Understanding your institution

This is an introduction to a range of tools that you can use to help you to better understand your institution, from a broader and deeper perspective. Many of these tools are not only useful for eliciting information, but also for communicating information to other stakeholders in your organisation.

What this is

A key tenet for anyone seeking to understand their institution is that other people's views matter – 'perception is reality'. People who don't know an institution well, but who may be making decisions about whether they want to engage with it, will act on their perceptions of what it is. No matter how 'wrong' their perceptions may be, their actions will reflect those perceptions. So these tools show you ways in which you can see your institution from a wider range of perspectives.

In this briefing note, we have gathered together tools for gaining a qualitative understanding – insight into the 'why's' rather than a description of the 'what's'. Our other guides:
- 'Analysing your institution by survey'; and
- 'Supporting claims of distinctiveness'

Consider the role of more quantitative techniques. The greatest benefit comes from combining the results of a range of approaches.

The list of tools described here is not intended to be comprehensive, but it is intended to encourage consideration of a wider range of techniques than you might previously have used.

Why it's useful

A university is typically a large, diverse and complex organisation with many 'faces'. It is highly unlikely that any one person in the institution knows all of these faces and yet these are the aspects which your stakeholders interact with. Gaining a broader understanding than your own personal experience of an institution is important in being able to manage the way in which it is perceived by stakeholders.

Using the tools described may also help you to compile an evidence base for claims you may wish to make about your institution.

Making it work for you

1. **Consider the different viewpoints**

    Effectively, this involves creating a list of stakeholder types, e.g.:
    - Students – current
    - Staff
    - Partner organisations (e.g. schools, colleges, research partners, organisations/companies which have developed course content with you)

- Members of your governing body
- Influencers such as local government and your MP
- Alumni
- Students – potential
- Local residents

The views of all these groups are important to the success of an institution, but some are more difficult to assess than others. It is too easy to leave out the difficult ones but ignoring a group may mean that when you need their goodwill it isn't there.

2. **Expore the tools**

- *Projective techniques* – ways of discussing the choices that people make which avoid the rational justification that occurs when direct questioning is used. If you ask someone directly why they chose University X, they will give 'good' reasons – reasons that are acceptable and put them in a good light – when in fact their reasons may be much more subtle and complex. Projective techniques can access that deeper understanding. They include personification, analogy, association, collage, and psychodrawing.

- *Means-ends / Attributional analyses* – detailed questioning techniques used to examine the reasons for, and values associated with, behaviours.

- See: http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2009/07/laddering-a-research-interview-technique-for-uncovering-core-values.php for an introduction to the 'laddering' technique used to link means to ends. For an academic paper describing a case study use of attributional analysis, see Silvester, J., Anderson, N. R., Patterson F. (1999) Organizational culture change: An inter-group attributional analysis, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology 72 (1) 1-23*

- *Storytelling* – stories can express truths about an organisation in a more compelling and memorable way than almost any other form of communication. They can bind people together through the recognition of shared values and experiences. See our briefing note http://www.distinct.ac.uk/resources/resourceindex/storytelling

- *Self-assessment workshop* – a workshop approach to developing a shared understanding of the attributes of an organisation that are genuinely distinctive. We will be issuing a briefing note on this approach soon.

- *Sense-of-place work* – eliciting what is special about a place from people who live in, visit or work there often uses a combination of projective techniques and storytelling. Pathways is a consultancy that specialises in this type of work and their website has a gallery of examples of how they get to the heart of what is special about a place: visit http://pathwaysconsultancy.wordpress.com/consulting/ and explore their links to clients, which show how their work is used.

3. **Match techniques to stakeholder types**

    Consider the different approaches available for gaining an understanding of perceptions of the university. Some of the tools are more suitable to, and / or more feasible to use with, particular stakeholder types.

    For example, it would be easier to organise ways of using Sense of Place techniques with staff and current students (e.g. through an on-campus exhibition), whereas a short exercise using projective techniques is easier to incorporate into a meeting of the governing body.

    Surveys may be easier to implement with far-flung alumni and the huge numbers of potential students or local residents. Alternatively, residents may be pleased to be invited onto campus to discuss experiences of the university in a storytelling format.

The deeper issues of the underlying beliefs and perceptions of key people in partner organisations may be better handled through one-to-one interviews using a means-ends or attributional analysis approach. The self-assessment matrix workshop is best suited to a meeting of senior managers responsible for developing institutional strategy, convened specifically for the purpose.

4. **Assimilate the learning**

    When you have collated the views of the different stakeholder groups, here are some questions to consider:

    Are there discrepancies between the views of the different groups?
    It is likely that those who have more direct experience of the institution have more knowledge of it; but are the perceptions of some groups at odds with those of others? The important thing at this point is not to seek to justify the discrepancies but to start to develop a strategy for addressing misconceptions and for changing the things that have brought about unwanted perceptions.

    What is likely to be the effect of misconceptions?
    Some perceptions – or the perceptions of some groups or individuals – will have a greater effect on the success of the institution than others. It is important to evaluate this and prioritise the actions you need to

take, based on impact, not on ease of resolution.

Bear in mind that beliefs can be harder to change than behaviours – for one thing, they are less obvious. If someone has had a negative experience, it may take a number of positive ones to overcome the effect. They are likely to give less weight to words from a source seen as having a vested interest than to the evidence of their own observations and experience. Furthermore, there is an innate tendency in humans to register evidence which supports their views while overlooking evidence which contradicts them.

5. Be realistic

It's important to bear in mind that while you can analyse and target people's perceptions, and execute a strong communications strategy, you will never have control over people's perceptions of your institution. What's more, the rise of social media means that views or incidents which might previously have been known only to those involved, and a few friends and colleagues, can 'go global' in hours and wreak havoc with your plans. The important thing is to make sure that you aren't the last people to know that you have a problem.

Additional resources

This link contains a really useful set of questions to ask in order to begin to understand the various aspects of your institution's culture.
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newSTR_90.htm

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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