

From reflection to intervention: How UCEN Manchester used the PAQ to support student success

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Introduction

UCEN Manchester, part of the Learning Trainign Employment (LTE) group, is a higher education provider with a strong focus on widening participation, student support, and career-focused learning. Serving a diverse student community, the institution places significant emphasis on understanding students' needs early and ensuring appropriate support is available throughout their transition into higher education.

The PAQ aligned closely with this approach. From the outset, the implementation process was described as straightforward, supported by strong collaboration between the project partners and the use of the Jisc platform. Importantly, the institution saw the questionnaire not simply as a mechanism for gathering data, but as a tool for understanding students' expectations, concerns and support needs early in their academic journey.

The ability to share findings quickly with tutors and support teams helped to *“remove the guesswork”* about what students expected, wanted and needed from their HE experience.

Context

The PAQ was launched during Welcome Week and remained open until October Reading Week. Rather than being delivered as a standalone survey, it was embedded within timetabled Personal Tutorial sessions, giving students dedicated time to complete it while allowing tutors to reinforce its purpose and value. Students who missed these sessions were encouraged to participate through additional promotion or social media and through the Students' Union.

A key feature of UCEN Manchester's approach was the strong institutional buy-in secured from the outset. Senior leaders actively supported participation, while Programme Leaders, tutors and support teams were all involved in promoting the questionnaire and using its findings. This whole-institution commitment helped create high visibility and signalled to students that their responses were valued.

The most successful form of promotion proved to be direct encouragement from academic staff during taught sessions. Students were significantly more likely to complete the questionnaire when it was introduced as part of a timetabled activity rather than as an optional request outside class time. By contrast, social media promotion generated relatively little engagement, reflecting the challenges of reaching students through institutional channels alone.

This approach resulted in a very high response rate, supported by dedicated tutorial time and a clear strategic commitment to participation across the organisation.

Outcomes

The PAQ findings were used extensively throughout students' first six weeks of study. Responses were incorporated into one-to-one Personal Tutorial discussions, enabling tutors to tailor conversations around individual students' expectations, concerns and support requirements. Where responses indicated additional needs, information was shared with specialist support teams so that proactive interventions could be offered at an early stage.

One of the most immediate examples of action was taken by the *Future U Student Support Team*, which contacted students who had indicated they might require support relating to mental health, disability, academic study or financial assistance. This allowed interventions to take place before concerns had an opportunity to escalate.

The data was shared widely across the institution through a structured reporting process. The Student Engagement Officer downloaded and distributed findings to Programme Leaders, who reviewed the results before sharing them with tutors and personal tutors. This ensured that insights were available to staff working directly with students and could inform local action planning.

Reflections

Several factors contributed to the success of the pilot. Strong senior leadership support, dedicated tutorial time for completion, and rapid sharing of findings all helped ensure that the data was translated into meaningful action. Staff engagement grew throughout the implementation period, with colleagues frequently requesting access to findings outside the agreed reporting schedule, suggesting the data was perceived as valuable and relevant to their work.

The experience also highlighted some useful lessons. In a small number of cases, students who had indicated they wanted additional support later explained that they had misunderstood the question or selected responses in error. While this did not create significant difficulties, it highlighted the importance of clearly explaining how responses may trigger follow-up contact from support services. The institution plans to provide additional guidance in future iterations to ensure students understand how their information will be used.

Student feedback also suggested that some respondents completed the questionnaire quickly rather than treating it as an opportunity for genuine reflection. As a result, the institution intends to place greater emphasis on positioning the PAQ as a reflective exercise that supports both personal development and meaningful conversations with tutors.

Looking ahead, UCEN Manchester plans to build on a model that has already proven highly effective. The questionnaire will be made available earlier, allowing students to engage before arrival while still remaining open into the first term. The institution has also reviewed its wider

survey schedule to reduce duplication and survey fatigue, ensuring that different student feedback activities complement, rather than compete with, one another. Significantly, the success of the pilot helped strengthen the case for investment in an institutional Jisc survey licence, creating opportunities for a more coordinated and strategic approach to student feedback in the future.

Reflecting on advice for others, the team emphasised the importance of securing strategic buy-in, embedding the questionnaire within timetabled activities, positioning it as a reflective learning tool rather than a survey, and sharing findings quickly so that students can see that their feedback leads to meaningful action.

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