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International student arrival: the impact of week -1 at LJMU

University academic calendars typically start at week 0, usually sometime in September or October, marked by a university-wide induction week before teaching commences in week 1. However, at LJMU we have seized the opportunity to implement a central international induction period in the week preceding week 0, now colloquially known as week -1. This bold initiative aims to minimize the number of late-arriving students, and so far, it has proven successful, especially in a group of MSc Management programs within the Business School.

The challenge of late-arriving students has become more pronounced with increasing numbers of international students joining the Business School. No longer confined to a handful of students arriving a week or two after the start of teaching, it had become commonplace for international students to join in week 4, 5, or even week 6 of teaching. This trend has been particularly notable in a suite of MSc Management programs, posing a significant challenge. Given that the first assessments for these MSc programmes occurs in week 6, students arriving late found themselves swiftly falling behind. Notably, 100% of students who arrived in week 6 failed their semester 1 modules. However, the repercussions extend beyond the affected individuals, as the delayed arrivals disrupt other students in the classes, as well as the flow of the curricula.

While LJMU sets an enrolment cut-off date in early October, allowing for potential delays in visa processing or disrupted travel plans, this does not guarantee that students will promptly begin attending their classes. Challenges relating to accommodation, arranging bank accounts, securing employment, and acclimating to a new environment often result in students only arriving for face-to-face classes weeks into teaching.

In the academic year 2021-2022, LJMU's international recruitment team initiated a new strategy to encourage the earlier arrival of international students. Throughout discussions, communications, and documentation shared with international applicants during the recruitment cycle, a consistent message emphasised international student attendance at a university-wide central induction program designed specifically for international students. In September 2022, LJMU held the first international induction programme in week -1 and at the Faculty of Business and Law's international welcome talk, a full lecture room of international students were present. At the same welcome talk a year later in September 2023, also in week -1, the lecture theatre was standing room only. A bigger lecture theatre may be needed in September 2024.

The week -1 international induction programme involves a series of events at both university and faculty level, including welcome talks from faculty leaders, orientation sessions both on and off-campus, and social activities. This early international induction program has also been incorporated into January cohorts within the Faculty of Business and Law.

The international student recruitment market is challenging and precarious, requiring substantial investments from multidisciplinary teams to attract students globally to the UK. This involves efforts from university recruitment teams, in-country agents, visits to partner institutions, and the creation of numerous marketing materials and resources. Encouraging international students to arrive earlier in such a competitive and complex recruitment landscape entails significant risk. However, for LJMU, this risk has paid off.

Preliminary data from the September 2023 international induction programme supports the success of this initiative. Many of our international MSc Management students arrived in time for the week -1 central events, placing them in Liverpool two weeks before the commencement of module teaching. There was an increased attendance of international students at the week 0 local induction events just for the MSc programmes themselves, with 75% of the expected cohort in attendance. Furthermore, 85% of the cohort were either present in the classroom or engaging online during the first week of classes. This level of early attendance and engagement represents a significant improvement compared to previous years.

While higher rates of student attendance from the beginning of the course is commendable, the MSc academic team has emphasised that students are also better prepared to learn at this point. Our assumption is that having been on campus for several weeks, attending various induction events, familiarizing themselves with the campus, exploring university systems, and adjusting to their new surroundings, students arriving in a timely manner has proven beneficial in several ways. Although the issue of late-arriving students may never be eradicated, the implementation of bespoke international student events in week -1, coupled with consistent communication about this expectation during the recruitment cycle, has proven to be a highly successful initiative in promoting earlier attendance and engagement with our MSc Management programs.

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