

From reflection to action: How the University of Worcester embedded the PAQ into the student experience

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Introduction

The University of Worcester is recognised for its strong commitment to student success, inclusion, and widening participation. With a longstanding focus on supporting students throughout their transition into higher education, the university viewed the PAQ as an opportunity not only to gather insight but also to encourage meaningful reflection among new students.

From the outset, the institution took a slightly different approach to implementation. Rather than presenting the PAQ as a survey, it was framed as a reflective exercise designed to help students think about their expectations, concerns, and preparedness for university life. This approach helped distinguish the PAQ from other requests for feedback and encouraged engagement from both students and staff.

As one colleague reflected, “we very clearly did not refer to the PAQ as a survey, but rather as a reflective exercise”.

Context

Although the PAQ was ultimately straightforward to implement, the team faced some early challenges. Securing senior leadership endorsement was an important first step, and, while support was readily forthcoming, timescales were tight. The period between receiving implementation information and launching the PAQ coincided with annual leave for many staff, creating pressure to establish plans, secure agreement for communications, and ensure schools were prepared for delivery at the start of the academic year.

A clear implementation plan proved critical in building institutional buy-in. By outlining both the longer-term benefits of participation and a route for providing immediate feedback to students, the team was able to secure support across Schools and senior leadership. At the same time, efforts were made to minimise competition for students' attention by ensuring there were no other surveys, or research projects targeting the same cohorts during the delivery period.

The university adopted a targeted, in-class approach to administration. Rather than launching institution-wide, specific courses were identified by individual schools, allowing staff to build the activity directly into scheduled teaching sessions. This ensured dedicated time for completion and enabled communications and support to be tailored to participating groups.

“Taking a purely in-class approach... meant that there was time allocated for the activity and communications and support could be clearly targeted.”

This focused model contributed to a high response rate and was viewed as one of the strongest aspects of implementation.

Outcomes

The PAQ findings have informed both immediate actions and longer-term institutional planning. One of the earliest responses was the development of a student-facing booklet containing resources and signposting to support services, designed specifically around themes emerging from the survey responses.

The university also established a structured way for reviewing the findings. Workshops were created to share the data with colleagues and identify potential interventions and actions. These discussions informed a series of recommendations that have been taken forward through the university's Retention Steering Group.

Importantly, the data has already led to tangible changes. Feedback from commuter students prompted focus group discussions regarding the creation of a dedicated commuter lounge. The university is now progressing plans to redesign and develop a space to better meet the needs of these students. In addition, pre-entry information is being reviewed to ensure it reflects themes identified through the PAQ responses.

The breadth of engagement with the findings is particularly notable. Rather than being owned by a single team, recommendations have emerged across academic departments, student support services, digital and IT services, professional academic support, communications, admissions, and library services. This whole-institution approach has helped position the PAQ as a catalyst for wider discussion about student experience.

Reflections

Looking back on the pilot, the team identified several factors that contributed to success. Strong institutional planning, senior-level support, and a carefully targeted delivery model all helped to generate engagement. Embedding the PAQ within induction activities and delivering it during class time ensured students had dedicated time and space to participate. The university believes this approach was instrumental in achieving high response rates and facilitating meaningful discussion among students.

The project also appears to have generated significant staff engagement. What began as workshops for participating schools has expanded into wider institutional discussions, with regular reporting through key governance groups including the Retention Steering Group, APP Steering Group, and Learning, Teaching and Student Experience Committee. The university regularly convenes student groups to work on projects relating to findings and actions from the PAQ.

While the compressed planning timescale presented challenges during the first year, the team sees this largely as a consequence of implementation timing rather than a limitation of the approach itself. With a longer lead-in period for future delivery, there is confidence that participation can be expanded to a broader range of students.

Reflecting on advice for other institutions, the team highlighted the value of embedding the questionnaire into timetabled induction activities. In their experience **“it works well when students complete the survey in class and can discuss in groups”**.

Looking ahead, the university plans to build on the strong foundations established during the pilot and continue using the PAQ as a mechanism for understanding student needs and translating insight into meaningful action.

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