###### CLIENT’S BRIEF

###### Exploring Students’ Perception of Organ Donation and Their Willingness to register as a potential organ donor.

**Client:** NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT)

## Background

There is currently a pressing shortage of body organs to be used for transplantation in the UK, with 7,026 patients currently registered on the NHS solid organ transplant waiting list (NHS Blood and Transplant, August 2014). Meanwhile the gap between the number of transplant patients on the waiting list and the number of deceased donors is widening (See Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1**: Transplant Activity in the UK (2009-2010), NHS Blood and Transplant

 For the latest Statistics on Potential Donors Audit, please visit

 <http://nhsbtmediaservices.blob.core.windows.net/organ-donation-assets/pdfs/activity_report_2014_15.pdf>

 In the UK, organs for transplantation are mainly procured through voluntary participation. This means that the NHS depends critically on the willingness of potential donors and their next-of-kin to give prior consent for their body parts to be used for organ transplantation. Potential donors are therefore encouraged to express their willingness by registering on the NHS Organ Donor Register as well as signing an organ donor card. As such, organ donation is largely understood as an altruistic act (Prottas, 1983; Radecki and Jaccard, 1997). The UK marketing campaign has largely adopted the ‘gift-of-life’ metaphor to encourage potential donors to consider giving away their organs in the event of death so as to save the life of another. In other words, the campaign appeals to potential donors by appealing to their collective sense of humanity and thus, upholding the sanctity of life.

More recently, the NHSBT has set up a strategic taskforce known as Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020', with the aim to increase organ donation consent from 57% in 2012/13 to 80% by 2020. It is the contention of the taskforce that there is a need to change public behaviour concerning organ donation and to increase awareness among the general public regarding the importance of organ donation. The taskforce reveals evidence showing that ‘there are low levels of awareness of organ donation and the need for transplants; also that it is not something most people personally experience’ (see <http://www.nhsbt.nhs.uk/to2020/about-the-strategy/changing-behaviour/>).

Despite its philanthropic connotation, the ‘gift-of-life’ campaign garners only hypothetical support from potential donors, whose intention rarely manifest into actual behaviour (e.g. Prottas 1998; Moloney and Walker, 2002). The latest UK statistics indicate that 90% of the populations have expressed a willingness to donate their organs after their death, yet only 27% are registered on the NHS Organ Donor Register (NHS Blood and Transplant, August 2009).

Williams and Calnan (1996a; 1996b) found that transplant technology continues to arouse deep feelings of ambivalence among the lay population. This is not surprising as organ donation embraces ‘many deeply personal, socially complex, and culturally ambiguous aspects of our humanity’ (O’Connell, 1996: 20). The act of organ donation therefore raises moral and ethical issues pertaining to how we come to define what the body is, how it should be treated and/or managed as well as who is the ‘rightful’ owner of the body.

More recently, NHSBT begins to appeal to the student population by setting up stalls at Freshers' Fairs around the country on an annual basis. In 2010, the campaign enjoyed record breaking success with an amazing 5,472 students signing up to join the NHS Organ Donor Register. The student population is particular important for NHSBT, particularly those who are about to start university (age 19-35). This is because they are more likely to be confronted with the request to join the donor registry when obtaining their driving licence or registering with a GP when attending university (Prottas, 1983). Besides, organs are normally derived from donors who are diagnosed as brain-stem-dead, most of whom are likely to be victims of accidents or suicide. The accident and suicide rate among young people are considerably higher than the other segment of the population. However, this group presents a significant challenge for NHSBT as they tend to give little thought to the possibility of death, and hence are not likely to consider organ donation. Due to such complexity and ambivalence, NHSBT would like to explore in greater depth student’s perceptions and fears surrounding organ donation.