COVID-19 and the return of learning abroad

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covid-19 and learning abroad

COVID-19 continues to evolve unpredictably and will define the learning abroad sector for years to come. The pandemic has tested existing policies and processes and has required great reliance from partners, suppliers and offshore networks. While learning abroad teams focus on improving operations that prioritise risk and safety, they must also continue to adjust their operations based on the "big unknown" – **when will learning abroad travel be possible**?

timing return to travel

Learning abroad offices have been racing against the clock to perform critical activities. Whether it be the timing of recalling students from their overseas programs in March 2020, the timing of cancelling a learning abroad offering or the timing of reactivating travel to specific locations, the question of **when** is critical. Learning abroad strategy and program development are subject to the very critical dimension of time.

Your team – managers, coordinators, advisors – will be conduits for students and colleagues to understand how timing informs decisions to continue or cancel programs.

common questions students ask

1. Why are you cancelling all programs **now**?

2. What if a travel bubble between Australia and a host destination emerges, **when** can I travel there? What is a travel bubble and how might we utilise it?

3. I'm living outside of Australia and am able to travel internationally, why does the travel ban apply to me?

4. I am going to my host destination in **one week** whether the university gives me permission or not, will the university support my experience?

5. Can I plan a study tour to New Zealand over the **next term**?

6. I've had a vaccine, why can I not travel **now**?

7. Can I get a **refund** of my flight and accommodation if the trip is cancelled or not approved?

8. What is your team **currently** working on if students are unable to travel?

The answer to some of these questions will be based on when the question is asked and when travel will take place – timing is key!

covid-19 contingency planning

Learning abroad teams should consider:

- State-based outbreaks and lockdowns declared by local health authorities in host institution locations, for which the overall DFAT travel advice may not change.

- Significant civil unrest due to local state-based management of COVID-19 such as political unrest and local protests.

- Outbreak amongst a cohort of students, including a study tour or semester cohort.

- Flight ban by the Australian Government from a location in which students are located.

- Students stuck in transit due to a flight ban.

- Severe illness or death related to COVID-19 complications.

- Difficulties for students to return home due to arrivals quotas implemented by the Australian Government. This includes flight availability and increased travel costs.

- International students recalled from program and unable to return to their home country or Australia.

- Student or staff member breaches local laws and restrictions relating to COVID-19 which results in action taken by local authorities.

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60 day rule*

For study tours or other third party provider programs, consider establishing a timeline working back from the departure date and assessing travel feasibility at each milestone. It is likely you will need to decide to either cancel or proceed with a program well in advance of the departure date and should consider a 60-day rule. The final decision about whether to cancel the program is made 60-days prior to departure. This provides time to cancel to cancel travel bookings, re-adjust enrolment and communicate with partners and other stakeholders.

Days to departure

120	100	90	70	60	
Applications close	Deposits due	Census date	Visa applications due	Balance due	Decision

*The 60 day rule is a guide only. Program coordinators should develop a timeline in consultation with delivery partners and suppliers.

covid-19 vaccines and travel

While future Australian Government directives regarding compulsory COVID-19 vaccinations and international travel remain unclear, another consideration is whether host countries or institutions will establish a vaccination requirement for entry. Implementing protocol, such as validating COVID-19 vaccination will require careful consideration.

Consider:

• What approvals and legal documentation are required by the Australian Government and the governments of host destinations?

• What are the shortfalls of institutions not having clearly defined approaches?

• Is it required for your institution to establish a position about vaccination?

It is worth exploring if your institution has a way to confirm or validate students' vaccination status, so that any changes to application processes can be quickly implemented. Failure to consider implementing these processes could result in students being denied entry and disrupting a learning abroad program.

When deciding to open or suspend application cycles, current vaccination rates should be reviewed and considered.

covid-19 criteria for reactivation

To assess the risk of COVID-19 for programs by location, learning abroad teams should consider analysing multiple sources of global security information. Determining and analysing key criteria for travel reactivation will assist to inform timing.

Key criteria include:

• DFAT Smartraveller advice is downgraded from 'Do Not Travel'.

• COVID-19 rates are stable or declining in a specific host location.

• Insurance coverage is confirmed.

• Quarantine requirements are eased internationally and/or domestically.

• Testing and vaccination policies including provisions for student visa holders.

• Students are able to enter host country and travel freely.

• Access and availability of flights and other modes of transport.

• Local restrictions are reasonable for the activity – local government, private intelligence.

Learning abroad offices should prepare plans for restarting programs in line with the Australian Government's 4-phase roadmap out of COVID-19, which states 80% of the adult population will need to be vaccinated in order for outbound international travel to resume. When making decisions to open application cycles or suspend programs, the current vaccination rate should be taken into consideration.