

From insight to intervention: Using PAQ data to deliver targeted student support at Portsmouth

Dr Alex Bradley, Senior Student Outcomes Manager, University of Portsmouth

Introduction

The University of Portsmouth is a modern, coastal UK university with roots dating back to 1869 and university status since 1992. With a diverse student population of over 25,000, it is known for its strong focus on employability, student support and applied learning, alongside excellent teaching and impactful research.

To explore early student experience and better understand incoming cohorts, the University of Portsmouth piloted the Pre/post Arrival Academic Questionnaire in September 2025 as part of the OFS-funded collaboration between Advance HE, UEL and Jisc.

“The platform itself was really straightforward to use, and the guidance sessions helped us set everything up quickly.”

The PAQ formed part of a wider effort to strengthen insight into student needs and ensure support services could respond early and effectively.

Context

The PAQ was delivered during induction and made available for students to complete independently outside of class. To encourage participation, the team used a mix of communication channels including email campaigns, social media posts and staff promotion through personal tutors and support teams.

“We saw clear spikes in responses after reminders went out, particularly through the online platform and on social media.”

However, implementation took place alongside other institutional surveys, which meant that the response window was shortened to two weeks. There was also limited opportunity to embed the questionnaire within timetabled teaching.

“A key challenge was timing, another survey launched at the same time, so we had to reduce our window, and we didn’t have appetite for in-class completion”.

Despite this, collaboration across teams was a strong enabler. Marketing and social media colleagues supported promotion, while internal stakeholders were already considering how they might use the data.

Outcomes

Although overall response rates were lower than hoped, the PAQ still generated valuable insights that were actively used across the institution.

Targeted student support

Several services used the data to proactively reach students:

Careers team contacted students who expressed interest in finding part-time work.

Disability services cross-referenced responses with existing records and reached out to students who may have previously received support but were not currently known to the university services.

“We tried to ensure no one slipped through the gaps, especially students who might need additional support, but who had not yet engaged.”

Internal insight and dissemination

The survey team produced concise summary reports which were shared with senior leadership and cascaded through faculties. Findings were also shared with key service areas including finance, careers and student support teams.

Closing the feedback loop with students

Importantly, the university made a deliberate effort to close the feedback loop by sharing headline findings with students through tailored undergraduate and postgraduate communications. These updates drew out key themes from the data, including students' motivations for study, such as subject interest and career aspirations; their most common concerns, including the cost of living and adjusting to academic expectations, and the strengths they identified in themselves, notably, curiosity and determination.

This approach helped to create a sense of dialogue rather than a one-way data collection exercise.

“Students responded positively to seeing the big-picture results, it showed that their input was valued”.

Reflections

Reflecting on the pilot, several lessons emerged about how to strengthen both engagement and impact.

What worked well

Several aspects of the pilot worked particularly well. Strong cross-team collaboration, bringing together marketing, social media and student services, helped to support both promotion and follow-up activity. The use of incentives, combined with timely reminders, also played an important role in encouraging participation and maintaining momentum

throughout the questionnaire window. The early use of data enabled the university to move quickly from insight to action, triggering targeted interventions to support students where it was most needed.

Challenges and limitations

The pilot was not without its challenges. The questionnaire window was compressed due to competing institutional activity, limiting the time available for students to engage. In addition, the absence of in-class delivery meant the questionnaire relied heavily on students completing it independently, which likely contributed to lower response rates. Finally, there were limited mechanisms in place for consistently sharing insights across all levels of the institution, making it more difficult to ensure findings were fully embedded in practice.

While these challenges shaped the initial delivery, they also highlighted a number of clear and actionable improvements. Looking ahead, the team identified several ways to strengthen implementation including extending the questionnaire window, introducing a wider range of smaller incentives to encourage participation, and increasing visibility through more tangible, on-campus promotion such as posters. There was also a recognition that engaging stakeholders earlier in the process would help ensure that insights are more consistently translated into action. Importantly, embedding the PAQ within in-class activity, with senior leadership support, was seen as a key opportunity to significantly boost response rates.

Taken together, these reflections provide a strong foundation for future delivery, and the team is keen to build on this learning through continued participation in Wave 2 of the pilot, using it as an opportunity to test some of these changes and further enhance impact.

Advice for other institutions

- + Secure senior leadership support early, particularly for timetabled delivery
- + Allow sufficient time for promotion and completion
- + Plan in advance how findings will be shared and acted upon
- + You need the time, resource and relationships in place, not just to run the questionnaire but to turn insights into action.

The University of Portsmouth's experience highlights both the practical challenges and the clear value of implementing the PAQ. While response rates were constrained by timing and delivery limitations, the pilot demonstrated how even modest engagement can generate actionable insights, particularly when institutions are prepared to act quickly and collaboratively on what students share.

Contact us

All enquiries

Email: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

Advance HE helps HE institutions be the best they can be, by unlocking the potential of their people.

We are a member-led, sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education for staff, students and society. We are experts in higher education with a particular focus on enhancing teaching and learning, effective governance, leadership development and tackling inequalities through our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work.

Our strategic goals to enhance confidence and trust in HE, address inequalities, promote inclusion and advance education to meet the evolving needs of students and society, support the work of our members and the HE sector.

We deliver our support through professional development programmes and events, Fellowships, awards, student surveys and research, providing strategic change and consultancy services and through membership (including accreditation of teaching and learning, equality charters, knowledge and resources).

Advance HE is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031. Company limited by guarantee registered in Ireland no. 703150. Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946. Registered Office: Advance HE, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom.

© 2026 Advance HE. All rights reserved.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of Advance HE. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the copyright owner. Such permission will normally be granted for non-commercial, educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given. The Advance HE logo should not be used without our permission.

To request copies of this report in large print or in a different format, please contact Advance HE: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

advance-he.ac.uk

in **X** **f** @AdvanceHE