



RESEARCH PAPER

After the survey

What UK universities and colleges do with what their staff tell them, and why so few staff believe it will make a difference.

SUMMARY

Most staff surveys stop at the report

Universities and colleges put real effort into asking staff how they feel. The questionnaires are thoughtful and response rates are often good. What happens next is far weaker, and staff can tell.

We read the staff survey questionnaires, results, action plans and "you said, we did" updates that UK universities and colleges have published or released to us under the Freedom of Information Act. We coded every action in every plan: who owned it, when it was due, how success would be judged, and whether a result was ever reported. This paper sets out what we found.

1 in 3

staff, at the typical university, believe action will be taken as a result of their survey. In no university we looked at did more than half.

1 in 25

actions in published plans has a named owner, a future date and a way of telling whether it worked.

Under 1 in 10

actions is taken at team level, where most people experience work. Three in five are organisation-wide.

1 in 28

actions ever reports a later result, so most plans give no way of knowing what worked.

Five findings

1. Few staff expect anything to change. Belief that the survey will lead to action is one of the lowest scores in the sector.

2. Action plans rarely say who, when or how we will know. Most actions have no owner, and almost none has a measure of its own.

3. Results stay at the top. Plans are pitched at the whole organisation, and few institutions describe results reaching individual line managers.

4. Comparisons rarely compare like with like. Almost every institution words its questions differently, and even "engagement" is calculated in several different ways.

5. The loop is rarely closed. Updates report what was done and stay silent on the rest, and the same priorities come back year after year.

FINDING 1

Few staff expect anything to change

Many staff surveys ask some version of "I believe action will be taken as a result of this survey". It is the most direct test of whether staff trust the process. At the typical university, **only about a third of staff agree**. The highest score we found was a little over four in ten, and no university reached half.

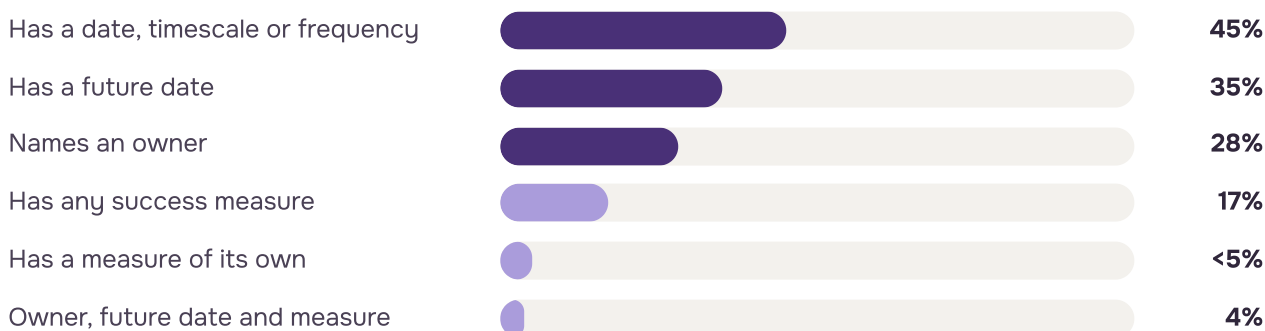
It sits among the very lowest results in the whole sector. Only confidence that change is well managed scores lower. Related questions tell the same story: about two in five staff believe their ideas will be listened to.

This matters for more than morale. In one institution's own analysis, staff who believed action would follow scored about twenty percentage points higher on engagement than colleagues who did not. When staff stop believing, fewer reply next time, and those who do are more guarded.

FINDING 2

Action plans rarely say who, when or how we will know

We coded each action in the plans institutions published or released. Most are sincere and sensible. Few are specific enough to be delivered and checked.



Where a plan does include a measure, nine times in ten it is a single line copied across every action, and most often it is simply "we will keep surveying". **Nearly two in five actions have no owner, no date and no measure at all**. About three in four plans give no way of telling whether any action worked.

Several institutions also told us that local action plans are kept by each school or department and are "not held centrally". In those cases the organisation itself cannot see what its areas have committed to.

FINDING 3

Results stay at the top

Staff experience work in teams, but survey responses are mostly pitched at the whole organisation. **Three in five actions are organisation-wide**, about three in ten are for a faculty, school or directorate, and **fewer than one in ten are for a team**. Around three in ten plans contain only organisation-wide actions.

The most common kind of action is communication: new newsletters, leadership briefings, a refreshed internal communications strategy. These are worthwhile, but they are rarely what staff raised in the first place.

Few institutions describe results reaching individual line managers. About two in five say nothing about who sees results, and only a small minority of the rest describe results going down to team or line-manager level. Rules on anonymity are just as unclear: **about three in four institutions do not say how small a group can be before its results are hidden**. Where a number is given, it ranges from three to ten responses.

A manager who cannot see their own team's results, or sees them only as part of a large directorate, has little to act on. A specific problem in one team disappears into an average.

FINDING 4

Comparisons rarely compare like with like

Every institution wants to know how it compares. In practice, comparison is much harder than it looks.

Different questions

About 95% of question wordings in university surveys are used by only one institution. Even on common topics such as pride, workload or senior leadership, the most popular wording is shared by only about one in eight of the universities that ask about it. Scales differ too: four, five, seven and eleven points are all in use.

Different measures

The headline "engagement index" is calculated in at least six different ways, from a percentage favourable to a score out of ten to a statistical factor score. Where institutions say who supplies their comparison, it is most often their survey provider's own client base, so the benchmark changes when the provider does.

Insisting on identical wording and scales halves the number of questions that can fairly be compared. A benchmark that ignores these differences can look precise while saying very little.

The loop is rarely closed

Only about one action in 28 ever reports a later result, and fewer than half of those are a survey figure. Only about one plan in eight reports a later survey or pulse result that it ties back to what it set out to improve.

Where we could set a plan beside its later update, the update reported what had been done and stayed silent on the rest. Promises that were dropped or changed were almost never labelled as such. In institutions with plans across several years, the same priority often came back again and again, with workload the most common.

Staff-facing "you said, we did" updates are a minority of what institutions publish. When staff are not told what happened, the most reasonable conclusion for them to draw is that nothing did.

Five practices that close the gap

- 1 **Put results in managers' hands.** Give every manager their own team's results, protected by a clear and published minimum group size, so issues can be found where they happen.
- 2 **Fewer actions, fully specified.** Three actions with an owner, a date and a measure of their own will do more than twenty good intentions.
- 3 **Measure each action against the question that prompted it.** Keep the wording and scale steady, and use a short pulse to check progress before the next annual survey.
- 4 **Benchmark honestly.** Compare only questions that are worded and scored alike, say how many institutions are behind each figure, and show where the data comes from.
- 5 **Tell staff what changed, and what has not changed yet.** Report against the original promises, including those that were dropped and why.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

How we did this

We collected the staff survey documents that UK universities and colleges have published, or released in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002, during 2026. They include questionnaires, results, reports, action plans and staff updates.

Each action in each plan was coded for its level, its owner, its timing, any measure of success and any later result, and every coded action was checked against the text it came from. Sector figures are medians across institutions, using each institution's latest full survey, and are shown only where at least five institutions contribute.

Notes. Figures are rounded and given as proportions. Action figures cover universities, specialist institutions and further education colleges together; question and benchmark figures cover universities. The documents are those institutions chose to publish or were able to release, so they are not a random sample of the sector, and institutions with weaker processes may be less likely to hold or release plans. No institution or individual is named in this paper.

About Open Floor

Open Floor is a staff survey and experience platform for UK universities and public services, made by Ridgeway Civic. It was designed around the gaps in this paper: team results for every manager with anonymity built in, actions with an owner, a date and a measure, benchmarks that compare only like with like, and "you said, we did" updates drafted from what was actually done.

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