![Qualzy - THE QUALITY INSIGHTS PLATFORM]

The University of Warwick is helping student insight shine through

Students shape its future via the Warwick Student Panel online market research community, built in partnership with Qualzy

Client: The University of Warwick

The University of Warwick is working with Qualzy to leverage digital qualitative market research technology as it builds an engaging and accessible online student community to inform decisions today and for the future.

Staying abreast of what students feel, want and need is a perennial and persistent challenge for a leading higher education institution like The University of Warwick. Each year it welcomes more than 28,000 students from 150 countries to its campus in Coventry. To continue to grow its significant global appeal means building their evolving needs into future strategy.

The University of Warwick Market Research & Insight (MR&I) team plays a critical central role in understanding the experiences and needs of all audiences – not only current students but prospective ones, alumni, staff, partners in the business community and beyond.

In December 2022, a chance encounter at the Times Higher Education Market Insights conference between the MR&I team and Qualzy started a chain of events that, one year on, has led to an exciting partnership.

It has helped form a fresh foundation for innovative and future-focused student research in the form of the Warwick Student Panel, an online research community built in the Qualzy platform. Alicia Buckley (Associate Director, MR&I) and Jess O'Brien (Market Research & Insight Manager, MR&I), alongside the MR&I team, have been working to create new ways for audience insight to shine through and shared some of their aspirations and learnings.

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Fighting fatigue

Students are normally regarded as a vocal bunch. Getting input and finding out what they think, want and need might appear relatively simple. Yet, maintaining engagement is a huge challenge in the face of student survey fatigue.

The University uses data to plan everything from courses to campus facilities, signage and services, support programmes and more. This is sought not only by departments but by numerous functions and services from the library to estates and accommodation, as well as by those assessing issues such as student wellbeing. External surveys are a constant; the annual National Student Survey (NSS) is a significant undertaking, while business institutions and commercial organisations frequently survey students too.

"Survey fatigue is a massive problem, so we were also keen to have an approach which would be more engaging, fun, and interactive for our participants. We also knew we wanted a research solution that was more agile, and offered better speed of research turnaround so we could test fast and get results back to internal clients quickly," Alicia explained.

Time for change

Practical factors are adding further pressures. The rise in remote and hybrid learning can mean fewer face to face research opportunities. The steady drift toward digital and social communication makes traditional qualitative research methods less appealing, especially to Gen Z and Millennial audiences. It was becoming harder and more time consuming to gather student insights.

Institutions must also keep a constant sense of how the student community is evolving, including how growing diversity is impacting needs and expectations.

The MR&I team knew that new digital thinking could address these changes. However, any new approach would need to be based on robust market research techniques and principles – not simply add fun or gamification. It had to change the paradigm of some aspects of student research, alter delivery, and expand beyond traditional Q&A formats to enable more continuous and compelling engagement.

Shifting some activities to digital could provide the basis for students to co-create their future, giving them an ongoing voice helping shape student experience, facilities and more. It would enable exploration and research innovation, leveraging the opportunities of generative AI. It could enable them to create a truly engaged student panel for the future.

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Challenges
- Survey fatigue
- Email fatigue
- Declining engagement
- Slow responses

Ambitions
- Enthusiastic engagement
- Speedier results
- Real-time insights
- Innovating with AI

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Partnering with experts

The University of Warwick's MR&I team are undoubtedly experts in higher education market research. However, they are not experts in digital technology and how it is being used for qualitative market research.

Finding the right tools and expert input to develop future-proofed and focused engagement was key. The right partner was equally important since any new approaches must be efficient in terms of time and cost.

When the MR&I team met the Qualzy team, each recognised that working together held potential. *"When we saw Ray and Paul from Qualzy present the possibilities at the conference, we could immediately see how using their platform could be beneficial to the University – but we couldn't quite see how it would work or what it would look like,"* Jess recalled.

Piloting ideas

The MR&I team checked out several platform options, but chose to start exploring with Qualzy. One reason was that it promised a real partnership, not simply a service level agreement (SLA). Qualzy were open about wishing to learn more about University insight needs and dynamics. It presented a chance to develop the future together.

A pilot project was the obvious place to start and explore the possible. A perfect opportunity presented itself. *"The upcoming 60th Anniversary was a high priority for senior stakeholders, so we created a Campus 2025 project as a contribution to forward planning, to find out how students would articulate the ideal future campus experience."*

Qualzy enabled the MR&I team to ask questions in new ways over the course of a 2-week fieldwork period, then generate a report on the findings – fast. Jess said: *"Qualzy let us add more visual elements and use types of tools that students would like – such as being able to capture videos or use mood boards. It helped that we knew it would be a topic that was interesting and engaging for students, too."*

After recruiting 145 students, 108 of these actively participated which represented a very satisfying 74% engagement rate. Students spent 61 hours on the platform in total – adding 863 posts, 54 images and 20 videos along the way.

Both parties went in recognising that there would be a need to trial, learn and improve at every stage. Yet the results of the pilot were almost too successful – the MR&I team then had to manage Qualzy through the procurement process as swiftly as possible, because the leadership wanted more, and fast.

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Campus 25 Trial

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With the 60th Anniversary fast approaching, putting an enduring student panel in place would be a huge opportunity to hear the voice of students, as part of driving an array of stakeholder led outputs and decisions.

"Before this, although we had a database of people to call on who had participated in surveys and panels previously, they never interacted together in a digital environment in the way that they now can with Qualzy. The flow of information was only one way, to us – they couldn't flow ideas up to us," Jess stated.

Ongoing student inputs

Planning for the Warwick Student Panel began. For the first time, they could build and sustain a group which could continue to evolve and be more representative of the wider student body.

The team began recruiting student participants in September 2023, building towards a goal of 500 students initially, but with the potential to expand the community later.

The MR&I team has so far signed up 464 students, very close to the goal number; activation is growing, and insights are already starting to flow through. Alicia outlined that *"each week there is a main activity for participants, as well as a quick weekly poll to gather quick insights that help us see a ranking or a snapshot of the responses – much like you see on social platforms. One way we used this was a multi-choice poll to assess campus signage, for example. There is a community chat area which is always on, too."*

There is an incentive scheme to help keep those signed up motivated to keep providing inputs – panel entries and posts earn them panel points, which generate prize draw entries for Amazon vouchers.

The platform even provides a perfect way to assess its own performance – which the MR&I team has used to ask participants to feed back on the platform experience and how enjoyable they find the activities. When this was run, 73% of the participants rated the experience of using the platform as very good or excellent and fed back on their favourite tasks so far. The favourite task was a Campus map and pin activity. One activity asked students to visit one of the campus grocery stores, take pictures, and comment about what they liked or disliked, to help with forward planning.

The MR&I team is conscious that since student research can often lead to a greater degree of personal insight than commercial research, it is important to have a safe environment for this to take place. Jess stated: *"We are often asking quite deep questions, especially around things like wellbeing and feelings of safety. We must manage how we interact, keep people safe, and protect their identity. Qualzy allows us to do that."* Students can choose which feedback is visible to other students, and which feedback is marked as private, so the student is always in control over what they include.

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Partnership power

The power of partnership is showing through as the student panel evolves. Jess reflected: *"True partnership is when each can learn from the other. This kind of technology is new to the higher education world, but working with Qualzy their expertise becomes our expertise, and vice versa, as we both learn together."*

Jess feels that the quality of relationship shows through in the day-to-day. *"They show a real sense of flexibility about what we need – because we are new to this world, and still working out what 'perfect' could look like. They have sometimes helped us out at very short notice – Ray has a few times jumped on calls to explain something I didn't know how to do! That is something I would never expect on a normal SLA contract with a supplier."*

The team is looking ahead at how the model could support different priorities. *"Warwick is a growing global University brand, and Qualzy can help us bridge some of the gaps in communications. Before, if we wanted to do anything with stakeholders in other countries, we would need to employ research agencies locally or try to run focus groups online, with all the challenges and time differences involved. With the platform in place, we will be able to engage with them, and they with us."*

Innovating at the edge of market research is also of great interest to the MR&I team. Jess said: *"One of the things that most attracted us to Qualzy was the ability to start to use generative AI, in a protected area where the data is protected; we can use that to do some of our reporting and pull out key themes from activities for example. Whilst we believe it will always need the trained eye of an expert in market research, AI has huge potential to boost our efficiency around things like analysing qualitative free text comments – it could be game-changing."*

Qualzy and The University of Warwick will present the success story of this partnership and the insights it is enabling at this year's THE Market Insights Conference in December 2023.

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