



Student Union Surveys - Delivering real benefits to Student Unions



An assessment by Jim Gardner – General Manager, Kent Union

Kent Union has been using the online survey service provided by Student Union Surveys since February 2005. In that time we have conducted six surveys.

Prior to using this service we were conducting paper based surveys. The benefits from the online service have been significant; indeed, the service has already paid for itself commercially as I will explain later. The service is very easy to use. We can build and launch surveys quickly and see the results in real-time as they come in, fully analysed and consolidated. Typically, we get most of the responses we need within three days. Thus, the results can be reported and discussed whilst the underlying business issues are still in people's minds.

Of particular value to us has been the responses to open questions. Students tend to give short answers when stopped to complete paper surveys but, because they can answer an online survey when they want to, from the comfort and anonymity of their rooms, we have noticed that the free text answers have been longer, more thoughtful and helpful compared with paper surveys. We have never previously had such good information, and it is so readily accessible from the online survey system.

In my role as General Manager, I have to ensure that our members have a democratic voice but, at the same time, set a strategic course for the Union that recognises the need to generate income to provide the goods and services required by the students. Setting pricing levels for the shops, bars, events and other services can be difficult, trying to meet members' expectations. There is a risk that one group of students could be cross-subsidising another, as we discovered from the results of one of our surveys.

Here is an example of how we have benefited commercially from our research. Previously we had assumed that the greatest demand for food would be for micro-wave meals. From our research we discovered that a high proportion of students have their own hot-plate cooking equipment in their rooms. In response to this we have increased the range of fresh fruit, vegetables and other food sold in the shop – which has been a great success. We ensure there is always one low cost food item. We have also improved signage in the shop as a result of student feedback. Shop sales have increased.

Whilst our surveys generate useful ideas for improving what we do, much of what we learn from our research is what not to do! After every survey we hold a focus group to confirm the findings and develop actions plans. Subsequently we run 'walk through' audits to ensure that actions have been implemented successfully. Our surveys and action plans are coordinated to ensure comprehensive coverage of the work of our Union.

A further benefit we have gained from using Student Union Surveys has been the personal development of our research staff. There has been a strong coaching element in the support we have received and our in-house skills have improved greatly. The online survey system is very powerful but easy to use. Because we can tailor the surveys visually with our logo and other images, they make us look much more professional.

We will definitely be using Student Union Surveys for our future research. The service has already paid for itself and we intend to expand our research activity.

**Jim Gardner,
General Manager, Kent Union
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www.studentunionsurveys.com
Contact Hedley Basford, 01227 768800