

#WeAreInternational
Grants scheme 2022–24
Pilot project

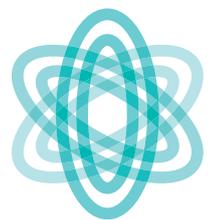
Accommodation support for international students

Liverpool John Moores University

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**UK Council
for International
Student Affairs**

UKCISA



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UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

The #WeAreInternational Grants scheme focuses on integrating the principles of the **#WeAreInternational Student Charter** in higher and further education institutions in the UK, to deliver a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.



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1. Aim of the project

Liverpool John Moores University (LMJU), named after the local businessman who founded the university in 1923, is a distinctive, unique institution, rooted in the Liverpool City region, but with a global presence. It has over 20,000 students, 2,000 of whom are international. Students and staff, past, present and future are the beating heart of Liverpool and can be found in every corner of every industry and community.

The university is proud of its four values, which guide attitudes and behaviours.

These values are:

- We are student focused.
- We care about our community.
- We are inclusive.
- We are courageous.

The motivation for the project came from feedback from international students during their induction at LJMU in September 2022 and January 2023. Large numbers of postgraduate international students who had arrived in the city were struggling to secure accommodation. The main challenge for many was that they were travelling with dependents and the university only catered for single students staying in student accommodation.

Despite signposting these students to a range of websites that advertised private accommodation, it soon became evident that they did not have sufficient and comprehensive information about the process of securing a place to live in Liverpool. In addition, most students did not have a clear indication of the costs related to renting a property, and their budgets were completely unrealistic. It was apparent that something had to be done to better to prepare students arriving in Liverpool.



2. Aim of the project

The aim of the project was to ensure that better guidance is provided to international students travelling to study at LJMU, to support them in finding accommodation. We wanted to ensure that any students who have an offer of a place to study at the university are provided with important information such as cost of accommodation, ideal postcodes in which to live and what to be aware of before signing a contract.

With this in mind, we aimed to develop a toolkit of information to help international students in their search for accommodation in Liverpool.

3. Project outcomes

A survey to gain information from international students about their experiences of finding accommodation was launched in April 2023. One hundred and two international students participated, which allowed for initial analysis of the issues. The survey was repeated in November 2023 with students who had joined LJMU in September. Forty-five students took part.

From the data collected, a toolkit of information was put together, initially to help students joining LJMU in September 2023 and then in January 2024. It was shared on the website and with the LJMU accommodation team. Feedback from students indicated that the toolkit provided before their arrival had been helpful. Further improvements to the toolkit are being implemented, so that it can continue to support further cohorts of international students.

4. Timescale

The duration of the project was 14 months, from February 2023 to April 2024. There was some delay from August until October 2023, due to the end of the academic year and the first ambassadors graduating and moving on.

Thesis number	Feb – April 2023	May – July 2023	Aug – Oct 2023	Nov 2023 – Jan 2024	Feb – April 2024
Hiring of ambassadors					
Initial planning and research					
Survey launch					
Data analysis					
Planned focus groups					
Toolkit launched					
Hiring of ambassadors					
Relaunch of survey					
Data analysis					
Implementation					
Final report for UKCISA					

Figure 1: Project Milestones

5. Project delivery

To evaluate the project's success, qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Quantitative feedback was collected after workshops, using a feedback form with a Likert scale. Students were asked, "Has this session improved your knowledge, skills and understanding of this topic?" Twenty-five responses were collected, 96% of them highlighting a positive improvement.

Hiring ambassadors

It was decided to hire two 'ambassadors' for the project: interns who would be representative of the main target audience – i.e. postgraduates living in private accommodation with dependent(s).

Both the ambassadors finished their studies in July 2023 and decided to stop working for the project. Two new ambassadors were appointed at the beginning of the new academic year.

Survey of international students

After initial research, a survey of the accommodation experiences of international students was put together and launched in the summer term 2023.

The survey covered such questions as:

- when the student had started searching for accommodation
- which platforms they had used in their search
- how long it had taken them to find accommodation
- how difficult it had been to find accommodation
- the nature of the deposit (if any)
- the conditions of the contract
- the type and size of the accommodation
- the rent payable
- whether the student had dependents
- whether they had moved to Liverpool before their dependent(s)
- whether they had children at school in Liverpool
- whether they had advice for future international students

Finally, the survey asked whether they would be interested in taking part in a focus group that aimed to dive more deeply into these questions and to facilitate the process for future students.

The survey was repeated in November 2023 for international students who had arrived in September. 45 students took part – fewer than half the number who had responded the first time. This could have been because they had already found accommodation and were therefore not particularly interested or because they were busy with coursework and other commitments.

Findings demonstrated in the below figures reflect answers from both surveys.

Key findings from the survey

1. Most participants used online platforms to find accommodation. The most common website was the LJMU website. This was followed by Google, Zoopla and Rightmove.
2. The average time taken for students to find appropriate accommodation was one month or less. This applied to 71% of participants. Fewer than 5% of participants had taken more than four months in their search.

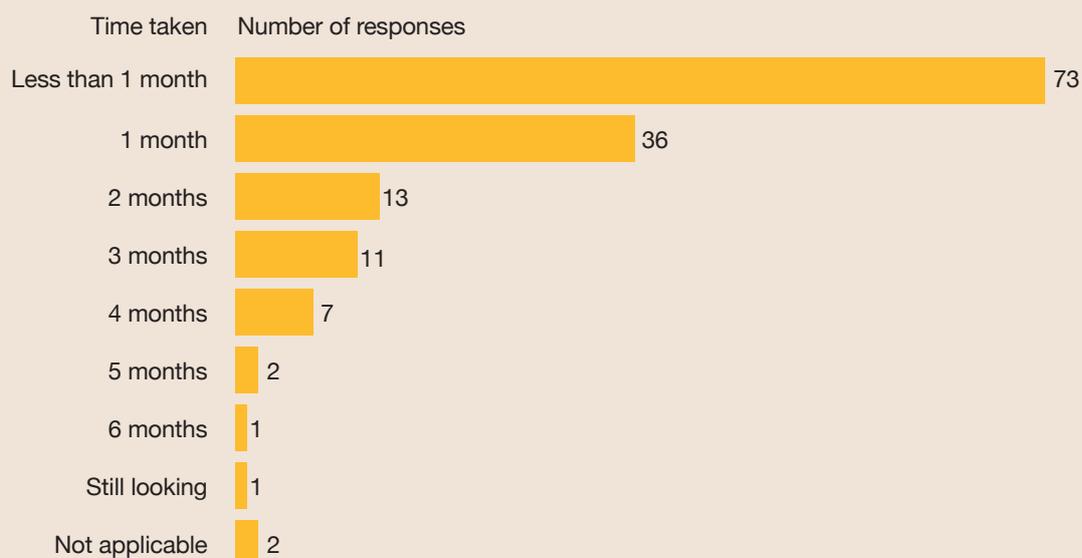


Figure 2: Time taken to find and book accommodation

3. Private accommodation was the most popular accommodation among participants.
4. Of the participants who provided their deposit fees, the majority paid less than £100. However, several participants had paid more than £1,700. Fewer than half the participants indicated that their deposit was refundable.

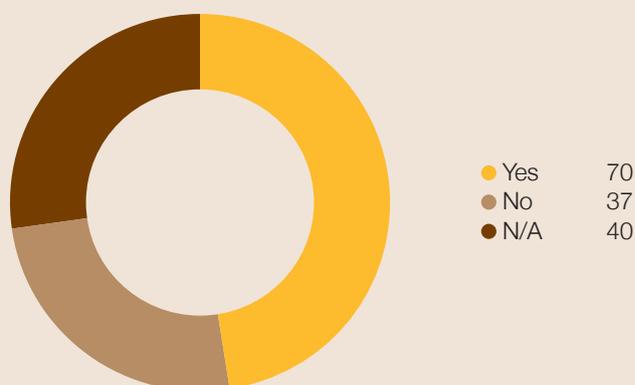
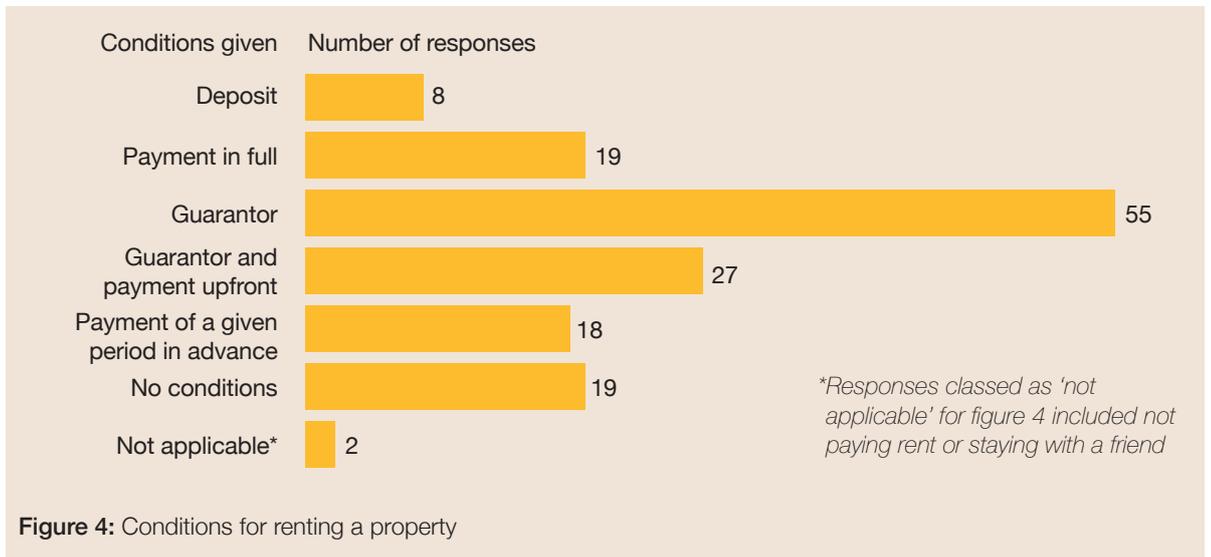
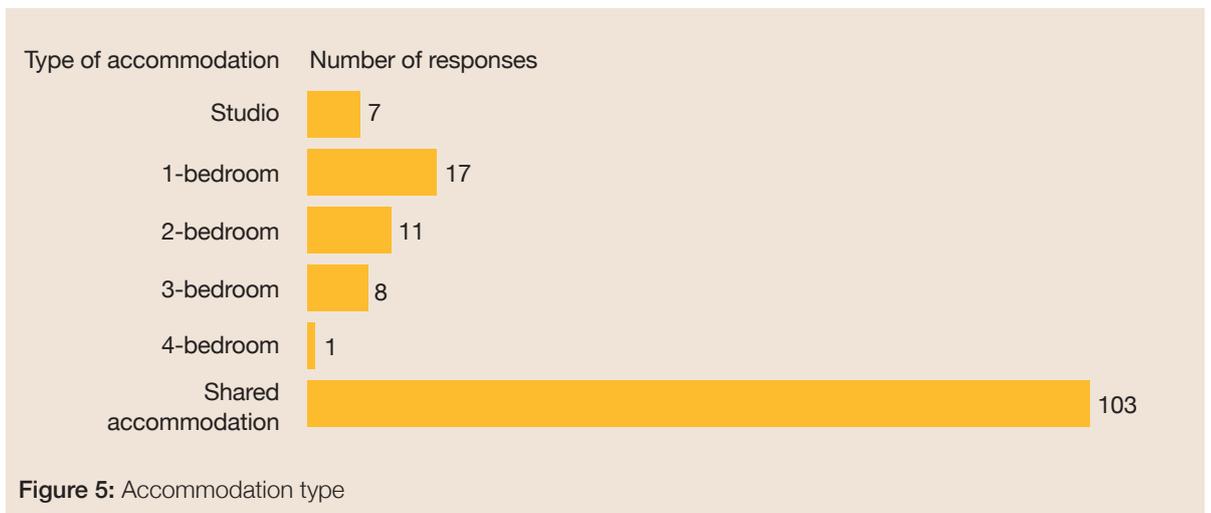


Figure 3: Deposits refundable Y/N

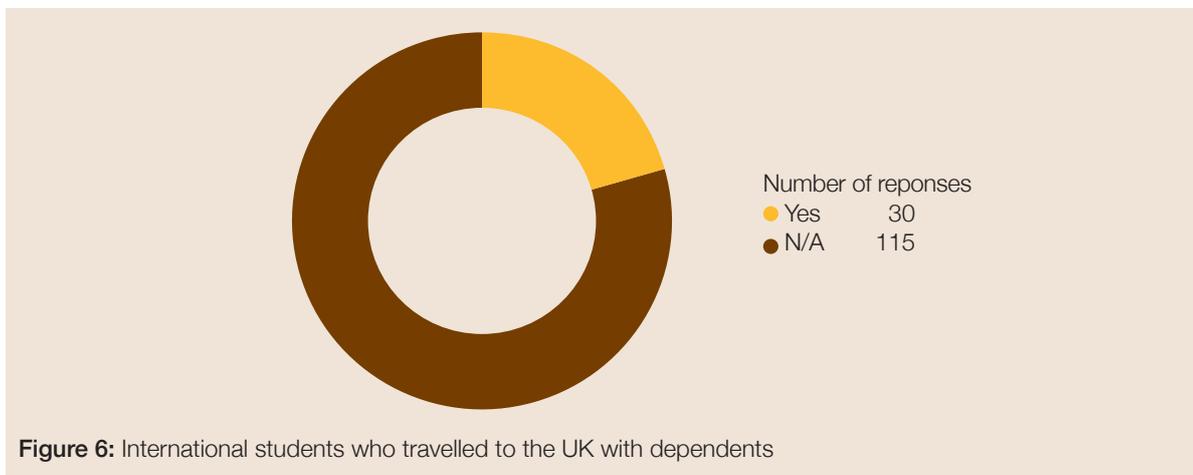
5. Most of the accommodation providers required the students to have a UK guarantor, while approximately half the students were required to provide a guarantor and payment upfront.



6. Most international students chose to live in shared accommodation for the duration of their studies at LJMU.



7. A substantial majority of students had not travelled to the UK with dependents, and the proportion of students that had done so dropped in the second survey. The question was not mandatory, so responses may not be fully representative.



(Note. This question, ‘Have you moved to the UK with dependents?’ was one of the initial research questions. A change in government policy in summer 2023 prevented international postgraduate taught students from travelling to the UK with dependents. The subsequent survey thus focused on all international students looking to stay in private accommodation.)

Planned focus groups

A focus group was planned for July 2023 to include any student who had given their consent to be contacted via the survey. By the time invitations had been sent out, most students had left Liverpool for the summer or were no longer interested in taking part.

A focus group was likewise planned following the survey in November 2023. This time, a doodle was sent around with an invitation, but the face-to-face group was again not viable.

It was therefore decided to put the toolkit together based just on the sets of data from the two surveys.

Accommodation guide ('toolkit') for international students

Following the analysis of the data collected from the survey, a toolkit was put together to support incoming international students to LJMU.

The guide, which will be regularly updated, provides information and advice on:

- LMJU-provided accommodation and Liverpool Student Homes
- private (non-student accommodation), including
 - common websites advertising properties
 - average rents in different areas
 - transport costs
 - tenancy issues
 - rental scams
- other information, such as
 - finding and registering with a doctor (GP)
 - local groups and communities
 - contact details for the international recruitment team and the accommodation team at LJMU

Furthermore, enhanced information was added to the accommodation website¹, and email communications were sent to all offer holders. In this way, it is hoped that prospective and current students can use it to guide their accommodation search. The toolkit was also shared with staff at the university that support students, including those in recruitment, as well as academics that have large cohorts of international students.

Feedback on the toolkit from students and staff as well as the September 2023 and January 2024 international student intake was positive.

6. Challenges

This project and UKCISA's involvement has been very important for the university. The ability to improve the support offered to international students struggling to find private accommodation was made possible by the matched funding from UKCISA. This afforded the team the opportunity to hire ambassadors and, through the toolkit, to greatly improve the resources previously available to international students. Furthermore, the results from the survey highlighted a number of challenges that international students were facing, which the international recruitment office was not aware of prior to the project. This will help the university to improve further the support offered to international students.

The project gathered a lot of data from the two surveys and a toolkit was put together, which considerably enhanced the accommodation information provided to international students joining LJMU in September 2023 and January 2024. Feedback from students has been positive, and further improvements are planned to ensure that all future international students are given the best support possible in securing accommodation.

¹ [Accommodation for International students | Liverpool John Moores University](#)

Despite the project taking off to a flying start, there were a few challenges within the first six months:

- In May 2023, the government announced changes to the student visa, which included restrictions on postgraduate taught students travelling with their dependents². The focus of the project had to change accordingly.
- The lack of students on campus after exams was not taken into account when planning the project. The focus groups planned for July 2023 had to be cancelled.
- Both ‘ambassadors’ hired were chosen as they were postgraduate taught students, living in private accommodation with a dependent. Unfortunately, both finished their final projects in July 2023 and decided to stop working on the project. This resulted in new interns having to be hired.
- Staff workload was not fully taken into consideration. Colleagues who had initially committed to supporting the project had other conflicting assignments.

7. Recommendations

Colleagues at other universities around the UK have reported similar issues for international students seeking private accommodation. It is widely known that there is limited information on private accommodation for international students, and the challenges that many students have faced have been reported extensively in the media.

It is imperative that all UK universities have adequate information to support international students. Options in relation to on- and off-campus accommodation should be provided in regular communication, alongside proper information, advice and signposting.

This project can easily be replicated with the following recommendations:

- Ideally, start the project in September when students have recently arrived.
- Target student societies to capture further information about the accommodation issues that students have faced / are facing, alongside the survey.
- Provide incentives for participation in the focus groups and ensure that they are held at a time when the maximum number of students are on site, but not in the process of exams or heavy coursework commitments.
- Continuously update all information on specific webpages for international students, as deemed necessary from feedback given by future intakes.

² **Written statements – Written questions, answers and statements – UK Parliament**

8. Appendix 1 – Survey questions

The survey was run through Microsoft forms and questions were truncated based on the responses – meaning, not every student answered every question.

1. LJMU email address
2. Which country are you from?
3. Are you under sponsorship from the government?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to say
4. When did you start to look for accommodation prior to your arrival?
 - a. Less than 1 month
 - b. 1–2 months
 - c. 2–3 months
 - d. 3–4 months
 - e. 4–5 months
 - f. 6 months or more
5. Which platform did you use to search for your accommodation?
 - a. LJMU website
 - b. Zoopla
 - c. Right Move
 - d. Google
 - e. Other
6. How long did it take to find accommodation?
7. How difficult was it for you to find accommodation
1 = very easy
5 = very difficult
8. Did you pay a deposit?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. How much was your deposit?
10. Was the deposit refundable?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
11. What were the conditions for you to rent the property?
 - a. No conditions
 - b. Guarantor
 - c. Payment in full
 - d. Payment of a given period in advance
 - e. Guarantor + payment upfront
 - f. Other

12. Who was your guarantor?
 - a. Friend/family in the UK
 - b. Friend/family outside the UK
 - c. Organisation in the UK
 - d. Organisation outside the UK
 - e. Other
13. Please enter the name of the organisation that was your guarantor
14. How many months of rent did you have to pay in advance?
 - a. 1 month
 - b. 2 months
 - c. 3 months
 - d. 4 months
 - e. 5 months
 - f. 6 months or more
15. Accommodation type:
 - a. Lives in student accommodation (LJMU provided)
 - b. Lives in student accommodation (private)
 - c. Lives in private accommodation (flat/apartment)
16. Enter the name of your accommodation
17. Which estate agency have you contracted with?
18. Specify the accommodation type
 - a. Shared accommodation
 - b. Studio
 - c. 1 bedroom flat
 - d. 2 bedroom flat
 - e. 3 bedroom flat
 - f. Other
19. Specify your postcode
20. How much is your monthly rent?
 - a. Less than £400
 - b. £400 – £600
 - c. £600 – £800
 - d. £800 – £1,000
 - e. £1200 – £1,500
 - f. More than £1,500
 - g. Prefer not to say
21. How do you travel to university?
 - a. Bus
 - b. Taxi
 - c. Bicycle
 - d. Walk
 - e. Other

22. Did you move to the UK with dependents?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
23. How many dependents did you move with?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5 or more
24. Have you initially moved alone to Liverpool before inviting your dependents?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
25. Where have you stayed during that period?
 - a. Hotel
 - b. Short stay apartment
 - c. Student accommodation
 - d. Share accommodation
 - e. Family/friend house
 - f. Private accommodation
 - g. Other
26. Do you have any kids going to school?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
27. How difficult was it to get you child into school?
 - 1 = Very easy
 - 5 = Very difficult
28. What advice would you give future international students coming with dependents?
29. Was there any particular issue you wish you knew about before moving to the UK?
30. Is there anything that facilitated the process of searching and finding accommodation?
31. Would you be interested to be part of a focus group? The focus group aims to dive deeper into the matter of international students looking for private accommodation and to be facilitate the process for future students
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

9. Appendix 2 – Focus group questions

Although the focus groups did not materialize, the following were the planned questions:

Group 1 – those with dependents

1. Which country are you from?
2. How many dependents do you have?
3. Did you move with them or you arrived first?
4. Where did you stay when you arrived into Liverpool?
5. How difficult was it for you to find accommodation?
6. How much was your deposit?
7. How far is your accommodation from the university?
8. Do you have any children? If yes – how difficult was it to get them settled into a school

Group 2 – private accommodation (no dependents)

1. Which country are you from?
2. Did you consider university provided accommodation?
3. What deterred you from staying in university provided accommodation?
4. Did you secure your accommodation before arriving in Liverpool?
5. If yes – what was the process? If no – what was the reason?
6. How far is your accommodation from the university?
7. How much was your deposit?
8. Are you happy with your decision to stay in private accommodation?

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