Analysing your institution

This is one of a group of topics about developing a more comprehensive, multi-faceted understanding of your institution. This evidence can be used both to aid strategic planning and decision-making, and also to support the claims you may wish to make about your institution.

What this is

In this briefing note, we consider the role of surveys in improving the understanding of the institution.

Qualitative methods – as discussed in the guide 'Understanding your institution' – can tell you a huge amount about what matters to people, but they can give you a false picture of the prevalence and relative importance of issues. A survey approach can help you to put issues into context.

Why it's useful

Surveys are not always popular, but they can provide both an opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback, and a means for the leadership to access knowledge and experiences which might not otherwise come to their attention.

Getting feedback from a good proportion of any stakeholder group can make sure you are responding to the institution as a whole rather than the latest hot topic or the most forceful individuals.

This guide not only looks at why surveys might be useful but also at how to make them more successful in eliciting useful responses.

Making it work for you

1. Whose experiences do you want? Consider surveys for a whole range of stakeholders:

    - **Staff** can tell you what annoys them about the institution (and will almost certainly be motivated to do so, if you follow the tips in point 3, below) but they can also be asked to talk about the good things – the things they want to see more of – too.

    - **Students** see the institution from a different perspective than those employed in it. The experiences of students today – and the belief framework within which they interpret those experiences – are very different from those whose experience as a student was a decade or more ago. Students can tell you which institutions they regard as your natural competitors and why they chose you over them.

    - **Partners** can tell you what they expect from you and how well their expectations have been met. They can tell you whether they understand what your institution's objectives are and whether they find them compelling. Partners can tell you which other organisations they interact with and how you compare with them.

- **Governors** can tell you how close they feel to the organisation and whether they feel that they are getting the information and opportunities for interaction that they need to fulfil their roles. They can also tell you about the experience and expertise that they can bring to help direct and promote the institution.

Decide what information you want from each audience and draw up a plan for when, and how.

2. **Horses for courses**
As far as is possible, tailor the medium to the type of respondent: you might be able to get students to engage through a blog, but it's likely that a paper questionnaire or personal contact will work better with members of your governing body. Your communications department may have conducted research into communication preferences across these audiences, which will enable you to deliver a tailored survey medium.

3. **Improving the response rate:**

- *Put yourself in the respondents' shoes*: one reason for surveys getting a poor response is that the people designing them don't give enough thought to the relevance of the questions to the audience. We tend to think in terms of the questions that we want the answers to, rather than asking people for the information they might be interested in giving.

- *Little and often*: Short questionnaires take less effort and are more likely to be completed. Focus – don't be tempted by the 'while we're asking them this, let's ask about that, and that and that… ' approach. It only makes sense if you think it's your only chance to tap into their point of view. If you ask interesting questions and don't make excessive demands on time, you can go back later for more.

- *Variety adds interest*: use different media (e.g. postcard, internet, personal contact) and different formats (e.g. tick boxes, scales, open-ended questions).

- *Timing*: think about what else might be preoccupying your audience that might prevent them from participating in a survey at a particular time. If you can find a time when your survey is more likely to secure their attention you can then set a shorter deadline for responses. Leaving too long a deadline makes it too easy for people to think 'that can wait' and then forget about it altogether.

- *Provide feedback and communicate the results*: as soon as possible after the survey's end, make the results available to everyone who was invited to respond. If possible, send out interim results to encourage those who haven't yet responded, to do so.

- *Demonstrate that you've listened*: acting on the responses is one of the best ways to motivate people to respond in future. As a minimum, give feedback about where the issues raised sit within the institution's priorities. If possible, give respondents the opportunity to get involved in finding solutions to issues raised.

4. Improving the value of the responses

There is a real tension between the convenience of tick-box answers and the potential to find out things that you hadn't even considered by offering space for open-ended responses.

Tick boxes allow a questionnaire to be both answered and analysed quickly, minimising both the effort demanded of respondents and the time to get to a point of being able to act on the findings.

Open-ended responses are often poorly completed – either little is written or the meaning of what is written is unclear.

A way to get the best of both worlds is always to use qualitative methods, first, to define what issues, attitudes and behaviours you want to measure. You can use focus groups or team meetings, invite interest groups to identify topics, set up a blog to invite comment or scan blogs that already exist, such as http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/index.php. From these you can design a better tick-box format questionnaire, drawing up sets of answers that reflect the audience's interests and concerns.

Additional resources

Another project from HEFCE's LGM fund has produced a toolkit for complementing relatively infrequent, whole-institution staff surveys with single page surveys concerning current issues in a single or small number of departments. This enables institutions to "Take the Pulse" in a timely, relevant way and so respond to issues as they occur. See http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/pulse/ for further information.

AMOSSHE has developed a value and impact assessment toolkit which provides formats, guidance and worked examples of assessing the work of student services' contribution to the student experience. In doing so it also enables institutions to produce data which can be used to help understand students' views on their university experience.
http://www.vip.amosshe.org/

To improve the skills of your in-house market research staff, consider the professional development courses offered by the Market Research Society. See http://www.mrs.org.uk/training/index.htm for further information.

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Find out more

www.distinct.ac.uk has a growing resource section.

Get involved

If you have a case study, report, or other resource you would like to share with colleagues in the sector we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at:
contact@distinct.ac.uk

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