

Planning for impact: Norland University of Early Childhood's PAQ pilot and the value of early preparation

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Introduction

Norland University of Early Childhood, a specialist higher education provider with a long-standing reputation for excellence in early years education and care, participated in the PAQ pilot to better understand the experiences and expectations of its incoming students. With small cohorts and a strong focus on student support, Norland was particularly interested in how the PAQ could complement and enhance its existing approaches to gathering feedback.

Reflecting on the experience, the implementation was described as straightforward overall, supported by clear guidance and resources. As one colleague noted, *“we felt well supported by the team running the questionnaire,”* allowing Norland to engage with the pilot despite joining at a relatively late stage.

Context

Norland administered the PAQ as a self-completion activity outside of formal teaching, promoting it primarily via email. Due to the timing of its participation, joining the pilot after another institution withdrew, Norland had limited time to plan its approach or explore a wider range of engagement methods.

This timing also coincided with a particularly busy period for incoming students. The survey was deployed pre-enrolment, when students were already receiving a significant volume of important information as they prepared to begin their studies. As a result, careful consideration had to be given to avoid overload. *“We didn’t want to overwhelm them at a potentially already challenging time”* the team reflected, highlighting the balance required between gathering valuable insight and maintaining a positive early student experience.

Despite these constraints, the questionnaire was accessible and participation was achieved at a moderate level, providing a useful dataset to inform initial reflections.

Outcomes

The PAQ findings were actively reviewed and shared across the institution, forming part of discussions at an Academic Board and informing broader considerations around student feedback. Reports generated from the data, both overall analyses and benchmarking comparisons, were disseminated to senior leadership, academic teams and support staff.

The findings largely reinforced existing institutional understanding of students' needs, while also surfacing areas that warranted further attention. This alignment provided reassurance around current support approaches, alongside an opportunity to refine them.

One of the most significant outcomes was the establishment of a working group to review how feedback is collected across Norland. While this work was already underway, participation in the PAQ strengthened and underpinned the group's activities, prompting further reflection on survey volume, overlap and effectiveness. The remit of this working group will be to consider how the PAQ may be integrated into a more streamlined and cohesive feedback system, potentially reducing duplication and strengthening the evidence base used to inform decision-making.

Reflections

The pilot highlighted both the value of the PAQ and the importance of careful planning to maximise its impact. A key challenge was timing: late entry into the pilot limited preparation, while delivering the survey during a busy pre-enrolment period risked competing with other essential communications. The length of the survey was also noted as a potential barrier to engagement, particularly when student capacity is already stretched.

However, these challenges have helped to clarify a clear set of improvements for future delivery. With greater lead-in time, Norland anticipates being able to take a more structured and visible approach, potentially introducing supported drop-in sessions where students can complete the questionnaire with guidance, and broadening communication methods beyond email.

There is also an intention to involve a wider range of colleagues in both promoting the survey and acting on its findings, ensuring that insight is more fully embedded across the institution. Alongside this, the newly formed working group will play a key role in aligning the PAQ with existing feedback mechanisms and strengthening how data is translated into action.

These reflections point to a strong commitment to learning from the pilot and highlight that the real purpose of this work is to support and encourage student wellbeing and success.

We were delighted to participate in the PAQ pilot, which has yielded significant insights into the experiences of our latest cohort. While some data points confirmed our existing assumptions, the findings also highlighted several nuanced trends we hadn't previously expected. The resulting report has been exceptionally well-received across the institution, and we are already moving to action these findings to ensure we are continuing to provide the highest level of support and encouragement for our students.

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