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# managing risk & travel

A guide for learning  
abroad practitioners  
during COVID-19

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## IEAA

International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) is the leading peak body organisation for international education. We strive to empower professionals, engage institutions, and enhance Australia's reputation as a provider of world-class education. We provide advocacy, deliver high-quality professional learning, and drive new research to highlight emerging trends, inform strategy and policy, and enrich the sector's knowledge.

## About the authors

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## COVID-19

IEAA acknowledges the significant challenges faced by the sector, institutions, students, graduates, and careers professionals as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This document was written in mid-2021, at a time of significant disruption and uncertainty, with long-term impacts still unknown. One of the primary aims of this document is to ensure learning abroad practitioners have a resource to assist navigate novel challenges they may be faced with in the resumption of student travel and overseas study experiences. IEAA recognises that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication, and will be updated as the global pandemic continues to unfold. To find the most current information, please visit [ieaa.org.au/managing-risk-and-travel](http://ieaa.org.au/managing-risk-and-travel).

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# Purpose

COVID-19 has profoundly impacted the work of learning abroad practitioners in Australia and globally. As travel reactivates and normalises post-pandemic, student safety and risk management in relation to learning abroad programs will be under sharp scrutiny.

With this in mind, a number of practitioners have collaborated to provide the Australian learning abroad sector with a consistent starting point for policies, procedures and processes. While this guide is primarily for learning abroad offices at higher education institutions in Australia, many of the concepts explored can be adopted by organisations and teams that facilitate international travel experiences for other tertiary education audiences such as overseas institutions and third party providers.

The advice provided within this document highlights the need for learning abroad teams to build capacity and expertise to prioritise

issues of travellers' safety. For Australian institutions to reactivate student travel to return to pre-COVID levels, they must prioritise and invest in resourcing critical areas including risk, safety and security. If Australian institutions under-resource security and risk management of learning abroad, relative to our international counterparts, we cannot recover at the same speed or capacity. In addition, if we do not meet the expectations of our students and partners, the reputation of the broader Australian learning abroad sector could be jeopardised.



"The COVID-19 pandemic and its global impact highlight the need for effective and collaborative approaches to managing risk to ensure safety. Universities have swiftly responded to defend staff and students from the immediate health risks posed by the virus, however, many challenges remain including the significant psychosocial impacts of the crisis. The disruption to student mobility from travel restrictions have impacted the sector financially, but the psychological harm to students caused by fear, uncertainty, and isolation is more concerning. As values-based organisations, universities have a responsibility as well as an opportunity to protect the health and wellbeing of students, as well as staff. By finding ways to effectively mitigate risks, institutions will be able to restore confidence in studying abroad. The Australasian University Safety Association commends the effort by Learning Abroad professionals to prepare for a return to student travel by thinking about what will be needed to support this in terms of people, skills, policy, practices and systems."

Scott Burnell

President, Executive, Australasian University Safety Association (AUSA)





# COVID-19 and learning abroad

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve as an unpredictable crisis and will define the learning abroad sector for years to come. There is ever-changing guidance from experts about the spread of variants and the efficacy of vaccines against them, which makes planning the return to travel extremely challenging for all institutions.

As COVID-19 is the key security concern that will impact all learning abroad programs to all destinations, providing specific COVID-19 strategies has influenced the information contained in this guide. As the COVID-19 situation evolves, your office may find broader insights in this document helpful in making operational improvements.

This guide also serves to outline the complexity and depth of professional experience and skills held by student mobility practitioners. Practitioners have demonstrated their ability to pivot programming and to apply their skills elsewhere in institutions through redeployment. This allows practitioners' expertise, institutional knowledge and global partnerships to be retained, which is vital to reactivating learning abroad activities when border restrictions are eventually eased.

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# Getting organised – what you can do now

## University governance and policy

During this time of restricted travel, learning abroad offices can reevaluate how governance at their institution can support safe, coordinated and consistent approaches for student mobility and travel. While governance structures, staffing profiles and policies may differ across institutions, a sector-wide approach for defining critical governance requirements can elevate the expertise, skills and value of the learning abroad team.

As we have seen during COVID-19, university governance structures have been activated and amplified as standard learning abroad decisions are subject to higher levels of approval and scrutiny. For example, a crisis management team may have been formed or activated and become responsible for approving the decision to recall students or cancel programs. The activation of the crisis response may have highlighted weaknesses in policies or uncovered ungoverned activities, such as extra-curricular international activities.

## Policy and procedures

Institutions have various policies in place that address certain aspects of learning abroad which may include: travel, academic coursework, insurance, partnerships, safety and security, risk management and

Learning abroad teams should partner with the governance and policy teams to review and amend primary and related policies that address the above listed topics before reactivating travel.

geopolitical considerations and objectives. Learning abroad teams should partner with the governance and policy teams to review and amend primary and related policies that address the above listed topics before reactivating travel. The network of policies that address learning abroad and student travel at your institution may include:

- Student mobility/learning abroad policies and procedures
- Travel policies and procedures (staff and students)
- Procurement/credit card/reimbursement policy (travel related)
- Crisis response and critical incident management policies and procedures
- WHS risk management policies and procedures
- WHS off-campus activities procedures
- Work integrated learning (WIL) and placement procedures
- Student placement policies and procedures (including for clinical placements)
- University travel insurance policy and other insurance policies
- Transnational education policies

Working with your institution's governance/policy team to advocate for change will ensure standard consultation processes are followed and that an unbiased party can negotiate effectively between functional areas. For instance, other portfolios may be invested in the activity of travel (such as procurement, human resources or, graduate research) and may have different priorities or approaches. Your learning abroad team may not have normally liaised with these areas about updating policy, so engaging the governance team will balance the needs of various stakeholders.

When you have identified all relevant policies or have identified a need for new/ revised policies, you should consider the following:

- What is the parent policy, and who is the policy owner?
- Do the other relevant policies address the topic under review?
- Is the clause you wish to develop present in another policy?
- Who does the new clause impact the most? Have you consulted with them?
- How are policies reviewed at your institution? Who can feed into these reviews?
- What have you learned and what pitfalls have you encountered when negotiating policies/procedures that impact your students?
- Can the policy be operationally applied with clear outcomes for students?

## Authority and approvals

One outcome of COVID-19 is that learning abroad teams may have discovered they no longer have the authority level for approving travel/programs they once had or that the risk of owning a decision is too great, and it is more appropriate to diffuse the ownership among experts. To share the risk and coordinate a senior leadership-level approval for the return to travel, establishing a clear travel risk assessment framework can ensure the most relevant stakeholders are making decisions when approving, denying or recalling students who are travelling.

The risk appetite of your institution may increase if robust frameworks with well-coordinated consultation processes take place. The learning abroad team should seek to collate the advice of key experts across the university such as risk and compliance, medical officers, legal counsel and other trusted individuals and present it in a manner that aligns with the desired outcome. This consultation process should ensure consistency among stakeholders requesting travel exemptions or undertaking high-risk activities.

Points of consideration for return to travel frameworks and approvals:

- Who are the trusted experts at your university?
  - *Where does their expertise end and the learning abroad team's expertise begin?*
- Who made decisions relating to student travel during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - *Does this differ from staff travel?*
  - *Are decisions consistent?*
- How do you respond to individual petitions to travel/do offshore activities?
- Who owns the risk of an offshore program? Is this the faculty or the learning abroad team?
- Will all travel be approved or will travel be considered based on: location, individual (student) circumstances, vaccinations and so on?
- In any circumstance that is not a case of 'all travel approved', who will be assessing these considerations and making decisions to approve/deny travel?



## Example

### Establish a Travel Risk Assessment Committee

The learning abroad team has been approached by an academic in the Faculty of Arts who wants to lead a study tour to Japan once borders reopen. Planning is currently underway so the program can be offered immediately but they require guidance regarding what safety protocols are required and how to obtain approval for the program.

Given the elevated risk of international travel, this university has established a central Travel Risk Assessment Committee, to ensure travel approvals are consistent, guided by experts and monitored. This allows all involved portfolios to share the risk of the travel, rather than it being owned primarily by the academic leading the activity.

- Travel Risk Assessment Committee members include:
  - One academic representative per academic area (Deputy Dean International or equivalent from each Faculty)
  - One representative per relevant professional or central services unit, such as insurance/risk, international/mobility, legal counsel, security team, geopolitical advisory groups, financial and travel services, and safer communities.)
  - A nominated Chair
- Responsibility of the committee:
  - Review and endorse recommendations to reinstate/recall student travel
    - *Committee recommendations should be taken to University Executive / Vice-Chancellor for final approval*
  - Review and endorse, or inform, recommendations around travel insurance at the time of review
  - Review and endorse, or inform, changes to policy/procedures relating to student travel
  - Approve/deny mobility programs that are high risk
  - Approve/deny individuals for travel that is high risk



# Prioritising the duty of care of students

## Duty of care

Duty of care is the obligation to act in a way “toward others and the public with vigilance, caution, and prudence” (TerraDotta, 2021). Learning abroad offices are legally obliged to ensure policies and practices are designed to support the duty of care owed to students. This is the guiding principle for all aspects of the learning abroad life cycle to be addressed in the development of partner agreements, staff training, pre-departure materials, and student mobility and travel policies. It is important to note that while your institution may choose to work with partners and providers that have a robust duty of care standard, this responsibility cannot be outsourced.

As it relates to COVID-19, to avoid negligence, students are required to abide by all local regulations and guidelines in their home and host countries and communities. Learning abroad offices should strive to facilitate a student’s understanding of how to comply with local regulations and how they compare or contrast with your and the partner’s institutional policies (Forum on Education Abroad, 2020). It is likely not sufficient to fully delegate that responsibility to each individual student as their interpretation could be inconsistent or not fully realised and may increase broader reputational risks to the university.

Practitioners may use these strategies to meet your duty of care responsibilities with limited resources by partnering with students and staff developing learning abroad programs.

## Self-assessment tools

These are tools provided to students to enable them to make informed decisions as to whether they should participate in a learning abroad program based on known risks pertaining to their individual circumstances.

- Medical issue disclosure questionnaire
- Mental health issue disclosure questionnaire

Learning abroad offices should strive to facilitate a student’s understanding of how to comply with local regulations and how they compare or contrast with your and the partner’s institutional policies

- A “health plan” for any disclosure to be completed by student and doctor (designed in conjunction with university counsellors and/or chief medical officer)
- Destination risk assessment for each student, including a contingency plan if the learning abroad program is disrupted

## Embed in policy

- Student mobility policies should directly address the requirement of duty of care responsibilities of staff developing and leading mobility programs
- Travel policies should include clauses relating to traveller safety and security
- Transnational education policies should set a requirement for health and safety risk assessments of partners.
- Share policies with key stakeholders, such as central student services team, so they can educate students and respond to queries

## Agreements and waivers

- Standard learning abroad participation agreement – how is it structured, what is included
- Clauses confirming that students will not hold partners/the university liable as a result of their own behaviour; and accepting the limits of a waiver if an incident were to occur

- Insurance waiver for students who, despite university direction, wish to remain in a high-risk situations. This holds students responsible for confirming they have adequate insurance

## Insurance policy

- Communicate the risks of allowing students to undertake offshore activities in the absence of adequate (travel) insurance
- Understand the role of insurance in meeting duty of care obligations

## Communications and media

- Use modules and videos to break down complex safety and compliance information
- Connect students with reputable organisations for booking ethical and safe travel
- Pre-departure sessions and materials that are contextual and assist with interpreting policy and guidance
- Develop shared understanding regarding the advantages and disadvantages of social media and using channels purposefully

## Tracking tools and cohort management

- Ensure all students are accurately captured in your learning abroad management system
- Where possible use your system to send bulk communications to student cohorts and collect responses en-masse
- Partner with yourtravel insurer and/or international risk and security supplier to track students and respond to emergencies

## Travel insurance

Many institutions provide student travel insurance cover to their students at no cost to the student. Reputational risks to the institution are reduced if all students have equal access to comprehensive cover. This can also assist with coordinating a consistent incident response when required. If the learning abroad team has not yet taken a deep dive into the insurance

settings at your institution, you should make requirements and processes known to your insurance office and insurance provider before returning to travel. Whether or not the learning abroad team funds the premium of student travel insurance, as primary users of the policy they have a vested interest.

Some considerations for student travel insurance settings:

- How is the policy funded?
- Is it one policy among many negotiated by your broker with the same underwriter?
- Are you able to negotiate to cover for individuals/activities that may not be explicitly stated in the policy? (for example, if a student forgets to register, can you request that a claim be paid for that student?)
- Is your insurance cover deactivated by DFAT travel advice?
- How much personal travel do you cover? What percentage of claims are made during personal travel?
- Does your insurance provider partner with an emergency services provider? Is there an extra cost to allow your students to access emergency support services?
- How do you address insurance cover in your student agreements/waivers?
- How is a 'journey' defined? Will this impact international students who commence a journey outside of Australia?
- Do you cover domestic student travel? What are the benefits/disadvantages of covering domestic student travel?
- Does your provider offer welfare and mental health services? Are these additional or standard inclusions? What conditions regulate access to these services for students?

# Get smart – concepts and tools for establishing safer practices

## Travel advisories and global advice

Governmental travel advisories and external intelligence sources are critical tools for risk management of learning abroad operations. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Smartraveller advice is the primary tool used by institutions in Australia to analyse the security situation of a location and determine permitted travel. Australian citizens and permanent residents are bound by DFAT travel restrictions, as experienced during the COVID-19 travel ban. However, given the global diversity of university operations, including staff and student backgrounds and transnational education initiatives, introducing additional tools to inform decision-making fills contextual knowledge gaps. These tools and advisory bodies may need to be utilised by institutions to assess destinations, taking into account the types of students participating in programs. For example, in the case of international students; are they able to travel freely to and from Australia; have they

Given the global diversity of university operations, including staff and student backgrounds and transnational education initiatives, introducing additional tools to inform decision-making fills contextual knowledge gaps.

received a vaccine in their home country that is accepted by the host destination; are they currently overseas and subject to travel restrictions beyond those in place in Australia?

Multiple sources of information will provide you with a multi-dimensional view of home and host country's security and safety situations. Below is a summary of advisory bodies your institution may wish to consult, or may already have access to.

### DFAT: Smartraveller

- *Purpose:* Federal advice for overseas travel for Australian citizens and residents.
- *Institution use:* University travel and learning abroad policies must adhere to DFAT travel restrictions. Travel insurance companies use DFAT travel advice to extend or restrict cover.
- *Key advice provided:* Broad country-specific safety advice; "before you go" advice by topic; consular services advice; crisis, emergency and urgent assistance for Australian citizens.



Further information can be found at:  
[smartraveller.gov.au](https://smartraveller.gov.au)

### Multilateral agencies – United Nations; World Health Organisation (WHO)

- *Purpose:* Global agencies specialising in global issues such as public health, climate change and human rights.
- *Institution use:* To deeply investigate a specific issue, universities can use global agency advice to inform decision-making. These advisories are generally not linked to university policy, so where they are being used to inform a key decision, senior leadership endorsement is essential.
- *Key advice provided:* For COVID-19, WHO publishes documents that provide detailed information about topics relating to public health and safety.



Foreign government advisories – US Department of State (Overseas Advisory Council); U.K. Foreign Office European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC); USA Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- *Purpose:* Local destination intelligence with contextualised on-ground advice. Non-Australian national agencies have travel advisories that may use different metrics to determine security levels. They also may advise on topics not covered by the DFAT Smartraveller site and will be subject to diplomatic regional relations.
- *Institution use:* May be used to consider on-the-ground access to services, provide contextual understanding on the capacity of the local health care system and infection rates such as hospitals, testing and clinics. Intelligence on other local vulnerabilities may be provided, including localised lockdowns or movement restrictions. These agencies may provide immigration advice to determine immigration regulations for students from your university. This is specifically relevant for COVID-19 as borders reopen.
- *Key advice provided:* Local safety and security regulations, immigration/border advice for your travellers, perspectives about security and safety at other locations. CDC Travel Recommendations are useful in assessing the risks of COVID-19 for the university's stakeholders. This advice can be used to determine whether inbound international students are permitted to travel to Australia for learning abroad.

Non-government aligned intelligence bodies – InternationalSOS, WorldAware, travel insurance companies

- *Purpose:* Universities may have access to security analyses via private organisations or contractors. They may provide customised reports upon request or curate intelligence for a range of clients. These custom reports may allow institutions to better tailor advice to individual student circumstances. For example, InternationalSOS provides detailed country profiles and will tailor advice for individual institutions based on a specific program and traveller profile.
- *Institution use:* Travel insurance companies and/or international security and emergency response providers might offer intelligence for a fee or as part of a contract. Similarly, their travel alert software, available through travel registration and/or student application management systems, may also provide alerts and notifications by country. Repatriation services and in-country assistance, including access to mental health support services, can ensure all students receive consistent levels of support irrespective of variances across host locations.
- *Key advice provided:* Alerts can be more current and immediate than governmental advice. Advice can be tailored for activities upon request and staff might be available for in-person information sessions or direct advice.

A photograph of two women in conversation, overlaid with a blue tint. The woman on the left has short, light-colored hair and glasses perched on her head. The woman on the right has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing glasses and smiling. They appear to be in an office or meeting setting.

## Example

### Design policy and guidelines that support the use of multiple sources

Due to the closure of Australian borders in March 2020, there are many international students who are enrolled at an Australian institution and are studying virtually from their home countries. For example, an international student from China is currently undertaking their studies online from China and wishes to participate in an exchange program to a Chinese institution to study in-person for a semester. The learning abroad team at their Australian institution has been tasked to assess the risk of this activity.

To adequately assess the risk of COVID-19, your office may choose to use non-DFAT sources in their decision-making processes. For example, US CDC travel recommendations provide a clear rating system to standardise and simplify risk assessment of COVID-19. However, as the CDC levels are typically not enshrined in policy, your office should seek endorsement from senior leadership when basing recommendations and/or decisions on externally sourced information.



# Emergency preparedness and response

Your institution will likely have a crisis management plan, framework or a team who provide broad rules around crisis response and manage crises as they arise. The learning abroad office should investigate if the crisis management plan will adequately support a crisis of a student located offshore and, if not, may seek to develop emergency preparedness processes that support your students, staff and offshore partners.

Emergency preparedness can be described as “the comprehensive knowledge, skills, abilities, and actions needed to prepare for and respond to threatened, actual, or suspected chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive incidents, man-made incidents, natural disasters, or other related events” (Bulson, 2020). Building emergency preparedness capacity may include developing guidance for risk assessing programs and locations; training staff to respond to emergencies; and ensuring a response framework or communication flow chart is in place. It is highly unlikely that travel

insurance underwriters will cover COVID-19 related travel cancellations and disruptions. Your emergency preparedness plan should reflect and communicate how a COVID-19 incident will be managed in the absence of cost recovery via an insurance underwriter.

## Example

Outbreak of COVID-19 in host location where lockdown has been enforced and the DFAT country rating increased to “Do not travel”

Information learning abroad offices should gather

- Assess local situation – where is the outbreak in relation to student location/s? Is the activity impacted by lockdown (campus closure, movement restrictions)? Where are COVID-19 testing sites? Are there support services for quarantine/isolation?
- Locate students – confirm safety and wellbeing, provide instructions and options such as ensuring adequate shelter is in place and plans for their return home
- Determine support available through insurance providers and emergency response services
- Determine how to communicate with students and internal/external stakeholders about options and responses



## Example action plan

ACTION	OWNER	URGENCY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Contact local/medical authorities.	Onsite staff/partner	High	
Contact insurance provider/emergency response service.	Learning Abroad Manager	High	
Contact students to determine safety, wellbeing and location, and to follow-up with emergency contacts if they are unable to locate any student/s.	Learning Abroad Coordinator and/or Onsite staff/partner	High	
Determine safety, wellbeing and location, and follow-up with emergency contacts if they are unable to locate any student/s.	Learning Abroad Manager and/or International Director	High	
Assess financial consequences of COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent program disruption and the financial support provided to students.	International Director	High	
Liaise with crisis management team/senior leadership about decision to continue or cancel programs.	International Director	High	
Investigate course progression and enrolment impacts, provide options to student/s with assistance from school/faculty.	Learning Abroad Coordinator	Medium	
Liaise with travel/third party provider about refunds and updates to bookings/travel arrangements.	Learning Abroad Coordinator and/or Program Leader	Medium	
Provide students with support services including mental health and medical support as well as other specialised services.	Learning Abroad Coordinator	Medium	
Track the location/progress of students until they return to their home country.	Learning Abroad Coordinator	Medium	

As a result of the above process, be prepared to support students that who into each of the following categories:

- Students who return to Australia/home location;
- Students who wish to remain at their host location;
- Students who travel to a third destination, including their home country;
- Students stranded in host location and unable to travel to Australia/home location; and
- Non-responders.

## Summary

Prioritising risk, safety and security issues for learning abroad operations will give institutions confidence to return to travel after the peak of COVID-19. This presents an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of skills already present in the team and the vital role a learning abroad office plays within their institution's global safety operations. In addition to usual business, your team may be expected to identify security and COVID-19 risks in host locations; advise on when and where it may be safe to send students; ensure the institution is not exposed to claims of negligence by setting up systems to meet duty of care obligations; train staff and students to ensure they are equipped before they travel; and play a central role in emergency responses.

In the absence of a dedicated role within the institution during these challenging times, the learning abroad office should ensure that key portfolios, such as risk and compliance, governance and travel offices, are aware of cohort size and locations of students travelling internationally as part of their studies. Learning abroad activities and associated travel risks should be managed collaboratively across the institution.



“This is a document of critical importance and immense value as Universities around the world seek to reengage in their learning abroad programs and continue to develop their global strategic initiatives. International safety and security in higher education requires specialized support all across the institution to ensure the highest levels of care for travelers and attention to reputational risk.”

Andrea Bordeau

President, Pulse: International Safety and Security Professionals in Higher Education

Director of Global Safety and Security, Vanderbilt University

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