Getting the most out of PRES at your institution

By Gosia Kulej, Project Co-ordinator (Surveys), The Higher Education Academy

1. Institutional questions

PRES core questionnaire is pretty extensive but generic at the same time. You can 'personalize' PRES questionnaire by adding your own, institution specific questions. Institutional questions appear between core PRES questions and demographic questions. You can add as many questions as you wish but please keep in mind the overall length of the questionnaire.

'Departmental question' was introduced in PRES 2008. This is the only demographic question that you can edit by mapping your departmental/faculty/school structure. This way you ask students which department they belong to and it makes it much easier to disaggregate results by school at analysis stage. This question cannot be compared with other HEIs due to different departmental names and structures.

2. Response rate

The higher response rate the better as it means that you know opinion of more of your students. Usually the first to reply to the survey are those, who have something negative to say. Then, those who feel very positive about their experience and those, who reply the last are more or less content with their experience. The average response rate to PRES 2008 was 29% which is very good considering the method (online survey only) and resources (think NSS). Ideally, 50% is desirable.

Ways, in which you can improve your response rate:

- 'warming up' your sample
- make sure that URL is correct and easy to remember
- email reminders
- letter to part time students
- incentives
- make schools to work with you (weekly rankings)

Institutional example: Northumbria University (Tim Baxter)

3. PRES data in BOS

Bristol Online Surveys [BOS] is the survey vehicle. In order to run PRES you need institutional account that can be arranged directly from Bristol University. There is a license fee for using BOS. It is a minimum of £250 + VAT for PRES only or £500 + VAT for a full basic license (unlimited number of surveys over 12 month period)

Once survey is live you can see your institutional results coming in real time (that enables you to control for response rate and take action if it is too low). You have full access to your institutional results at all times.

Not only you have access to your institutional results but also to a national aggregate which is active within two weeks form the start date. This allows you to see at a glance how your institutional results compare with national average. This feature, once set up is available to you all the time, even after the survey is closed.

The national aggregate includes results from all HEIs taking part in PRES in the current year. Differences of **5 percentage points** can be considered as substantial differences between results.
On average scores, difference of **0.2** or more can be considered substantial.

4. Benchmarking Clubs

Apart from the national aggregate it is possible to compare your results with smaller aggregates of results from certain HEIs called benchmarking clubs (B-clubs).
Participation in B-clubs, alike in national aggregate, is voluntary and you need to clearly express you want to be a part of it. In 2008 there were five B-clubs (Russell Group, 1994 Group, Pre-92, Post-92, Small and specialist). In 2009 the same B-clubs will be available and we anticipate one more – Scotland.

If you decide to be a part of one B-club you will be able to compare your results with all 5 B-clubs. For example, if your institution belongs to 1994 group your data will feed into 1994 Group B-club but you will also be able to compare your data with Russell Group aggregate etc. Institutions that do not wish to be a part of any B-club will have access to national aggregate only and their data will not be used in B-clubs.

5. Analysis in BOS

Apart from comparing your PRES results you can also conduct a range of simple statistical analysis using BOS software. You can look at individual items but also at scales – groups of questions (sections 1-7 in the questionnaire). Single questions have proven to be more useful to HEIs but scale analysis is a good way of presenting very top line results.

For more sophisticated analysis you can export **your** PRES data into excel or other packages as .csv file.

The great advantage of BOS is that you can do simple and user friendly reports very quickly.

6. Sharing PRES results

You probably would like to share your institutional results at very high level (PVC, VC), graduate school level, school/departmental level and with students.

High level report needs to be very short, top line results only together with national figures, easy read.

Each school should receive the report on their own results (this is where departmental question comes in handy). You can apply filter in BOS to display results for a certain school only then print the report or send it via email as website. You can use an additional option in BOS (£300 + VAT) that will allow you to create individual BOS accounts for each Head of Department as well as make sure that each of them can see only their departmental results. This is easy option but incurs additional cost.
Similarly, these departmental reports can then be passed on to students via email.

Institutional example: University of Newcastle

7. Engaging students

You can engage students by conducting another survey by Student Union to follow up on PRES results. Example question: PRES survey says that 80% of you are satisfied with supervision. Do you agree with this statement?

Institutional example: Heriot-Watt University

8. Triangulating PRES data

PRES is a large scale quantitative survey which means that it can indicate areas in which you are successful and areas which could be improved. PRES will not give you definite answers on what is being done well and what needs to change. You can run a focus group with your students in order to discuss PRES results in more depth. Also, some answers can be found in free text questions.

Institutional example: Bangor University

9. Taking PRES results further

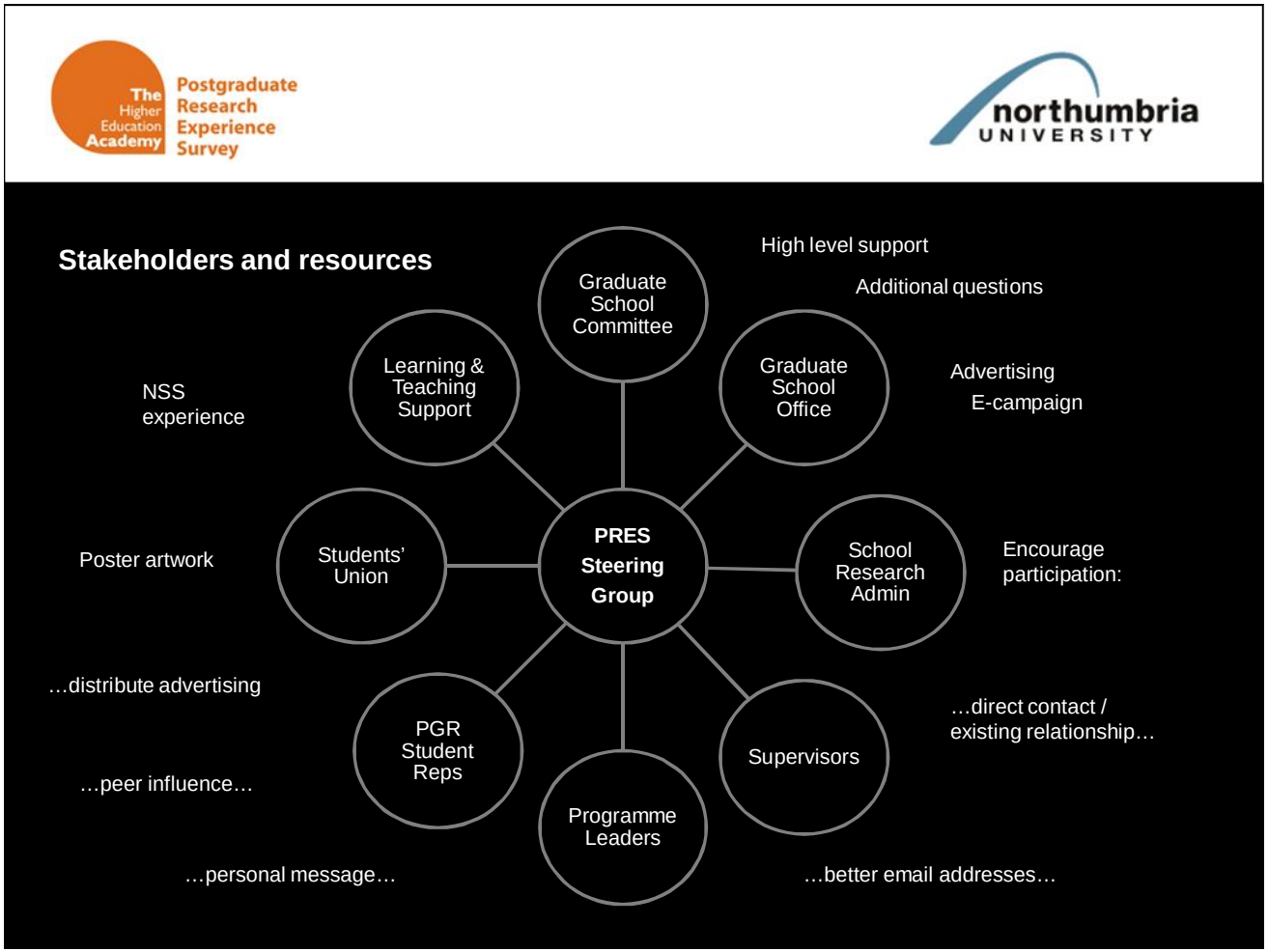
The biggest challenge with surveys is to actually act on the results. Usually survey results will not be a shock. You will probably be already aware of areas that could be improved. Survey can deliver a proof that can often trigger a specific action towards change for better.
It is advisable to actually use PRES results 'in practice' for example include them in policies, operational plans, action plans etc. If students commented lower on facilities a good action plan would be to increase number of

workstations or order new volumes for the library etc. Certain people should be made responsible to follow the action plan and report on progress.

Changes that are effect of the survey results (and more) should be clearly communicated to students to show that their answers are taken seriously.

10. Academy support

The Academy advised by HEIs and PRES steering group decided to move PRES towards a two year cycle. The next PRES survey (after 2009) will take place in 2011. We wish to use the 'gap' year to bring together all PRES institutions and share effective practice in using survey evidence to enhance students' experience.
One step is Survey conference (former NSS annual conference) that will take place on the 2nd of June 2009 in Nottingham.



Courtesy of Tim Brooks