

## The Pre-Arrival Academic Questionnaire (PAQ)

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### Why the PAQ was developed

I started developing an entry survey at both UG and PGT level about 10 years ago when I was at Kingston University. I designed it to support my transitions framework that I developed (can be accessed via my free portal [www.improvingthestudentexperience.com](http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com)).

I understood that to improve the learning experience of students, we had to understand their prior learning experiences and study expectations at university. The learning jump between school/college and HE can be quite wide especially for students with different entry qualifications and other demographic characteristics.

Experience surveys do not help the current cohort who completed them although they can feed into development of initiatives for the next cohort. The challenge though in such a changing environment is that cohorts can comprise different students' year on year with different skill bases and expectations.

I designed the PAQ to provide data to help identify student expectations so that course teams were better positioned to understand them and also correct any unrealistic/incorrect expectations. In the development of the PAQ at UG and PGT level over the years, student representatives have been involved in refining and enhancing the structure and order of questions.

One of the most powerful sections of PAQ is understanding what students think feedback is and how they interact with it. If we can get learning and other expectations right at the start of a course then hopefully it will not only impact on a student's progression and attainment in, through and out of the study journey but also impact on national metrics such as NSS, PTES, DHLE and TEF that are pivotal to the success of universities.

### Formalisation of PAQ

I formalised the PGT PAQ at national level when I created, led and managed the Postgraduate Experience Project (PEP) (HEFCE funded £2.7m) which consisted of 11 UK universities. The project's findings can be found by going to:

[http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/PG\\_documents/Postgraduate\\_Experience\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/PG_documents/Postgraduate_Experience_Report_Final.pdf)

However, prior study experience and expectation surveys undertaken pre-entry at Level 4 are not common and almost non-existent in the UK. The 'arrival' satisfaction surveys commonly undertaken within institutions tend to focus on the practicalities of arrival week and are commonly marketing driven with little focus on academic activities.

When I joined Bournemouth University as Associate Professor and Associate Dean for the Student Experience in the Faculty of Media and Communication, the University was committed to improving the study experience of its students and staff across the institution. With the support of the senior management team and working with colleagues from across the university, student representatives and the Student's Union, a Pre-arrival Academic Questionnaire was adapted from my previous work. Having successfully piloted it with new level 4 undergraduate entrants in September 2018 within my faculty, it was rolled out across the institution in September 2019. The report containing the findings entitled *Bridging the gap between secondary and tertiary education* can be accessed on this website by going to:

[http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/UG\\_documents/Bridging\\_the\\_gap\\_between\\_secondary\\_and\\_tertiary\\_education-Morgan\\_2020.pdf](http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/library/UG_documents/Bridging_the_gap_between_secondary_and_tertiary_education-Morgan_2020.pdf)

## The questionnaire design

The PAQ is designed to take entrants through a reflective journey of how they have studied previously, where they are now and their expectation of their future studies. The questions are academic focused. The UG and PGT PAQs are different but the six aims and objectives are the same.

- It collects key data to help course leaders and academic advisors/personal tutors understand the prior learning experience of entrants and how that may impact on their current expectations.
- The anonymous responses to the questions get sent to relevant staff in arrival week so changes can be made in the first week of teaching;
- The questionnaire takes entrants through a reflective learning journey to get them to start thinking about their upcoming studies;
- All students are asked to complete the PAQ as a pre-arrival piece of work which is an opportunity to engage in an appropriate and meaningful pre-arrival activity. This also helps create some parity of experience across the courses;
- The questionnaire findings feed into a self-help sheet with signposts to support and advice that is sent to students by email within 4 weeks of starting. A hardcopy is made available during the timetabled interactive 'Q&A –Life at university 4 weeks in' session where staff across the university are available to answer any queries or concerns raised by students.
- The findings help central services such as the Library and Student Services identify where there are learning and support issues at programme level (e.g. managing money issues, settling in concerns, weakness in study skills);
- The dataset helps identify how prepared entrants are and whether they have the correct study expectations. This information can support the work across all stakeholders in correcting expectations in information for schools and colleges etc.

## Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire comprises open and closed questions. It collects pertinent biographical data to check the representation of the sample and to provide detailed analysis of the questions asked with different student characteristics such as gender, domiciled status, generational status and entry route to study. It contains seven sections designed to obtain as much information as possible as to their prior experiences of higher education and their undergraduate expectations and aspirations. The sections are as follows:

- Previous study qualifications
- Previous study experience
- Motivations and challenges of undergraduate study
- Undergraduate study expectations
- Current learning expectations
- Attitudes towards undergraduate study
- Biographical details

The sections of the questionnaire are designed to make completion easy and to take respondents systematically through a logical set of questions that would be of benefit to them as well as the faculties. The questionnaire consists of 51 questions (inclusive of 11 biographical questions) thus providing an extensive amount of information. The survey was executed using Survey Monkey.

### **Collection of Data**

New students gain access to the PAQ via the Pre-arrival pages on the University VLE. Pre-arrival completion at both UG and PGT level is the preference as it does generate a substantially higher rate of completion than if it was an activity during arrival week. In this questionnaire, social economic class isn't included in the survey. However, age, generational status, ethnicity, gender and domiciled status are collected. The questionnaire is anonymous at the point of completion so identification of an individual is not possible. This approach was adopted to encourage engagement and honest answers by the respondents especially when providing the qualitative comments. Once downloaded and stored securely on a password protected laptop, the data is deleted off Survey Monkey.

### **Completion rates**

Completion rates are generally quite high. For example, in the pilot year for the UG PAQ, September 2018 in the Faculty of Media and Communication, 60% of all expected students completed the survey on the Friday prior to arrival week. When the undergraduate PAQ was rolled out across the institution, the questionnaire responses totalled 1603. For the purpose of analysis in the report, only the fully completed questionnaires were used which totalled 1104 across the four faculties.

### **Project questionnaires**

The PAQ, the UG institutional report and all PEP related surveys can be found on the resources page. It is important to remember that the PEP Entry to Study Survey was designed to collect extensive data for the sector. The undergraduate and PGT PAQs undertaken at Bournemouth University were half the length and used as a meaningful pre-arrival academic activity.