Policy for Postgraduate (including Research) Student Travel and Outside Study (off-campus and abroad)

This policy and guidance was approved by ULTSEC on 14 May 2015

Context

This Policy outlines the University’s requirements when Postgraduate students (on Taught and Research programmes) are participating in travel and outside study (off-campus and abroad) and also makes reference to relevant insurance implications and guidelines for students and their tutors / supervisors / advisers.

It should be noted that this policy is of particular relevance to students registered at the Newcastle campus. Nevertheless, the general principles in this policy apply to all students, regardless of their location, course or mode of study. Staff and students should note that there may be particular provisions or different Insurance arrangements at our Newcastle University London or overseas campuses (NuMED, NUIS etc.) and for students studying at a distance or through e-learning. Students based at the University’s London or overseas campus locations should contact the Insurance Office when they are considering travel and outside study, so that their individual situation can be considered. Contact details for the Insurance Officer are; ext. 86520 or email insurance@ncl.ac.uk

The details of this Policy refer in the main to University activity and associated travel outside the UK territorial limits.

The University encourages student engagement with diverse opportunities available as part of their programme of study, which can include, for example, primary research or field-work, off-campus / outside placements in various national or international locations. ‘University business’ is defined as an activity which is a formal part of the programme of study or research, or any other academic activity which has been approved as part of the programme of study, training or research. For clarity ‘Off-campus’ is defined as a location away from the student’s registered Campus, which includes all University buildings/farms/laboratories etc.

As a consequence the University’s Travel Abroad Policy, Insurance and current risk management authorisation protocols should be applied in every case.

Over-arching Policy

a) The University will take all necessary and reasonable measures to protect students whilst they are on University business – this includes active study at the student’s main campus and at any off-campus / outside locations for all fully registered postgraduate students.

b) Student Travel on University business / Outside Study for activities of more than one month, or to a location classified by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as ‘advise all travel’ or ‘against all but essential travel’ must be approved in advance of travel by the Dean of Postgraduate Studies on the recommendation of the Head of School or nominee concerned. However, where a project is in an area where the FCO advice is against all but essential travel, full sign off of the risk assessment by the Faculty PVC is required. Students should use
the ‘Outside Study Application form’, taking account of the provisions of this policy, and the associated insurance and risk implications. All advised health and safety protocols must be followed.

c) All other Overseas Student Travel on University business / Outside Study for activities must be approved in every case using the ‘Student Notice of Absence Form’ on the recommendation of the Head of School or nominee concerned, taking account of the provisions of this policy, and the associated insurance health and safety, travel abroad policies and risk implications.

d) The relevant travel ‘Risk Assessment Form’ must be completed by the student concerned for all Overseas Student Travel / Outside Study. This typically includes a risk assessment for the travel itself, and for the specific activities to be undertaken. The Risk Assessment Form must be considered and approved, in accordance with the Travel Abroad Policy, by the Head of School or nominee and, where appropriate, submitted to the Dean of Postgraduate Studies as part of the approval process for the travel / outside study proposal.

e) No off-campus / outside study will be authorised where the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advise against travel or against all but essential travel. There are also some countries where University insurance cover cannot be provided irrespective of FCO advice, and travel on University business to these countries will not normally be authorised.

f) In addition, for Postgraduate Research students, the University will take all steps to avoid instances where students travel to high-risk countries as part of their research programme during their candidature as a fully-registered research student; for a PhD student this is normally within the first 3 years of full time candidature or equivalent timescales for other modes of study. At key stages in the admission, project approval and ethical approval of the student’s candidature, the University will challenge and is unlikely to approve activities involving travel to high-risk countries or region of country as part of the postgraduate research programme. For all postgraduate travel, the University will actively ensure that all appropriate risk management protocols are fully addressed. Travel which does not meet the relevant approval criteria will not be classed as University business and will not be covered by University insurance policies.

Currently, the following is a list of countries for which no University insurance can be obtained.

Afghanistan  Cuba  Iraq  Iran

Information about countries not covered by the University’s insurance is available from the University’s Insurance Officer on ext. 86520 or email insurance@ncl.ac.uk.

This Policy does not apply where:

- Students voluntarily choose to travel or participate in activities which do not form part of their programme, or any other approved academic activity— e.g. student holidays or visits to families or to their home country for purposes other than approved University business.
- Students are not in active study on University business – e.g. where students are registered ‘writing up, pending submission, extended submission’, registered ‘under examination’ or are ‘external’ candidates or on leave of absence / interruption of studies
- International students have completed their studies and are no longer eligible to remain in the UK (or other university campus) under their student visa.
Insurance

University insurance cover will apply for all pre-authorised ‘University business’, even if the University is not directly funding the ‘off-campus / outside study’. Insurance cover is provided according to the Insurance Policy and associated provisions in force at the time of travel. Further information can be found at: http://www.ncl.ac.uk/internal/finance/insurance/cover/index.htm

The following points of exclusion should be noted:

- Where Students are travelling on pre-approved University Business to a country not covered by the University insurance, alternative insurance must be in place before travel. Only in cases where the travel is on pre-authorised University business, as defined above, may the costs of insurance be reimbursed by the student’s School.
- The medical costs incurred by students whilst in their home country are not covered, even if the student is travelling on pre-authorised University business. Students travelling to their home country are expected to access the health provisions of their home country in the normal way.
- Family members accompanying the students from Newcastle to another country are not covered by the University’s insurance: families should take out their own travel insurance for this purpose.

The specific provisions of the University’s insurance Policy for Postgraduate travel should be read carefully before travel. http://www.ncl.ac.uk/internal/finance/insurance/cover/travel_pg.htm

In all instances where the University's insurance cover is not available, students must arrange their own travel and / or Medical insurance cover.

Supplementary Information and Guidance

Postgraduate Students planning travel abroad / outside study, and those who advise them, are strongly recommended to bear in mind the following:

a) Staff and students are encouraged to refer to the University’s detailed policies relating to Travel, Insurance, Health and Safety, Risk assessment protocols, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice in relation to travel to high-risk countries.

b) Students who choose to travel (for family or personal reasons) to a home country where the FCO advises against ‘all travel’ or ‘all but essential’ travel, should take particular care to ensure their personal safety, including ensuring that their own insurance cover is in place. They should also be advised that it may become difficult to return to the UK to resume study if political or other situations are escalated.

Travel to high-risk countries

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises on the safety of travel to named countries. For individual countries or areas of a country the FCO may advise against all travel or against all but essential travel. The FCO guidance is subject to periodic change and the latest information should always be sought before any international travel is agreed for staff or students: www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice
The University recruits a large number of international research students some of whom are nationals of countries with FCO travel restrictions. A number of students may have tied sponsorship funding to undertake research within a country subject to FCO travel restrictions.

The University has a duty to protect students and to ensure that risks are actively managed for any off-campus study.

The University has a Travel Abroad Policy which applies to students and which is closely linked to FCO travel advice. Therefore, reference must be made to the travel abroad policy and FCO advice prior to acceptance of individual students. The Occupational Health & Safety Service can offer advice to staff and students on individual countries and research proposals.

The University cannot allow a student to travel for the purposes of primary or field research to a country (or specified part thereof), designated by the FCO as advise against ‘all travel’. PG students may be permitted to travel to countries (or specified part thereof) which are designated as advise against ‘all but essential travel’, but only after strict controls have been agreed and approved by the Faculty PVC, at the student’s own risk. The University must take all reasonable measures to ensure the protection of the student and have in place appropriate insurance policies, in accordance with the University’s Insurance Policy.

If travel risks cannot be suitably managed, in some circumstances the University may have to:

- Agree alternate programmes of study with a student and/or a sponsor;
- Reject an Admission or Decline to continue a student’s registration at the University

The procedures noted below are intended to:

- minimise the number of research students admitted where there is a prior commitment to primary or field research undertaken in a high-risk country,
- ensure that there are appropriate controls and approvals for any unavoidable travel, as primary or field research, to a high-risk country

Each case will be decided on its individual merits having regard to the best available information and FCO travel advice at the time.

Procedures/ Guidance for Staff when considering if a Postgraduate Student’s Research might entail Travel to a High-Risk Country

1. Admission

All University staff involved in admission decisions for research students should be mindful of the possible constraints when students submit research proposals involving study in high-risk countries, as designated by the FCO.

It is the responsibility of the academic unit (the Director of Postgraduate Studies or equivalent) to clarify whether primary or field research is intended to be undertaken in a high-risk country. Subject to normal entry criteria being met:

- If there is no suggestion of primary or field research to be located in a high-risk country, an offer may be made in the usual way.
Otherwise the application must be carefully considered and if necessary further information obtained from the student and/or sponsor. Unless for a pre-defined and approved research project, particular attention should be paid to the research proposal and the associated practicalities of admitting a student proposing to undertake research in a high-risk country. This should include consideration of the applicant’s health and safety and the safety of others involved in the research process, ethical questions that may arise when conducting field work and development of a plan to deal with any foreseeable potential risks in the field work location. Where there is any doubt about the viability of a research project the student should not be admitted. Some negotiation on the project proposal may be possible. If the academic unit intends to make an offer of a place to the student, a summary document should be prepared outlining the foreseeable risks, conditions and any restrictions up on which the offer is made and any specific controls to keep the student safe—this should be signed by the Head of School or nominee and sent to the Applicant.

- The Admissions Assistant will refer this application to the Dean of Postgraduate Studies before an offer is made.
- The Dean of Postgraduate Studies will allow an offer to be made if there is prima facie evidence of rigorous risk assessment protocols by the academic unit,

- If the academic unit cannot demonstrate effective risk mitigation strategies then the application must be rejected.

There will be instances where situations change post-admission, because of changes in the student’s project or changes in the risk status of particular countries. We will, therefore, need to carefully manage projects and their associated study or field work in potentially high-risk countries identified by the FCO or insurance provider. In these circumstances and other cases where there are dangers in the field the following guidance applies.

2. Project Approval and Annual Progression

Project Approval should be conducted in a timely manner as required by the Code of Practice (within approximately 3 months from commencement). Particular care should be paid by students and their supervisors regarding the health and safety issues involved when operationalising the project and they should consult the University’s Travel Abroad Policy (http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ohss/safety/management/travel/). A travel risk assessment must be completed for all international travel. If there are significant issues of personal health and safety these must be addressed either through a thorough risk appraisal/assessment, finding satisfactory ways of controlling the risk, and/or the development of an alternative plan should it not be possible to conduct the research as originally conceived. The methodological implications of any health and safety procedures should be considered.

Project Approval involves recommendation by two academics independent from the project team to the Head of School (or nominee, usually the Director of Postgraduate Studies) and ultimately approval by the Dean of Postgraduate Studies. It is their responsibility to ensure that the student and supervisory team have put in place arrangements for the work to be conducted safely.
Ethical Approval

There may be significant ethical issues associated with study in high-risk places. For example, a gatekeeper may be required for health and safety reasons, or health and safety considerations may necessitate the student being accompanied during the research which may have ethical implications. These should be addressed where necessary through an application for full Ethical Approval immediately following Project Approval.

Progress Review

Progress Review, conducted towards the end of the first year, and each year thereafter, should check that the student is well prepared for field work or study abroad and Project and Ethical Approval is in place. If it is apparent that health and safety issues have arisen which were not present at the time of Project Approval, then an alternative research plan need to be considered or appropriate risk mitigation strategies agreed. Again this involves academics independent from the project and the Head of School (or nominee) and ultimately signed off by the Dean of Postgraduate Studies.

3. Outside Study Approval

Any request to conduct a period of more than one month of registration outside of the University, should be made on the ‘Outside Study Application Form’, at least 3 months before the start of the period of outside study. This form provides information on location, purpose and access to facilities whilst the student is away from Newcastle as part of their research programme. Where this study is to be located outside of the UK a full risk appraisal/assessment should be included outlining how the project will be safely completed and what suitable and sufficient controls are in place mitigate risk. This risk assessment should have been signed by the Head of School (or nominee).

The Dean of Postgraduate Studies will normally approve the period of outside study when satisfied that adequate facilities and resources are available and that Health and safety issues have been appropriately considered. However, where a project is in an area where the FCO advice is against all but essential travel, full sign off of the risk assessment by the Faculty PVC is required.

Angela McNeill, Head of Student Progress Service

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