GPs and Practice Based Commissioners. SA4 mentioned objectives, relationships, external factors and players, alternative options, and trust responses.</p> <p>The participants also introduced other reasons. SA4 introduced the notion of high level. QP5 suggested that issues that were more strategic would not be as reactive as the one mapped.</p>	<p>A common theme is this group appears to be some notion of a disconnection between strategic thinking and the real world. PP5 “...my comments are more to do with the real world”, QP4 “This is a reflection of reality” and SP1 the map being a “reflection of reality”. CA1 commented that “...the map was more of a reflection of how to operationalise the strategic plan” which might meet the criteria in terms of actions. This is particularly interesting as CA1 also said “I have a problem with differentiating strategic from operational”.</p> <p>SP1 also introduced the notion that the map did not reflect strategic thinking because it was reactive.</p>

	No	<p>Two participants in this group, MA5 and NM1, talked about things that could be related to the criteria but the maps failed to meet the criteria because they were relatively simple with little interlinking. This may be a consequence of the interview conditions.</p> <p>The map for SA3 was also relatively simple with linear sequence of actions. This may be because the issue was "...a problem relating around how we deliver that strategy rather than the strategy".</p> <p>Two other participants in this group, MM2 and NA6, talked about goals and issues but said little about actions. This particularly interesting as MM2 also says "It is difficult to separate the operational from the strategic."</p> <p>SA3 clearly identifies scope as an important criterion for strategic thinking.</p>	<p>CA4 presents something of a contradiction because they say "My bent is to think how to get this to happen" but their map only contains 3 actions. The criteria suggest that CA4 has not talked enough about actions but they suggest they have talked too much about them.</p> <p>DM4's map does not meet the criteria because the goals and actions are relatively simple rather than having the degree of complexity required. In considering what might differentiate the strategic from what might be termed the tactical, this degree of complexity is fundamental. So DM4's reason that the map was more about tactics would correspond with this interpretation.</p> <p>FP2 is unique in response to this question in that they described strategic thinking as a group activity.</p>
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In considering the themes in Table 7-12 it should be remembered that the provisional framework is derived from previous empirical work and synthesises significant themes from the strategy literature. Consequently, a lack of agreement between the researcher's assessment based on the framework and a participant's assessment does not necessarily indicate a refutation of the framework. A lack of agreement might indicate possible fruitful areas for exploration and development. For example, FP2 described strategic thinking as a group activity, and in this they were unique amongst the participants, but that does not imply that the focus of this research on the individual is undermined. Rather, it suggests a further stage of research, assessing to what extent the framework might be applicable to strategic thinking as a group activity. Where there was disagreement, a frequent reason was that the participants' maps were relatively simple and this may have been influenced by the circumstances of the interview. In general where there was agreement, the participant's reasons were related to the criteria, that is, they talked about things that could be interpreted as related to goals, issues and actions, and the complexity of the interrelationships.

An important theme of notable significance emerging from Table 7-12 is a view that strategic thinking is disconnected from the "real world" in some sense. Those participants, who did not consider the map to reflect strategic thinking, although the criteria indicated it did, appeared to suggest that strategic thinking was not about the real world. This finding has noteworthy implications for the strategy field. Given the debate about the relevance of strategy research, that a quarter of executives considered strategic thinking not to be about the real world is concerning and suggests questions about the value they therefore associate with strategic thinking.

The deficiency of actions in some maps, and where there was a lack of agreement the most common reason was a deficiency of actions in the map, might also reflect this view that strategic thinking is not about the real world. This might be related to the notion introduced by SA4 that strategic thinking is high level. This may suggest that the incorporation of actions into the framework on equal terms with goals and issues may not reflect practitioner interpretations and hence the actions

element of the framework should be given less importance. Alternatively, the incorporation of actions on equal terms into the framework might indicate strategic thinking that has greater utility, since it is not disconnected from the real world. Empirical evidence for the difficulties in deciding on the importance attached to actions in strategic thinking is perhaps given by the two participants who expressed difficulties in separating the operational from the strategic.

A final theme that emerges from Table 7-12 is that strategic thinking is not reactive. What was meant by strategic thinking as not reactive was not explored further in the interviews but this produces an interesting contrast with the notion in this research of strategic thinking as a day to day activity, which is likely to be reactive to some extent. Accepting that strategic thinking was not reactive would imply that when faced with an unanticipated issue or event an individual would not be able to think strategically about that issue or event.

In conclusion, the analysis at this level suggests that there is a degree of support for the provisional framework. In addition there are two other notable findings. The most significant is that a quarter of the executives considered strategic thinking not to be about the real world, which has significant implications for the strategy field in terms of teaching and dissemination of knowledge of the subject. Related to this is the extent to which a consideration of actions plays a part in strategic thinking. The incorporation of actions into the framework on an equal basis with goals and issues did not match the interpretations of some participants but may suggest strategic thinking that has more utility because it is not disconnected from the real world because of the consideration of actions.

### **7.3 The middle level – the category set**

Assessment of the provisional framework at this middle level, that of the category set, involves an assessment of to what extent the categories of goals, issues and actions have meaning for the participants. In particular, do the categories make sense to the participants, how are they interpreted, what relationships between the categories are suggested and did the participants suggest any different or additional

categories? The mechanism for assessing the meaning of the category set for the participant was to suggest that they categorised the map nodes in terms of goals, issues or actions. This data was generated in stage 3 of the interview.

Of the twenty five participants, four were not comfortable in coding their maps in terms of goals, issues and actions. One of these, CM3, simply appeared to ignore the invitations of the researcher to code individual map nodes and preferred to talk in general terms about their role. In some ways this appeared as if CM3 was not prepared to be tied down to the specifics of what they had said but preferred to retain more control by choosing the topics they wished to talk about. A second participant, FP5, responded similarly, preferring to discuss the categories and provide examples, rather than categorise specific map nodes. For a third participant, DP3, a reluctance to code the map nodes may have been related to their expression of enthusiasm for “lean thinking” and the position they adopted at the start of the interview. At the start they had said how valuable lean thinking was, and when the categories of goals, issues and actions were introduced they said “This is what lean thinking is about”. Having made this statement any difficulties encountered in coding specific map nodes may then have proved embarrassing to DP3. For these three participants a reluctance to code the map nodes in terms of goals, issues and actions may have been related to the need to project an image of managerial competence, which may have been undermined by any difficulties in talking about the coding of specific map nodes. Alternatively, it may have simply been that they did not understand the requests. A fourth participant, UP5, simply stated “I’m not particularly comfortable with that paradigm”. The researcher’s interpretation of the response from this participant is different from the interpretation of the response from the other three participants. The statement from UP5 appeared to be simply what it was, a statement that they did not think in those terms.

Where participants appeared reluctant to employ the categories of goals, issues and actions the researcher was careful to avoid exerting excessive pressure. Excessive pressure may have disrupted the social process of the interview and hence jeopardised the later stages of the interview or even the inclination of the participant to engage in subsequent interviews. Perhaps more importantly, excessive pressure

may have forced the researcher's categories onto the participant, to a greater extent than the research design implicitly does, when they did not make sense for the participant, as in the case of UP5. The findings in this section therefore relate to twenty one of the twenty five participants and while four participants appeared reluctant to code the map in terms of goals, issues and actions, two of those still appeared comfortable with the categories. Hence for the majority of the participants, twenty three of the twenty five, the categories of goals, issues and actions had some meaning in relation to the issue of strategic significance and thus provides significant support for the provisional framework.

The most commonly occurring category, in those maps that were coded by participants, was "issue" which accounted for at least 50% of the nodes in two thirds of the maps and over 40% in all but two of the maps. On average "issue" nodes accounted for 54% of nodes on maps. A summary of the map statistics is shown in Table 7-13.

**Table 7-13 Summary of map statistics in terms of categories and clusters**

Participant	Goals	Issues	Actions	Uncoded	Total	Clusters
HM4	19	12	10	0	41	3
QP5	10	36	23	0	69	3
NA4	18	31	4	4	57	1
SP1	8	12	4	3	27	1
CA1	17	27	9	1	54	1
DM4	11	30	12	5	58	3
QP4	6	26	10	4	46	1
NM2	7	36	8	1	52	3
SA4	7	29	11	0	47	3
FP2	5	31	8	0	44	2
CP5	19	21	6	0	46	2
MA5	5	20	9	0	34	1
MM2	11	18	0	0	29	1
CA4	8	16	3	0	27	1
DP3	1	0	0	31	32	1
OA2	5	13	6	0	24	1
PP5	7	24	8	0	39	1
FP5	0	0	0	48	48	2
DA4	7	13	9	0	29	2
NA6	5	10	3	0	18	1

PP2	6	7	3	1	17	1
SA3	8	12	5	0	25	1
CM3	0	0	0	33	33	2
NM1	4	7	9	0	20	1
UP5	0	0	0	17	17	1

**A number of participants, six, were comfortable in using the categories of goals, issues and actions for the majority of the map nodes but found it difficult to code a few nodes in particular. A summary of the nodes that were difficult to code and relevant comments are shown in**

Table 7-14.

**Table 7-14 Comments regarding map nodes that could not be clearly categorised by participants**

	<b>Map nodes</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>NA4</b>	a 3 to 4 week wait for treatment	Could be action or issue.
	patients die remaining years of life are poor	Could be goal or issue. Because of the negative nature of these comments NA4 found it difficult to code these as goals but was not certain they were issues.
	develop expertise in dedicated centres for surgery and oncology	Could be action or goal.
<b>SP1</b>	walk-in centre in the area average out with A&E under 4 hours considered effective	These nodes were dismissed by SP1 as irrelevant but presumably they had some relevancy because they had included them. SP1 appeared to find this part of the interview quite difficult and the definitions of goals issues and actions were repeated 3 times. The circumstances to the interview were difficult, SP1 had been double booked by their PA and so there was a time pressure and they had a severe cold. There was also an impression that they was somewhat defensive in their responses.
<b>CA1</b>	not screw the commissioners	This node was not considered relevant by CA1
<b>DM4</b>	council culture is different from health a nightmare situation a difficult situation contract worth twelve and a half million request to me to be project director	All these nodes were described as being “part of the environment” or “just a fact”.

<b>QP4</b>	not waste time	Not categorised because QP4 could not decide which category was the right one, not that the categories were not appropriate
	do a bit more get engaged with functional planning of other services for example children with social services	Could be goal or action
	we should do something about it	Could be goal, issue or action
<b>NM2</b>	closure of the old hospital	In the past so not really relevant
<b>PP2</b>	PCT itself can create a clear case that separation has occurred	The categories made "complete sense". This map node was labelled as all three. A goal because this is "something that has to be fulfilled for the DoH". An action because "we will get on and do that". And an issue because "the PCT is schizophrenic about this".

A number of map nodes were not categorised because the nodes were considered to be irrelevant by the participant. This is interesting since they presumably had some relevance or the participant would not have mentioned them initially when the map was produced. DM4 described the uncoded nodes as being “just a fact” and so not a goal, issue or action. This suggests a possible fourth category, although this might be a subcategory of issues, related to the nature of the issue.

In all other instances where a node was left uncoded this was because the participant could not decide which category was appropriate or because the participant thought that more than one category was appropriate, rather than the participant indicating the categories were inappropriate. For example PP2 explained how all three categories were appropriate for a particular node. Conceptually the categories can be defined quite distinctly and clear definitions were provided to the participants before, and in some cases during, the categorisation (see page 123). However, some of these distinctions appeared to fade when participants were asked about specific map nodes. It may be that the nodes as discussed with the participant had a degree of “internal structure” that was not investigated under the circumstances of the interview. Possibly the phrases used by the participants were a form of shorthand that summarised a combination of say goals, issues or actions, and perhaps others categories not specified. For some participants the categories of goals, issues and actions may be distinct, but so closely related that an analytical separation does not reflect their experience. For example “a 3 to 4 week wait for treatment” may be an issue that is so closely associated, by the participant, with action to address that issue that the analytic separation is inappropriate. Alternatively, a specific node might indicate more than one category depending on the interpretation. For example it is easy to understand how “[to] develop expertise in dedicated centres for surgery and oncology” could be a goal whereas “develop expertise in dedicated centres for surgery and oncology” could be an action.

In conclusion, the category set of goals, issues and actions appears to be supported by the majority of participants. Even where participants had difficulties in categorising specific map nodes in general they did not reject the categories as



inappropriate but rather found it difficult to decide which category was appropriate. However, the instances where participants found it difficult to categorise nodes raises possible doubts about the extent to which the conceptual clarity and neatness of the provisional framework misrepresents the nature of strategic thinking as experienced by these participants.

### **7.3.1 The combination of goals, issues and actions**

A number of participants (MA5, OA2 and PP2) said that this category set made sense to them. Even UP5, who had stated that “I’m not particularly comfortable with that paradigm” and that they were not their “natural way of thinking”, confirmed this. MM2 said that while “The categories are not terminology we use... You could wrap up most of what we do into these categories”. Similarly, PP5 said “Most things could be put under those, where you want to go, barriers and transactions to get there, most things for boards and individuals”.

However, three participants commented that the categories were so broad that most things would fit into the combination. CA1 thought they were “sufficiently broad to cover most things” and QP5 that “the categories were so broad that most, if not all, things would fit into them”. NA6 similarly said “You can put most of it in these, probably because they are so broad”, that “The biggest issue is understanding what the relationship is between the three” and that strategic thinking was “about the relationships between the three categories”.

A number of participants saw a relationship between the categories. DM4 said that they saw “a relationship in terms of an issue requiring action that led to the achievement of a goal”. FP2 commented “We make choices about what outcomes we want, which we then translate into actions. What I would be doing in these terms can be aligned with the categories of goals, issues and actions”. FP5 commented “So I think those three cover everything” and that “it might simply be a question of sequencing the categories that were already there”. NA6 in relation to the strategic issue said “Here are the objectives, the issues are the risks to achieving those objectives and actions are taken to mitigate against those risks”.

A temporal aspect was introduced into the combination by CA4 in two ways. First, in suggesting that “Goals, issues and actions in places are time critical to get the goal” which might be a similar observation to FP5’s comment about sequencing of goals, issues and actions. CA4 also suggested that “some categories might change into others over time”. This latter comment might explain to some extent the instances of participants’ inability to definitively code a map node as a goal, issue or action.

### **7.3.2 The relationship between goals and actions**

A number of participants talked about a relationship between goals and actions. Four participants indicated a clear relationship. NA6 suggested, “The vision is no good if it can’t be put into practice. Its not about being so immersed in the day to day that you can’t see beyond it but the strategy has to be grounded in at least some of the operational realities”, for them, “The actions are the enactment of the ambition”. FP5 commented that “In the strategy there would be a template of how goals would be delivered and the actions to do that”. UP5 said “Life expectancy is our overall goal. Impacting on this means changing all sorts of bits and pieces”. CM3 talked about a specific map node and said it was “a goal for him but quickly lead to action in terms of working with clinicians”. These participants appeared to be suggesting that goals had some degree of precedence over actions, with actions being the way of delivering goals.

The relationship between goals and actions was not quite as clear for some participants. FP2 said they felt that “there was a degree of granulation between goals and actions with as goals became lower level they became more like actions”. SA3 said “I think that when something is a long way in the future, say five years or so, then five years away is so far away so that what might be actions are set as goals”. HM4 found that some map nodes were difficult to categorise, “particularly between goals and actions”.

DA4 appeared to talk about goals and actions as different criteria for evaluating Government policy, “It is Government policy so we have to do it but do we really want it? Is it doable and will it improve the health of the local population?”

### **7.3.3 The relationship between goals and issues**

Two participants talked about a relationship between goals and issues. MM2 clearly indicated a relationship between goals and issues, “We could go into more detail, talk about sub-goals and try to understand how they are related to the issue and how to influence the issue” and “Our relationship with the commissioners is a factor which is influencing our ability to achieve our goal, so the issue immediately bubbles into a goal”. They did suggest that “there was something between a goal and an issue” but this was not pursued further during the interview. MA5 suggested that culture could be an issue or goal depending on how it was treated, “If you accept the existing culture then it was an issue or you try to change it in which case it becomes a goal”. While these two participants clearly recognised a relationship between goals and issues, the nature of that relationship is not easily discerned.

### **7.3.4 The relationship between actions and issues**

Three participants talked about a relationship between actions and issues. DA4 suggested that “As you move along issues will be encountered and you will take action accordingly. My look up and look out is about this in identifying issues as you move along and how to take the next step”. SA4 suggested an intervening stage between issue and action involving debate, “Issues indicate choices and lead to a debate about the options and alternatives” or decision “Issue is connected to decision which then leads to action. This may in turn lead to other issues”. FP5 commented that “Some actions may be reactive in terms of issues that pop up”. All these participants appear to be suggesting some degree of incrementalism in the relationship between actions and issues with issues leading to action which may then result in other issues.

### **7.3.5 Goals**

The majority of participants made comments about goals when discussing the categories. Five participants made reference to the goals of different entities and stakeholders. CM3 highlighted “the importance of goal alignment between the organisation and individuals”. NA6 referred to “the aspirations of some people was

to compete” suggesting a personal dimension to goals. SA4 said “there is a question about who owns these things”. CP5 said “I could hit all the Government targets and the consumers might still not be happy”, suggesting the importance of the goals of different stakeholders. Similarly, DA4 said in relation to Foundation Trust status that “It is Government policy so we have to do it but do we really want it?”

Three participants made comments that suggested a system of goals or a degree of complexity associated with goals. FP5 stated “There are goals throughout the map, overall goals and sub-goals”. Interestingly, FP5 was one of the participants who appeared reluctant to code their map in terms of goals, issues and actions, suggesting that this reluctance did not indicate that the categories did not make sense to them. MM2 commented that “Other goals are so complicated that they are too difficult to separate out”. NM1 suggested “an intentional tension set up in the system by Government with the expectation that the tension will bring about contestability and hence better service for patients”.

Two participants introduced the notion of the tangibility of goals. DA4 related goals to plans, saying that “The five year plan is the product...The actual goal would be the new hospital” describing the plan as a “tangible” product that was important as a way of communicating what was to be achieved. FP2 also mentioned the notion of more or less tangible goals. They commented that “Concepts such as investing in peoples’ health and wellbeing are quite nebulous and people find them difficult because they are not really tangible. So what people say to themselves is that they will concentrate on targets because people won’t beat me up if I hit my target”. The apparent significance attached by these participants to tangibility is interesting in relation to the comments that strategic thinking is disconnected from the real world (page 158) as they appear to be suggesting that in relation to goals this connection is important.

Thus, the category of goals had meaning for the participants with some suggesting a goal system with overall goals and sub-goals, which may be the goals of other entities or stakeholders. These dimensions to goals are aspects of the provisional framework that were not evident to the participants at this stage of the

interview. Therefore, that these dimensions have emerged at this stage gives support to these dimensions of goals in the framework. There are suggestions that tangibility of goals may be important in communicating goals or influencing peoples' behaviour. This tangibility dimension of goals is not an aspect of the framework and may represent a possible modification or development of the framework.

### 7.3.6 Issues

A large number of participants made comments with respect to the issues category. DA4 suggested the importance of issues in saying "Issues carve into the strategy". (On reflection following the initial interview analysis, carve could alternatively have been calve, either interpretation gives an importance to issues.)

Five participants made comments regarding what might come under the category of issues, and possible sub-categories. CM3 made a distinction in saying "There are enablers and issues, but I suppose you'd put enablers as issues". FP5 introduced the notion of constraints saying "There is a bottomless pit of requirements but limited resources and so this is a constraint on our strategy" and that "You may consider this to be covered under issues but I think there is also something about constraints". DM4 made a distinction between some map nodes that were "environment" or "background", described as "just facts" and an issue as "something that has life rather than being fixed or static". SA3 appeared to make a similar distinction in saying "With issues there is probably a division within the types of issues. Some are facts compared to problems that are issues. With these we can choose how we tackle them". OA2 said that "the issues category could be broken down into different types" and finally settled on the terms "intellectual and practical" with the difference being that the practical ones required action while the intellectual ones needed to be thought about.

NM1 made two comments with regard to issues that were unique. One was that "there might be something about issue capacity" possibly related to the capacity to deal with number of issues. The other comment was that "Issues are about the unrevealed. We need to deal with these issues, between the direction we want to go in and what we do well at the moment." This suggests that there might be something

about responding to issues as they emerge rather than planning how to address them in advance.

Thus, the category of issues appeared to be accepted by the participants with some suggesting possible subcategories. In particular subcategories of enablers and constraints were suggested. Even though these were clearly implied in the definition provided to the participants (page 123), two felt it was important to draw attention to issues as enablers or constraints. More interesting are the suggestions that some issues are considered as just facts or background whilst others are not fixed or static and suggest some latitude or choice in how they are handled.

### **7.3.7 Actions**

A number of participants made comments with respect to actions. The importance of action was suggested by three participants. CM3 said, "It's important to be clear on goals, and strategy's about the what and how" and SA3 said "For the people on the ground strategy has no meaning until actions take place, otherwise strategy is like the sounding of a hollow bell". DA4 commented that "it's about suitability and feasibility of actions"

Five participants made reference to processes. Both CA1 and MA5 mentioned process but said that these were covered under actions. DA4 said that they "thought of actions and process together, not only what but how" and "What do I need to tackle this, what process is needed and then what actions". DA4 appears to be saying that process and actions are different, but that they think about them together. Similarly, OA2 commented "I suppose this is the processy stuff" to describe a combination of actions. SA3 thought that "when something is a long way in the future...is so far away so that what might be actions are set as goals. And so what you are left with as actions are very processy type things rather than say the delivery of services."

Two participants mentioned action in terms of it not occurring. DA4 interestingly commented that "If you decide to take the next step of course, sometimes the action can be to take no action". Similarly, SA4 said "a decision to

work in partnership may be taken but that may not lead to action". SA4 also appeared to suggest that actions were "to some extent tactical" since the organisation should "Only take action once a decision is made" and "because this is at a high level, only when the decision is made is action taken". The decision appears to be seen as more strategic perhaps, with action only following from that decision.

Thus, the category of actions appeared to be accepted by the participants with some suggestion that while actions may be to some extent less strategic than a decision they still are an important aspect of strategy. Two participants suggested that action might include not taking action. There appears to be some suggestion that actions in combination might be thought of as processes and that the categorisation of action or goal might change with timescale.

### **7.3.8 Additional categories suggested by participants**

In addition to the three categories of goals, issues and actions, comments from the participants suggested three possible additional categories. These were planning or sequencing, performance measurement, and uncertainty or dilemmas.

Performance measurement as a category that was missing emerged from five of participants. CM3 said "something about checks and balances, measuring your strike rate. I guess that's the performance management stuff". CP5 said "How do I know I'm a success? I could hit all the Government targets and the consumers might still not be happy" and "what was missing in the NHS was measurable commodities". DP3 commented "Value what you want and this leads to goals, which highlights issues and leads to and how to measure the results of that action". PP2 said "what was missing was something about how to evaluate where you are, the feedback loop, how will you know where you've got there". PP5 talked about "performance being something that might be added".

A category associated with uncertainty or dilemmas was suggested by two participants. NA4 suggested "what was missing was uncertainty associated with desired means and possible outcomes...the idea of alternative futures and the probability of those alternatives being realised", and that they were "clear about the

outcomes for the trust but these assumed that it remained a tertiary service provider and what would happen if that status was lost was uncertain and had not even been talked about". NM1 similarly implied a degree of uncertainty in saying "Monitor suggests that there will be fewer trusts providing services but that these will develop as centres of excellence but PCTs are all about decentralising and making the delivery of services more local. This is a big dilemma". While not one of the three categories of the framework, uncertainty and dilemmas are considered to be consequences of the nature of the three categories.

Two participants suggested a category related to planning or sequencing. CA4 commented that "planning should be somewhere" because "Some aspects of the map were time critical and this would be highlighted by planning". Similarly FP5 suggested that "There is also something about timelines that could be added" and that "it might simply be a question of sequencing the categories that were already there". These comments may not suggest an additional category as such but rather a relationship between the three existing categories.

### **7.3.9 Conclusion**

In conclusion the category set of goals, issues and actions made sense to the majority of participants and hence the findings from this stage of the analysis provide support for the framework. A number of themes can be identified, some of which were not present in the framework before the analysis.

The categories may be so broad that most things could be classified as part of the set. To some extent this is not a surprising finding since the categories were intended to be quite general in nature. Of course the framework is not just about the category set but about the nature of the elements of that category, for example a goal system rather than a single goal, and the interrelationships between the categories. As NA6 puts it "The biggest issue is understanding what the relationship is between the three". One aspect of the relationship between goals, issues and actions is a consideration of sequencing as mentioned by two of the participants.



While the conceptual definitions of the categories may be distinct for practitioners there appears a degree of doubt under the circumstances of the interview. It may be that the nodes as discussed with the participant had a degree of “internal structure” and the phrases were a form of shorthand. Alternatively that the categories of goals, issues and actions may be so closely related that the analytic separation does not reflect their perspective or that a specific node might indicate more than one category depending on the interpretation. One aspect of this doubt is that a categorisation may change with time. This may suggest that the apparent neatness and simplicity of the provisional framework to some extent misrepresents the nature of strategic thinking.

All the participants that mentioned a relationship between issues and actions appeared to suggest a significant incremental dimension to the relationship, with actions being taken as issues emerged which might then lead to other issues.

With respect to goals there is a suggestion that long-term goals are insufficiently tangible and that mechanisms are needed to communicate and make these goals more tangible. The suggestion appears to be that more tangible goals are likely to lead to action. Action, therefore, appears to be generated in two main ways, either in response to issues as they emerge or as a preconceived way to achieving a goal.

With respect to issues a number of subcategories were suggested. These were distinctions between enablers and constraints, between practical issues that demanded action and intellectual issues that needed consideration, and between background or factual issues that were fixed or static and issues which had life and suggested some latitude or choice about how they were handled.

With respect to action five participants talked about action in connection with process and the two appeared to be closely related, possibly with a process being a combination of actions.

Five participants suggested that a category relating to performance measurement was missing from the category set. Two participants suggested that uncertainty or dilemmas should be represented.

## **7.4 The lowest level – elaborations of a category**

Assessment of the provisional framework at this lowest level involves assessing to what extent the participants agree with the suggestion that the elaborations of the categories of goals, issues and actions, indicate better strategic thinking. The data for this level of analysis was generated from stage 4 of the interview and the specific questions are shown in Table 6-2. The majority of questions took the form “To what extent would an appreciation of [the elaboration] indicate better strategic thinking?” The participants were asked these questions irrespective of their answers to earlier phases of the interview. Clearly, these elaborations assume to some extent that the basic categories are valid and the questions are to that extent leading ones. If the question appears reasonable or if answering in the negative would appear unreasonable then the participant is likely to answer in the positive by default. The leading nature of these questions limits the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn but what is of interest is not only whether the participant agrees with the elaboration or not but also what they say in relation to the elaboration. Thus, the purpose of the questions at stage 4 of the interview are as much about developing insight into the categories and elaborations as it is about gaining some confirmation or otherwise of the elaborations. Each of the elaborations will now be considered in turn. (To avoid this section becoming overly long and detailed only indicative data is included in this section. Fuller data can be found in appendix 13.2)

### **7.4.1 Negative goals**

Nine participants were in agreement with the suggestion that an appreciation of negative goals indicated better strategic thinking: DP3 “Very important. You need to know both sides of the coin. You have to have a balanced perspective”; QP5 “Yes. Need risk assessment to manage negative things”; SP1 “Yes, it is important to

recognise things to avoid” and; MA5 “Yes I do. I wonder if you do that innately?... In strategy this is not made explicit...making it more explicit would make the strategy process more powerful.”

A further six participants did not provide a distinct yes statement but gave comments that suggested an appreciation of negative goals was important: NM1; “Its very important to scope these out because they can become show stoppers”; PP5 “They’re there aren’t they?”; SA3 “Interesting but I guess that a negative goal as you put it has been a big driving force for these changes”; and MM2 “we have to drive a road between these two things [negative and positive goals].”

Three participants were either not clear or appeared inconsistent in their answer. SA4 was not sure “to what extent negative goals were just the opposite of positive goals, the flip side. Was there any real difference” and they suggested that “Strategists much prefer the latter”. They pondered if “Negative goals may be more immediate and so prompt action”. CA1 replied “Not necessarily” and that “negative goals could just be the converse of positive goals”. However, they also said that “actions must be taken to avoid losing market share and since there is a minimum size for a general hospital and falling below that size would mean a loss of viability”. Negative goals could be identified in the statement, for example “avoid losing market share” and “loss of viability” and while these might be “flipped” into a positive, the positive did not appear to be CA1’s natural way of stating these goals. DM4 replied “This may be a personal style thing but I don’t worry about things to avoid” but added “It is important to be politically astute and avoid pissing people off.” This latter statement would appear to indicate an appreciation of negative goals. Thus, CA1 and DM4, while they claim not to think in terms of negative goals, both refer to them routinely. SA4 raised the interesting notion that negative goals may be more immediate and prompt action.

Two other participants were simply not sure. FP2 appeared to be thinking out loud “Maybe. Might be a big feature. An accurate view taken of where you don’t want to be.” NA6 was quite clear that they were not sure, “Don’t know about better but in terms of being grounded and realistic then negatives are important. It’s about

the getting the balance of opportunity and risk right. Often strategies are so out of touch with reality...Some of the decisions will be predicated on a negative. Some of it is a fear that we might lose things. After all you run faster if something is chasing you. You have to look at the upside and downside in a balanced way”.

DA4 suggested a relation between the goal and time in saying “The goal is so far away so I guess negative goals are more tangible... my talking to others is about getting some of those out”. However, they also suggested that “appreciation of negative goals is probably important but it should not constrain thinking about the future”.

In conclusion there appears to be a wide degree of support for an appreciation of negative goals indicating better strategic thinking. Two participants who suggested that negative goals were the flip side of positive goals both appeared to think, at least to some extent, in terms of negative goals. There are also suggestions that strategists or strategic thinkers prefer positive goals but that negative goals might be more tangible or grounded. There is also a suggestion that negative goals might drive action more strongly than positive ones but also that they might constrain thinking about the future.

## **7.4.2 Goals of different entities**

This question also met with almost universal agreement: QP4 “Yes, appreciating the goals of different parties is important”; FP2 “This is implicit. Just the reality of the world I live in...partnerships are important and this implies the goals of others”; MM2 “Yes...there are different views, the clinical skills view, the doctors view, the support staff view. Have to take account of all these”; NM2 “Yes this is an important part of strategic thinking. Who are the winners and losers...In the first submission for FT status there was a personal standoff rather than an organisational problem”; PP5 “This is a big barrier in organisational strategic thinking, the difference between individuals goals and the organisational goals at board level”; and FP5 “Yes...Someone draws up a business plan that is not aligned with the organisations objectives, this leads to conflict in the organisation.”

Four participants suggested benefits from an appreciation of the goals of different entities: CM3 “Yes...Aligning goals gets 20 to 30% extra effort”; CP5 “Yes, important to align personal goals with organisational goals. If there is not that alignment then you have to change the people or the goals. We don’t do either at the moment and we tolerate the consequences. This can lead to a creative tension though with one impacting on the other”; NM1 “It would be, it’s about alignment. That will add value to the quality of the debate and thoughts. Dissonance may improve the debate. Alignment brings speed and you may get a better idea through challenge”; and MA5 “I think it would. There may be instances where say personal goals conflicted with organisational ones but the personal goals could be moulded to be compliant with organisational goals”.

However, there were four participants (HM4, SP1, SA3 and NA6) who, while not disagreeing with the suggestion that an appreciation of the goals of different entities indicated better strategic thinking, gave answers that were not clearly in support of the suggestion. It appeared that the suggestion came as a surprise to SA3 who said “Interesting. We’ve tended to focus on organisational goals rather than peoples goals...I guess if you can align with people then that is the best thing to do”. NA6 introduced the notion of a personal strategy in addition to an organisational one, “It depends on how comprehensive you are in drawing up the business plan and including ambitions about your organisation, issues of capacity and pragmatic strategic responses to must do’s” and “Part of my personal strategy is about relationships. A strategy around maintaining relationships and community engagement and balance between the different aspirations”.

So in conclusion there appears to be almost universal support for the suggestion that an appreciation of the goals of different entities indicates better strategic thinking. Some participants suggested the benefits of an alignment of goals.

### **7.4.3 Goals in agreement or conflict**

There appeared to be a wide agreement on this with nine participants clearly agreeing with the suggestion, including: CM3 “Yes. If I don’t align my goals as chief exec there is quite a problem”; CP5 “Absolutely...The NHS attempts to have

something which is like a market...In a market my success means your failure”; DP3 “All of strategy has to take these into account and particularly in the NHS since there are so many goals”; NM1 “That realisation is very helpful. When goals are in agreement you can do more at speed...Agreement is desirable but not always achievable”; QP5 “Yes. Particularly with finance...conflicting goals both horizontally, for example between directors, and vertically, at different levels of an organisation...important to aim for a win/win and perhaps take a longer way round”. The notion of win/win was mentioned by two other participants, SA4 and SP1.

The comments from SA3 were particularly interesting, “My experience here and in other organisations is that people, or at least the people I’ve met, aren’t good at recognising those tensions. They can write them down but don’t see beyond the list to understand the way in which achieving one will compromise others...Its about understanding how you can achieve as much as possible with one while not going so far with that one that it completely undermines others”.

A significant number of participants, nine, appeared to only consider the conflict aspect of the question: FP2 “Conflicting goals are implicit” but also that “unintended consequences that may cause conflicts”; HM4 “recognising conflicting goals would indicate better strategic thinking but at the creative stage of strategy recognising conflicting goals was less important than at the implementation stage...There may be perceptions of conflict to be overcome”; MA5 “Yes...conflicting policies make goals difficult to choose...the two goals of cutting waiting lists and getting paid for the work we do are in conflict”; NA6 “There may be either / or discussions but we have wished to bring forward conflicting aspirations...”; SA3 “perhaps this is just in the NHS or in any big organisation there are bound to be goals in conflict...Any list of goals always has conflicts. Its almost inevitable”; and UP5 “the goals themselves are not in conflict but the way they are implemented brings them into conflict”.

Three participants appeared to place an emphasis on the agreement aspect of the question. CA4 stated that “You have to have goals that people can’t disagree with...higher goals that people all agree with”. Agreement over goals was considered

to have certain benefits. CM3 suggested that “Goal congruence is important, you get momentum and confidence”. NM1 suggested that “When goals are in agreement you can do more at speed. It means that there are quick wins you can get on and do.”

Three participants indicated that they were not sure. FP5 said “It depends from which perception”, and SA4 said “Not sure if this makes for better strategic thinking”. PP5 did not appear to be sure at the start of the answer saying “I don’t know really” but then at the end of the answer said “Acknowledging and recognising these risks can be powerful for partnerships because it can produce trust which may then lead to a shared set of goals, which may comprise our goals, organisational and personal”.

In conclusion there appears to be a degree of support for an appreciation of where goals are in conflict or agreement to indicate better strategic thinking. There appeared to be an inclination to discuss conflict rather than agreement and a suggestion that conflict was implicit and indeed may be an inevitable consequence of structure. The notions of understanding the goals of others, aligning goals, negotiating a win/win were prominent with the suggestion that agreement had benefits. Additional notions appeared to be that conflicts may emerge either during implementation, as different perceptions develop or as a result of unintended consequences.

#### **7.4.4 Goals of different stakeholders**

This question met with almost universal agreement: NM2 “Yes, and this is clearly illustrated above with the notion of the community and the tribes”; PP2 “Yes and what I’ve said about ticking boxes with partners and others shows this”; CA4 “Yes, people are coming from very different situations”; QP5 “Yes. Recognise what presses people’s buttons. There can be different goals even at the same level”; DM4 “three organisations involved, each with different goals, each with their own agenda. Strategic thinkers are people who are savvy, will interrogate the brief and understand what people want from it”.

Five participants related this question to the sector and indicative comments were: DP3 “In the NHS it is all about stakeholders” and MA5 “In the NHS that is essential...In the NHS there are all sorts of legitimate interests.”

Three participants indicated the difficulty of this: NM1 “Absolutely...Its very important and very hard work, it becomes terribly time consuming”; SA3 “Its harder. I’d like to set out my own goals and get on with it.” and PP5 “Challenging but it does. It is defined as a competence in the new World Class Commissioning framework just announced by the DoH.”

Two participants agreed but suggested that this was not done well. CM3 commented that “The NHS needs to better align goals between different organisations, we don’t do it well” and CP5 said “Entirely. But I think the problem is that we don’t recognise who they are”.

However, this elaboration did not meet with universal agreement. UP5 commented that, “I don’t use the term stakeholders and that type of stuff. The problem is that there is such an emphasis on working with other organisations that the partnership becomes an end in itself”.

In conclusion there is wide support for the suggestion that an appreciation of the goals of stakeholders indicates better strategic thinking. This may be to some extent sector specific and reflects the political nature of the NHS.

#### **7.4.5 Reflecting on the consequences of actions taken**

About half the participants agreed that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken would indicate better strategic thinking: CA4 “Absolutely. You have a goal and plan to take action, you achieve your goal and think thank God for that. Then you review”; FP2 “Yes. Need to take a view on what happened before ... Important to learn the lessons of the past”; SA3 “It should be shouldn’t it”; SP1 “Critical...Need to do stock taking on the way...how far along your direction of strategic travel”; MM2 “There is a value in history, this is an important point.



History can help the organisation in learning in a way that helps it to learn from the past”.

Six participants agreed this was important but that it was not done well: MA5 “Crucial. But we don’t do that well. There is a risk when strategic planning that you tend to own the project and are not prepared to accept when things are going wrong.”; NA4 “you tend to get on with the next thing but...reflecting on the consequences of actions taken would be an aspect of strategic thinking”; NA6 “It probably does but I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced this in any organisation I’ve worked with”; NM1 “Its got to be better but that’s not to say that it always happens. To positively look at what worked and what didn’t is important and useful...being reflective is very important”; NM2 “Important to keep taking a check, win hearts and minds”; PP5 “I don’t think it is done enough. Strategic thinking involves reflecting. Reflecting on what did not go well, although it might also be what did go well.”

CP5 thought that it would indicate better strategic thinking but mentioned a note of caution, “Yes this does make for better strategic thinking ... There is a danger that reflecting becomes a justification rather than being for the future.”

About half the participants suggested that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken might not necessarily indicate better strategic thinking. In some instances this interpretation by the researcher was made because the response was not clear. DP3 said “I do a lot of that” but whether this means agreement or not was not clear. The response from CM3 simply did not appear to fit the question.

Five participants elaborated reasons why reflecting on the consequences of actions taken might not necessarily indicate better strategic thinking: DA4 “I’m struggling again, that brings constraints because you’d never get anyone out of the here & now”; OA2 “We’re not very good at this in the NHS or maybe it’s just me or people in an acute setting. We find that we have to do this by then so we just do it. We don’t put effort into thinking about consequences. Actions taken in my area usually give quick feedback which enables reflection ... If something takes six months to have an effect then it might be difficult to reflect”; SA3 “I think we’re quite bad at this in the NHS. You ought to be able to set a direction of travel for the

organisation and stick with it. But in practice that seems difficult and you have to carve all the time to do this. There are a number of stages in the strategy at which we might stop the strategy as we encounter what we see as insurmountable obstacles but you can't afford to do that. So I've sort of answered yes and no to that haven't I?"; SA4 "Yes to some extent. Partly about the results of any strategy only emerging when you see what people do ... Asking did we do the right thing is often difficult. People don't like to be reminded of mistakes or risk having blame attached to them. If you don't do this though you don't learn very much"; UP5 "It's important but the danger is that it ends up as a straightjacket. Learning is important. You need to be quite careful that you're clear about what exactly you should and shouldn't be repeating. But sometimes there are developmental processes that are needed to get ownership. You want the end result but you can't just implement that end result."

The response from CA1 was unique in that they said that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken did not indicate better strategic thinking, "This needs to be minimised, it is inevitable, but needs to be minimised because it retards progress. There is a risk of introducing muddle and slowing progress. Momentum is important in strategic implementation and my role is to keep the momentum going".

In conclusion there is mixed support for the suggestion that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken indicates better strategic thinking. About half the participants suggested that it did and about half appeared not sure or expressed some reservations. A number of themes can be identified. First, that reflecting in some ways might limit progress and introduce or consolidate a preoccupation with the past or present rather than the future. Second, this is not done, or is not done well in the NHS. Third, a suggestion that the longer time scales that are seen as strategic make reflection more difficult in comparison to shorter time scales. As with previous findings, it appears that the actions element of the framework is not as clearly supported as the goals element.

#### **7.4.6 Actions – uncertainty and dilemmas**

The majority of participants agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas indicated better strategic thinking: DP3 "Essential, there

is uncertainty about how doable things are and risks associated with this”; HM4 “flexibility is needed to respond to changing circumstances ... a strategic pathway with choice points”; MA5 “Yes, strategic thinking has got to acknowledge uncertainties. The skill in strategic planning is to have flexibility”; MM2 “Yes, There are dilemmas on all levels. Big level and small level”; OA2 “Yes, there is always uncertainty ... You have plans in place but you have to prepare contingencies, have a plan B”; SA3 “It has to doesn’t it?...somewhere you’ve got to recognise how uncertain the world is”; NA4 “essential...one had to be comfortable with uncertainty.”

The response from about a third of participants suggested that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas might not necessarily indicate better strategic thinking. In some instances the response could not be clearly interpreted as a yes or no. CA4 said “It is but it shouldn’t be used as an excuse not to be a strategic thinker ... The NHS is a political environment and so you have to be prepared for things to crop up that weren’t in your plan.” CM3 avoided answering the question directly to some extent and said “I think it’s smarter thinking. Not everything is logical and can be planned for ... in part it’s about having the flexibility to adapt”. PP5 “I quite like uncertainty, it gives you the opportunity to be innovative and flexible ... You obviously need a level of certainty, when transacting things you need some certainty so that people can engage with them ... Actions need certainty but for me you need a level of uncertainty to allow you to be creative.” CA1 said they “thought in terms of milestones.”

Two participants gave responses that indicate pros and cons. NM1 commented, “Two trains of thought. You’d never do the wacky and creative stuff ... However, in the service you have in a public organisation ... you have to have a detailed plan. Without that its not good management is it?” Similarly, PP2 commented “To a degree it needs to in terms of inputting on constraints but if it doesn’t suffocate strategic thinking in the first place.”

One participant, DA4, was quite clear that this did not indicate better strategic thinking, “When you are thinking strategically you need to think without dilemmas

because you risk limiting your goals by a lack of information and so you constrain your thinking about goals. You need to set your goal and then address uncertainties later in the actions that you take. Otherwise you don't get the aspiration or the commitment".

In conclusion there appears to be support for the suggestion that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas indicates better strategic thinking from about two thirds of the participants. For a number of other participants it is difficult to interpret their responses in terms of support or otherwise. There is a suggestion of a tension between presenting a degree of certainty to gain legitimacy and commitment but recognition that a degree of uncertainty is inevitable.

### **7.4.7 Issues – external and internal**

This question concerned if an appreciation of both external and internal issues indicated better strategic thinking. This question was one of the last to be asked and the responses to this question are not as full as some of the earlier questions. There are two reasons for this, primarily the time pressure of the end of the interview looming and a possible degree of participant boredom or fatigue towards the end of the interview.

The majority of participants agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of both internal and external issues indicated better strategic thinking: CA4 "Yes. Goals and actions are OK but issues might make sure it didn't happen. Whole thing is about the relationship of internal to external"; NA6 "Essential, it has to, because that is the only way you will ground the strategic aim. For example what will the stakeholders pay for and what can they pay for ... Internally its about capacity and how hard people are working, how much head room there is."; OA2 "Huge really, issues do start to shape how you do something ... You can have the best laid plans but then issues...[sentence left hanging intentionally by participant]"; QP5 "Yes...about having checks and balances...avoiding tunnel vision. Listen to external sources."

Three participants qualified their response to introduce additional conditions: CM3 “Provided that analysis is real.”; CP5 “Almost certainly true but the issue, as you might say, is about what weight you give to the different issues”; SA3 “Yes, to a large extent. You need to judge relevance of the issue though”.

Three participants made responses that suggested an appreciation of both internal and external issues might not necessarily indicated better strategic thinking. DA4 introduced a concern around constraining thinking in saying, “You need an appreciation of them but ... it shouldn’t be constraining in terms of thinking about what can be achieved”. Two of these participants appeared to suggest a precedence of external over internal issues. PP2 commented “When I first take a strategy on I will do both, both of them have challenges ... At the beginning I’m concerned more with the external issues, they’re important in relation to the goal”. Similarly, UP5 commented, “Clearly both are important. But strategists need to primarily look at the external environment. If you try to do both it becomes difficult ... Strategy has to take account of people and the intricacies but the danger is it becomes overwhelming”.

In conclusion the majority of participants appeared to support a suggestion that an appreciation of both external and internal issues indicated better strategic thinking. A number of qualifications were introduced, primarily concerned with the accuracy, weight and relevance of the issues. Additionally there was a suggestion that primacy be given to external issues.

#### **7.4.8 Issues – different entities**

The question was towards the end of the interview and hence the responses were the fewest and the least comprehensive. In some instances the question was not asked because the interview ran out of time and hence the responses of thirteen participants were recorded. Of those participants asked, the majority agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of the issues associated with different entities would indicate better strategic thinking: OA2 “Yes, you have to tell a different story about issues to different levels, the housekeeper and the consultant group ... You have to translate it for your audience”; PP2 “ticking the boxes of others, that’s clearly about their issues”.

However there was not universal support. DA4 again cautioned about constraints in saying, "Appreciation is fine but the risk is that it constrains the thinking ... You have to take them out of their current environment so that you don't stifle creativity and belief in change". SA3 also cautioned about attempting to take account of the issues of a range of stakeholders, "Yes, to a point but if you try to combine the issue of everyone into a strategy it will fail, its about understanding their issues but not necessarily meeting them".

In conclusion, the suggestion that an appreciation of the issues associated with different entities appears to be supported by the majority of participants, although not all participants were asked this question. Those participants that did not appear to fully support the suggestion raised concerns about introducing constraints and about the difficulty of taking into account a wide range of issues.

## 8 Emergent themes from Study 3

### 8.1 Introduction

The interview questions and structure, and the analysis undertaken to this point have been largely determined by the framework. This will have imposed, to a greater or lesser extent, the categories and structure of that framework on the experience, interpretation and meanings of the participants as represented in the analysis. This is to some extent appropriate, given that the framework is derived from both the strategy literature and earlier empirical work. However, to aid the development of the framework it is important that the categories and structure of the framework are not the only basis for analysis of the data and that ideas that are at variance with or not explicit in the framework are also represented. This is achieved in two ways. First, when discussing the category set of goals, issues and actions, and when discussing the elaborations of those categories, the participants had the opportunity to disagree with what was proposed. Some did so. Second, the data is analysed for emergent themes that were not explicitly part of the framework. This emergent analysis involved a more detailed examination of the data, looking for words, phrases and sentences that might indicate particular themes. In this phase of the analysis instantiation was considered important in addition to substantiation. The methodology for this inductive phase of the analysis was considered in section 6.6.2.

Each interview transcript was broken down into nineteen sections. These sections corresponded to natural, readily identifiable breaks in the interview transcripts, for example responses to specific questions or researcher fieldnotes with regard to particular aspects of the interview. In total for the twenty five interviews this generated 475 data sections. Each of these data sections was assigned a random number and then analysed in that sequence for words, phrases and sentences that expressed particular themes. Each of these data items was assigned an "in vivo" code, that is, a code using the words in the transcript. After this detailed coding each of the transcripts were re-read in alphabetical order to check for any missed codes, this produced a further three codes. This detailed analysis produced in total 845 in vivo codes. The distribution of codes across participants is shown in Table 8-1. (To

avoid this section becoming overly long and detailed only indicative data is included in this section. Fuller data can be found in appendix 13.3)

**Table 8-1 Distribution of in vivo codes across participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Number of in vivo codes</b>
CA1	46
CA4	50
CM3	54
CP5	52
DA4	59
DM4	56
DP3	31
FP2	43
FP5	51
HM4	28
MA5	45
MM2	52
NA4	37
NA6	57
NM1	59
NM2	41
OA2	52
PP2	50
PP5	49
QP4	30
QP5	37
SA3	55
SA4	51
SP1	30
UP5	56

After the detailed in vivo coding, the codes generated were examined and grouped together in emerging themes or categories. As each code was categorised the original section of the interview transcript was re-examined to review the original context of the code. It is worth noting that during the inductive analysis some findings were difficult to interpret clearly in a way that made sense as part of a developing conceptual scheme. For example a few references were made to



pragmatism but it was difficult to see how these comments fitted together coherently as a category or how the concept of pragmatism fitted with the overall developing conceptual scheme. Thus the concept of pragmatism was neglected. This is not to conclude that it is worthy of neglect, indeed a different researcher or this researcher at a different time might make sense of the comments but not at the time of writing. Clearly, a proportion of the in vivo codes generated reflected the categories and elaborations of the framework. That is they reflected participants' comments with regard to goals, issues or actions, or relationships between them. Comments that refer specifically to goals, issues and actions, and the relationships between them were analysed in earlier stages of the analysis and hence in vivo codes arising from these were disregarded in this inductive analysis.

## **8.2 Emergent themes relating to the whole**

### **8.2.1 Strategic versus operational**

A strong theme in the data appears to be the difference and relationship between the strategic and the operational. Three participants clearly expressed a difficulty in differentiating the strategic from the operational: MM2 "It is difficult to separate the operational from the strategic"; CA1 it was "difficult to distinguish strategic from operational"; FP2 "what is and what is not strategic is a difficult question" and they "have three types of meeting, strategic, management and performance ... sometimes the separation was to some extent artificial". This final comment is interesting in relation to the discussion of strategic episodes in section 2.2.1 (page 20) which suggested that a distinction between strategic and non-strategic episodes might be difficult to establish empirically.

Two other participants appeared to underplay the importance of the operational: CP5 "We get sucked into operational management rather than futurising what we want the world to look like and how to get there"; DA4 in distinguishing the strategic from the "processy bits" of the map said about the latter, "they're just about getting through next year".

In contrast, CA4 acknowledged a difference between strategic and operational but suggested that the value of the operational can be under appreciated. CA4 complained about “being patronised and patted on the head because she is too operational...the other chief execs say they don’t do the detail because they pay someone to do that” but that in one instance they were “the only one who had read the detail and so was the only one who understood what the problem was”. As they put it “If you can’t put strategic thinking into action it’s useless”.

Seven participants acknowledged a difference between the strategic and the operational but without suggesting that the relationship was necessarily problematic: NA6 “We’ve made a decision about extra capacity, operationally it is about how that works” and “It’s not about being so immersed in the day to day that you can’t see beyond it but the strategy has to be grounded in at least some of the operational realities”; FP5 “A lot of blue sky strategic thinking is so much out of the box that it is not practical. It always has to fit with the circumstances”; UP5 “You need to be cold and calculating but you also need good operational managers to implement the strategy”; SA4 “in a sense this is more of a problem relating around how we deliver that strategy rather than the strategy”.

Four participants made comments related to a notion of a higher level: FP2 “I often thought that you need to be in some kind of higher state, released from the shackles of the day to day”; SA4 “a distinction between high level and when options begin to crystallize”; UP5 “high level things I need to try to action”. CA4 appeared critical in saying that other chief execs “talk about the strategic stuff that is far removed from the practical detail”. However they suggested that this was something of a weakness for them and hence they tried to “surround myself with people who I think have more blue skies thinking than I have”.

Three participants made reference to size in relation to strategic thinking: PP5 “They’re about the big picture”; UP5 “What are the big things?” and “There are big issues and big problems”. MM2 talked about “Big level and small level”.

Three participants made reference to scope in relation to strategic thinking: CM3 “This has an impact on the local community, commissioners and others”; FP5

“Not just a few individuals involved in the vision of the future but a number of boards”; DP3 “A lot of this stuff is not inter organisational it is intra organisational”.

Three participants made direct reference to the tactical. DM4 drew a distinction between the strategic and the tactical in that tactics were “about the immediate objectives or about manipulating the plan to make sure it works” and that “strategy was being delivered by tactics which were about small, quick wins”. MM2 talked about the idea of a tactical strategy “At the moment there is a view that we should develop a tactical strategy...but there is a discussion about this ... that we make the decision we want to be wider but we don’t disclose this and then do a U turn at the appropriate time”. CM3 commented that “It’s important to think tactically as a board”.

## **8.2.2 Strategy process**

A number of participants, made comments that suggested some notion of what might be termed a strategy process but with what appeared to be a wide diversity of perspectives.

The notion of direction was mentioned by five participants: MM2 “The role of the trust board is about the overall direction”; NM1 “We need to deal with these issues, between the direction we want to go in and what we do well at the moment”; CA1 “you need to set the strategic direction and preferred route”; SP1 “how far along your direction of strategic travel”; UP5 “You have to set and hold a direction but you have to listen and think and see if this is still right” and “we have to rely on our proxy figures that indicate that we are heading in the right direction”.

Two participants suggested strategy had some relationship between something to be achieved and how to achieve that: PP2 “about where does the organisation need to be and how it is to go about doing that”; PP5 “we have to think how we are doing and what would we have to think for this to be going where we want it to go”.

Three participants made reference to implementation: CM3 “the way we implement the Darzi report could be a unique selling proposition for us”; HM4 “actions...were needed in implementation to put strategy into practice”; UP5 “Not because the goals were in conflict but because the way the implementation looked at these”; and “You want the end result but you can’t just implement that end result” and “you also need good operational managers to implement the strategy”.

Plans and planning were mentioned by four participants: DA4 said that the elements of the “strategic plan” reflected strategic thinking on their map; DM4 said that strategic thinking was “about a plan and objectives” and “conducting the plan to deliver the objectives”; NM1 strategic thinking had begun to be “part of our integrated business plan and writing it down makes us think in more detail”; FP5 suggested the plan as an aid to strategic thinking “Back to a cycle in strategic thinking, what have we learnt from this? There are opportunities to revise, you track the plan”.

Comments from four participants related to a tension between a strategic plan which fixed things and a need for flexibility: CA1 “The strategic plan is designed to take us to the place we want to go, the end point, and means of getting there” but “I have a problem with the idea of setting a fixed strategic plan because the environment is too dynamic”; OA2 “there is always uncertainty and this forces critical planning, risk mitigation” and “You can have the best laid plans but then issues...[the sentence was left hanging by the participant]”; MA5 “The skill in strategic planning is to have flexibility ... Plans must be flexible and iterative and you must be prepared to change them”; QP5 “Plans can be formulated but there is always this uncertainty associated with people”.

Three participants referred to the relationship between the plan and a goal or outcome: DA4, “The five year plan is the product, the outcome will be the description. The actual goal would be the new hospital”; DM4 “The goal is the output, the end result of the plan”; SA3 “I think that when something is a long way in the future...is so far away so that what might be actions are set as goals. And so what

you are left with as actions are very processy type things rather than say the delivery of services...Things you do to plan the strategy rather than to do the strategy”.

Five participants made comments that suggest a degree of emergence in a strategy process: CP5 “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”; DA4 “Issues carve into the strategy”; DM4 “some form of navigator role and having to navigate around issues”; FP5 “What we have learnt from this strategic programme is the need to continuously change and improve”; CM3 “I think of strategy as a process, both deliberate and emergent, youknow the Mintzberg stuff. I’ve used both successfully in combination in my career.”

Two participants made reference to what might be termed as unrealised strategies: NA6 “The biggest problem is that you write a strategy that doesn’t happen”; SA4 “For the people on the ground strategy has no meaning until actions take place, otherwise strategy is like the sounding of a hollow bell”.

### **8.2.3 Future**

A future orientation was expressed in the data from 11 participants: CA4 “where the organisation is going in the future”; CM3 “this is long-term”; DM4 “strategic thinking was about the longer term”; FP5 “gestation period might be a 10 year period”; NM1 “Its about thinking about something in the future that we’re not doing now”; PP2 “thinking about a future, say five years”; SA3 “Where the future of the whole organisation is concerned”, UP5; “Time scale of five to ten years” and “any changes we make or actions we take will only affect the figures a few years down the line”; DA4 “The five year plan is the product”; SA3 “I think that when something is a long way in the future, say five years or so”; NM2 “capture issues that the board and I need to be aware of to frame the future, things that need to be on my radar”.

### **8.2.4 Systemicity**

Eight participants made some reference to systems, connectedness or complexity: CP5 “someone with huge passion to make a difference and an ability to

work the system to make a difference”; NM1 “an intentional tension set up in the system by government”; DP3 “You have to consider the system before and after to understand how to solve the problem”; NM1 “an integrated business plan”; NM2 “complexity of the issue”; PP2 “I think about the whole not the parts” and “taking a step back and thinking about the whole”; NM4 “strategic thinking was about understanding the connections”.

Two participants suggested that a degree of complexity introduced difficulties: MM2 “Other goals are so complicated that they are too difficult to separate out”; UP5 “Strategy has to take account of people and the intricacies but the danger is it becomes overwhelming”.

Three participants made reference to relationships: NA6 “As a Foundation Trust we could say sod off ... but we may need to call on help from the SHA and so we can’t afford to upset them”; SA4 “The organisational perspective is about the relationship with services and internal staff, the internal is as important as the external state”; DM4 “A lot of the map was a result of significant relationships”.

### **8.2.5 Reality**

Four participants made reference to reality: FP2 “Just the reality of the world I live in here”; FP5 “It’s with operational implementation that reality comes into it”; NA6 “Often strategies are so out of touch with reality”; MM2 “People may forget that this is not the real strategy”;

### **8.2.6 Sense making**

Two participants made comments that suggested sense-making: NA6 “to be effective operationally you need to understand the strategic context, where your organisation sits so you can shape your priorities, in terms of what you have to give attention to and what you can afford to give less attention to” and that some “things are in our own gift. The others have to be interpreted by us for what they mean for this organisation”; NM1 “If you’re listening to Monitor, they think there may be 30

mental health trusts in the future and picking up on that and trying to make sense of that. I guess it's a form of sense-making".

### **8.2.7 Difficulty**

Two participants made comments relating to difficulties: CM3 "This is challenging stuff so how to get people on board is an important issue; NM1 "It's aspirational and its not easy to do these things".

### **8.2.8 Balance**

Four participants made reference to a notion of balance: CA4 "If you can't put strategic thinking into action it's useless" but "It's important to avoid not overstretching" and "It's a hard balance"; CM3 "We have to think priorities and getting the pace and balance right"; SA3 "Youknow our strategy is to do four or five things and to hold them in balance"; DP3 "You have to have a balanced perspective", "Essential, must have a balanced view", and "You need to get a balanced view from carers, patients and getting the most bang for your buck".

### **8.2.9 Priorities**

The notion of priorities was mentioned by three participants: CM3, "We have to think priorities and getting the pace and balance right"; NA6 "you need to understand the strategic context, where your organisation sits so you can shape your priorities"; PP5 "My thinking is focussed for delivering priorities, doing the work we need to do this year, or worse the work we should have done yesterday".

### **8.2.10 Change**

Change was mentioned by three participants: CM3 "People don't like change and we'll be introducing different pathways that need new ways of working"; FP5 "Partnering needs to be refreshed as we move on because of these types of changes" and "People change and organisations change"; UP5 "Strategists need to have the goal in mind and be aware that you may have to change people, buildings, services, etc. to get there".

## **8.2.11 Decisions**

A number of participants mentioned decisions or deciding. Four of these made comments suggesting strategic or operational aspects of decisions. NA6 suggests that certain decisions are strategic when they say “We’ve made a decision about extra capacity, operationally it is about how that works”. MM2 “we don’t believe that it will take us where we want to be, that we make the decision we want to be wider”. Whereas CA1 suggests that certain decisions are operational, “core values, for example high quality care, care nearer to home, and use these to guide operational decisions which will move towards the values and vision”. Similarly NM2, “I’ve automatically given info about operational practicalities and decisions, about delivering”.

Three participants suggested a degree of difficulty related to decisions: NA4 “the NHS is not good at biting the bullet about difficult decisions”; NA6 “It has to be understood that hard decisions may have to be made”; MM2 “deciding about the direction has put a split down the board”.

## **8.2.12 Commitment**

Two participants made reference to commitment: NM1 “For me its something about if we’re committed then we need to be ahead of the game”; SA3 “we’re committed to the strategy and so its too late for some questions”.

## **8.3 Emergent themes relating to the category set**

While a number of emergent themes appear to be related to the whole, other emergent themes appear to be associated with the category set, the elements of the framework. Some of these themes appear to be related to more than one element of the category set.

### **8.3.1 People**

Eight participants made comments suggesting the personal nature of goals: CM3 “If you set your expectation too high you set people up to fail”; CP5 “someone



with huge passion to make a difference” and “Peoples’ perceived risk in not succeeding is overstated and they worry about it too much”; DM4, “Strategic thinkers are people who are savvy, will interrogate the brief and understand what people want from it”; MM2 “personal interests may not be met in time”; NA6 “aspirations of some people was to compete”; PP2 “I’ve looked at goals and inputs and consequences and there are going to be a range of consequences with people taking different views on those consequences”; QP5 “Recognise what presses people’s buttons”. CA4 “People fear things... There is a personal stake in these things...It’s about fear of change. People are the buggeration factor”.

Nine participants made comments that appeared to be related to aspects of issues associated with people: CM3 “there is some very strategic stuff and some of it is what’s in my face this week”; DA4 “I’m an evidence person so I would want to know them, so my talking to others is about getting some of those out”; FP5 “People change and organisations change”; MM2 “People may forget that this is not the real strategy”; NM1 “Some people enjoy and see the sense of thinking in that mode more than others”; PP2 “Some people clearly see some uncertainty and because of that it never gets off the ground”; QP5 “Some things the board will and will not accept”, “Uncertainty comes from not knowing how people will behave and if they will change to new ways of working” and “Plans can be formulated but there is always this uncertainty associated with people”; SA4 “For the people on the ground strategy has no meaning until actions take place, otherwise strategy is like the “sounding of a hollow bell”; UP5 “Strategy has to take account of people and the intricacies but the danger is it becomes overwhelming”.

Six participants made comments that appeared to indicate a people dimension to actions: CM3 “This is challenging stuff so how to get people on board is an important issue”; CP5 “behaviour was very important” and “it depends on the group...they may be more prepared to reflect”; NM2 “I collect issues...I enjoy interacting with people”; OA2 “Force people to think about this and support people, particularly at lower levels, in thinking about contingencies”; QP5 “Uncertainty comes from not knowing how people will behave and if they will change to new

ways of working”; SA3 “you can overanalyse and make too much of an issue and of course people will try to use this”.

### 8.3.2 Perceptions

Five participants made comments that appeared to suggest different perceptions of goals: CP5 “Peoples’ perceived risk in not succeeding is overstated and they worry about it too much”; FP5 “It depends from which perception, my goals as a commissioner or the Acute Hospital as a provider”; HM4 “There may be perceptions of conflict to be overcome”; PP2 “there are going to be a range of consequences with people taking different views on those consequences” and “The goal has to be the agreed with everyone and is explicit but peoples interpretation is different. It’s the same paper, the same document they’re reading, but people have different mindsets and so see it differently. I’m completely provider, and I’m the only one sitting around the table that is, so I see goals as a provider but the chief exec will see it as a chief exec and so will skew the goals from being purely about provider”; QP5 “Need to chunk goals differently for different people”.

Different perceptions or points of view were mentioned in relation to issues by four participants. In response to the request for an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation, DP3 asked “for me personally or the organisation?” and UP5 asked “for the organisation or the local population”. Two other participants mentioned framing: FP2 “Need to take a view on what happened before. Part of the framing” and NM2 “capture issues that the board and I need to be aware of to frame the future”.

Four participants made comments that appeared to relate to actions that took into account different perceptions: DA4 “I make sure it satisfies each of them but the story might be different. I’m not making it up just telling a different story” and “I would cut it and look for benefits for them and how to remove obstacles for them not joining on my journey”; MM2 “There is an organisation view that everyone who pitches into work here is here to do a good job, the definition of to do a good job may not be aligned”; OA2 “you have to tell a different story about issues to different levels” and “I’m someone who aims to give it a personal slant because it gives it

meaning rather than it being a nebulous thing. You have to translate it for your audience”; PP2 “from my provider perspective I can see that splitting finance and ledger is a good thing to do but the chief exec and the finance team would see it differently because it would mean splitting the team up”.

### 8.3.3 Timing

A notion of time or timing was mentioned by nine participants. Some of these comments referred to time scales or delays. UP5 commented “any changes we make or actions we take will only affect the figures a few years down the line”. By contrast OA2 stated “So there is an issue about time frames. If something takes six months to have an effect then it might be difficult to reflect whereas something where the consequences can be seen quickly makes it easier to reflect”.

Other comments referred to timing in terms of sequencing: CA4 “Some aspects of the map were time critical” and “Goals, issues and actions in places are time critical to get the goal”; FP5 “There is also something about timelines that could be added” and that “it might simply be a question of sequencing the categories that were already there”; “we have wished to bring forward conflicting aspirations. With a bit of talking they have been honed together, part of the thinking has to be about sequence”; QP5 “a DoF pressurising for the introduction of cost saving measures when staff had not had the proper training, so an issue of timing of goals rather than necessarily conflicting”.

Two participants suggested that categories might change into others over time: CA4 “some categories might change into others over time”; SA3 “I think that when something is a long way in the future, say five years or so, then five years away is so far away so that what might be actions are set as goals”.

A suggestion that time might have an effect on how things are interpreted was made by two participants: DA4 “The goal is so far away so I guess negative goals are more tangible”; NM2 “it also includes stakeholders who are not immediately apparent. So you must continually re-evaluate”.

### **8.3.4 Politics**

Two participants mentioned politics in relation to goals: CA1 “the NHS was very political and this reflected the interests of different stakeholders”; DM4 “It is important to be politically astute and avoid pissing people off” and “If one organisation wanted all the project this would have made things very political”.

Two other participants mentioned politics in relation to issues: FP5 “Also what is the political scene?”; OA2 “There’s always politics and you can never cover every eventuality”.

Two other participants mentioned politics in relation to actions: CA4 “The NHS is a political environment and so you have to be prepared for things to crop up that weren’t in your plan” and “Last year MRSA was on the agenda but not c.diff. then from there to here on the political agenda...If you can’t cope with the politics then this is not the place for you”; CM3 “Understand our risk across the organisation, strategically, financially and politically”.

### **8.3.5 Risk**

Nine participants mentioned the notion of risk in connection with negative goals: CP5 “Peoples perceived risk in not succeeding is overstated and they worry about it too much”; DA4 “The risk is it will slow you down [getting the negative goals into the open] and you may find you have to manage that risk”; FP5 “It’s with operational implementation that reality comes into it. It’s the strategic versus the operational and we’re generally risk averse”; MM2 “a judgement call on the risks”; NA6 “getting the balance of opportunity and risk right” and “If we don’t improve we will be at risk from other predators”; OA2 “If you don’t check this things will happen, for example loss of financial stability, your goals will be at risk. Have to emphasise that”; QP4 “more a question of more rounded thinking that meant knowing the risks rather than being driven to avoid something”; QP5 “Need risk assessment to manage negative things” and “Risk mitigation is important”; UP5 “There are big issues and big problems but you have to try to understand what the risks are and have some risk mitigation in place”.

Five participants also mentioned risk in connection with actions, in particular an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas: CM3 “You have to understand the enterprise risk. Understand our risk across the organisation, strategically, financially and politically, a sensible risk approach”; MM2 “The tactical strategy may be reasonable but it may be risky”; NM2 “I do a risk assessment, what would stop me from delivering this”; OA2 “there is always uncertainty and this forces critical planning, risk mitigation”; QP5 “Uncertainty is inevitable when factors are out of direct control but you have to use risk management”.

### **8.3.6 Alignment**

Seven participants made comments regarding alignment in connection with goals: CM3 “Aligning goals gets 20 to 30% extra effort”, “If I don’t align my goals as chief exec there is quite a problem” and “The NHS needs to better align goals between different organisations, we don’t do it well”; CP5 “important to align personal goals with organisational goals. If there is not that alignment then you have to change the people or the goals”; FP5 “Someone draws up a business plan that is not aligned with the organisations objectives, this leads to conflict in the organisation” and “it can mean that clinicians become their own empires and their goals, that are not aligned with the goals of the organisation”; HM4 “his personal goals were aligned with the organisational ones”; NM1 “its about alignment...Alignment brings speed and you may get a better idea through challenge” and “Where there is a lack of agreement it may be important to get some understanding to see if you can align them”; SA3 “I guess if you can align with people then that is the best thing to do”; SP1 “the overarching goal is agreed but whose responsibility and how to align with other goals are the questions”.

Four participants made comments regarding alignment in connection with actions: MM2 “the definition of to do a good job may not be aligned” and “You also have to have an awareness of powerful groups in the organisation. Use their influence to get other stakeholders aligned”; NA6 “a decision we have made around our site and the range of our services and aligned around a package of services and estate development plan”; NM1 “we try to align the consultation with the residents

and communicate as an ongoing process”; PP5 “how we meet the needs of the population needs to be aligned with the council”.

### **8.3.7 Pragmatic**

Three participants made comments in connection with goals that mentioned being pragmatic: CA4 “The key is to be pragmatic. There are people who won’t change. It’s about getting a critical mass”; DP3 “It’s about being rational and pragmatic”; NA6 “It depends on how comprehensive you are in drawing up the business plan and including ambitions about your organisation, issues of capacity and pragmatic strategic responses to must do’s”.

Two participants mentioned being pragmatic in relation to actions: NM2 “I’ve automatically given info about operational practicalities and decisions, about delivering it. Pragmatic ways of handling workstreams”; UP5 “Some people focus on action and call it pragmatism”.

## **8.4 Emergent themes relating the categories**

### **8.4.1 Goals**

Five participants made reference to goal conflict before the question of goals in conflict or agreement was asked: CA4 “There is inbuilt conflict from not understanding each other”; MA5 “There may be instances where say personal goals conflicted with organisational ones but the personal goals could be moulded to be compliant with organisational goals”; MM2 “There is a conflict between what people want as individuals, people who are senior enough to see what groups and commissioners want”; NM2 “I see conflicting goals as natural”; PP5 “the difference between individuals goals and the organisational goals at board level, for example are they in it for the money or the status, etc. It creates quite a bit of conflict”.

Two participants suggested that in relation to goals the stakeholders might not be apparent: CP5 “There are a lot of people who act as proxies for stakeholders”;

NM2 “stakeholders who are not immediately apparent...you see the powerful stakeholders but there are others”.

Five participants mention the notion of balance in relation to goals: DP3 “You have to have a balanced perspective”, “must have a balanced view” and “You need to get a balanced view from carers, patients and getting the most bang for your buck”; MM2 “It is about balance, a judgement call on the risks”; NA6 “getting the balance of opportunity and risk right...You have to look at the upside and downside in a balanced way” and “Part of my personal strategy is about relationships. A strategy around maintaining relationships and community engagement and balance between the different aspirations”; QP5 “Need a balanced view when selling something to people because they will ask what the downside is”; SA3 “You know our strategy is to do four or five things and to hold them in balance”.

Three participants mentioned priorities in relation to goals: OA2 “Its all about prioritising, it always is in the NHS”; QP5 “conflicting priorities”; UP5 “If there are 100 priorities but you’re told that 5 are the most important there is a tendency to focus on those 5”.

### **8.4.2 Issues**

Two participants made reference to understanding in relation to issues: CP5 “What we do is too superficial. We don’t really understand the issue”; UP5 “I know there are people who do MBAs and that helps them to think in particular ways but if they don’t understand the issues then I’m not sure how much help that is?”

### **8.4.3 Actions**

Three participants made reference to learning in relation to reflecting on the consequences of actions taken: FP5 “Back to a cycle in strategic thinking, what have we learnt from this”; MM2 “History can help the organisation in learning in a way that helps it to learn from the past”; QP4 “Have to learn from history but have to recontextualise...Learn to revisit”.

Two participants made reference to courage in relation to actions: DP3 “We need the courage to run with this and see if it works”; UP5 “It needs to understand the uncertainty and have the courage to move given that uncertainty”.

The term process was used by a number of participants, most often in conjunction with actions: DA4 “thought of actions and process together, not only what but how ...What do I need to tackle this, what process is needed and then what actions?”; MA5 “process was covered by actions”; OA2 “processy stuff”, a term which they used to describe a combination of actions.



## **9 Discussion**

This first section of this chapter discusses the motivation behind the research, the orienting influences, and concerns with rigour and relevance to enable knowledge claims to be judged appropriately. The second section of this chapter discusses the implications for theory of this research. This second section has four subsections: a discussion of the researcher and participant criteria for strategic thinking to consider to what extent the framework is supported and what revisions are indicated; a discussion of the structure of the framework to consider to what extent the elements are supported; a discussion of the individual elements of the framework; and a discussion of the connections between this research and the strategic thinking literature. The third section of this chapter discusses the implications for management education of this research. While the framework indicates the basic content for education to develop strategic thinking, this section suggests integrating academic and experiential knowledge in an inductive approach rather than more conventional deductive analytical approaches. It is argued that used in this manner the framework may represent a threshold concept leading to a transformed way of understanding and thinking. The fourth section of this chapter discusses the implications of this research for strategic thinking practice. Criteria for guiding practice are suggested against which the strategic thinking literature and this research are assessed. The section then considers different settings in which strategic thinking might occur and the significant differences between those settings. Three processes are suggested as ways making the framework accessible to practice, constructing, refining, and appraising.

### **9.1 Motivations and orientations guiding the research**

This research was stimulated by the increasing use of the term strategic thinking in the literature, as illustrated in Figure 1-1 and Figure 1-2, and claims that strategic thinking represents an important challenge facing executives (Bonn 2001; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991; Zahra and O'Neill 1998). It was also motivated as result of the researcher's role as a management educator. In that role the researcher

felt that there was little in the extant literature that provided robust but practical advice that could be offered to executives to improve strategic thinking. Given this motivation the researcher considered it important to conduct research that had both academic rigour and managerial relevance.

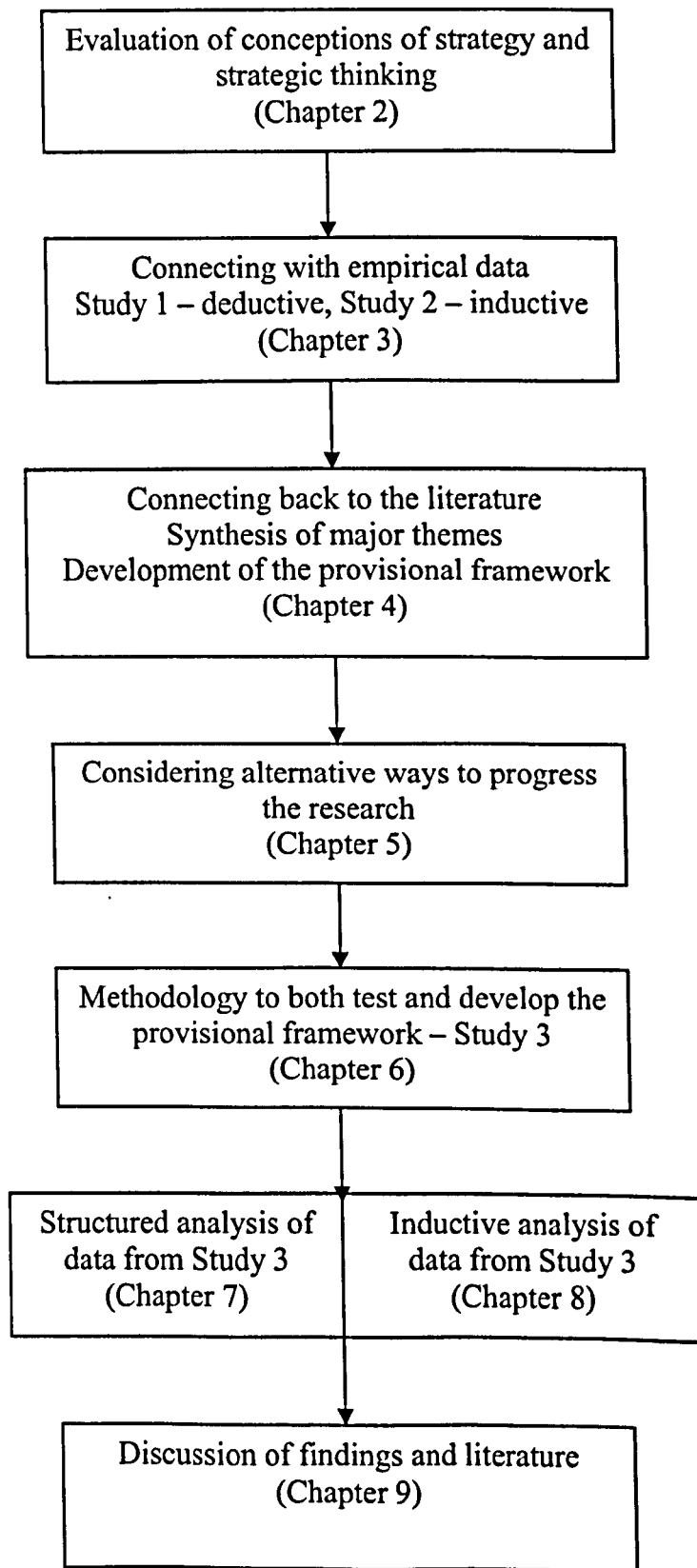
As discussed in chapter 1, concerns regarding rigour and relevance in management research are longstanding (Starkey and Madan 2001; Susman and Evered 1978; Whitley 1984a; 1984b). That a special collection of papers in a 2007 issue of the Academy of Management Journal, was devoted to rigour and relevance in management research illustrates the continuing significance of these concerns. This significance was underlined by the fact that the subsequent issue of the Academy of Management Journal was devoted to these concerns within the Human Resource Management field. It has been argued that any gap between management research and practice may only be a perceived one arising from an inappropriate definition of managerial relevance and failure to recognise sufficiently the range of channels for the dissemination of knowledge, including teaching and executive education (Markides 2007). The perception of a gap itself may lead to the development or widening of a gap as academics take sides in the rigor - relevance debate (Gulati 2007).

However, irrespective of the extent to which any gap between management research and management practice is real or not, how a researcher meets the double challenges of academic rigour and managerial relevance (Pettigrew 2001; Starkey and Madan 2001; Tranfield 2002a) is still imprecise. A significant difficulty in convincingly demonstrating how these double challenges have been met lies with the lack of agreement about what constitutes rigour and relevance. Distance from a phenomenon under study might be argued to improve objectivity and hence the scientific quality of the research but it may also undermine the relevance of the research to management practitioners. (Tushman and O'Reilly III 2007). Thirty years after what was described as a "crisis" in organisational science (Susman and Evered 1978:582), what is meant by rigor is confusing (Gulati 2007), for example a "quest for basic understanding" (Tushman and O'Reilly III 2007:769) or alternatively "the criteria we pay attention to when reviewing papers for academic journals"

(Vermeulen 2007:755). A similar confusion surrounds what is meant by relevance. For example, managerially relevant research helps managers to solve specific problems quickly by providing specialised and integrative solutions (McGahan 2007) or alternatively, less instrumentally “develops insights that help managers understand themselves and their organizations better” (Markides 2007:765). It can even be argued that research that lacks relevance may inherently lack rigour because in being disconnected from the phenomena it purports to study it necessarily becomes a study of different phenomena.

One possible solution to the apparent tension between rigour and relevance recognises that there is no “temporal imperative” in the application of management research (Tranfield and Starkey 1998:346) and hence rigour and relevance need not be simultaneous or coincident. For example, Vermeulen (2007) suggests in addition to a “first loop” comprising rigorous research into a topic a “second loop” of relevance, grounded in an understanding of a managerial world and dissemination to practitioners, that guides the research process and informs the first loop. Thus, management research can be seen as moving between conceptual and empirical planes, with tension between theory and data, in a process of discovery and not just validation; where plausibility may be a more sensible criterion than validity (van Maanen et al. 2007). This research has attempted to manage this tension between theory and data, and rigour and relevance, by building a bridge between conceptual and empirical planes in a number of stages, some with a more conceptual orientation, and some with a more empirical orientation. The bridging mechanism used was the development of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) that were grounded in relevant literature but were also meaningful to management practitioners. An overview of the stages involved in the research is shown in Figure 9-1.

**Figure 9-1 Overview of the research process**



In this research, relevance is indicated in a number of ways. The topic itself, strategic thinking, represents an identified challenge to management practitioners (Bonn 2001; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991; Zahra and O'Neill 1998). The high degree of response from executives to the research proposal (30 out of 36 expressing an interest and 25 out of 36 taking part) suggests that this research had relevance for them. Further, the concepts in the framework had meaning for the participants and were to some extent derived from the meanings and interpretations of the participants. Finally, the framework can be disseminated in a way that would be readily accessible to management practitioners.

Rigour is signified in a number of ways in this research. In one sense by the grounding of the framework in academic literature, some of which relates to research methodologies. Rigour is also signified by the design and application of research methodologies that were appropriate to the research topic and stage of the research. Reflexivity (Holland 1999) in the research also signifies rigour, in particular a methodological reflexivity (Johnson and Duberley 2003) in which transparency in the methods of data generation and analysis enables other researchers to examine the process and conclusions. An additional aspect of reflexivity was making explicit the personal orientations and influences of the researcher with regard to the research and recognition that the researcher is interpreting rather than merely representing (Alvesson et al. 2008). This reflexivity was not open-ended, in that it emphasised the impossibility of a reflexive stance devoid of inherent ontological and epistemological commitments (Johnson and Duberley 2003), but rather was instrumental in that it was intended to improve the research (Weick 1999). Reflexivity improved the research by making explicit the researcher's personal orientations and influences, and the methodological biases and limitations of the research, such that the implications of these for any knowledge claims made from the research could be evaluated. Consequently, before discussing the findings in detail it is appropriate to consider these implications.

A major influence in this research was a conception of strategic thinking as an everyday activity (Denis et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007) that managers would be expected to undertake as part of their everyday work, utilising knowledge

that they carry around in their heads (Eisenhardt 1989b; Meziar and Starbuck 2003a). Following from that orientation, in all three empirical studies data was generated from interviews that lasted about one hour, which was judged to be a not untypical time span if an executive undertook strategic thinking as an everyday activity. Further, the executives were given no guidance for preparation for the interview, other than the disclosure that the research was connected with strategic thinking. Additionally, the method of generating data with regard to strategic thinking was interviewing an executive with respect to an issue that may have strategic significance for their organisation. This approach was considered to be fruitful because it potentially gave access to a manager's thinking about strategy without becoming distracted by the possible of confusion and complexities of what strategy is, as discussed in section 2.2. Clearly, it could be argued that these conditions lacked validity. In particular it could be argued that strategic thinking is not an everyday activity, that it occurs only on relatively rare occasions under atypical circumstances, for example in strategy workshops or "awaydays". It could also be argued that executives engaging in strategic thinking would do so having gathered relevant data in advance to inform the activity and would not rely on knowledge carried around in their heads. There is some limited evidence in the data from Study 3 for this alternative view when two participants (QP5 and SP1) suggest that strategic thinking is not reactive and one (FP2) talked about strategic thinking involving "being released from the shackles of the day to day". However, this is the only data from the three studies to suggest that presuming strategic thinking as everyday activity lacks validity. Also, there is no obvious justification for excluding strategic thinking from the group of activities that are considered to constitute everyday strategising (Whittington 1996). Ultimately, it may be that the framework developed in this research, given the circumstances of the data generation, is qualified as a framework for strategic thinking for "real-time strategy making" (Vilà and Canales 2008:275) but such a conclusion would be premature at this stage.

An additional major influence on this research were the notions of preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000) and the suggestion of concepts as either definitive or sensitising (Blumer 1940; 1954). As mentioned earlier in this section

(page 208) this research aimed to bridge between conceptual and empirical planes, but initially it was difficult to decide how to begin that bridging process. Adopting a deductive approach would give precedence to an academic perspective presented in the academic literature, while adopting an inductive approach would give precedence to a practitioner perspective. The notions of preunderstanding (Gummesson 2000) and of concepts as definitive or sensitising (Blumer 1940; 1954) provided nucleation points around which a logic and rationale to progress the research crystallised. In particular a conclusion that strategic thinking was not a definitive concept suitable for highly deductive research led to the staged researched process shown in Figure 9-1. However, it can be argued that no concept in social science is truly definitive (Hodgkinson 2007) and concluding a definition of strategic thinking to be problematic might be considered an unnecessary impediment to developing a tractable research project. For example Goldman (2007) appears to avoid difficulties in defining strategic thinking, and hence is able to focus instead on identifying top strategic thinkers to conclude what experiences made them a top strategic thinker. On the other hand, it could be argued that critically evaluating the conceptual basis of a research topic strengthens any subsequent conclusions from that research. Further, critically evaluating the conceptualisation of strategic thinking in this way may produce a contribution in itself because it generates a stronger insight into the literature and hence may result in greater clarification and integration of the literature. This research has produced an integration of the strategy literature concerned with goals, issues and actions, and has made valuable contribution to the field in so doing.

A further influence was the notion of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) as a bridging mechanism, meaning that they were both grounded in relevant theoretical concepts and had meaning for practitioners. This meaning is somewhat different from that proposed by Huxham and Beech, who relate the term specifically to reflective practice, but it does seem reasonable to use the term in a way inspired by Huxham and Beech, albeit in a different context. Thus, the framework for strategic thinking developed in this research is not claimed to offer “a precise description of the world as it is” but rather to “help the...[user]...to suspend, momentarily, the

complexity of everyday life” (Huxham and Beech 2003:88). Thus, while the framework is relatively simple and is argued to have some general applicability, it is not considered to be accurate to specific settings (Starbuck 2004; Thorngate 1976; Weick 1999), rather it is an abstraction from reality, aiming to identify relevant concepts and possible relationships between those concepts (Teece 2007). As discussed earlier (page 117), the apparent neatness and simplicity of the framework, therefore, may appear to misrepresent the complexity of strategic thinking but it is intended to help practitioners to deal with this complexity rather than deny or remove the complexity.

An additional factor of influence to consider is the context within which the research was undertaken. All but one of the thirty three individuals that took part in the empirical studies was an executive in the UK National Health Service. One implication of this is that claims to generalise from this research may be unwarranted because the findings might not relate to other organisations. For example the complexity of the goal system indicated by the framework may be typical of the UK National Health Service, or other public sector organisations, but not of a large commercial enterprise or a small family firm. However, there are suggestions that pluralistic contexts are of increasing relevance to commercial organisations (Denis et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006) and that differences between public and private sector organisations may be overstated (Bozeman and Kingsley 1998). Ultimately, this research was conducted with a particular set of individuals, from a particular context in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and if strategic thinking is considered as a socially embedded phenomenon then it may well be different at different times and in different societies (Whittington 2007). However, a strength of the framework is that it identifies potentially relevant concepts and provides a basis for exploring those differences in terms of how those concepts might be interpreted, and be interrelated in different settings.

In this introduction the influences on the research and its development, and the implications for the findings from the research have been considered. In the later sections of this chapter the findings will be discussed with respect to the implications of the research for theory, management education and practice. It is important that



this discussion is viewed in light of the influences and orientations considered in the introduction. It should be remembered that this discussion considers how the findings relate to the framework in two ways, firstly the extent to which the framework is substantiated in the findings, primarily from the structured analysis, and the extent to which modifications to the framework might be suggested, primarily from the inductive analysis. In considering possible modifications instantiation is considered important in addition to substantiation.

## **9.2 The implications for theory**

This section has four subsections. The first subsection discusses the researcher and participant criteria for strategic thinking to evaluate to what extent the framework is supported, what revisions are indicated, and draw conclusions for the conceptualisation of strategic thinking. Although some of the participants' criteria for strategic thinking are reflected in the framework others are not. In particular criteria related to "high level", "not reactive", "operationalising strategy" and a disconnection from the "real world" suggest that the framework is not fully supported and requires modification. The discussion in this subsection also concludes that the goals element of the framework is most strongly supported and the actions element the least strongly supported.

The second subsection discusses the structure of the framework in terms of the degree of support for the elements and their interrelationships. The categories were supported in terms of having meaning for the participants, and notions of balance and priorities were suggested. Interesting aspects of the categories discussed in this subsection are that the importance of timing, the personal dimensions to strategy, and the processes of perception and interpretation may be underappreciated, and that the categories may blur empirically. The only additional category suggested was performance measurement.

The third subsection discusses of the individual elements of the framework and the conclusion drawn that while the goals and issues elements are supported the actions element is problematic, again suggesting a modification of the framework is

required. Interesting aspects of the categories considered in this subsection are the concept of proxy stakeholders, that negative goals may have value in being more tangible and driving action more strongly, and insight into managerially relevant conceptions of risk.

The fourth subsection discusses the connections between this research and the strategic thinking literature, which it classifies as thinking with a particular structure, thinking with particular characteristics, or thinking about strategy. This research connects most evidently with the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking with a particular structure, in particular the work of Eden and Ackermann. The discussion in this subsection clarifies the ways in which this research differs from that work and how it expands and develops that work. The discussion in this subsection also clarifies how this research connects with the characteristics associated with strategic thinking, as summarised in Table 2-1, and comments on the characteristics that are included in the framework and those that are not. With regard to the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking about strategy this research maintains a degree of relevance because it integrates three central themes in the broader strategy literature, as discussed in chapter 4.

Finally, conclusions are drawn with respect to the conceptualisation of strategic thinking and the strategic thinking literature, and the framework reconsidered and revised as a result of those conclusions.

It is important to emphasise that this developing provisional framework is not a fully developed theory. Rather, it is intended to identify relevant concepts and possible relationships between those concepts (Teece 2007). As such the framework represents not only a conceptualisation of strategic thinking but also a sensitising instrument for exploring strategic thinking. In this discussion these two aspects are interrelated by considering the implications of the findings, particularly from Study 3, for the concepts in the framework, their relationships and the connections to the academic literature on strategic thinking. Specifically, this discussion will consider to what extent the framework is supported by the findings of Study 3 and what modifications might be indicated.

## 9.2.1 Criteria for strategic thinking from assessments of participants' causal maps

The methodology for Study 3 involved producing a causal map of what a participant said they had been thinking about an issue that may have strategic significance for their organisation. A subsequent comparison was made between the researcher's assessment and the participant's assessment of to what extent that map reflected strategic thinking (section 7.2). Of those participants whose response could be clearly and unequivocally assessed, eleven participants considered their map to reflect strategic thinking and seven did not (Table 7-2). Two of these participants were excluded from the comparison because their map nodes were not categorised in a way that enabled the researcher's criteria to be applied. Thus the comparison was only possible for 16 out of the 25 participants.

An initial evaluation of five maps against the researcher's original criteria resulted in no maps classified as reflecting strategic thinking and the criteria were relaxed to facilitate analysis of the data (Table 7-3). The original, more stringent, criteria may be unrealistic under the circumstances of the interview in which there were significant time constraints. Additionally, participants may have restricted the scope of the material they discussed (as suggested in Table 7-1), thus producing relatively simple maps and relatively few nodes. However, it was found that 16 maps met the stringent criteria for goals. Relaxing the criteria to what might be more realistic under the interview circumstances meant that approximately half (9 of 21) would be assessed as reflecting strategic thinking. All the maps met the relaxed issues criteria. About half (10 of 21), but not all, maps failed to meet the relaxed actions criteria, primarily because only a few actions were mapped. Thus, there appears to be a clear order in the ease with which the researcher's criteria for strategic thinking are met. If thinking about an issue that may have strategic significance for the organisation involves strategic thinking then the goals element of the framework is most strongly supported and the actions element the least strongly supported. These initial findings from Study 3 suggest that the three elements should not be given equal weighting. If "There is near unanimity that whatever else strategy may be thought to be, it certainly is *consistent corporate action over time*" (Tsoukas

and Knudsen 2002:422) (emphasis in the original) then it is interesting that the least important element of strategic thinking appears to relate to thinking about actions. One might speculate that if strategy is fundamentally a pattern of actions over time, with some degree of consistency, then strategic thinking should place an emphasis on an appreciation of those patterns of actions. This would be particularly so if, as Eden suggests, “Real managers cannot think about the future of their organization without thinking about action and implementation” (1990:35). However, that does not appear to be the case in these findings.

An analysis of the reasons why the researcher or the participant considers a map to reflect strategic thinking (Table 7-12) leads to an indication of the participants’ criteria in terms of what strategic thinking is and what strategic thinking is not. These criteria are summarised in Table 9-1. A consideration of these criteria indicates ways in which the researcher’s criteria and hence the framework might be invalid or incomplete.

**Table 9-1 Summary of participant criteria for strategic thinking from a comparison of whether the researcher or participant consider the map to reflect strategic thinking**

		Does the participant consider the map a reflection of strategic thinking?	
		Yes	No
(Meets researcher criteria)	Yes	Strategic thinking is - High level Strategic thinking is not - Reactive	Strategic thinking is – About a vision for the future Strategic thinking is not – About the real world, about operationalising strategy, reactive
Does the map meet the criteria?	No	Strategic thinking is – High level, about the whole organisation Strategic thinking is not – About delivery  (Researcher – Maps were simple but the elements were present or few actions were mapped with emphasis on goals and issues)	Strategic thinking is – About future possibilities Strategic thinking is not - About actions to get things to happen  (Researcher – Maps were simple or had few actions mapped)
(Researcher’s reasons why criteria not met)			
Additional criteria from maps where participant said some aspects did and some did not		Strategic thinking is – High level and about the elements of the strategic plan, connections, impact, aspirations, partnerships	Strategic thinking is not - About processy bits, day-to-day work, operations, delivery

Considering the participants' criteria for what strategic thinking is, a number of these criteria are reflected in the provisional framework, and hence these findings provide some support for the framework. "Aspirations" fits with the broad definition of goals. "About the whole organisation" is reflected in the theme of Scope (see Figure 3-10). "Partnerships" is reflected in the appreciation of the goals of stakeholders. "Connections" is reflected in the Consideration of interrelationships (see Figure 3-10). The notion of connectedness also emerged from the inductive analysis of data from Study 3 (section 8.2.4), labelled as systemicity. "About a vision for the future", "Future possibilities" and "Impact" are all reflected as Consequences beyond the immediate. A future orientation also emerged from the inductive analysis of data from Study 3 (section 8.2.3). Without knowing what the "Elements of the strategic plan" are it is difficult to relate this criterion to the framework.

However, not all the participants' criteria are reflected in the framework. The criterion of "High level" is not explicit in the framework. As the framework has developed the emphasis has been on complexity rather than high level to indicate a strategic nature. This finding may indicate that, for example, a goal system should contain at least some "high level" goals to indicate strategic thinking. Additionally, the participants' criteria that strategic thinking is not reactive or about day-to-day work are interesting with respect to a fundamental assumption of this research and perhaps more importantly to the strategy as practice field. This research has taken a fundamental perspective to investigate strategic thinking as an everyday activity; a perspective that an executive would undertake strategic thinking during their everyday work. Clearly, some aspects of this are likely to be reactive in terms of thinking about issues as they arise. If practitioners reject this perspective as invalid for strategic thinking, then this calls into question aspects of the strategy as practice field that emphasise the day to day activities that may have strategic consequences (Balogun et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2003). This may be an instance of where an academic perspective fails to appropriately reflect the phenomenon under study or alternatively where practitioners fail to appreciate the nature of their practice, in particular the strategic consequences of apparently non-strategic activities (Eden and Ackermann 2000).

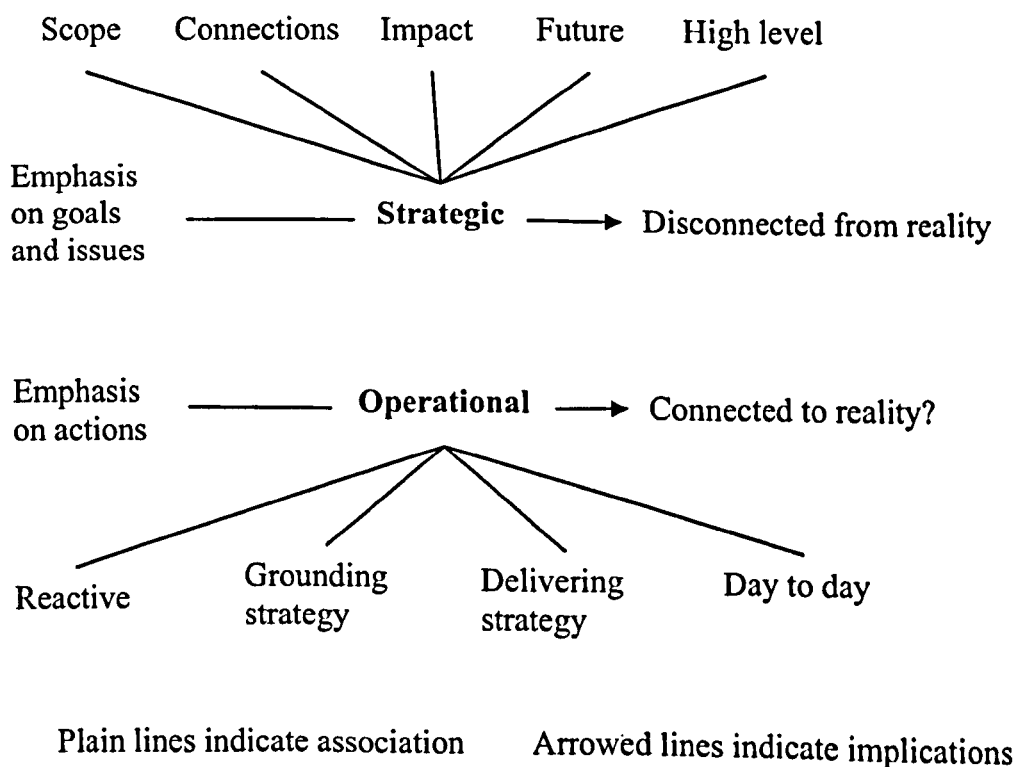
A number of participant criteria, specifically that strategic thinking is not about, “operationalising strategy”, “operations”, “delivery”, “actions to things to happen” and “processy bits” could be interpreted to militate against the incorporation of the actions element in the framework. This is particularly so given that the actions element is least strongly supported in earlier findings (page 216). Additionally, two participants suggested that the operational was a distraction or inconsequential (section 8.2.1). Giving full weight to these criteria would suggest that strategic thinking was essentially about goals and issues, and that the actions element should be discarded.

The final participant criterion suggests a view that strategic thinking is disconnected from the “real world” in some sense. Inductive analysis of the data from Study 3 (section 8.2.5) suggests a view that strategies are often out of touch with reality and that reality “only comes into it” with operational implementation. This may be consistent with the criterion of strategic thinking being high level. This distinction between the strategic and the operational is supported by inductive analysis of data from Study 3 (section 8.2.1) in which seven participants suggest that the relationship between the strategic and the operational is not problematic, with strategy being grounded in an operational reality or with strategy being delivered operationally. However, the distinction is not definitive, with three participants expressing a difficulty in differentiating the strategic from the operational and one suggesting that the importance of the operational was unappreciated. If strategy and strategic thinking are disconnected from reality in some sense then it is interesting to ponder why strategy and strategic thinking is considered so important by executives. One possibility may be that strategic thinking is a phenomenon that is abstract in nature and that any disconnection an inevitable, necessary and acceptable consequence. Alternatively, it may be that practitioners are engaging in a managerial discourse (Knights and Morgan 1991) with less consideration for concrete effects than the self-legitimising practice itself (Knights and Morgan 1990); essentially engaging the rituals of strategy as they are expected.

In summary the goals and issues elements of the framework are more strongly supported than the actions element. Goals and issues appear to be more

strongly associated with strategic thinking by the participants. Strategic thinking is seen to be high level, with a future orientation and considering scope, connections and impact. This may lead to a view that strategic thinking is disconnected from the real world. Practitioner opinions do not appear to be consistent regarding the extent of such a disconnection and whether such a disconnection is problematic. The actions element is least strongly supported, and although not completely discredited, appears to be more associated with the day to day and operational, involved in grounding and delivering strategy than with strategic thinking. In practice, there may be a tension between strategic thinking that is discredited because it is disconnected from the real world and strategic thinking that discredited because it is too operational. The tension is perhaps best expressed by NA6, “It’s not about being so immersed in the day to day that you can’t see beyond it but the strategy has to be grounded in at least some of the operational realities”. This tension is indicated diagrammatically in Figure 9-2.

**Figure 9-2 Strategic thinking as disconnected from the real world: the tension between the strategic and the operational**





## 9.2.2 The structure of the framework

The categories of goals, issues and actions made sense to the majority of participants in Study 3 (section 7.3), suggesting a significant degree of support for the categories themselves. The proposal that the categories could represent conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003), having meaning for practitioners, is clearly illustrated by the comment from MM2, “The categories are not terminology we use... You could wrap up most of what we do into these categories”. One contribution of this research is in connecting the categories of goals, issues and actions to a wider strategy literature as demonstrated in chapter 4. For example, although Eden and Ackermann (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002) draw attention to negative goals they make no direct connection to relevant literature, in particular a cybernetic perspective that views strategy as developing to avoid negative outcomes (Morgan 1983) or as a response to constraints (Simon 1964). In making these connections explicit this research makes a contribution to theory by indicating more explicitly how the substantial work of Eden and Ackermann relates to that wider body of strategy literature. This also produces an additional contribution in terms of integrating the three usually discrete themes of goals, issues and actions in the literature.

In addition to support for the categories, relationships in terms of priorities and balance were suggested in relation to goals specifically (section 8.4.1) and between the categories in general (sections 8.2.9, 8.2.8). While the notion of prioritising goals, issues and actions (Ackermann and Eden 2005) and of a balanced view of performance (Kaplan and Norton 1992; 1993; 1996) are evident in the literature, the notion of balance within and between these categories is not. Other relationships between categories suggested action as the way to achieve or deliver goals (section 7.3.2) or action being taken as issues arose (section 7.3.4), suggesting a degree of incrementalism. The importance of the relationships between the categories was emphasised by NA6 who said, “The biggest issue is understanding what the relationship is between the three”.

However, one of the interesting findings in this research is that empirically the categorisations of goals, issues and actions may not be fixed or clear. While conceptually the categories can be defined quite neatly and distinctly, some of these distinctions appear to blur when participants are asked about specific instances. In a number of cases participants were unable to categorise definitively a map node. Typically, they were either not sure which category was the appropriate one or thought that more than one category was applicable, rather than suggesting that a different category might be appropriate. It may be that the map nodes as discussed with the participant had a degree of “internal structure”; for example it may be that the phrases used by the participants were a form of shorthand that summarised a combination of say goals, issues and actions, and possibly other categories not specified. For some participants the categories of goals, issues and actions may be so closely related that the analytical separation does not reflect adequately their interpretation. Alternatively, a specific node might indicate more than one category depending on the interpretation, and the participant might be comfortable with a single node having more than one interpretation. Perhaps most interestingly there was a suggestion that some categories might change into others over time (page 167), in particular actions that are a long way in the future might be set as goals (section 8.3.3). In Study 2 one participant commented that some actions have significant duration and some goals may extend over time so there may be overlap between actions and goals (page 65).

A notion of time was also evident in the findings in the suggestion that timing and sequencing of goals, issues and actions is an aspect of strategic thinking. This theme emerged from the inductive analysis of data from Study 3, being mentioned by nine participants (section 8.3.3) and also in the more structured analysis (section 7.3.8). Participants in Study 3 indicated that timing and sequencing of categories were not well represented in the causal maps and similar indications were present in Study 2 (page 61). It has been argued that a time dimension is an important aspect of strategy (Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004) that is often misunderstood or neglected (Warren 2004) and that time-based thinking is a significant challenge (Warren 2005). Timing in terms of tempo and pace of organisational responses is an under-

researched area (Perez-Nordtvedt et al. 2008) but tools to capture the time-path of strategy are as yet underdeveloped (Warren and Langley 1999). While a time dimension is explicit in the work of Eden and Ackermann it focuses on the later stages of a strategy making process related to, for example, “an action package with timescales and responsibilities” (Eden 1990:37) but not explicitly to goals and issues. The findings from this research indicate that timing and sequencing of goals and issues is a significant aspect of strategic thinking and a methodological development that better captures temporal aspects would have value.

A strong and consistent theme emerging from the inductive analysis suggests a people or personal dimension to the categories (section 8.3.1): eight participants made comments suggesting that goals had a personal aspect; nine participants made comments suggesting that issues had a people dimension; and six participants made comments suggesting a people dimension to actions. The people theme emerged from the inductive analysis in Study 2 (page 51) in relation to goals with a high degree of support, five out seven participants. A second theme to emerge from the inductive analysis in Study 2 was labelled social (page 53) and was related to issues and actions (see Figure 3-10) and was also strongly supported. The emergence of this people theme in the inductive analysis of the data from Study 3 confirms the importance of the personal and social dimensions of strategic thinking and supports their incorporation into the framework. Although the theme of a personal aspect to strategy is present to some extent in the strategy literature there are suggestions that it has lost some of the emphasis that it once had (Hambrick 2004; Hoskisson et al. 1999). The highlighting of the people oriented or personal aspects of strategy is a notable contribution to a conception of strategic thinking.

An additional finding of particular interest is that a number of participants made reference to perceptions and interpretations, with equal numbers relating these to issues, goals and actions (section 8.3.2). The suggestion that perception and interpretation are significant processes with regard to strategic issues is well established and accepted in the literature (Dutton and Duncan 1987; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Ocasio 1997). Assessing the extent to which perception and interpretation are accepted as significant processes with respect to action is difficult

because the nature of action is not well characterised in the strategy literature (Bouchikhi et al. 1997; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). The most prominent action related theme in the strategy literature concerns the mechanisms by which action comes about, in particular the extent to which thought or decision making precede action (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002; Weber and Glynn 2006), and the extent to which action is deliberate and reflective (Andersen 2000; Chaffee 1985) or automatic and unreflective (Chia and Holt 2006; Starbuck 1983).

However, a finding of notable significance is that perceptions and interpretations may also be significant factors with respect to strategic goals. Perhaps the best example of this is from PP2, "The goal has to be the agreed with everyone and is explicit but peoples' interpretation is different. It's the same paper, the same document they're reading, but people have different mindsets and so see it differently". That perception and interpretation might play such a significant role in relation to strategic goals is essentially absent from the strategy literature. It could be argued that the significance of perception and interpretation with respect to strategic issues is related to their controversial, ambiguous, uncertain, incomplete, equivocal, ill defined or conflicting nature (Bansal 2003; Dutton 1986; Dutton et al. 1983; Dutton and Ottensmeyer 1987; Dutton et al. 1989; King 1982). However, it would appear reasonable to propose that at least some of these adjectives are equally applicable to strategic goals. Indeed, the lack of tangibility and conflicting nature of strategic goals have emerged as important themes in this research. It has also been suggested that ambiguous and ill defined strategic goals have merit over precise, well defined strategic goals (Quinn 1977). In the literature, goals are considered to be in conflict as a result of multiple goal structures (Quinn 1978) or powerful stakeholders with different aspirations (Mintzberg 1978; Schwenk 1995). Even where a pluralistic context is specified (Denis et al. 2007; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006) different perceptions or interpretation of goals are not explicitly acknowledged. One implication of this finding is that the established literature concerning strategic issues could be adapted and expanded to study the processes of framing, categorisation and interpretation with respect to strategic goals.

The only additional category suggested by participants was performance measurement, which was suggested by five participants (section 7.3.8). This was interpreted in terms of measuring success or results or progress. Interestingly, although performance measurement did not emerge as a category in Study 2, some of the data from that study could be interpreted as falling into that category. Specifically IG suggested that what was categorised as a goal he thought of as an operational milestone (page 65) and SA commented that two nodes coded as issues could be interpreted as interim goals or descriptors of steps along the way or as indicators of success (page 66). The most prominent expression of performance measurement in the strategy literature is the balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton 1992; 1993; 1996) but performance measurement is most often associated with financial or operational performance (Venkatraman and Ramanujam 1986) and is a strong theme in the operations management literature (Beamon 1999; Neely et al. 1995). The suggested addition of this category is interesting because performance measurement is usually associated with the later stages of strategy making, involving actions and controls to deliver a strategy (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002). Participants in this research appear to be indicating that considering performance measurement is an aspect of strategic thinking. Because this category emerged at this late stage in the research it was not possible to explore it further. However, it is proposed that performance measurement as an element of strategic thinking would require a degree of complexity analogous to other elements, that is a performance measurement system of interrelated measures rather than a simple set of measures or single measure.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that only six participants made any reference to decisions or decision making, and only three of these suggest decisions of a strategic nature. At an early stage in this research a decision was taken not to link strategic thinking necessarily to strategic decision making because of the contested nature of the topic (Hendry 2000). It may be that a weak connection between decisions and strategic thinking is an artefact of the research process but one might have expected it to emerge as a stronger theme if the connection was strong.

### 9.2.3 The elements of the framework

The goals element of the framework was the most strongly supported of the categories, which is consistent with the persistent centrality of goals in the strategy literature (Bracker 1980; Chandler 1962; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006; MacCrimmon 1993; Schwenk 1984; 1995). With respect to goals, a number of participants made reference to goals of different entities and stakeholders when commenting on the category of goals (section 7.3.5) and there was almost universal support for the suggestion that an appreciation of the goals of different entities (section 7.4.2) and of different stakeholders (section 7.4.4) indicates better strategic thinking. Given the emphasis on partnership working and reflecting stakeholder interests in the NHS this may be sector specific, but is clearly valid for this sector. These findings support the proposal that strategic thinking involves an appreciation of a goal system that reflects the multiple aspirations of organisational actors (Stacey 1993) and goals of many groups and individuals (Donaldson and Preston 1995; Jones 1995; Mitchell et al. 1997). However, there was a suggestion that the organisation dealt with proxies for stakeholders rather than stakeholders themselves and that some stakeholders might not be apparent (section 8.4.1). The concept of proxy stakeholders is not explicitly considered in the literature, even when assessing a political environment (Cummings and Doh 2000). Proxies for stakeholders, for example, politicians, are usually considered as stakeholders themselves. A distinction in terms of primary versus secondary stakeholders is made (Hillman and Keim 2001; Waddock et al. 2002) but this is a different distinction than between proxy and "true" stakeholders. Recognising a distinction between proxy and true stakeholders enables research into what might be important and consequential relationships between the two stakeholders. For example, one might envisage a trade union acting as a proxy stakeholder for its members but the nature of the relationship between the proxy and true stakeholder would be consequential for the organisation.

The majority of participants agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of where goals were in agreement or conflict indicated better strategic thinking (section 7.4.3) but a relatively large number of participants (9 of 25) appeared inclined to discuss conflict rather than agreement. Indeed, goal conflict was

mentioned without prompting in the earlier stages of the interview by five participants (section 8.4.1). Thus, although notions of understanding the goals of others, aligning goals, negotiating a win/win and the suggestion that goal agreement had benefits were mentioned (section 7.4.3), there appeared to be a suggestion that conflict was implicit or inherent and may be an inevitable consequence of a goal system reflecting the aspirations of many stakeholders (sections 8.4.1, 7.4.3). In such a goal system it is probably impossible to meet all stakeholder aspirations all of the time; a manager cannot “just do one thing” (Sterman 2001:9). It was also suggested that conflict may emerge during implementation, as different perceptions develop or as a result of unintended consequences (section 7.4.3). Given these findings the suggestion that an “integrated set of objectives” be “agreed upon by all senior executives” (Kaplan and Norton 1996:76) would appear to present an unrealistic description of goals and goal formation in organisations (Cyert and March 1992), at least in this context. A more realistic conceptualisation of strategic thinking involves an appreciation of goal conflict arising from disagreement about goals and the means of achieving those goals (Schwenk 1995) between organisational actors (Child 1997).

Overall there was a wide degree of support for the suggestion that an appreciation of negative goals indicated better strategic thinking (section 7.4.1). An interesting aspect of these findings is suggestions that negative goals might be more tangible, grounded and realistic, and might drive action more strongly than positive goals. Tangibility was mentioned in relation to goals in terms of communicating goals and influencing peoples’ behaviour (section 7.3.5). DA4 commented “The goal is so far away so I guess negative goals are more tangible”. Typically, in the literature, negative goals are considered to indicate an undesirable or underdeveloped goal system in which negative goals need converting into more positive, aspirational goals (Ackermann and Eden 2005). This view is consistent with the mainstream literature that emphasises the role of vision (Collins and Porras 1996), mission (Campbell and Yeung 1991) or strategic intent (Hamel and Prahalad 1989) in strategy. The value of developing a goal system that represents a positive, aspirational future can be appreciated, for example, in holding a creative tension

between present circumstances and a desired future (Senge 1993). However, converting negative goals into positive ones has two potential disadvantages. First, it may misrepresent the role that negative goals and avoidance of outcomes play in strategy in general (Morgan 1983) and, more specifically for this research, in strategic thinking. Even the two participants who explicitly stated that they did not think in terms of negative goals made comments that suggested that they did think about avoiding outcomes. These might be later “flipped” into a more positive form for wider consumption but their comments were clearly about avoiding outcomes. Second, more instrumentally, while a positive goal might be more socially and politically acceptable, and hence have value, a negative goal might also have value because it is more tangible and may drive action more strongly, for example, in bringing about organisational change.

A theme associated with goals that emerged from the inductive analysis in Study 3 was that of risk, being mentioned in relation to goals by nine participants (section 8.3.5). The emergence of risk as a theme is an interesting one because of how this relates to the strategy and strategic thinking literature. The characteristics of strategic thinking rarely include notions of risk (see Table 2-1). That risk was mentioned by this relatively large number of participants indicates that it has a more central role in strategic thinking than the literature acknowledges. Understanding risk is an important goal in strategic management research but there is confusion over the meaning and measurement of risk (Palmer and Wiseman 1999). The emphasis in the strategy literature has been financial risk (Bettis and Hall 1982; Bowman 1980; Montgomery and Singh 1984; Ruefli et al. 1999) with typical risk measures being derived from stock returns, financial ratios and income stream uncertainty (Miller and Bromiley 1990). There is usually an assumption of a positive relationship between risk and return but there is some evidence to suggest that this is not the case (Bowman 1980; 1984) and that the relationship is more complicated (Fiegenbaum and Thomas 1988; Miller and Chen 2004).

A second aspect of the strategic risk literature is an assumption that risk is associated with choice between strategic alternatives (March 1988; March and Shapira 1987) and the uncertainty about the extent to which those alternatives will



deliver desired, often hard to define, outcomes (Baird and Thomas 1985; Sitkin and Pablo 1992). While managers may consider both potential positive and negative outcomes, and attempt to offset potential losses by potential gains in relation to strategic alternatives (Chatterjee et al. 2003), there are suggestions that managers appear to associate risk more with negative outcomes rather than positive ones (March and Shapira 1987). This is often termed downside risk (Das and Teng 2001b) and downside risk measures may be more managerially relevant (Miller and Reuer 1996) because they better reflect the managerial perception of risk (Das and Teng 2001b; Miller and Leiblein 1996). This appears to be so in this research since the comments from participants in relation to risk with respect to goals came exclusively in response to the interview question about an appreciation of negative goals.

However, the concepts of risk employed by practitioners may be significantly different than abstract definitions found in the literature (March and Shapira 1987). In particular the notion of risk being associated with uncertainty appears to be debatable in light of comments by some participants, specifically: QP4 “more a question of more rounded thinking that meant knowing the risks rather than being driven to avoid something”; QP5 “Need risk assessment to manage negative things”; and UP5 “you have to try to understand what the risks are and have some risk mitigation in place”. These comments could be interpreted as suggesting some sense of certainty rather than uncertainty associated with risk; of acknowledging or accepting downside outcomes and attempting to manage rather than avoid downside outcomes. It could be conjectured that an appreciation of a goal system implies an understanding that a manager cannot “just do one thing” (Sterman 2001:9) and there is an inevitability of negative outcomes of some nature for some stakeholders. A manager cannot provide positive outcomes for all stakeholders all the time. Thus, risk in this sense may be more related to “damage limitation” to address the implications of negative outcomes rather than attempting to avoid those negative outcomes. It has been suggested that strategy researchers have failed to appreciate the concepts of risk employed by managers and that the development of managerially relevant concepts and measures of risk in strategy research require a substantial reconsideration (Ruefli et al. 1999). This may be an example of such a

reconsideration based on empirical research. The suggestion that risk may be perceived, by some practitioners, as related to managing the implications of inevitable negative outcomes that form part of a goal system is a notable contribution to both the conceptualisations of strategic thinking and of risk in strategy more generally. It may be that this perception of risk is specific to this sector but there is little evidence of different perceptions of risk between public and private sector organisations (Bozeman and Kingsley 1998).

The issues element of the framework was also supported, but not as strongly as the goals element. Support for the issues element is consistent with the importance attached to strategic issues in the literature (Ansoff 1980; Dutton and Ashford 1993; Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Dutton and Duncan 1987; Dutton et al. 1983; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Ocasio 1997; Schneider and Demeyer 1991; Thomas and McDaniel 1990). With respect to issues, the categorisation (Rosch 1975; Rosch and Mervis 1975; Tversky and Hemenway 1983) of issues was evident in comments from a number of participants (section 7.3.6). As suggested in the literature (Dutton et al. 1989; Smith 1995) certain categories employed by the participants were not those found in the literature. Two participants made a distinction between issues that were “facts” that were essentially fixed and static, and other issues that were not fixed but were “live” and had some degree of choice about how they were handled. One participant suggested sub-categories of practical and intellectual, with the difference being that practical ones required action while intellectual ones needed to be thought about. While these sub-categories of issues may not be explicit in the literature, the former may relate more to automatic/affective interpretations and the latter to more active/deliberative interpretations (Julian and Ofori-Dankwa 2008).

The assessment of the characteristics of issues (Dutton et al. 1989) was evident in comments about issues (section 7.3.6) with characteristics relating to the accuracy, relevance and weight given to an issue. Two participants highlighted the importance of deep rather than superficial understanding of issues (section 8.4.2). These characteristics echo some found in the literature, for example, importance and uncertainty (Dutton 1986); feasibility and urgency (Dutton and Duncan 1987) and value and relevance (Ocasio 1997). The characteristic of accuracy appears to suggest

that strategic issues are factual rather than interpreted (Thomas and McDaniel 1990). However, this characteristic may involve a more sophisticated notion of accuracy, for example a consensus between judgements (Kruglanski 1989) or a pragmatic realisation that others will engage in issue selling (Dutton and Ashford 1993).

The majority of participants appeared to support the suggestion that an appreciation of both internal and external issues indicated better strategic thinking (section 7.4.7) although two participants suggested that precedence be given to external issues. This may reflect a “fit” view of strategy (Zajac et al. 2000) over a “stretch” view (Hamel and Prahalad 1993) and may be entirely appropriate given significance of external factors in the strategies of UK NHS trusts.

The suggestion that an appreciation of the issues associated with different entities appears to be supported by the majority of participants with those participants who did not appear to fully support the suggestion raising concerns about introducing constraints and the difficulty of taking into account a wide range of issues (section 7.4.8). This may indicate a practical awareness of an individual’s bounded capacity to be rational (Cyert and March 1992) and limits to attention (Miller 1956).

When commenting on the category of actions (section 7.3.7) three participants suggested the importance of actions, two suggested that the category of action could include not taking action and others that the category of actions could also include processes. The notion of courage to take action was suggested by two participants (section 8.4.3). The suggestion that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas indicates better strategic thinking was supported by about two thirds of the participants (section 7.4.6). For a number of other participants it is difficult to interpret their responses in terms of support or otherwise. There is a suggestion of a tension between presenting a degree of certainty to gain legitimacy and commitment but recognition that a degree of uncertainty is inevitable. Legitimacy may be gained via a planning process, as NM1 commented “you’re responsible for spending £56 million of public money you have to have a detailed plan. Without that its not good management is it?”, but adaptive actions (Andersen 2000; Chaffee 1985) and

incrementalism (Johnson 1988) mean that both deliberate and emergent (Mintzberg and Waters 1985) aspects are acknowledged. This reference to strategic planning suggest that the activity is still an important one and that the demise of strategic planning has been indeed been exaggerated (Whittington and Cailluet 2008).

Risk was mentioned by five participants in relation to actions (section 8.3.5), in responding to the question about an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas. This corresponds to the position in the literature that risk is associated with uncertainty, particularly where time horizons are long (Das and Teng 2001a).

With respect to the suggestion that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken indicates better strategic thinking, about half the participants suggested that it did and about half appeared not sure or expressed some reservations (section 7.4.5). These reservations were mainly that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken might limit progress and introduce or consolidate a preoccupation with the past or present rather than the future. This is perhaps related to the future orientation that emerged as one of the participants' criteria for strategic thinking (Table 9-1) and the influence of the vision related strategy literature (Collins and Porras 1996). As with previous findings in this research, it appears that the actions element of the framework is more problematic than the goals or issues element.

The discrediting of the actions element may be related to the participants' criterion that strategic thinking is high level. As the framework developed the emphasis has been on complexity as an indicator of a strategic nature rather than high level. This finding suggests that, for example, a goal system should contain at least some high level goals and a combination of issues should contain at least some high level issues. However, as NA6 suggests, strategic thinking requires some grounding in "at least some of the operational realities".

#### **9.2.4 The strategic thinking literature**

Strategic thinking is a topic of continuing interest and relevance within the field of strategic management. As illustrated in Figure 1-1 and Figure 1-2 the use of the term in the academic literature has increased over the last three decades.

However, as discussed in chapter 2, there is a lack of a clear and agreed definition of strategic thinking. Related to this there is a relative scarcity of robust empirical research into strategic thinking. The majority of literature related to strategic thinking can be classified as: conceptual papers lacking empirical connection (Bonn 2005; Dickson et al. 2001; Heracleous 1998; Liedtka 1998b); papers with an empirical connection but an indefinite or unquestioning conceptualisation of strategic thinking (Finlay and Marples 1998; Goldman 2007; Watson and McCracken 2002); papers with an empirical connection but unconvincing methodology (Crouch and Basch 1997; Linkow 1999); and papers in the managerial cognition field that have robust methodologies but limited contribution to a general conceptualisation of strategic thinking (Calori et al. 1994; Hodgkinson 1997; Jenkins and Johnson 1997; Porac et al. 1989; Reger and Huff 1993). Thus, this research makes a notable theoretical contribution by developing a provisional framework (page 117) that is grounded in both the strategy literature and in practitioners' interpretation and experience, by a process that is methodologically sound in connecting empirical and conceptual planes.

The framework connects most evidently to the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking with a particular structure (Klayman and Schoemaker 1993; Weber 1984), in particular the work of Eden and Ackermann (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden 1990; 2004; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002) that refers to goals, issues and actions. These categories were incorporated into the framework following the inductive analysis of data from Study 2, that analysis itself being influenced by the work of Eden and Ackermann. However, the inductive analysis of data from Study 2 also suggested characteristics that made an issue strategic (section 3.3.2.1), and these were incorporated into the framework, but were not influenced by that work. Additionally, there are two fundamental ways in which this research is distinct from that of Eden and Ackermann. First, this research focuses on strategic thinking as an everyday activity undertaken by an individual rather than a process of making strategy with a management team (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden and Ackermann 1998), usually with periods of time between workshops focussing separately on goals, issues and actions (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden 1990). Second, while

Eden and Ackermann arrange goals, issues and actions into a form of hierarchical directed graph (Eden 1990; 2004; Eden and Ackermann 1998), the framework is not prescriptive in this sense.

The framework also connects to the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking with particular characteristics. These characteristics are summarised in Table 2-1 together with citing authors. Certain of these characteristics were incorporated into the framework in Study 1 but others were not (section 3.2). These characteristics can now be re-evaluated in light of the findings from Study 3 in terms of the extent to which they are reflected in the framework and supported by participants' interpretations or criteria. This evaluation is summarised in Table 9-2.

**Table 9-2 The framework and its relationship to the characteristics of strategic thinking cited in the literature**

Characteristic (Number of citing authors)	Comment
Characteristics reflected in the framework	
2 Vision of the future (7) 6 Longer time perspective (5)	Both are reflected in the Consequences beyond the immediate aspect and supported by the participants' criteria.
3 Holistic (7) 4 Complex or systems thinking (7)	Both of these characteristics are reflected in the complex nature of the framework involving a goal system, combinations of issues and patterns of actions and the interrelationships of these three. The participants' criterion of Connections and the importance of understanding the relationship between goals, issues and actions support this. The full inclusion the actions element is suspect following Study 3.
10 Broader context (3)	Reflected in the framework in terms of goals and issues associated with stakeholders and entities, and both internal and external issues. This is supported by the participants' criteria of Scope and High level.
12 Connecting past, present and future (3)	Connects to the timing theme emerging from Study 3 and argued in the literature to be an important but often misunderstood or neglected aspect of

	strategy. However, some participants suggested that focussing on the past or present would undermine progress. The methodology did not capture the time dimension well.
13 Problem solving (3) 14 Intent focussed (2)	Both of these characteristics are reflected in the proposition that strategic thinking is purposeful and hence in the goals element of the framework. This is supported by persistent centrality of the goals theme in the strategy literature and by the findings from Study 3 in which the goals element was most strongly supported.
15 Abstract or conceptual (2)	The framework is intended to represent a set of conceptual handles and to that extent reflects this characteristic. Interestingly, the notion that strategic thinking was disconnected from the real world emerged as a participant criterion for strategic thinking.
16 Tolerant of risk or ambiguity (2)	This characteristic was not reflected in the framework but emerged from Study 3. Risk was associated with actions in terms of uncertainty and with goals in terms of damage limitation as a result of downside outcomes or negative goals. Risk was strongly associated with negative goals and this suggests that an appreciation of risk is a more important aspect of strategic thinking than is acknowledged in the literature.
18 Active in shaping circumstances (1)	This was not reflected in the framework but is most likely associated with the now diminished action element.
19 Focusing on most significant forces (1)	This was not reflected in the framework but the notion of priorities emerging in Study 3 would reflect with this characteristic.
20 Involving values (1)	This was not reflected in the framework but connects with the personal dimension of strategic thinking. The personal and social dimensions of strategy emerged as a strong theme and this suggests that these are more significant in strategic thinking than the literature acknowledges.
Characteristics not reflected directly in the framework	

<p>1 Creative (12)</p> <p>7 Questioning taken for granted assumptions (5)</p> <p>8 Divergent (4)</p> <p>17 Curious, experimental or exploratory (2)</p>	<p>These four characteristics are grouped together for the purposes of this discussion because in some sense they all have a quality that suggests a difference from established ways of thinking. These characteristics are not directly reflected in the framework but the framework does not necessarily exclude them. For example one might think creatively about a goal system, question the taken for granted assumptions about the impact of a combination of issues, think about divergent futures as a result of a combination of issues, propose a goal system to explore and experiment with stakeholder responses, etc. Thus, while the framework does not directly reflect these characteristics it does provide a focus in terms of what to think about. For example, the proposal that to think strategically involves thinking creatively leaves one bereft of guidance on about what to think creatively. The framework provides that guidance.</p>
<p>5 Rational and analytical (5)</p> <p>9 Synthetic (4)</p> <p>11 Intuitive (3)</p>	<p>In an argument analogous to the one above, while the framework does not directly reflect these characteristics it does not exclude them but provides a focus for these “ways of thinking”.</p>

The evaluation of the framework against the characteristics associated with strategic thinking in the literature (Table 9-2) provides an interesting perspective. Those characteristics not directly reflected in the framework relate to “ways of thinking”, for example, creative, analytical, synthetic, etc. and suggest an inadequacy in the framework. These characteristics might be considered as complementary to the framework. For example, an appreciation of a goal system may require analytical thinking to identify goals initially, creative thinking to understand ways in which those goals might be interrelated and synthetic thinking to generate a coherent goal system. However, a conceptualisation that relies on those characteristics alone is also inadequate because it fails to provide guidance on, for example, what to think creatively, analytically or synthetically about. The framework provides this guidance.



The third type of conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature is as thinking about strategy. This conceptualisation was not employed in this research because of concerns about the stability of conceptualisations of strategy given the different organisational circumstances under which the strategy concept is invoked, and changes of the concept and conditions over time (section 2.2). These circumstances may relate to whole organisations and include individual businesses (Porter 1980; 1985), organisations with a number of businesses (Porter 1987a), small firms (Ebben and Johnson 2005), international businesses (Yip 1989), and the public sector (Llewellyn and Tappin 2003). Additionally, strategy has lost its connotations of referring to a whole organisation (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001), has been appropriated by a number of management disciplines (Barry and Elmes 1997; Lyles 1990) and its conceptualisation may change with time (Mintzberg 1994; Prahalad and Hamel 1994). However, accepting the framework as a simple and general but not accurate one (Starbuck 2004; Thorngate 1976; Weick 1999) formed by a set of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) with loosely defined concepts and relationships (Teece 2007) allows a degree of insight into strategic thinking defined in this way. For example, while the nature of the goal system might vary between a single commercial business and a public sector organisation an appreciation of the goals of that organisation will be an aspect of strategic thinking. Similarly, irrespective of whether an organisation is pursuing a competitive strategy (Karnani 1984; Porter 1985), a collaborative strategy (Eden and Huxham 2001; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven 1996; Gulati and Singh 1998) or a strategy with aspects of both competition and collaboration (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1995; Harrigan 1988), an appreciation of the goals of competitors or collaborators will be an aspect of strategic thinking. Additionally, although the conceptualisation of strategy may change with time, fundamental aspects of the framework will remain fundamental aspects of strategic thinking, in particular an appreciation of the purpose or goals of the organisation and an appreciation of the issues facing that organisation. Thus, while the framework was developed in isolation from the conceptualisation of strategic thinking as thinking about strategy it does connect to that conceptualisation.

## 9.2.5 Conclusion

The purpose of Study 3 was to evaluate to what extent the provisional framework (page 117), developed from previous empirical work and a critical evaluation of the literature, would be supported and what modifications might be indicated. The discussions in this section have considered: to what extent the framework reflects participants' criteria for what is and what is not strategic thinking; the structure of the framework in terms of its elements and relationships; the individual elements of goals, issues and action; and the connection of the framework to the strategy and strategic thinking literature.

An assessment of participants' maps produced a clear order in the ease with which the researcher's criteria for strategic thinking are met, with the goals element of the framework being most strongly supported and the actions element the least strongly supported. A comparison between the researcher's criteria for strategic thinking (Table 7-3) and participants' criteria for strategic thinking (Table 9-1) provided support for some but not all aspects of the framework. A participant criterion that strategic thinking is not reactive or about day to day work contradicts a fundamental assumption of this research and has interesting implications for the strategy as practice field. The participant criteria that strategic thinking is high level and disconnected from the real world, together with the criterion that strategic thinking is not about operationalising or delivery strategy further militate against the incorporation of the actions element into the framework. However, a view was expressed that strategy has to be grounded in "at least some of the operational realities". A tension is therefore proposed between strategic thinking that is discredited because it is disconnected from the real world and strategic thinking that is discredited because it is too operational.

There was support for the categories of goals, issues and actions themselves and one contribution of this research is in making explicit connections from categories that make sense to practitioners to themes in the strategy literature. Further, in doing so, this work integrates the three usually discrete themes of goals, issues and actions in that literature. A people or personal dimension to the categories

was also supported and highlighting this aspect of strategic thinking reflects a further contribution of this research. Understanding the relationships between the categories was suggested to be the “biggest issue” and relationships of priorities and balance were indicated. While the notion of priorities with respect to the categories is evident in the literature the notion of balance is not. However, it appears in this research that while conceptually the categories can be defined clearly, empirically those distinctions blur for some participants. One explanation of this is that categories may change into others over time. The timing and sequencing of the categories was considered important but this was not represented well in the cause maps. Capturing the time-path of strategy and time-based thinking are challenges that are relevant not just at the implementation or delivery stages of strategy and a methodological development that better captures temporal aspects would have value. The only additional category suggested by participants was performance measurement which indicates that it may have a role to play in strategic thinking and not just the later stages of strategy making involving actions and controls.

The goals element of the framework was the most strongly supported. The elaborations with respect to appreciation of the goals of different entities and stakeholders were widely supported with the concept of proxy stakeholders emerging from the analysis. The elaboration regarding an appreciation of where goals were in conflict or agreement was also widely supported with a tendency to emphasise conflict, and indications that goal conflict might be an inevitable consequence of a goal system. There was also wide support for the elaboration regarding negative goals, and suggestions that negative goals might be more tangible, grounded and realistic, and might drive action more strongly. Converting negative goals into more positive aspirational ones might misrepresent the role they play in strategic thinking and in driving behaviour. Associated with negative goals was a concept of risk which appeared to be related to damage limitation from inevitable downside outcomes of a goal system rather than uncertainty of outcomes. This may indicate a need to reconceptualise risk in more managerially relevant terms than those found in the literature. A finding of notable significance was that the process of perception and interpretation are significant with respect to goals. That these processes might be

significant with respect to goals is absent from the strategy literature and suggests fruitful areas for future research.

The issues element of the framework was also supported, not as strongly as the goals element, but more strongly than the actions element. The elaborations regarding an appreciation of both internal and external issues and the issues of different entities were widely supported. Concerns were expressed with the difficulty and constraints associated with taking into account a wide range of issues. The categorisation of issues was evident with categories of fixed or live and practical or intellectual issues emerging. The assessment of issues characteristics was also evident in terms of accuracy, relevance and weight. As suggested in the literature these categories and characteristics do not necessarily correspond exactly with those found in the literature.

The actions element of the framework was least strongly supported and its relevance diminished by both the researcher's assessments of participants' cause maps and participants' criteria for strategic thinking. The elaboration regarding uncertainty and dilemmas was supported by about two thirds of participants. An important consideration for participants was the tension between presenting a degree of certainty to gain legitimacy and commitment but recognition that a degree of uncertainty is inevitable. The elaboration with regard to reflecting on the consequences of actions taken was supported by about half the participants with concerns expressed that this might result in a preoccupation with the past or present rather than a future orientation. As with the category itself, the elaborations of the actions element are more problematic than those of the goals and issues elements.

The framework connects most evidently to the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking with a particular structure, in particular the work of Eden and Ackermann, which refers to goals, issues and actions. However, this research makes contributions through its distinctiveness from that work. In particular this research relates to strategic thinking as an everyday activity undertaken by an individual rather than a process of making strategy with a management team. Additionally, this research makes contributions through expanding and developing

that work. In particular: connecting the categories of goals, issues and actions to the wider strategy literature and integrating three usually discrete themes; highlighting the notion of balance between and within the categories; indicating the potential lack of empirical clarity with regard to the categories; highlighting the importance of timing and sequencing of the categories and indicating the value in methodological development that would better capture temporal aspects; highlighting the people or personal dimensions to strategic thinking; recognising the significance of the processes of perception and interpretation with respect to strategic goals; suggesting an additional category of performance measurement; introducing the concept of proxy stakeholders; highlighting the notion that negative goals might be more tangible, grounded and realistic and consequently the disadvantages in converting these into more positive, aspirational goals; highlighting the importance of risk with regard to negative goals and indicating a managerially relevant concept of risk; clarifying the tension between the need for a presentation of certainty to gain commitment and legitimacy whilst recognising inevitable uncertainty; and clarifying the tension in practice between strategic thinking that is discredited as being too high level and disconnected from the real world and strategic thinking that is discredited as being too operational.

The framework also connects to a second conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature, that is, strategic thinking as thinking with particular characteristics. As indicated in Table 9-2 the framework and participants' criteria for strategic thinking reflect a large number of these characteristics. However, this research indicates that certain of these characteristics warrant a stronger emphasis, in particular the role of risk in relation to negative goals or downside outcomes and the role of values. Those characteristics not reflected in the framework relate to "ways of thinking" and whilst are not explicit in the framework could be complementary to it with the framework providing the content for thinking in those particular ways.

The third conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature is as thinking about strategy and this conceptualisation was not used in this research because of concerns about the stability of that type of conceptualisation. However, the framework connects to that conceptualisation through its fundamental nature, that

is, irrespective of the organisational circumstances and the type of strategy, an appreciation of the goals or purpose of the organisation and the issues facing the organisation will be fundamental elements of strategic thinking.

### **9.2.5.1 The framework reconsidered**

In light of the findings from Study 3 and the discussion above, the provisional framework can be reconsidered and revised. One prominent revision is the weight attached to the elements of goals, issues and actions as part of the framework. The goals element was most strongly supported and the actions element the least strongly supported. Each element will be discussed in order of its significance in the conceptualisation of strategic thinking.

The most strongly supported element of the framework is the goals element. Strategic thinking involves an appreciation of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or a simple sequence of goals. There are a number of aspects to the appreciation of a goals system. An appreciation of the goals of other stakeholders and one aspect of this may be recognition of proxy stakeholders. An appreciation of goals relating to different entities, for example, supra-organisational, organisational, departmental and personal goals. An appreciation of where goals are in conflict or alignment but conflict rather than alignment is anticipated in a goal system. Further, the processes of perception and interpretation may be such that apparent conflict or alignment is misleading. An appreciation of negative goals, which are ends to be avoided but which may be more tangible and drive action more strongly. Risk is associated with negative goals and this may be in terms of damage limitation from inevitable downside outcomes. An appreciation of a goal system involves appreciating consequences beyond the immediate, which might also be multi-stranded. Immediacy here includes not just a temporal interpretation but also a causal one. Thus, a consequence beyond the immediate might indicate a consequence that occurred a relatively long time after the cause or a consequence a relatively large number of steps away from the cause. A goal can be an end in its own right, and a

means to an end within the goal system. Goals may be broad and general or more narrow and specific.

The second most strongly supported element of the framework is the issues element. Strategic thinking involves an appreciation of combinations of interrelated issues rather than single issues. There are a number of aspects to the appreciation of combinations of issues. This appreciation extends to a diversity of issues, which may be internal or external, and may include supra-organisational, organisational, and personal issues. Considering a diversity of issues may be difficult and introduce constraints such that the range of issues may need to be limited. Appreciation of combinations of issues involves the impact on the goal system. Appreciation of combinations of issues also involves the impact on patterns of actions by constraining or enabling actions, including social and political awareness. A combination of issues determines the context for the goal system and patterns of action. This appreciation may involve reflection on how issues might be framed, categorised and reinterpreted over time. The categories and characteristics employed in relation to issues may be those from practitioners experience rather than those found in the literature.

The least strongly supported element of the framework is the actions element. While it was proposed that strategic thinking involves an appreciation of a number of patterns of actions in support of a goal system rather than a simple list of actions or a single pattern of action, this is not well supported in this research. Indeed, strategic thinking emerges in the findings from Study 3 to be primarily concerned with goals and issues and to a much lesser degree with actions. The proposal that strategic thinking involves an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas was weakened by the suggestion that a presentation of certainty is needed to gain commitment and legitimacy. The proposal that strategic thinking involves reflecting on the consequences of actions taken was weakened by concerns that this might lead to a preoccupation with the past or present to the neglect of the future.

An additional aspect of strategic thinking suggested by the findings from Study 3 is performance measurement. This implies that strategic thinking involves an

appreciation of performance measurement in terms of the indicators of progress or success but because this category emerged at a later stage of the research this requires further research.

A significant aspect of the findings is the indication that the relationships between and with the categories is an important aspect of strategic thinking. Strategic thinking involves an appreciation of priorities, balance, timing and sequencing within and between the categories, while acknowledging the significantly diminished role of the actions element.

Certain implications of this reconsideration relate to the framework as a whole and to the conceptualisation of strategic thinking. Although this research has taken strategic thinking to be an everyday activity, which is to some extent reactive, this assumption may not be a valid conceptualisation for practitioners. This highlights one of a number of tensions that emerge from this research with respect to strategic thinking. In practice it may be that strategic thinking requires a balance between reactive and non-reactive thinking such that while a degree of reactive thinking is needed as strategy develops there is also a need for non-reactive thinking, possibly at earlier stages of a strategy process. A second tension is between strategic thinking that is discredited as too high level and disconnected from the real world and strategic thinking that is discredited as too operational. The findings in this research indicate that strategic thinking is high level and disconnected from the real world. In practice it may be that strategic thinking is high level and abstract but requires a balance such that it is grounded in some operational realities. The nature of this balance may change depending on the stage of a strategy process, for example between developing a vision and implementing a strategic plan. A third tension is between the presentation of certainty to gain a degree of commitment and legitimacy and an appreciation that uncertainty is inevitable and allows flexibility. The balance within these tension and the relationships between them is likely to be different at different stages of a strategy process and hence the emphasis of strategic thinking may also be different.



## **9.3 The implications for management education**

This section considers the implications of this research for management education. The fundamental knowledge structure for management education to develop strategic thinking has been considered in the preceding section, that is, the framework with its elements, elaborations, interrelationships, and related literature. The emphasis in this section is the nature and process of management education to develop strategic thinking. Given the lack of clear and agreed definitions of either strategic thinking or strategy, and that the development of strategic thinking is increasingly associated with education in strategic management or strategy this discussion extends to strategy education more generally. It is argued that integrating academic and experiential knowledge in an inductive approach better reflects the complexities of strategic thinking than more conventional deductive analytical approaches. Employed in this manner the framework represents a threshold concept leading to a transformed way of understanding and thinking.

Following the reconsideration of the framework (section 9.2.5.1) the actions element of the framework was substantially diminished, although not completely eliminated, in the conceptualisation of strategic thinking developed in this research. In the interests of brevity and ease of reading, the diminished significance of the actions elements will not be reiterated but taken as read, having been acknowledged at the start of this discussion. An appreciation of performance measurement was suggested as an additional element of strategic thinking but was not developed further. Again, where this is mentioned in the discussion its underdeveloped status is taken to be understood.

### **9.3.1 Concerns with management education to develop strategic thinking**

Given that the preceding section considered the implications of this research for conceptualisations of strategic thinking it is reasonable to consider what a learner would be taught that strategic thinking is as a result of this research, and how that differs from extant strategy education. One of the primary motivations for the researcher followed from the conclusion that there was little in the extant literature

that gave robust but practical advice to a management practitioner to improve strategic thinking. Consequently, the discussion of management education in this section primarily applies to post-experience learners. Understanding the phenomenon of strategic thinking and grounding that in managerial practice is important because business schools have a role in training future strategists (Whittington et al. 2006).

The relationship between education in strategic thinking and education in strategic management or business strategy or corporate strategy lacks clarity. This is unsurprising given the lack of definitive conceptualisations of either strategy or strategic thinking as discussed in chapter 2. Further, strategic thinking is conceptualised by some authors as thinking about strategy (page 22) and developing strategic thinking is increasingly an outcome associated with education in strategic management or strategy (Liedtka and Rosenblum 1998; Schneider and Lieb 2004). Thus, a discussion of the implications for management education necessarily embraces, to a certain extent, education in strategy and strategic management and not just strategic thinking in isolation. However, the implications drawn relate specifically to education to develop strategic thinking and not strategy education more generally.

Education usually involves acquainting learners with formal bodies of knowledge. Formal theory has a clear role in terms of communicating the outcomes of valid and reliable research related to strategy and strategic thinking (Greiner et al. 2003). Additionally, maintaining an intellectual distance from the organisation's circumstances and everyday concerns of the practitioner is of value in management education by introducing new or alternative ways of thinking about those concerns (Harrison et al. 2007). Further, education that neglects theory and overemphasises practice risks learners failing to understand the assumptions and reasoning behind models and techniques, which weakens their ability to evaluate where and when they may be appropriate (Wren et al. 2007).

However, an emphasis on formal knowledge risks giving precedence to inappropriate models (Armstrong 2005), for example stressing competition (Porter 1980; 1985) where collaboration (Dyer 1997; Kanter 1994) might be more

appropriate or vice versa. This may be detrimental and insidious as the theoretical frameworks used to understand a situation influence not only how that particular situation is interpreted but lead to a worldview within which other situations are interpreted similarly (Ghoshal 2005; Weick 2007). Further, teaching theory to the neglect of application risks learners possessing abstract conceptual knowledge but without the abilities to usefully apply that knowledge in managerial settings (Wren et al. 2007). Analysis techniques in particular, often appear to be a form of ritual knowledge (Meyer and Land 2003) in that the necessary diagrams and figures can be generated but without understanding or evaluating the principles and complexities behind the representation. For example, it is rare that a learner cannot produce a growth–share matrix of the Boston Consulting Group type but it is also rare that they appreciate the underpinning logics and interrelationships of the experience curve, product life cycle, market share and related cash flows (Hambrick et al. 1982; Seeger 1984).

Additionally, the nature of managerial knowledge in general, and strategy related knowledge in particular, calls into question an emphasis on formal knowledge in management education (Ghoshal 2005; Greiner et al. 2003). Ambiguity and rapid change (Schoemaker 2008) together with delays between research, its publication and dissemination mean that such theory has limited prescriptive value (Greiner et al. 2003). From within the strategy field itself, the resource based view (Barney 1991; Prahalad and Hamel 1990; Teece et al. 1997; Wernerfelt 1984), would suggest that knowledge on which success is based is unlikely to be codified, and if it were and communicated through management education then the source of advantage would be lost in doing so (Donaldson 2002). Unlike knowledge in the natural sciences the dissemination of knowledge potentially changes the phenomena of interest. Thus, in management education what may be more valid than reifying general solutions, causal relationships, universal models and theories is identifying pragmatic concepts that help to focus attention and develop management understanding that is contextualised (Løwendahl and Revang 1998). If valuable strategic knowledge is localised and contextual, as suggested by the resource-based view, then the teaching of abstract and objectified concepts is of limited value (Schneider and Lieb 2004).

In relation to strategy education in particular it is argued that traditional curricula and pedagogy overemphasise analysis (Kachra and Schnietz 2008; Schoemaker 2008; Weick 1979), leading to an analytical detachment (Armstrong 2005). Emphasising analytical techniques encourages learners to adopt a programmed response to phenomena, privileging the technique over the phenomena (Schneider and Lieb 2004), and regiments thinking in a way that may be unhelpful in complex and uncertain environments (Kachra and Schnietz 2008). Teaching analytical techniques in a sequential manner can lead to an understanding of models as discrete conceptual entities rather than developing an integrated pattern of understanding (Liedtka and Rosenblum 1998; Mahoney and McGahan 2007).

In summary, education usually involves acquainting learners with formalised bodies of knowledge, codified as models or theories but the practical accomplishment of a management role requires a capability within a set of organisational circumstances (Whittington 1996). Thus, strategy education that overemphasises theory may be too abstract and fail to be relevant to management practice, while that which overemphasises application may be too superficial and fail to provide the necessary theoretical underpinnings. The challenge is in bridging the gap between general theories, and the needs and circumstances of a particular manager or organisation (Mockler 1994); in combining experiential and academic knowledge to an appropriate degree (Augier and March 2007). An additional aspect of this challenge, in education to develop strategic thinking, is developing an understanding that reflects the complex, dynamic and interrelated nature of strategy (Liedtka and Rosenblum 1998; Mahoney and McGahan 2007). Meeting this challenge requires an appropriate degree of contextualisation, acknowledging the criterion of usefulness for knowledge in a specific context, without losing the insight and benefits provided more general knowledge (Mahoney and McGahan 2007; Mahoney and Sanchez 2004). The contribution made by this research in responding to this challenging can be considered from two closely interrelated aspects, the content of education to develop strategic thinking and the educational process to develop strategic thinking.

### **9.3.2 The content of management education to develop strategic thinking**

This section discusses the implications of this research for the content of management education to develop strategic thinking. Two caveats are declared with respect to the nature of strategy education and the fundamental assumptions of this research. Following this declaration the section argues that to develop strategic thinking differences in perspective and emphasis are needed in relation to: the complexity of goals; the presence of goal conflict; the value of negative goals; understanding issue combinations; and understanding interrelationships between the elements of the framework, in particular temporal relationships.

A significant challenge in management education is in combining experiential and academic knowledge to an appropriate degree (Augier and March 2007). This research addresses this challenge directly by identifying contextually relevant categories (for example goals and issues) and relationships that have meaning for practitioners (Mahoney and Sanchez 2004) that are also connected to the central themes in the strategy literature reviewed and synthesised in chapter 4. The framework thus formed comprises a set of conceptual handles (Huxham and Beech 2003) that help practitioners to represent the complexities of organisational circumstances and, because of the connection to more general theory, facilitates access to the insights and benefits of that more general theory.

The implications of this research for what strategic thinking is considered to be are discussed fully in section 9.2, which essentially addresses the research question, “What is strategic thinking?” This current section addresses the second research question, “What guidance might a management educator offer to improve strategic thinking?” using the conclusions of section 9.2 as the basis for the content of management education. At this point it is important to note two caveats. The discussion thus far has necessarily considered education in strategy and strategic management because of the lack of consistent or agreed definitions of either strategy or strategic thinking, and because developing strategic thinking is increasingly an intended outcome of such education (Liedtka and Rosenblum 1998; Schneider and

Lieb 2004). However, the prescriptions here relate specifically to education to develop strategic thinking.

The extent to which these prescriptions are novel for *all* management educators is difficult to judge, since gaining access to their individual practice is impractical. The indicators of extant education to develop strategic thinking used in this discussion are from three sources: published articles relating to strategy education, for example those considered in section 9.3.1; widely used strategy textbooks, for example Johnson et al (2008), Lynch (2006), de Wit and Meyer (2004), and Ackermann and Eden (2005); and the researcher's anecdotal evidence from interactions with a number of educators and institutions over a decade of involvement with strategy education. Based on these indicators the prescriptions in this section are novel and significant. However, even for those management educators whose practice strongly reflects these prescriptions, this research makes a contribution by clarifying the relationship between their practice, existing strategy theory, and a robust and grounded conceptualisation of strategic thinking.

For example, techniques for analysing industries (Porter 1980) form an essential part of most strategy courses but a grasp of these techniques is not essential for strategic thinking. It may even be that knowledge of such techniques would constrain strategic thinking and hence be detrimental to developing strategic thinking. Illustrations are available from educational practice that would suggest this is so. For example, the researcher has observed an executive from a chamber of commerce, conducting an industry analysis, grappling with whether his members are buyers or suppliers and similarly, an executive from a professional service organisation, conducting a value chain analysis (Porter 1985), grappling with what "inbound logistics" means for his organisation. While grappling with these analytical techniques may develop a greater understanding of the technique it may also lead to confusion and obfuscation or a form of ritual knowledge (Meyer and Land 2003). None of these outcomes leads to the integrated understanding that is essential for strategic thinking.

Thus, the prescriptions here will not apply to education in strategy on the whole since developing strategic thinking is usually only one of a number of intended educational outcomes. For example, capability with analysis techniques, while not essential for strategic thinking, is essential for strategic analysts and planners. Similarly, an understanding of strategic changes processes (Balogun and Hope Hailey 2008) is not essential for strategic thinking but is essential for strategic management. Equally, appreciating national and structural differences (Mayer and Whittington 1999) is important in understanding the role and implications of strategy as a social practice (Whittington et al. 2003) but is not essential for strategic thinking.

The second caveat concerns the fundamental perspective taken on strategic thinking in this research, specifically that strategic thinking is an everyday activity undertaken by an individual practitioner. Clearly, there are other perspectives on strategic thinking in the literature, for example as a multilevel phenomenon involving individuals, groups and organisations (Bonn 2005). There is also empirical evidence in this research to indicate that although this perspective is not completely rejected by practitioners it is not universally supported. For example, a participant in Study 3 considered strategic thinking to be a group activity involving being “released from the shackles of the day to day”. Acknowledging these two caveats, the implications for the content of education to develop strategic thinking are now considered. This consideration begins with the most strongly supported element, the goals element, and ends with the interrelationships between the elements of goals, issues, actions and performance measurement.

Strategic thinking involves an appreciation of a goal system, that is, a pattern of goals consisting of multiple and interlinked goals rather than a single goal or simple sequence of goals. This goal system reflects the goals of different stakeholders and of different entities, for example supra-organisational, organisational, sub-organisational and personal goals. Extant strategy education does not adequately reflect the interrelated nature of this goal system. In particular corporate governance and stakeholder expectations are considered distinctly from organisational purpose and goals. The usual approach involves considering the

influence of stakeholder expectations on organisational goals, suggesting that organisational goals exist in isolation from those stakeholder expectations. This fails to reflect that organisational goals can influence stakeholder expectations, that organisational goals can be facilitative for stakeholder goals, or that the relationships between different stakeholders' goals may be at least as significant as relationships between stakeholder and organisational goals. This usual approach promotes a focus on the goals of the organisation, with a secondary emphasis on how those goals fit into a wider goal system and thus fails to develop the systemic appreciation that is necessary for strategic thinking. Where the setting is a multi-organisational collaborative or partnership, the goal system is still usually focussed on the organisations within that arrangement (Eden and Huxham 2001).

Similarly, extant strategy education does not adequately reflect personal goals and aspirations, which emerged as significant aspect of strategic thinking in this research. It is argued that strategy has lost an important human dimension (Hambrick 2004; Hoskisson et al. 1999), and although more recent literature re-emphasises a human dimension to strategy (Chia and Holt 2006; Whittington 2003; 2004) this stresses the role of skills, activities and practices in strategy, but less so the aspirations of individuals. In extant strategy education, where a human dimension is included this is usually in terms of outstanding leaders and leadership qualities (Westley and Mintzberg 1989). In education based on a strategy making approach, personal goals are considered but this is within an organisational role setting (Eden and Ackermann 1998), thus again limiting the scope of the goal system. For an individual strategic thinker there will be personal goals, for example with respect to a spouse or family life, that are not part of an organisational role setting but that are still significant in the overall goal system. A strategy making approach also emphasises the importance of including power brokers in a strategy making process (Ackermann and Eden 2005) but not necessarily the incorporation of their personal goals into a wider goal system.

The significant point is that the goals element of the framework provides a different perspective for developing strategic thinking than extant strategy education that focuses separately on organisational goals, stakeholder analysis and personal



aspirations, especially since a personal dimension is neglected in much strategy education. This perspective is a better basis for education to develop strategic thinking because its focus is an interlinked goal system, rather than treating parts of that goal system, for example organisational goals, stakeholder goals or personal goals, as discrete elements. This perspective gives precedence to understanding the overall system rather than these discrete elements. The educational process by which this perspective can be developed is discussed in section 9.3.3.

One benefit of a perspective with a more inclusive goal system is that it facilitates a better appreciation of where goals are in alignment or conflict, which is an aspect of strategic thinking. Alignment of goals, particularly personal and organisational goals, emerged as a theme in Study 3 (section 8.3.6). In extant strategy education, alignment of goals is seen as a desirable and achievable situation (Bourgeois 1980; Kaplan and Norton 1996), but goal conflict receives limited attention. This may be warranted if, as is reported, conflict within senior management teams is rare (Eisenhardt et al. 1997). Where goal conflict is acknowledged, the recommendation is to modify goals to bring about alignment (Ackermann and Eden 2005). However, by focusing on the organisation, and senior managers in an organisational setting, extant perspectives fail to appreciate important areas of alignment and conflict in the wider goal system. Importantly, the extant perspective suggests that goal conflict is an avoidable state of affairs and suggests to learners that actions can and should be taken to bring about goal alignment. When making such suggestions, extant perspectives adopt a Cartesian dualism (Calori 1998; Powell 2002) in which the identification of conflicts and the formulation of actions to bring about alignment occur prior to and distant from the experience of those conflicts.

This research indicates that this view is misguided and limits the development of strategic thinking for a number of reasons. First, if the goal system is drawn appropriately widely to reflect strategic thinking then goal conflict is an expected consequence. This conflict may arise, for example, between personal and organisational goals, the different goals of powerful individuals, or the different goals of different stakeholders. As participants in Study 3 commented, “I see

conflicting goals as natural”, “Conflicting goals are implicit”, and “...in any big organisation there are bound to be goals in conflict...Any list of goals always has conflicts. Its almost inevitable”. Apparent lack of goal conflict is a consequence of drawing the goal system too narrowly, for example including only organisational goals or excluding personal goals not related to an organisational role. Second, the processes of perception and interpretation are significant with respect to goals and so different individuals are likely to interpret goals differently. As one of the participants in Study 3 stated “The goal has to be the agreed with everyone and is explicit but peoples interpretation is different. It’s the same paper, the same document they’re reading, but people have different mindsets and so see it differently”. A second participant stated, “There is inbuilt conflict from not understanding each other”. Hence, apparent agreement could mask conflict. Third, conflicts arise as strategy develops as a result of changes in interpretation or unintended consequences. As a result of these three factors, goal conflicts cannot be completely anticipated and may only emerge or be recognised as strategy develops.

The significant point for education to develop strategic thinking is one of perspective and emphasis, as with the goals element itself. The extant perspective gives limited attention to goal conflict and emphasises goal alignment as the natural state of affairs for a well managed organisation, achievable by identifying goal conflicts and then taking actions to bring conflicting goals into alignment. Conflict and the political nature of strategy may be acknowledged but usually as minor or deviant themes. However, education to develop strategic thinking needs a greater acknowledgement of goal conflict and to recognise that conflicting goals are an inherent aspect of the type of goal system required for strategic thinking. This is not to say that the benefits of goal alignment or attempts to bring goals into alignment should be completely discredited. Rather, education to develop strategic thinking needs to acknowledge that, despite apparent alignment, goal conflicts are likely to be inherent but unrecognised or undeveloped in a goal system, and may only be recognised or emerge over time. Such education needs to emphasise a dynamic aspect that anticipates managing goal conflict as an ongoing process as strategy

develops rather than naively suggesting that goal conflict can be removed from a goal system.

An additional aspect that is underemphasised in extant strategy education is the importance of negative goals. Extant strategy education emphasises a positive perspective with respect to goals, expressed as, for example, vision (Collins and Porras 1996), mission (Campbell and Yeung 1991) or strategic intent (Hamel and Prahalad 1989). Extant strategy education however fails to acknowledge that negative goals might drive behaviour more strongly than positive goals. As one participant in Study 3 stated “you run faster if something is chasing you”. Negative goals are acknowledged in the strategy making approach but even in this approach there is a suggestion that negative goals need converting into more positive, aspirational goals (Ackermann and Eden 2005). However, an aspect of negative goals that is not stressed, even in strategy making approaches, is that negative goals are considered more tangible, grounded and realistic by some practitioners in comparison to traditional positive strategic goals, which are considered too nebulous. The significant point with respect to education to develop strategic thinking is that such education should include an acknowledgment of the importance of negative goals in driving behaviour and having a greater degree of tangibility. That is not to say that negative goals should not be converted into more positive ones, since positive goals are more socially and politically acceptable, but rather to make clear to learners the advantages and disadvantages of each type of goal.

The second most strongly supported element of the framework is the issues element. Strategic thinking involves an appreciation of combinations of interrelated issues arising from both internal and external sources, including supra-organisational, organisational, sub-organisational and personal issues. Strategic thinking requires an appreciation of the ways in which issues from various sources combine to generate the organisational context or circumstances. It is the appreciation of this issue combination as a whole that reflects strategic thinking. As with the goals element, the difference between education to develop strategic thinking and extant strategy education is one of perspective and emphasis. In extant strategy education a strategic issue perspective is not common; the emphasis is on analytical techniques that may

surface strategic issues rather than understanding the issues themselves. This approach encourages an emphasis on the technique rather than the issue, and understanding and applying the technique become ends in their own right. As one participant in Study 3 commented, "I know there are people who do MBAs and that helps them to think in particular ways but if they don't understand the issues then I'm not sure how much help that is". This is unfortunate since the work of a management practitioner involves dealing with issues more than conducting analyses.

Further, extant approaches usually teach analytical techniques in a sequential manner, typically starting with broad external analysis techniques and then moving onto internal analysis techniques. A typical sequence would be macro-environmental analysis using PEST or one of its derivatives, industry level analysis using a five forces framework, strategic group analysis, market segment and competitor analysis, stakeholder analysis, resource audit, competencies analysis, value chain and value system analysis. Having conducted this range of analyses, the learner then needs to integrate their findings to produce an overall assessment of the organisation's circumstances, in essence to appreciate the issue combination facing the organisation. The success or otherwise of this approach for developing strategic thinking depends crucially on the extent to which the learner can re-integrate these issues produced by the various analysis techniques. Unfortunately this sequential analytical approach usually undermines the learner's ability to produce an integrated assessment of an organisation's circumstances because it gives precedence, at least in the learner's mind, to the analytical technique. Further, the approach *dis*-integrates interrelationships between issues that do not fall into the same analytical domain, for example issues concerned with industry level dynamics and the organisation's resource base. The most common methods in extant approaches of integrating across analytical domains and redressing this atomisation of organisational circumstances use SWOT or similar frameworks. However, these usually fail to generate any significant integration of issues or develop any depth of understanding (Hill and Westbrook 1997).

One established approach to strategy education that does place an emphasis on strategic issues and their interrelationships is the strategy making approach of

Ackermann and Eden (2005). However, there is a difference in perspective between that approach and this research. In particular their strategy making approach explicitly refers to a strategy making process with a management team whereas this research explicitly refers to strategic thinking as an everyday activity undertaken by an individual. The strategy making approach involves eliciting a combination of issues to generate a shared understanding within a team of an organisation's circumstances as the first stage in a strategy making process. Subsequent stages in that process build on that initial shared understanding. This approach therefore may encourage a perspective with learners, similar to more mainstream analytical approaches, that issue combinations are relatively static and thus fail to adequately reflect the dynamic nature of issue combinations, for example how issues may be re-framed, re-categorised or reinterpreted over time.

The significant point for education to develop strategic thinking is that a different perspective is required with respect to strategic issues than is prevalent in extant strategy education and that perspective is provided by the framework developed in this research. Extant strategy education gives precedence to the sequential application of analytical techniques, and even though that approach is intended to systematically develop an understanding of an organisation's circumstances, it fails to do so because the techniques to produce subsequent integration of issues are ineffective. Education to develop strategic thinking needs to give precedence to understanding the issue combinations that constitute an organisation's circumstances so that an integrated understanding of those circumstances is preserved and developed. This involves a primary emphasis on issue combinations to preserve an appreciation of their interrelationships and a secondary consideration of analytical techniques. The educational process by which this is achieved is discussed in section 9.3.3.

The discussion thus far has stressed the importance of integration within the elements of the framework; that the goal system reflects a diversity of stakeholders and entities, and the interrelationships between their goals; that an issue combination integrates issues from a diversity of stakeholders and entities so as to provide an understanding of an organisation's circumstances. This stress on integration and

appreciating interrelationships extends to the framework overall. Education to develop strategic thinking also requires an appreciation of interrelationships between the elements of the framework, that is, interrelationships between goal systems, combinations of issues and, to a lesser degree, patterns of actions (and performance measurement). As one participant in Study 3 stated, strategic thinking is “about the relationships between the three categories” and “The biggest issue is understanding what the relationship is between the three”. The ability to achieve an integrated perspective on an organisation and its circumstances is usually seen as a primary goal of strategy education (Greiner et al. 2003; Stephen et al. 2002; Thomas 1998). However, extant strategy education encourages learners to think in a compartmentalised way, for example, in categories of internal and external or formulation and implementation (Kachra and Schnietz 2008) and so usually fails to develop this integrated perspective.

Thus, education to develop strategic thinking should encourage learners to think about what outcomes might be realised, what factors might facilitate or hinder the realisation of those outcomes, how those outcomes might be realised and how they might be measured, in an interrelated way rather than, for example, in a sequential way, moving from setting strategic objectives, through strategy formulation to implementation and control. For example, two elements of the framework are goals and performance measurement (although this latter element is undeveloped in the research). In extant strategy education, performance measurement would usually be considered as a later stage consideration, related to implementing or developing strategy to deliver predetermined goals (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden and Ackermann 1998). The argument from this research is that the direction of causality can be reversed with performance measurement regimes influencing what goals are set. By way of illustration, the National Student Survey is a performance measure for UK Higher Education institutions but its introduction has led some institutions to set organisational goals at the award and module level that map directly onto the National Student Survey performance measures. The establishment of performance measures has influenced directly what organisational goals are set.

The preceding example illustrates a relationship of influence between two elements of the framework. There are a potentially large number of possible interrelationships between the elements of the framework, and these will vary in terms of direction, strength and type of relationship. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to consider the diversity of potential relationships and, more importantly, the research provides limited data with respect to the characteristics of different interrelationships, other than indicating their importance with respect to strategic thinking. However, one type of interrelationship highlighted by this research relates to the timing and sequencing of the elements in the framework.

The aspect of time most often represented in strategy education is that of a time horizon; strategy is about the long term, learners are usually told. Time horizons are also often mentioned in relation to the time available to bring about strategic change. However, this research indicates that there are other aspects of time that are involved in strategic thinking, specifically, an appreciation of the temporal interrelationships between the elements of the framework. For example a participant in Study 3 talked about a Director of Finance pressurising for “the introduction of cost saving measures when staff had not had the proper training...an issue of timing of goals”. Thus, education to develop strategic thinking should develop an understanding of rhythms and pace associated with organisational phenomena, in addition to time horizons (Bluedorn and Standifer 2006). Such education should encourage learners to develop a time-path view of strategy with interrelationships mapped over time (Warren 2005; Warren and Langley 1999).

Again, this is a matter of perspective and emphasis. The importance of timing in strategy is acknowledged to some extent but most prominently in relation to the timing of innovation moves in high velocity environments (Eisenhardt and Sull 2001). What is argued in this discussion is that a stronger emphasis on temporal aspects is needed. For example, a typical case study used for educational purposes will contain a description of events and factors in the past, present and future. However, it is rare for learners to be encouraged to map those onto some type of strategic calendar (Thakur and Calingo 1992) such that they can appreciate the sequencing, pace, cycles, durations, gaps and overlaps of those events and factors. It

is still rarer for learners to be encouraged to add their analysis and recommendations, for example with respect to significant goals, issues and possibly actions. Similarly, a SWOT type analysis rarely includes any temporal characteristics. This type of temporal mapping would highlight differences between temporal mental models and is likely to facilitate enhanced group working (Standifer and Bluedorn 2006), thus improving the managerial capability of the learner.

The significant point for education to develop strategic thinking is that a perspective is needed that has a greater emphasis on the interrelationships between the elements of the framework than is currently found in extant strategy education. In particular temporal interrelationships require a greater emphasis. This represents a significant challenge for both the educator and the learner since the tools and methods to capture and represent these temporal interconnections are not readily available and will require a degree of development.

In summary, this research has a number of implications for the content of management education to develop strategic thinking. These implications are primarily in terms of perspective and emphasis, and are specifically: a perspective of a wider goal system incorporating stakeholder and personal goals rather than a discrete focus on organisational goals; a greater emphasis on goal conflict rather than an implicit assumption that goal alignment is the natural state of affairs for a well managed organisation; a greater recognition that in converting negative goals into more positive ones certain benefits related to tangibility are potentially lost; a perspective that places a greater emphasis on understanding combinations of issues rather than an emphasis on analytical techniques that dis-integrate understanding across analytical domains; and a perspective that places a greater emphasis on the interrelationships between the elements of the framework, in particular temporal relationships in terms of timing, duration, pace, cycle, gaps and overlaps of events and factors.



### **9.3.3 The process of management education to develop strategic thinking**

The preceding section highlighted the limitations of sequential, analytical approaches to strategy education and asserted that different perspectives and emphases were required to develop strategic thinking. However, no explicit recommendations were made for alternative approaches. This section addresses that shortcoming by making explicit prescriptions for the type of educational process that would develop strategic thinking in a way consistent with the conceptualisation of strategic thinking developed in this research.

The most prevalent approach to strategy education is a deductive one in which precedence is given to strategy theories and concepts (Greiner et al. 2003). The advantages and disadvantages of a deductive approach are discussed more fully in section 9.3.1 and highlighted in section 9.3.2, and are only summarised here. A deductive approach would utilise valid research, maintain an intellectual detachment and provide new ways of thinking and new insights. For example, a practitioner tasked to conduct a five forces industry analysis (Porter 1980) will benefit from a conceptual description of industry dynamics based on validated research. Prompting the practitioner to think of the substitutes for an industry's products may lead a practitioner to think more broadly, outside the confines of their industry, than they had previously done. However, a deductive approach risks: the application of inappropriate models or theories leading to inappropriate worldviews; conceptual detachment and regimented thinking that may provide understanding but a limited basis for action; a lack of integration that fails to reflect the nature of the practitioner experience and the managerial world; and an unwarranted prescriptive authority to general theory. For example, giving precedence to a five forces analysis may structure a practitioner's worldview in terms of threats such that they overlook opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Further, knowledge of the threat of substitutes for their industry's products may provide little guidance to the practitioner as regards action to take, as part of the ongoing interrelated complex stream of issues, events, decisions, problems and actions in which they are immersed, despite recommendations the "minimise the threat of substitutes".

Given these considerations and the discussions in sections 9.3.1 and 9.3.2 it is argued here that an inductive approach is better suited to the development of strategic thinking than a deductive approach. An inductive approach would involve using a minimal set of initial categories, that is, goals, issues, actions and performance measurement, in their simplest form, and building and elaborating from that starting point. It is acknowledged that the significance of the actions element is diminished and that the performance measurement element is undeveloped, but in the interests of brevity and ease of reading these qualifications will not be reiterated, having been acknowledged here. The emphasis would be to maintain an integrated perspective rather than develop a number of atomised views by the application of analytical techniques. It is clearly impractical to provide complete and detailed prescriptions for such an approach because of potential differences in group composition, prior knowledge and experience of the learners, length of time available, how that time is arranged, and the personal preferences of the educator. However, general recommendations and illustrations can be provided.

By way of illustration, one method of introducing these elements to a group of learners would be by applying the framework to the course itself. Most courses begin with some form of introduction that usually indicates what the course is intended to achieve, what content will be covered and what activities will be involved. In the inductive approach suggested here, the first session could involve a series of questions to the individual learners in the group: what are their goals for the course; what will help and hinder their achievement of those goals; what actions will they take to support those goals; and how will they measure their performance? Answering these questions could take a relatively short period of time, in the region of ten minutes. These questions establish with the learners the fundamental elements of the framework and, importantly, introduce a personal dimension. Subsequent questions to the learners would then be used to elaborate and develop interconnections from those initial answers. While the exact details may vary from group to group it is possible to speculate on some of those elaborations and interconnections. For example, some learners will set a goal of success in the course and this will require actions in terms of commitment to study. However, this is likely

to cause conflicts with other goals, for example time spent with a spouse or taking a promotion or a foreign posting. Clearly, this can be used by an educator to bring in an appreciation of the goals of other stakeholders, spouse and employer, which are of consequence for the learner's goals for the course. It can also be used to develop an understanding of how the goals associated with the course fit into their individual goal system. It may be that completing the course is a facilitative goal towards a promotion, in which case if offered a promotion the commitment to the course becomes unnecessary. Alternatively, if completing the course is a facilitative goal for changing employers, then an offer of promotion will not affect the commitment to the course. Thus, the course itself is used as the content and context for the learners to become familiar with the framework in an experiential rather than a conceptual way. This develops knowledge of acquaintance (Spender 1996) and strategic thinking in that context, with the expectation that it can be transferred to other contexts. This first session is likely to last between 30 and 60 minutes and the role of the educator is to manage a process that encourages learners to elaborate the elements of the framework and to develop interrelations between the elements.

The second session would then move on to consider the circumstances of a particular organisation, with executives or post experience learners using their own organisation. The entry point for this second session could be any of the four elements of the framework again using questions to guide the learners' thinking, for example: what goals are pursued, why are these goals pursued and what actions support these goals; what issues are facing the organisation, why are they issues and how is the organisation responding; what actions is the organisation taking or intending, what goals do those actions support and what issues do these actions address; or how is performance measured and why is performance measured in that way? This approach is likely to be seen as more relevant by practitioners and may be more valid in terms of understanding an organisation's circumstances. In subsequent sessions, depending on the entry point and the answers given, the educator can steer the learners to develop and elaborate specific aspects as appropriate. For example, if a group appear to be overly fixated on actions or performance measures the educator can reorient them towards goals or issues whilst maintaining the connection to

actions or performance measures by asking what goals particular actions support or what issues are associated with particular performance measures. The significant point here is that while the educator facilitates a change in focus the process of questioning adopted maintains at least a peripheral awareness of interrelationships. Thus, the details of the how and when topics are covered may vary from group to group but what those topics are is guided by the ideas discussed in section 9.3.2 and the educator asks questions and makes references to maintain an awareness of integrated perspective by the learner.

This inductive approach does not necessarily involve disregarding extant theory. For example, a practitioner can gain some of the insights and benefits of value chain analysis (Porter 1985), without applying the technique in a deductive sense, if a management educator facilitates links between the practitioner's experience and the value chain literature. Developing this example, if providing value to customers is not identified as an issue by a learner then a question about how value is created for customers would prompt consideration of that issue. Subsequent questions about what activities were primary and which were supporting in creating (or destroying) that value would prompt a deeper consideration of the issue. Further questions about how each of those activities in isolation and in their interconnections created value would prompt a deepening of understanding. The use of appropriate questions and prompts, as in this example, is one way in which extant theory can be incorporated in the educational process but there will be other methods. For example, if providing value to customers is not identified as an issue, a learner could be directed to general theory regarding value chain analysis (Porter 1985) or possibly more focussed theory (Armistead and Clark 1993; Stabell and Fjeldstad 1998). Thus the role of the management educator is to facilitate a connection between the grounded categories of the practitioner and the abstract concepts of theory. The learners' knowledge and understanding is not restricted to their specific limited experience, because it is linked to more general theory, and their knowledge and understanding is not restricted to general theory, because it is linked to their individual experience. In this way, theory is used as a way to clarify

thinking, test underlying assumptions and provide new insights rather than as a description of the world as it is.

Utilising existing theory in this inductive approach involves more of a coaching role than a teaching role (Whittington 1996) and a set of questions to guide this coaching are developed later in section 9.4.2 and summarised in appendix 13.4. In this coaching role the management educator has a clear understanding of the knowledge structures with which they wish the learner to become familiar and a sound grasp of the related literature. In education to develop strategic thinking these knowledge structures and related literature are those discussed in sections 9.2 and 9.3.2. The framework developed in this research forms the foundational elements of a network knowledge structure, providing the basis for meaningful learning that links new knowledge, which may be conceptual or experiential, to existing knowledge (Hay et al. 2008). However, in contrast to a more deductive teaching role, the management educator guides the learner to explore and consider relevant theory in relation to their own individual and organisational circumstances. Different learners may take different paths through this knowledge structure but the educator ensures they all visit the major sites of interest along the way. Thus, while the framework provides the foundational elements of a network knowledge structure this is personalised as the learner adapts and elaborates it to reflect their own interpretations and experience. Clearly, for this approach to be successful a management educator requires not only a strong capability with the strategy literature, but also a high degree of confidence to work with that literature in a relatively freeform way, and a skill with questioning and facilitation techniques to promote learning.

Where this inductive approach is used a learner is likely to progress through three stages. The initial stage represents superficial understanding in which the suggestion that strategic thinking involves an appreciation of goal systems and combinations of issues may be seen as quite anodyne. However, a learner will quickly move towards understandings that are more appropriately complex in reflecting organisational circumstances and managerial experience (Atwater et al. 2008; Mahoney and McGahan 2007; Weick 1979). The final stage involves a move towards more profound understandings that have adequate awareness and knowledge

of theory such that the learner is equipped to disregard theory that is not of value in the particular circumstances (Weick 2007). By this final stage the learner has built on and elaborated the foundational elements of the framework by exposure to relevant theory and consideration of its value in relation to their particular circumstances to form a personalised network knowledge structure.

To this extent the framework could be interpreted as a threshold concept that leads to a previously inaccessible way of thinking (Clouder 2005) and a transformed understanding that integrates other concepts (Davies and Mangan 2007; Meyer and Land 2003) from the strategy field. As discussed in section 9.2 the framework brings together concepts from the strategy literature relating to goals, issues, actions and performance measurement in a way that emphasises the interrelationships between these concepts. Thus, the framework provides an organising schema that shifts emphasis from isolated concepts, for example industry analysis, to a more integrated perspective that places an emphasis on the interrelationships between concepts. By way of illustration, stressing the temporal relationships between say, the time taken to achieve a goal the organisation sets, the duration of an opportunity that would support that goal, the response time of competitors that would hinder that goal and the time required to develop the necessary organisational resources to take advantage of the opportunity, enables a significantly different perspective than one that places an emphasis on say industry analysis.

However, this transformed understanding might involve a degree of emotional distress as a learner passes through a liminal state (Meyer and Land 2005) in which there is a degree of anxiety (Cousin 2006). While management education should be about extending a learning community rather than handing over finished models (Gosling and Mintzberg 2006) this may lead to a degree of anxiety from learners, particularly if the certainties of the analytical techniques of strategy are undermined but not replaced with the certainties of alternative techniques. The techniques of strategy may be so closely tied to identity that once acquired, discarding them causes anxiety and a threat to the identity of the individual since such techniques create an impression of managerial competence (Weick 2007) and enable participation in the managerial discourse of strategy (Knights and Morgan

1991). This may especially be so where learners expect trouble free knowledge, since given the nature of practice, that is not possible (Clouder 2005) and the conceptualisation of strategic thinking here may be troublesome (Meyer and Land 2003) to the extent that it suggests that there are no clear and definitive solutions. This transformation might also have implications for an individual's identity (Davies and Mangan 2007) and a shift in values, feelings and attitude (Meyer and Land 2003), particularly if it involves a shift away from conceptual knowledge independent of context to learning as a process of becoming a different person with respect to others and a wider environment (Harrison et al. 2007).

This section has considered the implications of this research for the process of management education to develop strategic thinking. It is argued that an inductive approach would be more effective in developing strategic thinking than a deductive approach. An appropriate inductive approach would use the elements of the framework as a minimal set of initial categories and emphasise the interrelationships between these categories. Extant theory would be used to clarify thinking, test underlying assumptions and suggest new insights and the role of the educator would be to facilitate links between the learners' experience and extant theory. In this type of approach the framework could be interpreted as a threshold concept that develops an integrated understanding based on the framework.

## **9.4 The implications for practice**

The section begins by establishing the basis for claims that this research is suitable for guiding strategic thinking practice. It subsequently examines three archetypal settings, everyday settings, formal meetings and strategy workshops. It is argued that these settings differ in terms of the time available, the information available and the purpose of strategic thinking in that setting. It is concluded that while everyday settings are disadvantaged by a lack of time and information, workshop settings are disadvantaged by a lack of disclosure. The later parts of the section discuss detailed guidance for strategic thinking practice based on three speculative processes: constructing; refining and appraising. A question set is

associated with each of these processes to act as guidance for the practitioner and the full set is presented in appendix 13.4.

This research suggests guidance for the practice of strategic thinking but before considering this in detail it is appropriate to consider the basis for such claims. Research and literature relevant to strategic thinking can be evaluated for its value in guiding practice using three criteria: the robustness of the theoretical and methodological basis for the conceptualisation of strategic thinking; the scope of the conceptualisation of strategic thinking; and the degree of orientation towards either “about what to think” or “how to think”. The distinction between strategic thinking as “about what to think” and “how to think” in relation to this research is summarised in Table 9-2.

A lack of robust theoretical or methodological basis limits value to practice since any guidance given may be founded on weak knowledge claims, even though such guidance may be readily accessible. For example, Linkow (1999) concludes that there are seven thinking competences from a study of twenty strategic thinkers. However, because the methodological details are neither disclosed nor provided by Linkow on request, and the journal does not have a high academic standing, the veracity of his conclusions must be treated with caution. Alternatively, where there is a robust basis for knowledge claims, the value to practitioners may be limited because of a narrow conceptualisation of strategic thinking, for example, strategic thinking that is related to strategic groups (Reger and Huff 1993) or competitive groups (Porac et al. 1989). Further, the circumstances of the practitioner may be different from those in which the conceptualisation is applicable, for example, strategic thinking that is related to international development (Goldsmith 1996) or military conduct (Chen 1994) will have little relevance for a practitioner in a collaborative partnership with a sub-national scope. Additionally, while strategic thinking is frequently conceptualised as how to think (as indicated in Table 2-1), for example creatively (Porter 1987b) or synthetically (Mintzberg 1994), this recommendation is of little value unless it is combined with a recommendation of about what to think. For example, Heracleous (1998) emphasises that strategic thinking is a creative mode of thinking involving double-loop learning and draws on



a number of authors to develop this conceptualisation. However, Heracleous is less explicit regarding exactly about what a practitioner would be thinking creatively. Thus, the value of literature is limited unless both these aspects are adequately represented. It is argued that the framework developed in this research performs well against these criteria: it has a robust theoretical and methodological basis that is explicit to the reader; it develops a simple and general framework (Starbuck 2004; Thorngate 1976; Weick 1999) that has wide applicability and the flexibility to be tailored to specific circumstances; and because of its network structure accommodates adequately aspects of both about what to think and how to think, as detailed in Table 9-2.

### **9.4.1 The influence of different settings on strategic thinking**

However, in considering guidance provided by this research it is pertinent to consider the influence of the setting in which strategic thinking takes place. This research adopted a position of strategic thinking as an everyday activity undertaken by an individual. Strategic thinking in this sense is considered a form of *mindful* practical coping rather than *mindless* practical coping (Chia and Holt 2006; Chia and MacKay 2007), as practitioners “act thinkingly” (Weick 1983:225). This position distinguishes this research from the research to which it connects most directly, that of Eden and Ackermann (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden 1990; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002), whose emphasis is explicitly on a strategy making process with a management team in a workshop or similar setting. These two types of settings are in some ways diametrically opposed, as the former explicitly relates to the day to day that is considered suspended in the latter (Hodgkinson et al. 2006). However, despite this contrast, a contribution of this research is in illuminating the different aspects of strategic thinking emphasised in these different settings, and providing guidance to practitioners based on those different emphases. A third type of setting, positioned between these two opposites, are formal meetings, for example board meetings or management team meetings, whose explicit purpose is does not include strategy. For example one of the participants in Study 3 stated that the senior management team held “three types of meeting, strategic, management and

performance". There are three features of these different settings that are relevant to this discussion.

First, in these different settings there will be different time frames within which strategic thinking occurs, that is, the time available for strategic thinking. In an everyday setting, the time available for strategic thinking might be severely constrained because of other calls on a practitioner's time and attention, and may only be a matter of minutes. Alternatively, in formal meetings the time frame for strategic thinking may extend to a few hours rather than minutes but may still be constrained because of calls on the practitioner's time and attention by the purpose and agenda of the meeting. For example, the agenda of a performance meeting may direct a practitioner's attention towards a limited set of goals to the extent that it is difficult to consider how that limited set fits into a wider goal system. In settings whose explicit purpose is related to strategic thinking, for example strategy workshops, the time frame may extend to a number of days. Clearly, there may be opportunities outside these explicit settings, for example when travelling, that might inform strategic thinking in these specific settings.

Second, the information available to the practitioner and incorporated into strategic thinking is likely to vary in different settings. In everyday settings the practitioner is likely to utilise knowledge carried around in their heads (Mezias and Starbuck 2003a), often in the form of a mental model that integrates key information (Eisenhardt 1989b), but which is likely to contain erroneous assumptions and perceptions (Mezias and Starbuck 2003b). Methods of working with this information in everyday settings are often minimal and unsophisticated, for example hand written notes and diagrams. However, as in the celebrated story of Jack Welch's napkin (Keidel 2005), such simple methods can be effective in those settings. In formal meetings more substantial information will be available and the receipt and discussion of formal reports will often form the basis of the meeting agenda. These reports may be in depth and detailed but methods for integrating this information are not usually a design feature of such meetings. Discussing strategy explicitly in these meetings may be considered inappropriate but the meeting does provide an opportunity to obtain the perspectives of other members of a group. Strategy

workshops are supported by extensive information provision, for example of the type suggested by Ansoff (1968), and also by methods for capturing, presenting, sharing and integrating that information (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden 1990; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002; Hodgkinson et al. 2006).

The third feature is the purpose of strategic thinking in that setting. In a strategy workshop there are usually expectations that strategic thinking will be made explicit and that there will be a degree of sharing between the participants. This sharing is beneficial in terms of providing multiple perspectives, offsetting individual biases and interpretations, and building areas of agreement. However, a strategy workshop involves social and political processes (Eden 1992b; Eden and Ackermann 1998), and usually an expectation that a conclusion will be reached at the end of the workshop. Consequently, there will be pressures for an individual strategic thinker to engage in an accepted strategy discourse (Barry and Elmes 1997) and their revealed strategic thinking may be substantially different from their private strategic thinking. Hence there will be a substantial difference between strategic thinking that remains private to an individual and what is shared in strategy workshops and formal meetings. This suggestion that aspects of strategic thinking will remain private and others revealed was suggested by one of the participants in Study 2 (page 65).

These features, the time available, the information available and the purpose of strategic thinking in the setting, will have consequences for the scope and depth of strategic thinking, and the extent of disclosure of strategic thinking. Based on these features general guidance can be offered. In everyday settings a practitioner should be aware of the potential limitations arising from time constraints, partial and superficial information, and personal bias and interpretations. In response to this awareness a practitioner should attempt to obtain better information about those areas where they consider information to be weak and to seek opportunities to obtain the perspectives of others. Formal meetings provide opportunities to obtain and request better information and also to observe and elicit others' perspectives. Strategy workshops also provide similar opportunities but with the additional aspect that a degree of sharing between workshop participants is expected. This means that the perceptions of others are more accessible. However, strategy workshops involve

social and political processes and hence the practitioner should be aware that certain aspects of their individual strategic thinking may be socially and politically unacceptable in this setting. For example, one chief executive in Study 3 complained that they were “the only one who had read the detail and so was the only one who understood what the problem was” but this led to them being “patronised” as being too operational. Thus, in response to this awareness a practitioner should consider which aspects of their strategic thinking it is appropriate to reveal and which to keep private. In the example above, the chief executive may have been wiser to avoid talking about the detail and maintained credibility with their peers, even though they considered understanding the detail an important aspect of strategic thinking in this instance. The significant point here is that the strategic thinking undertaken by an individual in an everyday setting will be significantly different from that revealed in a strategy workshop or similar setting; but different does not mean inferior. The very conditions intended to improve strategic thinking, specifically the sharing of information and perceptions, and engagement in social and political processes, have the consequence that certain aspects of strategic thinking are not revealed or shared. Thus, while strategic thinking in an everyday setting is impoverished by weaknesses in information and individual bias, strategic thinking in a workshop setting is impoverished by a failure to disclose socially and politically unacceptable aspects.

#### **9.4.2 Guidance for strategic thinking practice**

The previous section considered the influences of setting on the guidance for practitioners in general terms. This current section discusses this guidance in more detail with reference to the framework for strategic thinking developed in this research. The framework is discussed in detail in sections 9.2 and 9.3.2 and the guidance in this section is based on that detail. Although strategic thinking is conceptualised in this research as an everyday activity undertaken by an individual, in contrast to a group activity in a workshop setting (Ackermann and Eden 2005; Eden 1990; Eden and Ackermann 1998; 2002), this research has implications for workshop settings in terms of the expression of individual strategic thinking in those settings. Making explicit the consequences of workshop settings for the expression of strategic thinking is particularly pertinent given that the study of strategy workshops

of increasing interest in the strategy field (Hodgkinson et al. 2006; Whittington et al. 2006).

For the purposes of this discussion it is useful to conceive of strategic thinking as comprising three processes: constructing; refining; and appraising. It is important to make clear that these processes are not supported directly from the data in this research and this is not a creative attempt by the researcher to produce an explanation of the reality of the phenomenon of study (Starbuck 2004). Rather, they represent an appropriate use of creativity, insight and inspiration in a research process (Langley 1999; Pettigrew 1997) to codify the research in way to make guidance for practice more accessible. The introduction of this classification is an original aspect of this research, since, although these processes may be implicit in other work, they are not explicitly delineated in this form or combination. For the purpose of this discussion each of these processes will be considered in turn but it is important to recognise that this sequential presentation of processes and aspects of those processes is an analytical and discursive device. If these processes were to represent a valid description of processes involved in strategic thinking they would be expected to occur with degrees of simultaneity and iteration rather than in a linear and sequential manner. At the end of the description of each process a series of questions is provided as the basis for guidance to practitioners.

#### **9.4.2.1 The process of constructing**

The process of constructing involves identifying the elements of the framework and their interrelationships. It is pertinent to comment on the actions and performance measurement elements of the framework at this point. Following Study 3 the significance of actions element is diminished and the significance of a performance measurement element under-explored. However, both elements are included in this discussion for completeness and their diminished and under-explored status not reiterated, having been acknowledged at this point. When discussing strategic thinking practice it is also pertinent to bear in mind that although conceptually clear, the categories of goals, issues and actions blurred for some participants in Study 3. Thus, in practice it may be less important to definitively

categorise a factor, say as a goal or issue, than recognising the factor's significance and its interrelationships with other factors.

The constructing process has two aspects. The first involves the identification of the elements of the framework, specifically: the goals of the organisation, its stakeholders and relevant entities; the issues associated with the organisation and those stakeholders and entities; true stakeholders if proxy stakeholders are indicated; current and intended actions; and performance measurement criteria and procedures. This primarily involves analytical thinking and the significant point of guidance to the practitioner is to consider a goal system wider than they might otherwise do such that it includes the goals of stakeholders and personal goals.

The second aspect of the constructing process involves identifying interrelationships within and between the elements. In particular this involves appreciating: a goal system with multiple and interlinked goals, some of which will be facilitative for other goals; an issue combination that provides an understanding of context and circumstances; the impact of an issue combination on a goal system; and the impact of an issue combination in constraining or enabling actions. This aspect of constructing primarily involves synthetic thinking but there will be an element of creative thinking in identifying possible interrelationships. This aspect of the constructing process can be illustrated with respect to the goal system. Even where there appears to be a single, clearly stated goal, for example maximising long-run profitability, the practitioner should appreciate that goal as part of a larger, more complex goal system. Achieving maximising long-run profitability is the consequence of achieving a number of subordinate goals and might itself be subordinate to the goals of investors concerned with not only return on their investment but also ethical business behaviour. Further, achievement of this goal might be more or less possible depending on the goals of competitors and collaborators, for example their goals regarding which products to supply to which markets. Clearly, achievement of long-run profitability or not will have implications for the personal aspirations of those involved. The significant point of guidance to the practitioner is a shift of perspective to a more holistic view and questions to guide this shift in perspective are presented in Table 9-3.

**Table 9-3 Questions to guide the constructing process**

- What are the goals of:
  - The organisation?
  - Its stakeholders?
    - Are there any proxy stakeholders?
  - Recognisable groups and individuals?
  - You personally?
  - How are these goals interrelated?
- What are the issues associated with:
  - The organisation?
  - Its stakeholders?
    - Are there any proxy stakeholders?
  - Recognised groups and individuals?
  - You personally?
  - How are these issues interrelated?
- What actions are currently being undertaken or planned by:
  - The organisation?
  - You personally?
  - How are these actions interrelated?
- How is performance measured of:
  - The organisation?
  - You personally?
  - How are these measures interrelated?
- What goals do these actions support?
- What issues are these actions in response to?
- How will these actions affect performance?
- How will these issues impact on goals?
- How will these issues impact on current or planned actions?
- How will progress towards these goals be measured?

#### **9.4.2.2 The process of refining**

The process of refining involves appreciating the significant features of the framework and can be considered to have two aspects. The first aspect involves significant features associated with the elements of the framework and should be sensitive to four features. First, with respect to goals there may be expressions of negative goals or outcomes to avoid. The usual practice would be to convert these into more positive aspirational goals (Ackermann and Eden 2005). However, because negative goals may be more tangible and drive action more strongly, the guidance to the practitioner is to consider the relative advantages and disadvantages of goals expressed in negative terms rather than positive terms.

The second sensitivity refers to the processes of perception, interpretation, framing and categorisation. The significance of these with respect to strategic issues is well established. However, a notable contribution of this research is to highlight that these processes are also significant with respect to goals. Thus, the guidance to the practitioner is to consider which goals, issues, actions and performance measures are most likely to be open to different perceptions or interpretations.

Third, the refining process involves assessing the identified elements against a number of criteria to establish some degree of relative significance. The recommended criteria for this purpose are importance, urgency and feasibility. Traditionally these criteria have been applied to strategic issues but the argument here is that they can be usefully applied to the other elements. For example, it is useful to consider which performance measures are the most important, which ones most urgent to establish or report and which most feasible to apply. The combinations of criteria and elements are summarised in Table 9-4. Although these three specific criteria are recommended a practitioner might use other criteria that they consider relevant, for example legitimacy or control. The guidance to the practitioner is to use relevant criteria to establish priorities. Indeed, if categorisation of the elements is unclear for a practitioner, then this type of assessment may be more significant than categorisation.

**Table 9-4 Combinations of criteria and elements**

	Importance	Urgency	Feasibility
Goal			
Issue			
Action			
Performance measurement			

Fourth, since strategic thinking involves an appreciation of risk, the refining process should highlight areas of significant risk. This may be in terms of a traditional risk versus return relationship, risks associated with not achieving goals or damage limitation contingencies for inevitable negative outcomes. The guidance to the practitioner is to consider the areas of significant risk, the nature of the risk and how that risk is managed.



The second aspect of the refining process involves the interrelationships between elements and should be sensitive to three features. First, in relation to a goal system, areas of alignment and conflict would be significant features. Alignment as a general phenomena would be expected to bring benefits (Powell 1992; Reich and Benbasat 2000; Zack 1999) and in relation to goals can lead to “win/win” situations that benefit a number of stakeholders (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1995). However, these benefits may difficult to realise (Walley and Whitehead 1994) and the complex nature of the goal system means that conflict is inherent, and even where it is not evident it should be anticipated. Even where goals appear to be in alignment, different perceptions and interpretations may mean that they are in unrecognised conflict. The guidance to the practitioner is they should be prepared to manage conflict as it emerges or develops rather than attempting to eliminate it entirely.

Second, the refining process should highlight significant causal interrelationships. This can be illustrated by the case of a UK based bespoke chemicals manufacturer known to the researcher. Conscious of a downturn and increasing competition in its UK market the firm adopted a strategy of international expansion via exportation. A sales team with knowledge of foreign markets was appointed to generate sales. These sales required the production of small scale product samples by the firm’s laboratories before the confirmation of an order. The international expansion strategy generated negligible sales in its first two years and it can be argued that this was because of a failure to appreciate significant causal relationships. First, the sales team were appointed on terms and conditions that were outside and superior to the agreed remuneration framework to which all other staff were subject, without consultation. This meant that whole international expansion strategy became a matter of personal injustice for staff and received minimal support on a day to day basis. Second, the international sales team were “in the field” for most of the time while the UK sales team spent a significant time at base. The mere physical proximity of the UK sales team meant they received preferential treatment in terms of sample provision to support their sales efforts. Third, the increase in sales enquiries not only generated an increase in work for the laboratories but also for the packing and export departments. However, no since additional resources were

provided even when samples were prepared they sat awaiting packing and export paperwork. Consequently, the guidance to the practitioner is to consider what causes something to happen, or, perhaps more pragmatically, must occur or be in place for something to happen.

Third, the refining process should highlight significant interrelationships in terms of timing and sequencing between the elements of the framework. For example, certain goals may not be causal in respect of other goals but their achievement may be a prerequisite and the achievement of certain goals may only be possible or worthwhile while certain issues are current. For example, in the continuing relationship between employers and unions in the UK Higher Education sector a fundamental subject of disagreement is the timing of discussions relating to pay and conditions. The union favours beginning discussions earlier in the academic year so that any action by its members is timed to have maximum leverage, when students are at the assessment stage. The employers favour beginning discussions later in the academic year so that any action by union members will have minimum leverage, when students have completed the assessment stage. The timings of the issue of student assessment and the action of beginning discussions are significant for what goals might be achieved by either side. The significance of timing is evident in this example but the guidance to the practitioner is to consider what timings and sequences are significant in their case.

**Table 9-5 Questions to guide the refining process**

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of expressing that goal in negative terms? (assuming that there are negative goals)
- Which goals, issues, actions or performance measures are most likely to be perceived or interpreted differently?
  - How would you ascertain what those different perceptions and interpretations are?
- Which goals are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- Which issues are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?

- Which actions are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- Which performance measures are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- What are the significant risks?
  - What is the nature of the risk?
  - How is that risk managed?
- Which goals are in alignment?
- Which goals are in conflict?
- From which goals is conflict most likely to arise?
  - How might that conflict be managed?
- What causes that to happen?
- What must occur or be in place for that to happen?
- What are the significant aspects of timing and sequencing?

### 9.4.2.3 The process of appraising

The process of appraising involves evaluating the appropriateness of the framework given the features of the setting, that is the time available, the information available and the purpose of strategic thinking in that setting. There are five aspects of appropriateness to evaluate. The first aspect is the scope and diversity reflected in the framework, for example in terms of stakeholders and issues. Greater scope and diversity will lead to more comprehensive strategic thinking but there are clearly limits arising from time, information and cognitive constraints. In an everyday setting the scope and diversity that can be incorporated will be highly constrained and the methods of working with information relatively unsophisticated. However, such constraints may not be excessively detrimental in that they may force a focus on the most significant factors; essentially getting to the heart of the matter. Of course this focus will be informed by the practitioner's knowledge and insight to that point and in that sense the constraints in the everyday setting are less severe than they appear. In a workshop setting, time and information constraints are less severe and this enables greater scope and diversity to be handled, provided sufficiently sophisticated methods of working with information are available. The guidance to

the practitioner is to consider whether sufficient scope and diversity is incorporated and whether the methods of working with that information are sufficiently sophisticated.

The second aspect is whether the framework is appropriately high level, given that one of the criteria for strategic thinking is that it is high level. Clearly, high level is a relative term. The significant point here is that some of the elements of the framework should be at and above the level of the entity to which the strategic thinking relates. For example, if the entity is an organisation then strategic thinking should include goals and issues at and above the organisational level. Similarly, if the entity is a department, then strategic thinking should include goals and issues that relate to the department as a whole and the organisation of which the department is a part. The guidance to the practitioner is to establish the level of the entity to which the strategic thinking relates, for example organisation or department, and then consider a level above that.

The third feature relates to areas of uncertainty. For example, the goals of stakeholders, the extent of goal conflicts, the nature of causal interrelationships and the details of timings may all be subject to significant degrees of uncertainty. In some instances, uncertainty may arise as a result of a lack of information and may be resolved by acquiring that information. For example, uncertainty regarding the goals of stakeholders may be resolved by consulting stakeholders or by taking action that provides information by virtue of the stakeholders' responses. The guidance to the practitioner is to consider where there are significant areas of uncertainty and how that uncertainty might be reduced, if possible.

The fourth aspect is an evaluation of the extent to which the balance within and between the categories is appropriate. For example, a goal system will represent the goals of different stakeholders but it may not be appropriate to award equal status to those goals and the goals of some stakeholders should be privileged over others. Similarly, the balance between goals, issues and actions should have an emphasis on goals and issues, with actions having a diminished representation. An equal balance between these elements will be inappropriate. However, this balance may shift at

different stages of a strategy process. For example at a vision forming stage, goals may be the primary focus, with little consideration of issues and no consideration of actions. At a strategy formulation stage, goals and issues may be awarded equal consideration, with some limited consideration of actions. At a strategy implementation stage, there may be an increased consideration of actions. The guidance to the practitioner is to consider where there are areas of imbalance and whether such imbalance should and could be addressed.

The fifth aspect is an evaluation of what is appropriate to reveal and what will remain private to the practitioner. In an everyday setting the practitioner need not make any revelations. However, in formal meetings and especially in strategy workshops there is a requirement that the practitioner has a degree of engagement. This engagement dictates that at least some of the practitioner's strategic thinking is revealed and is influenced by social and political processes. The influence of these social and political processes mean that the practitioners revealed strategic thinking in a workshop setting may differ in four ways from their private strategic thinking. First, the practitioner may recognise inherent or irresolvable goal conflict but not highlight this conflict because the tacit premise of the event and process is one of eliminating conflict and reaching alignment. Second, the practitioner may readily acquiesce to converting negative goals into more positive aspirational ones even when they themselves think in terms of outcomes to avoid and recognise the benefits from stating those goals in negative forms. Third, the practitioner may consider that the level of strategic thinking is inappropriate but not challenge this to maintain credibility with the group. Strategic thinking that is too high level risks being discredited as disconnected from the real world. For example, a chief executive in Study 3 claimed that their peers did not understand the problem because they did not understand the detail. However, strategic thinking that is not high level may be discredited as too operational. This was the case with the chief executive in this example who was patronised for wanting to consider the detail. Thus in some settings, to avoid their strategic thinking being discredited, the practitioner will need to emphasise the high level aspects while in other settings the practitioner will need to emphasise more operationally grounded aspects. Fourth, the practitioner might

privately appreciate a high degree of uncertainty but in sharing their strategic thinking might need to present an impression of certainty to gain commitment and legitimacy. However, in presenting an impression of certainty the practitioner might eliminate opportunities to remove some uncertainty by sharing or gathering extra information. The guidance to the practitioner is to consider what aspects of their private strategic thinking it is wise to reveal in workshop settings, in particular, the emphasis on goal conflict, the benefits of negative goals, the level of strategic thinking and areas of uncertainty.

**Table 9-6 Questions for guiding the appraising process**

- Given the constraints of the setting is sufficient scope and diversity incorporated?
- Are the methods of working with the information suitable?
- Have you considered goals, issues, actions and performance measurement at the organisational (departmental, etc.) level?
- Have you considered goals and issues above the organisational (departmental etc.) level?
- Where are there significant areas of uncertainty?
  - Is it possible to reduce that uncertainty and if so, by what means?
- Is there an appropriate balance between:
  - The goals of different stakeholders?
  - The goals of the organisation and you personally?
  - Internal and external issues?
  - Goals, issues, actions and performance measurement, given the stage of the strategy development process?
- What should you reveal in this setting?
  - Should you highlight areas of goal conflict?
  - Should you resist converting negative goals into positive ones?
  - Should you challenge the level as too high or not high enough?
  - Should you acknowledge areas of uncertainty?

This section has considered the implications of this research for strategic thinking practice. It is argued that guidance for strategic thinking practice can be made accessible by conceiving of three speculative processes, which are, constructing, refining and appraising. Based on this, guidance can be provided as a series of questions which prompt the practitioner to consider and explore their strategic thinking. These questions are presented as a complete set in appendix 13.4. It is possible to apply this question set in a number of different ways and settings. In

an educational setting the questions can be used as the basis for an inductive educational process with a relatively explicit link to strategy theory as described in section 9.3.3. As the basis for an executive development programme the questions can be used as a structured way of developing strategic thinking that is relevant to the executives experience with or without explicit connection to strategy theory. The question set could also be applied as the basis for a coaching intervention with an individual practitioner. The intended outcome in each of these settings is a degree of internalisation of the question set by the practitioner such that they act as a guide to strategic thinking outside the educational, development or coaching context.

## 10 Conclusions and recommendations

This research began with a concern to develop an understanding of strategic thinking that connected the conceptual world of academic literature and the empirical world of management practice. In the early stages of the research it was concluded that neither strategy nor strategic thinking was a sufficiently definitive concept (Blumer 1940; 1954) to support highly deductive research, which led the research process described in this thesis and shown diagrammatically in Figure 1-3. Interestingly, despite ongoing concerns about the relevance of management education and research, recent research producing a definition of the strategic management field considered it only as an academic field (Nag et al. 2007), essentially giving precedence to an academic conceptualisation over a practitioner one. Similarly, Goldman's (2007) use of social labelling in identifying expert strategic thinkers relies on a definition derived from the academic literature rather than practitioners' interpretations, again giving precedence to academic conceptualisations over practitioner conceptualisations. It is interesting to speculate if Goldman's findings would have been different if she had used social labelling without providing an explicit definition of strategic thinking. One of the ways in which this research makes a notable contribution is that it has minimised precedence of either academic or practitioner perspectives but has balanced the two in a research process, thus developing a framework for strategic thinking that is grounded in both the conceptual world of academic literature and the empirical world of management practice. This research is a rare example of this with respect to strategic thinking.

In addition to the contribution made by bridging the worlds of academic literature and management practice, this research also makes contributions with respect to both. With respect to the academic literature this research develops a framework that identifies relevant concepts and possible relationships between those concepts (Teece 2007). As such the framework represents not only a conceptualisation of strategic thinking but also a sensitising instrument for exploring strategic thinking. Principally, the framework reflects the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking as thinking with a particular structure, in particular the work of Eden and Ackermann, but this research makes a contribution by



extending and developing that literature. In particular: connecting the categories of goals, issues and actions to the wider strategy literature and integrating three usually discrete themes; highlighting the notion of balance between and within the categories; indicating the potential lack of empirical clarity with regard to the categories; highlighting the importance of timing and sequencing of the categories and indicating the value in methodological development that would better capture temporal aspects; highlighting the people or personal dimensions to strategic thinking; recognising the significance of the processes of perception and interpretation with respect to strategic goals; suggesting an additional category of performance measurement; introducing the concept of proxy stakeholders; highlighting the notion that negative goals might be more tangible, grounded and realistic and consequently the disadvantages in converting these into more positive, aspirational goals; highlighting the importance of risk with regard to negative goals and indicating a managerially relevant concept of risk; clarifying the tension between the need for a presentation of certainty to gain commitment and legitimacy whilst recognising inevitable uncertainty; and clarifying the tension in practice between strategic thinking that is discredited as being too high level and disconnected from the real world and strategic thinking that is discredited as being too operational.

This research also makes a contribution with respect to the most frequent conceptualisation of strategic thinking, that is, as thinking with particular characteristics as summarised in Table 2-1. A number of these characteristics are incorporated into the framework and hence this research provides a degree of empirical grounding for some of those characteristics. Those characteristics that are not directly reflected in the framework are “ways of thinking” and, while these are not directly incorporated into the framework, they are not excluded. Indeed, these ways of thinking are complimentary, with the framework providing guidance regarding what to incorporate into, for example, analytical, synthetic or creative thinking. Thus, the two conceptualisations together form a complementary pairing that better conceptualises strategic thinking than either in isolation.

The third conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature is as thinking about strategy and, although this conceptualisation was not used in this research, this

research contributes to the literature that conceptualises strategic thinking in this way because it integrates fundamental elements of strategy. Indeed, the synthesis of three quite discrete streams in the strategy literature in chapter 4 represents a notable contribution in itself. The incorporation of performance measurement into the framework suggests that the framework may provide the basis for the synthesis of a fourth stream of literature. The framework produced by integrating these fundamental elements of strategy is relatively simple and general, meaning that it has a wide degree of applicability to a diversity of strategies and organisational circumstances. Thus, if strategic thinking is conceptualised as thinking about strategy, the framework still has a degree of validity, irrespective of the particular strategy.

With respect to management practice this research makes a notable contribution by offering guidance that scores well against three criteria, specifically: a basis in robust knowledge claims; a sufficiently fundamental conceptualisation that facilitates dissemination but retains the flexibility to be tailored to specific circumstances; and an ability to accommodate aspects of both about what to think and how to think. This guidance is relevant to a number of different settings in which strategic thinking might occur, for example everyday settings, formal management meetings or strategy workshops. These settings differ in terms of the time available for strategic thinking, the information available and the purpose of strategic thinking in that setting. However, irrespective of the setting, employing the framework can be conceived of involving three not necessarily sequential processes; constructing, refining and appraising. The process of constructing involves identifying the elements of the framework and their interrelationships. The process of refining involves appreciating the significant features of the framework. The process of appraising involves evaluating the appropriateness of the framework given the features of the setting. While the framework indicates about what to think and is complemented by characteristics of strategic thinking that indicate how to think, these three processes indicate how to employ the “about what to think” and “how to think” aspects of strategic thinking in practice. The guidance to practitioner is summarised as a set of questions and presented in appendix 13.4.

While there are a number of mechanisms for influencing management practice, the one most pertinent to this research is management education, since a prime motivation for this research arose from the researcher's professional role as a management educator. The framework developed in this research addresses the challenge of integrating experiential, contextualised knowledge with academic, generalised knowledge by using categories that have meaning for practitioners that are connected to central themes in the strategy literature. This framework has a degree of persistence because it reflects fundamental themes in strategy. This research also makes a contribution by indicating the nature and process of management education that would be appropriate for developing strategic thinking. It is argued that the appropriate educational process is an inductive one that avoids an overly analytical and compartmentalised approach but preserves the integrated nature of the framework that reflects the nature of strategic thinking. In employing an inductive approach, existing theory would be used as a basis for clarifying thinking, testing assumptions and providing new insights. In this approach the management educator facilitates a link between a learner's experiential knowledge and formal academic knowledge, possible by suitable prompts and questions. The integrated nature of the framework may indicate that it represents a threshold concept that leads to a transformed understanding and way of thinking that integrates other concepts.

This research has made a number of contributions with respect to theory, practice and management education relating to strategic thinking. However, conceptualisations of strategic thinking in the literature still lack authority and there is a scarcity of robust empirical studies. There is clearly a need for further research into this important and under-researched topic. As a rare example of empirical research into strategic thinking, it would be advantageous to develop this particular research further. One limitation in this research is that the empirical work in which the framework is grounded was almost exclusively in the UK NHS. Hence, one route to develop this research would be to conduct similar research in other contexts, for example a commercial firm or a non-UK health organisation. An interesting extension of this research would be to use the framework as a basis to analyse organisational strategy statements and strategic plans to see to what extent the

framework is reflected in those statements and plans. A survey based on the framework might form a basis for a more definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking based on statistical generalisation. A strong point of such a survey would be that the concepts operationalised in the survey instrument would be derived from the meanings and interpretations of practitioners rather than the literature. Alternatively since strategy develops not just through thought but also through action (Gavetti and Rivkin 2007) it would be interesting to use the framework as a basis for action research. This would offset some of the limitations of the interviews used in the development of the framework. A particularly interesting aspect of this extension of the research would be to understand the circumstances under which strategic thinking is beneficial.

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# 13 Appendices

## 13.1 Briefing note sent to participants prior to Study 3

### A Proposal for Research into Strategic Thinking

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider this proposal. I am a researcher at the University of Strathclyde working towards a PhD with the topic of strategic thinking. After working in industry for twenty years I joined the university sector and have taught strategy at number of universities for the last ten years, currently at Manchester Metropolitan University.

My proposed research involves discussion with individual executives about the issues facing their organisation. During these meetings a “map” is produced that summarises the discussion and provides a basis for reflection. These maps form the primary source of data supported by publicly available organisational documents and brief biographical details as might be found in a CV. I anticipate that the meetings would be approximately one hour in duration, but possibly slightly longer. Discussions will be strictly confidential and confidentiality of the data will be maintained by avoiding any reference to real names or places in the PhD thesis.

While the data would be valuable for my research, I would hope that the time invested in the meetings would also be of benefit to the individuals by providing an opportunity to discuss significant issues with an informed and impartial listener. Whilst at this stage, for my purposes, I do not anticipate more than one meeting being required, I would be happy to engage in further discussions with participants if requested.

Kevin Gallimore

## **13.2 Additional evidence relating to the lowest level of analysis – elaborations of a category**

This appendix contains additional evidence and comments from participants regarding the elaborations of a category that were excluded from the main text to prevent the main text becoming too long or detailed.

### **13.2.1 Negative goals**

Some participants, HM4, NA4 and PP2, gave a clear and simple yes answer to this question before talking further. Others elaborated immediately: CM3 “Absolutely, you’ve got to know where the hard yards are, as a rugby player” and; CP5 “Yes, like getting the sack” and saw this related to being “about how you create accountability”.

While not giving a definitive yes statement some participants suggested this was important: NM1 “You have to see the pitfalls and do something about it” and “You ignore at your peril”; OA2 “If you don’t check this, things will happen, for example loss of financial stability, your goals will be at risk. Have to emphasise that”; PP5 “They’re there aren’t they? Negative goals...For communication we turn this into a positive but it is negative underlying. There is often a negative thing or view...could stop you from doing other things because you avoid it or discussing it, we skirt around it”; SA3 “Interesting but I guess that a negative goal as you put it has been a big driving force for these changes, that we can’t continue as we are. That if we don’t do something the future will be more difficult...This has been a big part of our case to convince some people, talking about how things might be in the future and how they will be worse than they are now unless we do something like this”; UP5 “I tend to think in terms of what are the elephant traps”; MM2 “we have to drive a road between these two things [negative and positive goals]” and that this was “a model I try to work with but not everyone does”.

QP4 interpreted this question quite personally and picked out a map node “wait to feel the pain” and said they “didn’t want to feel the pain” and talked about “avoiding an additional responsibility” and that “It would be horrible to do an

impossible job” and “I don’t want to be the person responsible for an impossible task”. Rather than thinking in terms of negative goals they said “it was more a question of more rounded thinking that meant knowing the risks rather than being driven to avoid something”.

FP5 appeared to say contradictory things. Initially “Yes. I suspect that it’s not generally taken up as an approach” but then later “There is an initial enthusiasm for change, improvement...The last thing strategic thinkers want is someone coming along and saying that the NHS has cuts coming in the next five years and how can we cope with that loss of revenue...you don’t want to talk about negatives and when things go wrong they will become part of the baggage, mud sticks”.

### **13.2.2 Goals of different entities**

Some participants, gave a definitive “Yes” in response, SA4 and NA4, or a simple supporting statement, DM4 said this was “important” and gave examples of “the organisation, staff, people, patients, the public and statutory organisations”. Other participants elaborated further: CA4 “Yes. Secondary care think they understand primary care and vice versa and the truth is we don’t”; DP3 “Essential, must have a balanced view, if you don’t understand the other person then you will find yourself having to justify your decisions. In my current role I have to see it from both sides”; NM2 “Yes this is an important part of strategic thinking. Who are the winners and losers. The membership of the Foundation Trust will like more community control but the tribal entities might find this threatening...In the first submission for FT status there was a personal standoff rather than an organisational problem. I ask why people would challenge to try to understand what they want from something”; OA2 “Yes, for example with waiting lists. Some people think I’m only interested in it from a management perspective, because it’s a target, but from a personal perspective why would you want to wait...Clinicians think you’re only interested in targets”; PP2 “My goal ticks their boxes as a commissioner and with others and our partners. We are supporting the delivery of each others goals”; FP5 “Yes. More general individual and corporate objectives. Someone draws up a business plan that is not aligned with the organisations objectives, this leads to

conflict in the organisation. For example our Director of Public Health has had individual business cases from individual clinicians. When we ask the organisation about these cases we get a totally different response from the one given by the individual”.

Four participants suggested benefits from an appreciation of the goals of different entities: CM3 “Yes...Aligning goals gets 20 to 30% extra effort”; CP5 “Yes, important to align personal goals with organisational goals. If there is not that alignment then you have to change the people or the goals. We don’t do either at the moment and we tolerate the consequences. This can lead to a creative tension though with one impacting on the other”; NM1 “It would be, it’s about alignment. That will add value to the quality of the debate and thoughts. Dissonance may improve the debate. Alignment brings speed and you may get a better idea through challenge”; MA5 “I think it would. There may be instances where say personal goals conflicted with organisational ones but the personal goals could be moulded to be compliant with organisational goals”.

However, there were four participants (HM4, SP1, SA3 and NA6) who, while not disagreeing with the suggestion that an appreciation of the goals of different entities indicated better strategic thinking, gave answers that were not clearly in support of the suggestion. HM4 found the question difficult because they did not feel it was really relevant to them because their “personal goals were aligned with the organisational ones”. SP1 commented that “Project teams think in terms of responsibilities for them to deliver rather than goals...Everybody understands their part in it. This is what we do re the organisation”. The suggestion appeared to come as a surprise to SA3 who said “Interesting. We’ve tended to focus on organisational goals rather than peoples goals...I guess if you can align with people then that is the best thing to do”. NA6 introduced the notion of a personal strategy in addition to an organisational one, “It depends on how comprehensive you are in drawing up the business plan and including ambitions about your organisation, issues of capacity and pragmatic strategic responses to must do’s” and “Part of my personal strategy is about relationships. A strategy around maintaining relationships and community engagement and balance between the different aspirations”.

Although the response from CA1 was “Yes”, the subsequent elaboration appeared to be more relevant to the question about the goals of stakeholders, “the NHS is very political and this reflected the interests of different stakeholders” and that “they should not take their lead from the DoH but rather from their local populations and stakeholders”.

### **13.2.3 Goals in conflict or agreement**

There appeared to be a wide agreement on this by a number of participants: CA4 “You would think so, you have to have goals that are achievable but stretching”; CM3 “Yes. If I don’t align my goals as chief exec there is quite a problem”; CP5 “Absolutely...The NHS attempts to have something which is like a market but this is not mature at the moment. In a market my success means your failure”; DA4 “Yes, absolutely. The challenge there is if you fail to take account of that, others will not buy into it...you have to understand where they are coming from and their goals”; DM4 said it was “an important aspect of strategic thinking...there are different goals ...and organisations had linked goals which meant there was some bargaining...It is important to understand what people want”; DP3 “All of strategy has to take these into account and particularly in the NHS since there are so many goals so naturally there are two sides, difficult choices we call them”; FP5 “Ultimately it’s about negotiation and bringing together through contracts the providers and commissioners”; NM1 “That realisation is very helpful. When goals are in agreement you can do more at speed...Where there is a lack of agreement it may be important to get some understanding to see if you can align them. If not, if you can get understanding and hence you can move forward. Agreement is desirable but not always achievable”; QP5 “Yes. Particularly with finance...conflicting goals both horizontally, for example between directors, and vertically, at different levels of an organisation...important to aim for a win/win and perhaps take a longer way round”.

The notion of a win/win was mentioned by two other participants, SA4 commented that “Different goals for different parties is obvious but these are not necessarily in conflict...I see it in terms of negotiation, understand what the other

parties want, a win / win. Why would anyone agree unless they were getting something from it?" and SP1 commented "It is about goals and responsibilities and how to get to a win/win although this is often difficult".

The comments from SA3 suggested that appreciation meant more than mere awareness, "My experience here and in other organisations is that people, or at least the people I've met, aren't good at recognising those tensions. They can write them down but don't see beyond the list to understand the way in which achieving one will compromise others...Its about understanding how you can achieve as much as possible with one while not going so far with that one that it completely undermines others".

Although the question was posed in terms of an appreciation of where goals were in agreement or conflict a number of participants appeared to focus on or emphasise the conflict rather than the agreement. In some instances this was a matter of emphasis. CA4 had agreed with an appreciation of both but appeared to emphasise the conflict "If people have conflicting goals you will never get there. You have to have goals that people can't disagree with". Similarly CM3 had said "Yes" but went on to say "You want some tension. I might be setting goals that might be in tension, for example finance versus performance. You set a tension, perhaps between different directorates, but it's important to have openness about that tension. I'd rather think of it as tension rather than conflict". In a similar vein, CA1 said "Yes" and that they had "not yet tried to sell the ... model to clinical staff and anticipated that this would be an example of conflicting goals about which services to invest in or not".

A significant number of participants appeared to only consider the conflict aspect of the question: FP2 "Conflicting goals are implicit" but also that "unintended consequences that may cause conflicts"; OA2 mentioned "knock on effects"; HM4 "recognising conflicting goals would indicate better strategic thinking but at the creative stage of strategy recognising conflicting goals was *less important* than at the implementation stage because to put a strategy into practice it needs to be realistic and to recognise potential resistance. There may be perceptions of conflict to be

overcome”; MA5 “Yes...conflicting policies make goals difficult to choose...the two goals of cutting waiting lists and getting paid for the work we do are in conflict”; NA6 “There may be either / or discussions but we have wished to bring forward conflicting aspirations. With a bit of talking they have been honed together”; PP5 “There are times when they would...Taking social care as an example there are different organisations with different cultures and targets and performance measures and regulatory frameworks, creating opportunities for conflict without trying”; QP4 “very important” and gave an illustration of having “responsibilities that are diametrically opposed”; SA3 “Partly there’s always...perhaps this is just in the NHS or in any big organisation there are bound to be goals in conflict...Any list of goals always has conflicts. Its almost inevitable”; UP5 “Not because the goals were in conflict but because the way the implementation looked at these...So the goals themselves are not in conflict but the way they are implemented brings them into conflict...The improvement of health is a long-term thing but the NHS has an annual cycle, in all sorts of things from service review to accounting, with a pass or fail evaluation. So against this background the long-term view is difficult”.

A few participants appeared to place an emphasis on the agreement aspect of the question. CA4 stated that “You have to have goals that people can’t disagree with...higher goals that people all agree with”. Agreement over goals was considered to have certain benefits. CM3 suggested that “Goal congruence is important, you get momentum and confidence”. NM1 suggested that “When goals are in agreement you can do more at speed. It means that there are quick wins you can get on and do” and “Where there is a lack of agreement it may be important to get some understanding to see if you can align them. If not if you can get understanding and hence you can more forward”.

Three participants indicated that they were not sure. FP5 said “It depends from which perception”, and SA4 said “Not sure if this makes for better strategic thinking”. PP5 did not appear to be sure at the start of the answer saying “I don’t know really” but then at the end of the answer said “Acknowledging and recognising these risks can be powerful for partnerships because it can produce trust which may



then lead to a shared set of goals, which may comprise our goals, organisational and personal”.

### **13.2.4 Goals of different stakeholders**

This question met with almost universal agreement with a number of participants FP2, MM2, NA4, OA2, SA4, HM4 and SP1, simply giving a clear statement indicating that it did indicate better strategic thinking. Other participants supported a yes answer with an additional statement: NM2 “Yes, and this is clearly illustrated above with the notion of the community and the tribes”; PP2 “Yes and what I’ve said about ticking boxes with partners and others shows this”; CA4 “Yes, people are coming from very different situations”; QP5 “Yes. Recognise what presses people’s buttons. There can be different goals even at the same level”; DM4 “three organisations involved, each with different goals, each with their own agenda. Strategic thinkers are people who are savvy, will interrogate the brief and understand what people want from it”.

A number of participants related this question to the sector: DP3 “In the NHS it is all about stakeholders”; MA5 “In the NHS that is essential...In the NHS there are all sorts of legitimate interests”; QP4 “this was critical. Come up with something that everyone can go with. Essential in healthcare because of the nature of the sector”; CA1 “Yes...the NHS agenda was now largely about engagement, working with other organisations and agencies, having a constructive dialogue”; DA4 “Vital, even if it’s your strategy and it doesn’t affect them. For example Foundation Trust status may only be of interest to this organisation but we won’t get supported in our application if we can’t get evidence of engagement from other interested parties”.

Three participants indicated the difficulty of this: NM1 “Absolutely. We have a range of key stakeholders, commissioners, carers, patients staff and a range of agencies...Its very important and very hard work, it becomes terribly time consuming and often that is not recognised back in the organisation. It’s not your day job but it still needs to be done”; SA3 “Its harder. I’d like to set out my own goals and get on with it. The strength of the project is that it grew out of discussions with the PCT...Their views along the way don’t bust the programme because we’ve

agreed its goals”; PP5 “Challenging but it does. It is defined as a competence in the new World Class Commissioning framework just announced by the DoH”.

### **13.2.5 Reflecting on the consequences of actions taken**

About half the participants commented that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken would indicate better strategic thinking: CA4 “Absolutely. You have a goal and plan to take action, you achieve your goal and think thank God for that. Then you review. Is the way you got there the right way? The goal is not the only thing, its about means as well as ends... hit the target and miss the point. Could we have done that better. Also the issue about goal sustainability. So I could achieve 95% compliance with the four hour A&E wait next week but I couldn’t sustain that”; FP2 “Yes. Need to take a view on what happened before. Part of the framing. Gather meaningful intelligence including has that been done before and what happened. Important to learn the lessons of the past”; SA3 “It should be shouldn’t it”; SP1 “Critical...Need to do stock taking on the way...how far along your direction of strategic travel”; MM2 “There is a value in history, this is an important point. History can help the organisation in learning in a way that helps it to learn from the past”.

Six other participants thought this was important but that it was not done well: MA5 “Crucial. But we don’t do that well. There is a risk when strategic planning that you tend to own the project and are not prepared to accept when things are going wrong. You have to be big enough to admit you are wrong”; NA4 “you tend to get on with the next thing but...reflecting on the consequences of actions taken would be an aspect of strategic thinking”, this “may be something that happens and I’m not aware of it or it may not happen”, and they “tend to be forward looking all the time and only reflects when the wheels fall off”. NA6 “It probably does but I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced this in any organisation I’ve worked with, in that it was part of the process. People in their minds eye set objectives that are hard and challenging but they are the ones that are usually difficult to achieve. They usually bury the ones they don’t achieve and so don’t reflect on them. Or they do so badly that they simple go and so don’t have time to reflect on them, or have plenty of time

to reflect on them but by then they are no longer with the organisation”; NM1 “Its got to be better but that’s not to say that it always happens. To positively look at what worked and what didn’t is important and useful...being reflective is very important. There may be things in the ether, not obvious”; NM2 “My personal management style is naturally driven on delivery and this can produce wreckage behind you that you can’t see. Important to keep taking a check, win hearts and minds, not abuse positional power, decide where the wins are for people to make them feel good”; PP5 “I don’t think it is done enough. Strategic thinking involves reflecting. Reflecting on what did not go well, although it might also be what did go well...Often reflection is an individual thing rather than something we do as an organisation”.

CP5 thought that it would indicate better strategic thinking but mentioned a note of caution, “Yes this does make for better strategic thinking. Have to ask have we created a blame culture, although we say this does not exist now in the NHS it still does to some extent. There is a danger that reflecting becomes a justification rather than being for the future.”

DM4 appeared to interpret the question in terms of the consequences of actions that might be taken rather than had been taken, “Think longer term and write the plan, you should be able to think through the consequences. The 5 options enabled me to map out the consequences, positive and negative. I don’t like surprises and this means that there are no surprises. Of course you sometimes have to wing it. You have to make sure the consequences do not impact on the ongoing vision”.

About half the participants suggested that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken might not necessarily indicate better strategic thinking. In some instances this interpretation by the researcher was made because the response was not clear. DP3 said “I do a lot of that” but whether this means agreement or not was not clear. The response from CM3 simply did not appear to fit the question.

Other participants elaborated reasons why reflecting on the consequences of actions taken may or may not indicate better strategic thinking: DA4 “I’m struggling again, that brings constraints because you’d never get anyone out of the here & now.

In this organisation you wouldn't start the Foundation Trust journey, people in this organisation don't look beyond today. I might be meeting the aspirations of today but we have to pull people out of the here & now. Most people out of the NHS can't do that, it's a very task driven organisation"; OA2 "We're not very good at this in the NHS or maybe its just me or people in an acute setting. We find that we have to do this by then so we just do it. We don't put effort into thinking about consequences. Actions taken in my area usually give quick feedback which enables reflection...So there is an issue about time frames. If something takes six months to have an effect then it might be difficult to reflect whereas something where the consequences can be seen quickly makes it easier to reflect. Of course we have a yearly review of business plans, risk and governance but this process is not at all levels"; SA3 "I think we're quite bad at this in the NHS. You ought to be able to set a direction of travel for the organisation and stick with it. But in practice that seems difficult and you have to carve all the time to do this. There are a number of stages in the strategy at which we might stop the strategy as we encounter what we see as insurmountable obstacles but you can't afford to do that. So I've sort of answered yes and no to that haven't I? So there's the part where you have to keep going based on some recognised commitment. I suppose it is related to what you're talking about as well. If you're talking about introducing a new procedure it perhaps makes sense to use it for a few weeks and then review the outcomes"; SA4 "Yes to some extent. Partly about the results of any strategy only emerging when you see what people do. So are we delivering on the strategy? Two questions, did that action move us towards our goals and is that in line with the strategy. Not a great one for regret. Asking did we do the right thing is often difficult. People don't like to be reminded of mistakes or risk having blame attached to them. If you don't do this though you don't learn very much"; UP5 "It's important but the danger is that it ends up as a straightjacket. Learning is important. You need to be quite careful that you're clear about what exactly you should and shouldn't be repeating. But sometimes there are developmental processes that are needed to get ownership. You want the end result but you can't just implement that end result. You need some of those developmental process to get there and to get ownership from the people involved. So you need to repeat parts of events to gain ownership."

The response from CA1 was unique in that they said that reflecting on the consequences of actions taken did not indicate better strategic thinking, “This needs to be minimised, it is inevitable, but needs to be minimised because it retards progress. There is a risk of introducing muddle and slowing progress. Momentum is important in strategic implementation and my role is to keep the momentum going”.

### **13.2.6 Actions – uncertainty and dilemmas**

This question was related to the notion of strategic thinking having to appreciate uncertainty, potential dilemmas and alternative courses of action. The majority of participants agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas indicated better strategic thinking. Some participants, FP2 and SA4, gave a simple “Yes” response and QP4 stated “there is no one right way”. Other participants offered further elaboration: DP3 “Essential, there is uncertainty about how doable things are and risks associated with this”; CP5 “This is back to the floor. We have clever people who are well trained. Unfortunately they are taught to take risks in the environment of controlled trials. It is therefore counterintuitive for them to take risks outside that controlled environment. There is a huge place for action driven by intuition and shaped as it goes along. There is a degree of resistance to this in the NHS but the degree of resistance depends on the group”; HM4 “flexibility is needed to respond to changing circumstances, particularly where factors were outside their control...a strategic pathway with choice points”; MA5 “Yes, strategic thinking has got to acknowledge uncertainties. The skill in strategic planning is to have flexibility. It’s not about planning into a box. Plans must be flexible and iterative and you must be prepared to change them”; MM2 “Yes, There are dilemmas on all levels. Big level and small level”; OA2 “Yes, there is always uncertainty and this forces critical planning, risk mitigation. You have plans in place but you have to prepare contingencies, have a plan B”; NA6 “It must be and I knew it to be true having gone through the process of consultation in our Foundation Trust application”; QP5 “Yes. Uncertainty is inevitable when factors are out of direct control but you have to use risk management”; SA3 “It has to doesn’t it?...somewhere you’ve got to recognise how uncertain the world is, but not within the whole organisation. I spend a lot of my time making things that are complex and

uncertain simple and certain in order to communicate these things to different parts of the organisation. This avoids an organisational nervous breakdown”; SP1 “It does...the 2012 vision has a lot of uncertainty about how to achieve it”; NM2 “Yes, this was clearly illustrated by the number of questions arising out of the initial issue”; NA4 “essential...one had to be comfortable with uncertainty. If someone was not comfortable with uncertainty then it usually led to unhelpful behaviour”; DM4 “the example of the 5 options that had been produced for the option appraisal... understanding the different delivery mechanisms for the vision and mission”.

The response from about a third of participants suggested that an appreciation of uncertainty and dilemmas might not necessarily indicate better strategic thinking. In some instances the response could not be clearly interpreted as a yes or no. CA4 “It is but it shouldn’t be used as an excuse not to be a strategic thinker. In my business plan, but things come out of left field...The NHS is a political environment and so you have to be prepared for things to crop up that weren’t in your plan...If you can’t cope with the politics then this is not the place for you. So you have to be prepared to flex the plan”. CM3 avoided answering the question directly to some extent and said “I think it’s smarter thinking. Not everything is logical and can be planned for. Environmental analysis is key. You have to have an informed look at the environment before you step into it...So in part it’s about having the flexibility to adapt”. FP5 “For me if the thinking becomes the reality, without that check at an early stage on how the implementation looks and how we are going to develop the services there is a greater chance of success. Rather than relying on an idea that is not thought through and is influenced by an individual leadership. Strategic thinking is not in individuals with ideas but by challenging the idea in practice”. PP5 “I quite like uncertainty, it gives you the opportunity to be innovative and flexible. You can mould things rather than being on a fixed track. You obviously need a level of certainty, when transacting things you need some certainty so that people can engage with them, especially if you are working with other organisations. Actions need certainty but for me you need a level of uncertainty to allow you to be creative and have the creativity you need”. CA1 said they “thought in terms of milestones...In terms of action there were two types of action. The first type was the hygiene factor

that was necessary just to keep the place going. Higher up the hierarchy is the type of action that will move me further along the strategic pathway...there was a third type, actions to catch up to where you should be because the NHS is quite good at throwing things at you”.

Two participants gave responses that indicate pros and cons. NM1 commented, “Two trains of thought. You’d never do the wacky and creative stuff. They could get stifled by all the pitfalls you identify. However, in the service you have in a public organisation, you know you’re responsible for spending £56 million of public money you have to have a detailed plan. Without that its not good management is it? At times you need to be in that mode and at other times you need to let fly”. Similarly, PP2 “To a degree it needs to in terms of inputting on constraints but if it doesn’t suffocate strategic thinking in the first place. In the action box you need to be clear if it will make it on the ground but you need to get the balance right. Some people clearly see some uncertainty and because of that it never gets off the ground. You need to ask what are the constraints and how to overcome them. I would want to be clear”.

One participant, DA4, was quite clear that this did not indicate better strategic thinking, “When you are thinking strategically you need to think without dilemmas because you risk limiting your goals by a lack of information and so you constrain your thinking about goals. You need to set your goal and then address uncertainties later in the actions that you take. Otherwise you don’t get the aspiration or the commitment”.

### **13.2.7 Issues – external and internal**

The majority of participants agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of both internal and external issues indicted better strategic thinking. Some, DM4, DP3, FP2, HM4, MA5, NA4, QP4, and SP1, made a simple statement of agreement. Others elaborated further: CA1 “Yes...the national perspective was important. 75% of peoples’ experience of the NHS is positive but most people would say that the NHS is in a state of crisis. This is a paradox that the government is trying to understand and address. Relating this internally, staff, of all types, were the prime

ambassadors for the trust”; CA4 “Yes. Goals and actions are OK but issues might make sure it didn’t happen. Whole thing is about the relationship of internal to external”; NA6 “Essential, it has to, because that is the only way you will ground the strategic aim. For example what will the stakeholders pay for and what can they pay for. It’s not just much of their cake can we get but how big is their cake because it is not worth upsetting them to try and get more than they have. Internally its about capacity and how hard people are working, how much head room there is. Like the generals in WW1 who were too remote from the frontline to realise that their battle plans would not work”; NM1 “Definitely. Living in the real world where these things interact in a dynamic way”; OA2 “Huge really, issues do start to shape how you do something, definitely more than actions. Issues determine what some of the actions are going to be. Relentless process has to be quite fluid. There’s always politics and you can never cover every eventuality... You can have the best laid plans but then issues...[sentence left hanging intentionally by participant]”; QP5 “Yes...about having checks and balances...avoiding tunnel vision. Listen to external sources”; SA4 “internal and external things but that these are clearly interrelated”.

Some participants qualified their response to introduce additional conditions. CM3 mentioned the idea of the analysis being real, “Provided that analysis is real. I build it from what people tell me in a month. You just pick it up. It is vital that you do”. Two participants introduced the importance of appreciating the weight or relevance of issues: CP5 “Almost certainly true but the issue, as you might say, is about what weight you give to the different issues”. Similarly SA3 cautioned “Yes, to a large extent. You need to judge relevance of the issue though”.

Three participants made responses that suggested an appreciation of both internal and external issues might not necessarily indicated better strategic thinking. DA4 introduced a concern around constraining thinking in saying, “You need an appreciation of them but, and this might be a site specific factor, related to this organisation and what is happening here, it shouldn’t be constraining in terms of thinking about what can be achieved”. Two participants appeared to suggest a precedence of external over internal issues. PP2 commented “When I first take a strategy on I will do both, both of them have challenges. What these two perspectives



mean is relevant to that issue. Internally and externally we don't operate in a vacuum. At the beginning I'm concerned more with the external issues, they're important in relation to the goal, I do that bit at the beginning. Then have we taken into account all the factors that internally are needed in delivering that goal?". Similarly, UP5 commented, "Clearly both are important. But strategists need to primarily look at the external environment. If you try to do both it becomes difficult. There has to be a certain element of gap between the two. Strategy has to take account of people and the intricacies but the danger is it becomes overwhelming".

### **13.2.8 Issues – different entities**

The question was towards the end of the interview and hence the responses were the fewest and the least comprehensive. In some instances the question was not asked because the interview ran out of time and hence the responses of 13 participants were recorded. Of those participants asked the majority agreed with the suggestion that an appreciation of the issues associated with different entities would indicate better strategic thinking. A number of participants, FP2, HM4, MA5, NA4, QP4, SP1 and QP5, made a simple statement of agreement. Other participants elaborated further: CP5 "Yes but the challenge is how you move away from being paternalistic and possibly patronising"; MM2 "Steer their thinking and use one to influence the other"; OA2 "Yes, you have to tell a different story about issues to different levels, the housekeeper and the consultant group. I'm someone who aims to give it a personal slant because it gives it meaning rather than it being a nebulous thing. You have to translate it for your audience"; PP2 "ticking the boxes of others, that's clearly about their issues".

However there was not universal support. DA4 again cautioned about constraints in saying, "Appreciation is fine but the risk is that it constrains the thinking. We're back to process now, you have to understand the culture and what you want to achieve. You have to take them out of their current environment so that you don't stifle creativity and belief in change. You have to take them out and put them somewhere different". SA3 also cautioned about attempting to take account of the issues of a range of stakeholders, "Yes, to a point but if you try to combine the

issue of everyone into a strategy it will fail, its about understanding their issues but not necessarily meeting them”.

## **13.3 Additional evidence relating to emergent themes**

### **13.3.1 Emergent themes relating to the whole**

#### **13.3.1.1 Strategic versus operational**

A strong theme in the data appears to be the difference and relationship between the strategic and the operational. A number of participants clearly expressed a difficulty in differentiating the strategic from the operational: FP2 “what is and what is not strategic is a difficult question” and they “have three types of meeting, strategic, management and performance and while...there were practical reasons for the separation in terms of being able to finish the meeting that sometimes the separation was to some extent artificial”; MM2 “It is difficult to separate the operational from the strategic”; CA1 it was “difficult to distinguish strategic from operational”. CA1 did however acknowledge some ability to do so in saying they preferred to “set core values...and use these to guide operational decisions which will move towards the values and vision”.

Other participants appeared to underplay the importance of the operational. CP5 saw the operational to be a distraction, “We get sucked into operational management rather than futurising what we want the world to look like and how to get there”. DA4 also underplayed what might be described as operational. In distinguishing the strategic from the “processy bits” of the map they said about the latter, “they’re just about getting through next year”.

In contrast, CA4 acknowledged a difference between strategic and operational but suggested that the value of the operational can be under appreciated. CA4 complained about “being patronised and patted on the head because she is too operational...the other chief execs say they don’t do the detail because they pay someone to do that” but that in one instance they was “the only one who had read the detail and so was the only one who understood what the problem was”. As they put it “If you can’t put strategic thinking into action it’s useless” and the “people who are remembered are not those who come up with the ideas but those who put the idea into place”.

Others acknowledged a difference between the strategic and the operational but without suggesting that the relationship was problematic. NA6 said “We’ve made a decision about extra capacity, operationally it is about how that works” and that “to be effective operationally you need to understand the strategic context”. Further, “It’s not about being so immersed in the day to day that you can’t see beyond it but the strategy has to be grounded in at least some of the operational realities”, “that is the only way you will ground the strategic aim” and “Like the generals in WW1 who were too remote from the frontline to realise that their battle plans would not work”. Similarly, FP5 linked strategic thinking to “the practical development of business cases” and said that “A lot of blue sky strategic thinking is so much out of the box that it is not practical. It always has to fit with the circumstances” and “It’s with operational implementation that reality comes into it. It’s the strategic versus the operational and we’re generally risk averse”. PP2 suggested that “The issue I’ve talked about is not one just for me or the top team to think about. I believe that patterns emerge from the staff and the service” and that “question is how to get the two together, particularly at early the stages”. UP5 “You need to be cold and calculating but you also need good operational managers to implement the strategy”. NM2 commented “The questions about workforce planning, estates, finance are more about operational delivery planning”. SA4 suggested “in a sense this is more of a problem relating around how we deliver that strategy rather than the strategy”. DM4 talked about “a disconnect between vision and the delivery of that vision”, “a disconnect between the vision and goals”, “the disconnect from details”.

A number of participants made comments related to a notion of a higher level. FP2 said “I often thought that you need to be in some kind of higher state, released from the shackles of the day to day”. SA4 drew “a distinction between high level and when options begin to crystallize” and commented that “Because this is at a high level only when the decision is made is action taken”. For UP5 the map reflected “high level things I need to try to action” and thought that “Those involved at the very highest level do have to have a good understanding of the other organisations and their plan of work and goals”. CA4 appeared critical in saying that other chief execs “talk about the strategic stuff that is far removed from the practical

detail". However they suggested that this was something of a weakness for them and hence they tried to "surround myself with people who I think have more blue skies thinking than I have".

A number of participants made reference to size in relation to strategic thinking. PP5 commented that "They're about the big picture". UP5 asked himself the question "What are the big things?" and commented "There are big issues and big problems but you have to try to understand what the risks are and have some risk mitigation in place". MM2 talked about "Big level and small level".

Similarly a number of participants made reference to scope in relation to strategic thinking. CM3 said "This has an impact on the local community, commissioners and others". FP5 emphasised that strategic thinking, in relation to the specific issue they had discussed, affected a number of organisations, "Not just a few individuals involved in the vision of the future but a number of boards", "We rely on other organisations to support our application to the DoH and then the treasury", "Partnering needs to be refreshed as we move on because of these types of changes" and that "The key is to have all partners involved and to have an understanding of the background, there is always baggage". DP3 "A lot of this stuff is not inter organisational it is intra organisational".

A couple of participants made direct reference to tactics. DM4 drew a distinction between the strategic and the tactical in that tactics were "about the immediate objectives or about manipulating the plan to make sure it works" and that "strategy was being delivered by tactics which were about small, quick wins". MM2 talked about the idea of a tactical strategy. The tactical strategy is about being a limited provider, and would be supported by stakeholders. The actual strategy is about being a wider provider, but this would not be supported by stakeholders. "At the moment there is a view that we should develop a tactical strategy...but there is a discussion about this...that we don't believe that it will take us where we want to be, that we make the decision we want to be wider but we don't disclose this and then do a U turn at the appropriate time, that we forget that being the limited provider is not where we want to be eventually and this becomes the actual strategy. This tactical

strategy is reflected in our strategy documents, for example our service strategy documents that do not mention the possibility of wider provision". MM2 said "The tactical strategy may be reasonable but it may be risky". CM3 commented that "Its important to think tactically as a board".

### **13.3.1.2 Strategy process**

The notion of direction was mentioned by five participants. MM2 talked about "The role of the trust board is about the overall direction" and that "deciding about the direction has put a split down the board". Two participants talked about setting a direction, NM1 "We need to deal with these issues, between the direction we want to go in and what we do well at the moment" and CA1 said, "you need to set the strategic direction and preferred route". Two other participants talked about progress along a direction, SP1 about "how far along your direction of strategic travel" and UP5 commented that "You have to set and hold a direction but you have to listen and think and see if this is still right" and that "we have to rely on are proxy figures that indicate that we are heading in the right direction".

Three participants made reference to implementation: CM3 "the way we implement the Darzi report could be a unique selling proposition for us"; HM4 "actions...were needed in implementation to put strategy into practice"; UP5 "Not because the goals were in conflict but because the way the implementation looked at these"; "the goals themselves are not in conflict but the way they are implemented brings them into conflict"; "You want the end result but you can't just implement that end result" and "you also need good operational managers to implement the strategy".

Plans and planning were mentioned by four participants. Some participants related strategic thinking directly to a strategic plan. DA4 said that the elements of the "strategic plan" reflected strategic thinking on their map. DM4 commented that strategic thinking was "about a plan and objectives" and "conducting the plan to deliver the objectives" with tactics being about "the immediate objectives or about manipulating the plan to make sure it works". For NM1 strategic thinking had begun to be "part of our integrated business plan and writing it down makes us think in

more detail". FP5 suggested the plan as an aid to strategic thinking "Back to a cycle in strategic thinking, what have we learnt from this? There are opportunities to revise, you track the plan".

Comments from four participants related to a tension between a strategic plan which fixed things and a need for flexibility: CA1 "The strategic plan is designed to take us to the place we want to go, the end point, and means of getting there" but "I have a problem with the idea of setting a fixed strategic plan because the environment is too dynamic" and that "strategy more as an ongoing journey rather than about achieving a fixed end point". OA2 commented that "there is always uncertainty and this forces critical planning, risk mitigation" and in a somewhat resigned tone of voice commented "You can have the best laid plans but then issues...[the sentence was left hanging]". MA5 emphasised the need for flexibility, "The skill in strategic planning is to have flexibility. It's not about planning into a box. Plans must be flexible and iterative and you must be prepared to change them" but that "There is a risk when strategic planning that you tend to own the project and are not prepared to accept when things are going wrong". QP5 suggested that "Plans can be formulated but there is always this uncertainty associated with people".

Four participants made comments that suggest a degree of emergence in a strategy process: CP5 "Culture eats strategy for breakfast"; DA4 "Issues carve into the strategy". DA4 drew a distinction between strategic aspects of the map which involved them being able to "think ahead so that I can challenge", with less strategic aspects that were about "how am I going to get to the next step and then take the next step". DM4 "some form of navigator role and having to navigate around issues... generally two types of route, those that went around issues, but took longer, and those that sailed through the storm, which was rougher for those with him but was quicker". FP5 "What we have learnt from this strategic programme is the need to continuously change and improve"; CM3 "I think of strategy as a process, both deliberate and emergent, you know the Mintzberg stuff. I've used both successfully in combination in my career."

### 13.3.1.3 Systemicity

A number of participants made some reference to systems, connectedness or complexity: CP5 “someone with huge passion to make a difference and an ability to work the system to make a difference”; NM1 “an intentional tension set up in the system by government”; DP3 “If the system is not appropriately run you hit the buffers”, “You have to consider the system before and after to understand how to solve the problem” and “we’ve started to become more systemic on certain things”; NM1 the production of an “integrated business plan”; NM2 mentioned the “complexity of the issue”. PP2 made three comments that suggested a degree of complexity, “I think about the whole not the parts”, see from “the balcony to the ballroom” and “taking a step back and thinking about the whole”. FP5 talked about the map being a good example of “joined up” thinking.

NM4 clearly stated that connectedness was an important aspect of strategic thinking in saying that “strategic thinking was about understanding the connections, it was forward looking, about how what you do makes a difference and scanning for issues that might help or have an impact”.



## 13.4 Question set for guiding strategic thinking practice

### 13.4.1 Constructing questions

- What are the goals of:
  - The organisation?
  - Its stakeholders?
    - Are there any proxy stakeholders?
  - Recognisable groups and individuals?
  - You personally?
  - How are these goals interrelated?
- What are the issues associated with:
  - The organisation?
  - Its stakeholders?
    - Are there any proxy stakeholders?
  - Recognised groups and individuals?
  - You personally?
  - How are these issues interrelated?
- What actions are currently being undertaken or planned by:
  - The organisation?
  - You personally?
  - How are these actions interrelated?
- How is performance measured of:
  - The organisation?
  - You personally?
  - How are these measures interrelated?
- What goals do these actions support?
- What issues are these actions in response to?
- How will these actions affect performance?
- How will these issues impact on goals?
- How will these issues impact on current or planned actions?

### 13.4.2 Refining questions

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of expressing that goal in negative terms? (assuming that there are negative goals)
- Which goals, issues, actions or performance measures are most likely to be perceived or interpreted differently?
  - How would you ascertain what those different perceptions and interpretations are?
- Which goals are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?

- Which issues are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- Which actions are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- Which performance measures are the most:
  - Important?
  - Urgent?
  - Feasible?
- What are the significant risks?
  - What is the nature of the risk?
  - How is that risk managed?
- Which goals are in alignment?
- Which goals are in conflict?
- From which goals is conflict most likely to arise?
  - How might that conflict be managed?
- What causes that to happen?
- What must occur or be in place for that to happen?
- What are the significant aspects of timing and sequencing?

### 13.4.3 Appraising questions

- Given the constraints of the setting is sufficient scope and diversity incorporated?
- Are the methods of working with the information suitable?
- Have you considered goals, issues, actions and performance measurement at the organisational (departmental, etc.) level?
- Have you considered goals and issues above the organisational (departmental etc.) level?
- Where are there significant areas of uncertainty?
  - Is it possible to reduce that uncertainty and if so, by what means?
- Is there an appropriate balance between:
  - The goals of different stakeholders?
  - The goals of the organisation and you personally?
  - Internal and external issues?
  - Goals, issues, actions and performance measurement, given the stage of the strategy development process?
- What should you reveal in this setting?
  - Should you highlight areas of goal conflict?
  - Should you resist converting negative goals into positive ones?
  - Should you challenge the level as too high or not high enough?
  - Should you acknowledge areas of uncertainty?