

Embedding early insight in complex environments: SOAS's PAQ pilot and the challenge of engagement

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Introduction

SOAS University of London is a specialist institution with a global focus, known for its expertise in the study of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. With a diverse and internationally oriented student body, the university places strong emphasis on understanding student backgrounds, expectations, and transitions into higher education. The PAQ pilot offered an opportunity to build on this by gathering structured insight at the earliest stages of the student journey.

The first year of implementation was a learning experience. While the questionnaire itself was valuable, identifying how and when to embed it effectively within an already busy institutional landscape proved more complex. As one colleague noted, **“it was tricky to identify when best to roll the questionnaire out and how to get department and programme-level buy-in.”**

Context

SOAS adopted a mixed approach to administering the PAQ, making it available both pre-arrival and during induction, with students completing it independently outside of formal teaching. Promotion was delivered through multiple channels, including email, the virtual learning environment, staff encouragement, and student-facing communications.

The most effective engagement occurred early in the process. Integrating the PAQ into initial pre-arrival communications led to a noticeable increase in responses. *“The initial pre-arrival email appeared to work the best”* with participation rising shortly after it was sent.

However, sustaining engagement beyond this point proved challenging. Once students arrived on campus, competing priorities, particularly during Welcome Week, limited both staff capacity to promote the questionnaire and students' ability to engage with it. The framing of the survey as pre-arrival also meant that its relevance diminished over time, making it harder to encourage completion after the first few weeks.

In addition, securing buy-in from both academic and professional services colleagues at key points in the student journey proved difficult, particularly within a crowded and fast-paced induction period.

Outcomes

Despite lower than anticipated response rates, the PAQ generated insights that have already begun to inform institutional discussions and planning. Findings were reviewed by

the Access, Experience and Success team and shared across key governance groups, including the Student Experience and Outcomes Committee and Senior Leadership Team.

The data has contributed to ongoing reflection on how best to support students during their transition into university, particularly in relation to study skills and fostering a sense of belonging. While concrete actions are still being developed, the insights are feeding directly into planning for future Welcome Week activities and the 2026 intake.

The findings have also highlighted differences between student groups. In particular, variations between international and UK postgraduate students in their preparedness for academic life and understanding of expectations have provided a useful prompt for more targeted support approaches.

More broadly, the PAQ has helped to deepen staff understanding of students' experiences and expectations. As noted, **“the findings are proving useful for staff to consider changes to their welcome activities and how best to support students based on their circumstances, hopes and fears.”**

However, the timing of the data meant it was more difficult to demonstrate impact to students during this first cycle highlighting the importance of closing the feedback loop more effectively in future iterations.

Reflections

The pilot surfaced a number of key challenges, particularly around timing, engagement, and institutional alignment. Delivering the survey during a busy pre-arrival and induction period meant it often competed with more immediate priorities for both students and staff. Securing programme-level ownership and embedding the survey more meaningfully within academic structures also emerged as a critical factor in driving participation.

At the same time, these challenges have provided a clear direction for future development. There is a strong emphasis on strengthening engagement with academic departments earlier in the process, ensuring the PAQ is embedded within programme-level pre-arrival activities rather than positioned as a standalone exercise.

The team is also considering a shorter, more focused questionnaire window, paired with a more coordinated promotional effort, to create a clearer sense of priority and momentum. Earlier closure of the questionnaire is being explored as a way to enable more timely analysis and action, supporting both staff engagement and student visibility of impact. Looking ahead, there is a clear commitment to building on the first year's learning. As the questionnaire becomes more embedded within institutional processes, there is optimism that it can play a stronger role not only in generating insight but in shaping early student experience in a more visible and responsive way.

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