

UNIVERSITY POLICY STATEMENT S3/07 – revised March 2016

OVERSEAS TRAVEL

Summary of the change

This is a minor revision to the policy, which introduces the need for academic merit to be considered as part of the risk assessment for high risk travel.

At a recent meeting the Health and Safety Management Subcommittee discussed some of the challenges associated with fieldwork and overseas travel. Of particular note was the apparent increase in student travel to higher risk destinations.

There was consensus that the key question was whether the work would add substantially to the body of knowledge in a particular area of research, and it was a factor which was to be considered by supervisors when discussing travel plans with their students and by heads of department when deciding whether or not to approve the travel.

It was agreed that a short paragraph should be added to the University's travel policy to highlight the need to balance travel and fieldwork risks with the academic merits of the project, and for suitable justification to be provided. The change may be seen in Section 4 of the revised policy.

Travellers, particularly overseas travellers, are reminded to seek health advice prior to travelling, to determine the need for vaccination and/or specific prophylaxis according to their destination, and to ensure the proper management of any pre-existing health condition.

Julie Black, University Safety Officer
March 2016

1. Introduction

Many staff and students travel and work overseas in the course of University business. Most of this work is no more risky than the equivalent activity in the UK and takes place in countries that are considered safe for travellers. Increasingly though, work takes place in countries or parts of countries where the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises against travel.

This policy outlines the steps needed for safe management of these activities. It applies to work carried out by staff (working alone or with colleagues), by students and staff (as part of a course of study), or by students (carrying out research, either alone or with others, or on work placement).

2. **Risks involved in overseas work**

Risks to health and safety that arise from overseas work can be:

- (a) Work-related (e.g. physical risks from the fieldwork itself)
- (b) Health-related (e.g. exposure to tropical diseases)
- (c) related to personal security (e.g. associated with local criminal or political activity, or civil unrest).

This policy concentrates on (c) as UPS S5/07 deals with the health and safety aspects of the work itself. However, both should be read in conjunction.

3. **Risk Assessment**

UPS S5/07 explains the importance of planning and risk assessment, and the importance of establishing good communications and emergency procedures. As it makes clear, risk assessments must be made for all overseas work. This need not necessarily be onerous – the nature and complexity of the assessment should reflect the risks involved in the work. In many cases the work itself is not hazardous but it takes place in hazardous surroundings. In these cases the risk assessment should concentrate on the travel-associated risks. For instance, no written risk assessment would be needed for low risk activities such as attending conferences or visiting colleagues in Northern America or the European Union, but similar activities in more dangerous locations would require one.

4. **FCO Travel Advice**

The FCO website (www.fco.gov.uk/travel) carries up-to-date travel advice for over 200 countries. It should be used as the basis for informing all those travelling on University business of the risks that they might face. Although the advice pertains to the safety of British travellers, it is relevant to other nationalities as British insurance companies use it to determine the extent or validity of insurance cover.

The FCO may advise against all travel, or against all but essential travel, to a country or parts of a country. In all cases where the FCO advises against travel, a written risk assessment must be prepared, approved by the head of department or institution, and submitted to the University Safety Office for review. While the ultimate authority to approve travel rests with the head of department, he or she is expected to take into account the Safety Office's comments.

In these cases the risk assessment should consider the FCO's advice and explain clearly how the traveller's previous experience or better quality information (e.g. from consular officials, local government officials, the UN, Non-Governmental Organisations or other reliable local contacts) justifies disregarding the FCO advice.

In cases where the proposed travel is to a high risk destination, as defined by the FCO, supervisors and heads of department or institutions must also consider carefully how the research will add to the body of knowledge in a particular discipline, and whether the academic merits of the research justify the risks involved when making their decision whether or not to approve the travel.

5. **Insurance**

Staff and students travelling on University business should normally use the University's travel insurance policy (www.admin.ox.ac.uk/insurance/travel.shtml). Insurance cover is conditional upon the traveller complying with the relevant University

policies (i.e. this policy and S5/07). Where the FCO advises against all travel, then the risk assessment (approved by the head of department and reviewed by the Safety Office) will be referred to the University's insurers for approval. Because insurers may decline the proposal if they do not accept the risk assessment, this element of travel planning should be done in good time to allow for the collection of additional information and revision of the assessment.

If the University's travel insurance is not used and individuals chose their own insurer, care should be taken to ensure that cover adequately meets requirements and is valid. Note that commonly available insurance policies are unlikely to be valid in cases where the FCO advises against travel.

6. Contingency planning

Even in cases where written risk assessments are not required, departments or institutions should be informed when their staff or students travel abroad on business. It would be prudent for them to retain contact details, and details of next of kin where appropriate.

Where written risk assessments have been made, they should address the issue of contact/communication with travellers. Where the FCO advises against all travel then it is particularly important to ensure that contingency plans are in place to deal with emergencies (e.g. the visit may need to be postponed or curtailed if civil or political unrest develops, or seems likely to develop).

7. Health matters

Heads of departments or institutions must ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, that staff and students travelling on University business take expert advice on the potential health risks associated with overseas travel. This should be sought in good time so that any recommended immunisations can be given and/or prophylactic drugs prescribed, and advice provided for the management of any pre-existing health issues that may affect the traveller.

The University's Occupational Health Service can provide expert travel advice: <https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/uohs/travelhealth/>

Further information on country specific health risks may also be found at: https://www.nathnac.org/ds/map_world.aspx

THIS STATEMENT FORMS PART OF THE UNIVERSITY'S SAFETY POLICY AND UNIVERSITY POLICY NOTE S3/07 ISSUED JANUARY 2007 IS SUPERSEDED. PLEASE AMEND THE INDEX.

March 2016

J Black

CIRC: A, C, H, O, S: Heads, DSO1s, DSO2s, Admins, DDSO1s, DDSO2s, List V.