

Turning insight into action: Southampton Solent University's experience of embedding the PAQ

Charon Tsang, Evaluation and Insight Manager, Southampton Solent University

Introduction

Southampton Solent University is a modern university with a strong focus on applied learning, employability and widening participation. Serving a diverse student population, the institution places significant emphasis on understanding student experiences and using evidence to inform both academic and support provision. Participation in the PAQ pilot provided an opportunity to gather insights into incoming students and explore how these could be used to enhance future planning and student support.

While the university recognised the value of the data generated through the PAQ, implementation came with a number of practical challenges. These included securing institution-wide engagement, accommodating the survey within existing priorities, and encouraging participation in a relatively lengthy questionnaire. Nevertheless, the pilot provided valuable learning about how student insight can be gathered and used effectively across the institution.

Context

The PAQ was primarily administered through a combination of in-class delivery and self-completion outside scheduled teaching. Promotion relied heavily on staff engagement, particularly through course teams and teaching staff, who were encouraged to support survey completion and communicate its value to students.

The most successful approach involved in-class sessions where students were given dedicated time to complete the survey. These sessions consistently achieved stronger response rates than courses where completion was left to students independently.

However, achieving this level of engagement across all programmes proved difficult. Allocating up to 30 minutes of teaching time to survey completion was not always feasible, particularly given concerns about the survey length and competing academic priorities. Timing also created challenges given the need for enrolment data to be finalised before survey circulation.

Outcomes

Although response rates were lower than hoped, the university was able to generate a substantial dataset that informed institutional discussions and future planning. As the data

became available after enrolment, its primary value was in shaping longer-term improvements rather than informing immediate support interventions.

The findings were shared widely through institutional governance structures. A formal PAQ report was presented to the Student Experience Committee, bringing together Deputy Deans and Heads of Professional Services to review the findings and discuss potential actions. In addition, detailed data summaries were distributed across the university, including institutional-level, departmental, and student subgroup analyses.

Several teams have already begun using the findings to inform future planning. For example, library services have drawn on the data to shape future workshops and support activities, particularly around study organisation and perseverance. The findings highlighted areas of strength in the University's appeal to prospective students. Industry links, employment prospects and Open Day experiences were identified as stronger attractions for Solent students than for their sector peers. This provides further confidence in the University's continued emphasis on practice-led and industry-focused approaches, while reinforcing the value of efforts to provide a welcoming and inclusive Open Day experience.

At the same time, the findings challenged some existing assumptions and identified opportunities for improvement. Students were less likely than their sector peers to identify placement opportunities as a reason for choosing Solent, prompting reflection on how placement opportunities are communicated through marketing and recruitment activity.

The survey also provided valuable insights into the experiences of different student groups. Analysis highlighted variations in students' motivations, expectations and feelings of belonging, helping the university identify areas where support and engagement strategies may need to be tailored more effectively. These included differences in financial pressures, demand for different types of academic support across departments, social needs, and personal goals among students from diverse backgrounds and protected characteristic groups.

These insights directly support the University's mission to place students at the centre of their learning experience, enabling a more informed and responsive approach to meeting diverse student needs. By better understanding these differences, the University can use the findings to inform strategic planning and continue to deliver tailored, targeted and inclusive support that reflects students' individual circumstances, learning needs and aspirations, helping every student to engage, develop and succeed.

Reflections

The pilot demonstrated both the potential and value of the PAQ and the importance of securing institutional engagement from the outset. Several elements worked particularly well. The survey itself required relatively little administrative resource to implement, and the supporting materials provided clear explanations of how the resulting data could be used to enhance the student experience.

As noted by the team, **“the materials provided by the PAQ team offer a clear overview of how the data can be used to enhance the student journey.”**

At the same time, the pilot highlighted several areas that could strengthen future delivery. The survey length was frequently raised as a concern by staff, particularly where completion depended upon valuable classroom time. There was also a recognition that earlier and more targeted communication with academic and professional services colleagues would help secure broader support and improve response rates. Presentations of the survey at departmental meetings and wider use of course leader networks were identified as opportunities for future implementation.

The university also reflected on the importance of planning ahead. Ensuring that student data, communications and institutional support structures are in place before the start of the academic year would enable a more coordinated approach and reduce implementation challenges. As one reflection highlighted, successful delivery requires engagement from across the institution, from Heads of Services and Deans through to Course Leaders responsible for supporting participation.

Looking ahead, there is a strong sense that the PAQ has the potential to become a more influential tool within the university's evidence and planning processes. Future aspirations include wider dissemination of findings, improved data visualisation through dashboards, and stronger integration of PAQ insights into institutional decision-making. While many actions arising from the data remain at the planning stage, the pilot has already demonstrated the value of capturing students' perspectives early and using those insights to inform future improvements.

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Email: enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

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