

COVID-19 supporting resources

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Contingency Planning for International Placements (‘mobilities’)

Introduction

The opportunity to undertake international study, in particular the exchange and mobility of students, is a key feature of UK higher education. International placements give unique opportunities to understand, engage and share ideas with people from different cultures. Many providers promote the benefits of experiencing another country first-hand as intrinsic elements of their courses, others offer international placements as options once students commence their studies. Offering placements of this kind in the COVID-19 pandemic has proven highly challenging and, in many cases, will involve substantial changes to the student experience.

This paper is intended to help providers and students navigate the decision-making process on whether to cancel, defer, replace or resume optional international placements. It also acts as an aid to reflecting on decisions you have already made. It can be read in conjunction with the QAA supporting resource, [Contingency Planning for Placement Provision](#).

This paper has primarily been written for providers’ central quality teams, but may also be useful for mobilities teams. It has been developed following discussions with providers who are involved in contingency planning for the current and the forthcoming academic years. It is not regulatory and following it will not ensure compliance with the regulatory requirements in your part of the UK, nor does it constitute advice on how to comply with legal obligations. Although this paper does not specifically discuss PSRB regulated placements, aspects of it may apply to such provision. Providers may also find the [Advice and Guidance on Work-Based Learning](#), linked to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, a useful reference point.

What do we mean by international placements?

This paper defines international placements as any period of study within a higher education course where that block of learning takes place on-site in workplaces, partner universities or learning environments (such as field work) outside the UK. These kinds of placement are often referred to as ‘mobilities’ within providers, who may have dedicated central teams for managing students on mobility, or their coordination may be an additional responsibility for registry or academic departments. Such placements can be organised by the provider or self-sourced by students.

We use the phrase ‘on-site’ instead of ‘face-to-face’ teaching and learning, to illustrate that learning through digital delivery is also often a face-to-face experience.

Contingency planning principles for international placements

These principles are adapted for the international context from those appearing in the [Contingency Planning for Placement Provision](#) resource.

1. Underpin all of your considerations with the aims of ensuring consistency for students on the same courses, emphasising fairness, supporting transparency, promoting academic quality and reducing risk for your students and staff - their health and wellbeing must always be your priority.
2. Aim to resume or continue placements whenever possible, coordinating with relevant agencies and placement providers, and supporting students to understand the risks and their options. Tailoring your approach may avoid blanket cancellations of mobilities, for example by offering a variety of models to facilitate as much mobility as possible across subject areas.
3. If placements cannot run onsite, aim, where possible, to replace them with alternative arrangements. If that is not possible, deferral or cancellation should be available without detriment to the student.
4. Ensure that every course involving a placement has a contingency plan that will be used if COVID-19 restrictions continue or resume. Use alternative arrangements, which may include online and blended approaches, and modify assessments where necessary. Ensure such alternative assessments are in line with your existing academic regulations and any specific policies on assessment, such as 'no-detriment'.
5. Ensure that students have opportunities to achieve the intended learning outcomes for their course through other modules if the originally planned placements cannot take place. It may be helpful to map any module learning outcomes that cannot be completed to course level outcomes.
6. As many mobilities are carried out on an exchange basis, and are dependent on overseas providers and students still being willing and able to operate those exchanges, flexibility may be difficult and decisions may not rest with the UK provider alone. Where you do decide to cancel placement provision, first explore the possibility of virtual placements, flexible alternative assessments and remapping of module to course learning outcomes.
7. Deferring placements could be an appropriate option, but this can create challenges relating to progression, the volume of credit students may be taking at any one time, the capability of dealing with significantly more students in overseas locations than usual, and the capacity of international partners to cope with additional students. Therefore, deferring placements will need very careful consideration.
8. You, and your students, must comply with the relevant government and health authority guidance in the countries in which you operate placements.
9. The degree-awarding body will, as always, retain responsibility for the academic standards of their award wherever it may be delivered.

What do we need to think about when contingency planning?

It may be useful to focus on meeting learning outcomes rather than the volume of learning expressed in hours/credit when considering shortening overseas study periods. This is a view supported by the Office for Students, which offers the following [guidance regarding placements](#):

'If placements are disrupted, providers could decide that the placement should no longer be required because students can demonstrate that relevant outcomes have been achieved by other means; this may be appropriate if the placement repeats achievement demonstrated in previous placements or in other assessment that has already taken place'.

Some countries are beginning to relax their social, economic and travel restrictions, but it is possible that there may be future re-impositions of restrictions. We are also aware that providers in some countries in Asia, Australia and the USA are cancelling their placements for the next academic year, and more are expected to follow. At the time of writing, the [Foreign & Commonwealth Office](#) advice remains to avoid all but essential travel overseas.

Nonetheless we understand that many universities are continuing to proceed with placements as planned for next academic year, while discussing contingencies. This is especially the case for placements involving travel to Europe where the academic year, typically, has a later start. At the time of writing, the UK National Agency for [Erasmus+](#) has indicated that it is monitoring the position closely; it is not indicating that mobility should not go ahead at the start of next academic year. In addition, there remain thousands of students all around the world who chose to stay in-country where it was possible to continue with their studies and safer to do so. Understandably, students will be anxious about the impact on their degree, their safety in different national contexts, and the preparations they need to be making.

It is important that providers' central quality teams are engaged in the approval of any changes to mobility opportunities. Academic, quality and mobilities teams will together need to consider the impact of any changes on credit, award title (for example, resulting from a reduction in the volume of credit studied abroad), the degree transcript, and ensuring the courses continue to meet threshold academic standards. There may be circumstances where academic regulations or algorithms need to be reviewed. The student's contract will also govern the learning which providers are expected to deliver. QAA has produced a supporting resource outlining the [arguments for and against including specific COVID-19 statements on transcripts](#) which you may find helpful.

There are particular difficulties in continuing placements where the exchanging institution or employer has taken the decision to cancel or withdraw. The disruptions arising from pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong provided an example of how to respond quickly with alternative placement models. Practice from the sector indicates that an institution-level response was key, as was engagement of the academic faculty or departments in quickly developing alternative models.

It seems very likely that 'business as usual' in terms of mobilities will not be possible for some time, and that consequently a range of options should continue to be explored. Flexibility will be very important if providers are to respond swiftly to national and international developments.

Examples of course structures and alternatives

This is not an exhaustive list but, typically, course structures involving international placements include:

- mandatory year abroad (for example, language and STEM students)
- study abroad courses where one of those years is overseas (for example, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland a four-year integrated Master's and, in Scotland, a five-year equivalent)
- in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a Bachelor's degree with honours studied over four years with one year spent at an overseas university (the year abroad may be optional or compulsory)
- in Scotland, a Bachelor's degree with honours studied over five years with one year spent at an overseas university (the year abroad may be optional or compulsory)
- Bachelor's level over three years with one semester abroad
- Six to eight-week overseas placement 'blocks'.

Each of these structures will have different solutions, as well as unique challenges. As noted earlier, many students are currently undertaking placements overseas and, if it is possible and safe to do so, completing these should be encouraged.

Where course learning outcomes are not significantly dependent on a mobility experience, it may be relatively straightforward to satisfy those outcomes with alternative assessments, for example weekly online tasks. In some cases, for example workplace-based outcomes, a UK-based alternative may be possible. In this case the qualification title may need to be considered, for example if the course title includes the phrase 'study abroad'. The QAA supporting resource on [Contingency Planning for Placement Provision](#) is likely to be useful in considering alternative models for work-based placements.

In some cases, introducing alternatives to placements will mean students receive a different qualification but at the same level. However, it is possible that removing the placement might mean the student can only receive a qualification at a lower level. Neither option should be taken lightly given the students' expectations when selecting their courses. Providers should also consider what any such change might mean under consumer law and CMA guidance. It is possible that deferring an academic year would be the best option for students in some cases. This should be considered carefully, not least because it has implications for potentially managing multiple cohorts in future.

Where a student has been able to complete part, but not all, of an international placement, it may be possible for the student to transfer back to the UK provider for the remainder of the academic year. In this case, there may be complexities around how to calculate the student's grades. For example, depending on the academic regulations, the student's marks might have to be based only on the credit completed overseas. With appropriate mapping of learning outcomes it should be possible to put in place alternative arrangements which recognise the learning that has taken place in each location. In planning for the next academic year, there would be benefit in considering alternative arrangements which avoid year-long module formats.

Virtual placements are being considered by some providers but they present significant costs, both in financial and human resource terms, which may be in short supply at the present time. A small number of students have undertaken, or are undertaking, remote placements. Beyond modern languages, the typical disciplines involved are humanities, some STEM subjects, psychology, criminology, business, sports, law, journalism, and engineering. Some of these subjects lend themselves to virtual delivery more than others.

In some apprenticeship programmes, employers are continuing to support work-based placements through home working, which is similar to a virtual placement.

It may be possible for students to move from an overseas study to a work placement approach, but there may not be sufficient time to develop and arrange these before students need to enrol. For modularised courses, it may be possible to adjust module learning outcomes while still meeting overall course outcomes. In addition, students may be able to start virtually and/or start later.

Some providers are developing short, private, online courses (SPOCs) which are aimed at aiding student transitions and forming connections, which is one of the main aspects of the learning experience students indicate they are currently missing.

The final option is full cancellation of international placements for this and the forthcoming year, with additional year and replacement year models. Some providers may already have taken the decision to cancel overseas placements, in order to give students certainty. This may align with other decisions they have taken to deliver courses digitally or to enforce travel bans for the year.

What are the external factors that could affect our plans?

Some of the factors which providers should take into consideration when making decisions about proceeding, cancelling, or adjusting international placements include:

- Foreign & Commonwealth Office travel advice
- visa processes and restrictions (those relating to COVID-19, in addition to the anticipated new immigration system from semester 2 onwards).
- insurance coverage
- changes to staffing due to COVID-19
- changes to semester dates in the UK or in partner providers, which may cause misalignment between timetables
- resource implications for creating alternative models
- resource implications of potential further mass repatriations, which have already put pressure on some mobility offices, particularly those with large cohorts to manage capacity for additional students if there were to be high numbers of deferrals
- uncertainty about possible changes in COVID-19 mitigations including the potential for re-entering restrictions, and different travel restrictions being in force in other countries
- uncertainty about how funding, grants and loans from the Student Loans Company and Erasmus+ will be affected for next academic year, and the attendant difficulties around advising students
- the financial pressures internally to reduce costs and compensate for lost income
- the impact on tuition fees arising from alternative models, especially if study abroad periods are charged at lower rates than UK-based study.

How should we consult with those affected?

Consultation and communication are crucial, however they are carried out. They could be de-centralised and carried out by schools, or centrally coordinated by either quality or mobilities teams setting out options with different possible models. Effective consultation will include some proposals and possible outcomes. These options might include changing the year in which some students undertake their international placement (meaning the provider would need to manage two overseas cohorts at once). Another option would be to retain the

study abroad award title but reduce the duration of the period abroad to half a year, with the attendant challenge of how students would spend the remaining six months.

Providers are giving assurance to students who are, or were, abroad in the current academic year that proposals with the various options are being progressed through institutional committee structures as quickly as possible to ensure that students will not be negatively impacted by the disruption. Actions providers have needed to take include recalling students from international placements and replacing in person learning with digital delivery. In some cases, providers have permitted academic schools to use discretion in applying institutional policies. The large numbers of students involved, coupled with the very short timescales for decision-making, has meant that allowing full student choice, even based on limited options, has not been feasible in all cases. However, all of the options have involved careful communication with students using a range of methods. Some providers have developed or revised their risk awareness policies for international placements so they can be used to help students consider and evaluate their own positions.

Providers now need to communicate with students who are planning to undertake placements in 2020-21. These students will, understandably, be anxious and they will need clarity. Their feedback will also be valuable for providers' planning.

How should alternative arrangements be approved?

Each provider will have its own system for managing placements and there will be different models within which organisational approval needs to be sought. For example, some providers separate the financial repercussions from the practical and academic considerations to facilitate faster decisions.

In some providers, there is a centralised, top-down approach to considering alternative models, with decisions taken by senior roles and/or institutional committees. Some colleagues have argued that this could lead to 'risk-averse' solutions and that department-led approaches might be more focused on finding nuanced alternative options. Research by Universities UK (UUK) suggests that 'blanket' decisions, for example to cancel all placements, are less common, with a variety of solutions being explored. Other sector practice includes a student-led approach, where a range of options are provided to students who are able to choose. Feedback suggests that students themselves are being creative in generating alternative options.

What do we need to consider in engaging with partner organisations?

Providers are in regular contact with their overseas partners - employers and universities - about alternatives. In the current situation, those international partners may also be overwhelmed. In addition, they may be waiting for the UK provider to reach decisions about possible placements options before making decisions themselves.

QAA has learned that some providers in Canada, Spain and Australia are offering 'virtual mobilities' but this option is not without challenges, for example creating a learning community at a distance is not straightforward. Providers are considering ways of adding international collaboration into their curricula; retaining the structure of the courses, but broadening delivery partners to include international employers instead of relying on student study exchanges. This may have benefits for the student learning experience and promote students' employability, for example by offering students the chance to gain experience of working in international teams.

At least one colleague indicated that this alternative to an international placement could help to close the achievement gap, because less-advantaged students, who may not have the same opportunities to travel overseas as others, will gain this experience of international colleagues and cultures without leaving the UK. If virtual placements become part of the higher education landscape, it will be important to avoid the unintentional creation of a two-tier system, where students choose the virtual placement option simply because they do not possess the confidence or financial ability to go abroad.

Reflective questions

The following questions can be used by providers to evaluate their approach to contingency planning for international placements.

- What expectations have been set by marketing activity, the student contract and other sources about the content, delivery and location of learning?
- What will be the impact on future cohorts if large numbers of students defer?
- Have we consulted with students, exchange partner universities, and employers?
- Are we giving our decision-making bodies informed recommendations on alternative arrangements?
- Will digital learning provide an adequate alternative to the international learning experience? Will a blended approach be feasible, and safe?
- How will course learning outcomes be satisfied? Will contributory learning outcomes need to be adjusted, and mapped back to the course learning outcomes?
- Are we keeping our students (both those whose placements are at risk and those who are currently continuing) fully informed about the developments that affect them?
- Have we fully considered the quality issues related to amending courses (for example, award title, text on transcripts, credit volumes)?
- How are workplaces being impacted by COVID-19, and are we preparing students for workplace practices that will still be relevant?
- Can providers, or placement employers, guarantee workplace safety in view of COVID-19, and what impact does this have on providers' duty of care? (this would include common measures such as provision of first aiders, fire marshals, building security, and so on)
- Can our decision-making on placements be integrated with our risk assessment process?

Additional resources

ASET, the work based and placement learning association - www.asetonline.org

British Council - www.britishcouncil.org/study-work-abroad/outside-uk/coronavirus-response

Office of the Independent Adjudicator - relevant to England and Wales, advice to help providers think about potential complaints arising from COVID-19 disruptions.
www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/latest-news-and-updates/oia-briefing-note-complaints-arising-from-coronavirus-covid-19-disruption/

UUKI, the international arm of Universities UK - www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/International.
UUK have surveyed their members regarding how they are addressing the uncertainty around student mobilities. The results are expected to be published shortly.

UCML, the Universities Council of Modern Languages - <https://university-council-modern-languages.org/membership-of-ucml/>. UCML are developing advice on virtual placements – in the meantime they have produced principles for the year abroad 2020-21. <https://university-council-modern-languages.org/year-abroad/>

WACE - the international professional organisation dedicated to developing, expanding, branding and advocating for cooperative and work-integrated education programmes within industry and educational institutions. www.waceinc.org

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