



Case Study: Application of Lean to enable Local Improvement without IT Development

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Introduction

I started working at the University in University of Leeds in October 2018.

I predominantly work in 'Student Opportunities' within the School of Languages, Cultures & Societies, helping to promote student employability and set up work placements for students going abroad.

Since working here, I have also taken over responsibilities managing the Japanese Year Abroad Programme. It didn't take long to realise that the current processes with the Japanese Year Abroad Programme can be long-winded, complicated and downright baffling!

Here's a few examples:

- Students apply to 15 different Japanese Universities, each with their own unique and complex application procedures
Some applications are online submission, some are hardcopy submissions (AND online). Huge amounts of information to remember for each University and a huge workload to advise 50+ students on separate complex applications.
- Students submit pretty much all documents by a combo of email and in person
Makes it tricky to keep track of which students have submitted, plus added risks of losing work/info!
- Information documents/spreadsheets/handbooks that duplicate information
A faff to update!
- Some documents that students fill in aren't GDPR compliant
Concerns about students giving more information than they need to e.g. medical conditions. Negative impact on student experience.
- Old-fashioned sign-up sheet on office door for student 1-1 meetings
Students have to come to the office to sign up for an appointment and then return at a later date to have their applications checked.

How I've made parts of the process Leaner

1. Creating handover documents – to eliminate ambiguity and enable service continuity

When initially taking on the Japanese Year Abroad, there was very limited documentation and handover due to previous members of staff no longer being here. To combat this, I've found it very useful to create handover documentation as I go, with information about each Japanese University's application process and deadlines.

The documents have also proved a great reference point for me when trying to remember the overall Japanese Year Abroad process, and to remember certain nuances to each University's application process. Finally, they will also help future staff members in case I move onto pastures new or 'fall under a bus'!

2. Creating process maps – to document the process and identify waste and areas to improve

Similarly to handover documents, mapping out the entire process of the Japanese Year Abroad programme has helped me identify parts of the process that could be scrapped/simplified to improve the student experience. Some of these are tiny sub-processes that get in the way and take up more time than necessary. The 'Lean Ways of Working: Introduction' addresses these as 'wastes'. It's crazy how many 'wastes' you spot that you didn't even realise were there!

I've also helped our LCS Residence Abroad team by creating process maps for shipping application documents abroad, which is required for all other Year Abroad programmes within the school of LCS, not just Japanese Year Abroad. Again, a big help and memory aid for the whole team, especially when we come to ship applications again in a year's time!

On the subject of waste, you may be wondering why we ship applications abroad; This is historical, in some cases cultural (Institutions in certain countries will only accept hard-copies) and not something we can easily influence in terms of change.

3. Updating/amending documents – querying their purpose and content

Before updating/amending documents, I've first asked around to see what their purpose is. "Do we really need them?"

For those that we still needed and that would benefit students, I've updated them so that they could be of more help and hopefully save them and myself some time.

For instance, I've made notes of answers to queries that students have had and then included those answers and info into pre-existing documents, such as Pre-Departure Meeting slides. As all students attend these meetings, it has helped to inform them better and avoid students needing the answer to something further down the line when a deadline is fast-approaching.

Other documents I've updated and slimmed down are the 'Year in Japan' Guide for students when they're actually in Japan. The document now has the main essentials (it even has a contents page with page numbers now – why wasn't that there before?!).

One particular document that students fill in is a 'Needs Form'. In the form, students list their 'preferences and needs', such as wanted to be located at a Japanese University in a small city/big city/rural/homestay accommodation; any food allergies etc.

However, some questions ask sensitive information about medical conditions, and we received some feedback from some students that a couple of the questions were 'intrusive' and too sensitive. After liaising with colleagues and with the Disability Support Team, we have been able to amend the form to remove these unnecessary questions for next year's cohort, and make it GDPR compliant.

4. Creating student guides – to provide better support and reduce errors/queries

I noticed a trend while students submitted their applications to me. Amongst all 15 Universities' different applications, there was one document that was identical in each, and incidentally was one that most students made errors completing.

Ready for next year, I've made a guide for students specifically on how to complete that document. This will help give better support to students in future years, and also makes the information accessible to amongst my team in case I'm no longer here.

5. Simplifying student submission – to save time, make tracking easier and reduce paper usage

In previous years, students have completed two documents and submitted them by email:

- Risk Assessment Form and Pre-Departure Checklist
- Summer Address Form

This has made more work than necessary, due to having to keep track of which students have emailed in with the completed form. This has led in previous years to the creation of spreadsheets (or extra columns to an existing spreadsheet) in order to keep track of which students have submitted. On the whole, email submission seems to create a lot of extra work and extra risks with losing documents.

To combat these problems, I've created Turnitin submission areas on Minerva so that the completed documents can all be collated in one place. This has helped to reduce emails and potential for errors, as well as keep better track of who has and hasn't submitted. Minerva also gives you the option to download and save all documents at once if you need to keep them on file – super handy!

My plan for next year is to scrap the application 1-1s with students entirely and have an assessment area for students to submit their applications. Having everything submitted in assessment areas on Minerva is going to save students a lot of time next year. Firstly they won't have to come to my office to sign up for an appointment – students can always come and see me in office hours anyway. Also, they won't need to submit hardcopies and then sit for 15 minutes while I check their applications for the first time. They then won't have to edit and print out the applications again.

It also saves me sitting down with each student and also helps keep better track of which students have met the application deadline, and also will allow me to divvy up checking the applications amongst my team.

Future improvements to make

Other things I want to roll out for next year's students are:

Future Improvements	How they will help
Online submission of applications and other documents via Minerva	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable easier collation of data in once place. • Eliminate need for 1-1s, where students would be required to come into University on a study day/Easter holidays. • Allows for LCS Residence Abroad team to manage the applications as a team, rather than just myself doing 1-1s. • More time to look over each student's application to check for any errors – less time pressure.
Amend 'Needs Form' to be more GDPR compliant and change to an online survey via Jadu or BOS.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More convenient for students - avoids several emails flying about. • Omitting non-GDPR compliant questions will improve student experience. • Answers can be made mandatory to avoid answers accidentally not being answered by students, and subsequent chasing of information. • Enable easier collation of data in once place.
More resources on Minerva to guide students in completing their applications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the application process easier for students. • Reduce the amount of student queries about the application process. • Applications will be completed more efficiently by students. Reduce the amount of late applications.
Divide workload across different Year Abroad Programmes across the team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote more teamwork and to deal with peak times across Year Abroad Programmes as a team. • Students' queries and issues should get seen to quicker. • Lessen the stress and responsibility on one member of staff to manage the Year Abroad programme.
Collaborate with Study Abroad Office to streamline processes together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidify teamwork and processes between School and Central University. • Make the Year Abroad Programme easier to manage.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look into possibilities of streamlining/reducing processes and workload.
Develop feedback surveys after the application process each year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the student experience for future years. • Help to measure our progress with improving the application process and support we give to students before and during their Year Abroad.

What I gained from the ‘Lean Ways of Working: Introduction’

The ‘Lean Ways of Working: Introduction’ workshop really helped re-enforce my own feelings towards continuous improvement of processes. It’s also helped to spark further ideas for improvement and to think more often about which parts of processes are to students’ benefit, and which ones aren’t and could do with being made more efficient (or scrapped altogether!).

I think when processes are extremely complicated, you can easily lose sight of the end goal, which is that students should benefit from your work. Identifying ‘wastes’ - such as duplications - as well as common problems that students seem to face has helped me to make my workload more manageable.

I look forward to attending more ‘Lean’ training sessions so that I can further improve the processes I have to deal with on the daily!