

The Forum on Education Abroad
**Guidelines for Undergraduate Research, Field Studies,
and Independent Study Projects Abroad**

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INTRODUCTION

Research experiences for undergraduate students abroad can guide them to a first-hand understanding of the fundamentals of research, facilitate the development of discipline-specific knowledge, encourage a deeper engagement with the local culture, and expose them to subjects or methods that can only be researched in a specific location. The autonomous and hands-on nature of mentored research experiences can help students develop self-sufficiency and resiliency, assist them to explore the possibilities of more advanced studies in a particular field, and witness important events or phenomena in ways that can benefit themselves and the communities in which they are based.

Beneficial though they are to students, research experiences abroad are also very work-intensive for the faculty and administrators who guide and support them. In many ways, research abroad shares the same best practices as disciplinary research in the home campus setting. However, the fact that undergraduate students must travel abroad for the experience presents an additional set of considerations and concerns beyond those of the more traditional education abroad learning experience, and different from the on-campus research setting. Often, neither a single education abroad professional nor a single faculty member has all of the time, resources, or expertise to address these varied considerations. Strong institutional support and collaboration between all who facilitate and mentor undergraduate research abroad is the best way to lay the groundwork for making these experiences educational and valuable for students, their mentors, and the communities in which they do their work.

Under the umbrella of “research experiences abroad,” undergraduate students are engaged in many activities across a variety of academic disciplines. They may travel on faculty-led programs to work as a team and learn research methods. They may visit research groups at host institutions and observe and assist with their work. They may conduct research as a part of an internship or service-learning position they hold. They may choose to pursue an independent study in addition to their coursework. Sometimes, they travel alone to pursue a project entirely their own. They do research in communities, in labs, in archives, and “in the field.” The project can be limited to the time a student spends on-site or be designed on the home campus, conducted abroad, and continued after return to the home institution. The experiences may or may not garner academic credit. While these experiences can look very different, there are certain underlying principles common to them all.

These Guidelines should help stakeholders who create or support undergraduate research experiences abroad to find common ground and collaborate to achieve their common goals. To achieve the most effective outcomes, we recommend using them in conjunction with the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* and discipline-specific guidance on research methods and ethics.

STANDARDS The *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad* were established in 2004 by The Forum on Education Abroad, and are recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice and Federal

1 Trade Commission as the Standards Development Organization (SDO) for the field of education
 2 abroad. They are higher education’s benchmark for education abroad program excellence and
 3 accountability.

4 5 **KEY TERMS**

6
7 **research abroad:** an activity abroad that typically pairs a student or students with an on-site faculty
 8 mentor and/or other local experts to pursue a specific topic or research question; such research
 9 typically results in the writing of an academic paper or presentation, whether to fulfill requirements
 10 for academic credit or other degree requirements or with an eye to publication in a peer-reviewed
 11 journal or presentation at an academic conference; the research may be undertaken as part of an
 12 organized study abroad program (i.e., a research-based course or independent project) or in a
 13 completely independent manner outside the structure of a program*

14
15 **research team:** comprised of all stakeholders involved in the collection and interpretation of data
 16 for a research experience, including student and faculty researchers, faculty or other researchers
 17 mentoring independent student projects, other collaborators, research assistants, etc.

18
19 **field study:** structured learning outside the classroom; includes such experiences as internships,
 20 service-learning projects, nature observation and research, small-team field assignments, and
 21 individual research projects;* can also be referred to as field experience

22
23 **independent study:** a research project or other individualized project that a student pursues; this
 24 may be offered as part of the curriculum on an overseas program, or the student may be doing the
 25 project independent of a program*

26
27 **human subjects research:** “human subjects research is research involving a living individual about
 28 whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains [either] data
 29 through intervention or interaction with the individual, [and/]or identifiable private information,”**
 30 **also called human participants research**

31
32 **home institution:** college or university where a student is pursuing their degree of study

33
34 **host institution:** (or host school) the institution at which the student conducts their research while
 35 abroad (if applicable)

36
37 **coordinating organization or institution:** the institution or organization responsible for identifying
 38 research sites and connecting students to research opportunities; these organizations sometimes,
 39 but not always, also provide students with mentors

40
41 **sponsoring or approving organization:** the institution or organization(s) involved in providing
 42 financial support or awarding academic credit for research abroad; often, but not always, a
 43 student’s home institution

44
45
46 *adapted from The Forum’s Glossary: www.forumea.org/resources/glossary

47 **as defined by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH):

48 <https://humansubjects.nih.gov/walkthrough-investigator#tabpanel11>

BEST PRACTICES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

Undergraduate research experiences, field studies, and independent studies abroad are most valuable to students, institutions, and communities when the multiple parties involved are realistic about the skillsets and capabilities of undergraduate students and work respectfully together to create opportunities for students to learn research methods and ethics while doing no harm to the individuals and communities with whom they work. The following best practices can help achieve these goals.

- a. Articulate specific objectives for undergraduate research abroad.
- b. Set realistic goals for what an undergraduate student or students can achieve based on their ability and knowledge, as well as the time they have to complete the project.
- c. Involve faculty mentors and local cultural experts from the earliest stages of the design of student research projects to ensure appropriate methodology and oversight.
- d. Delineate clear policy and procedural guidelines for undergraduate research abroad for students, faculty, and on-site faculty and experts.
- e. Establish mechanisms to facilitate communication between staff, faculty, and/or mentors at the coordinating organization, the sponsoring or approving organization, student researchers, faculty mentors at the student's home institution, and on-site research supervisors/counterparts.
- f. Require that legal compliance matters appropriate to the local setting will be addressed prior to the commencement of any research project.
- g. Provide clear, consistent direction on research ethics in the areas of data collection, human subject research, informed consent, and confidentiality in the preparation of and throughout the proposed research.
- h. Train student researchers in preparing materials that explain the project to research subjects and others prior to their participation, the objectives of the research, the procedures to be followed, and potential risks and benefits.
- i. Clarify intellectual property issues, such as ownership, electronic distribution, and possible future use or publication of the research results before the work begins.
- j. Establish protocols for informing education abroad or other central office of student travel abroad for sponsored or approved research purposes in order to provide, minimally, health and safety training and support.
- k. Ensure consistency of admissions policies with other education abroad experiences based on criteria e.g., grades and disciplinary records.
- l. Link the research experience abroad to the intellectual life of the home or sponsoring institution, e.g., by fostering collaboration between the student and home institution faculty, and/or between home faculty and on-site/program faculty and experts.
- m. Ensure that faculty, staff, or other mentors involved with community-based research are properly trained in working with host communities and the social, economic, and cultural contexts of the project at hand and prepared to help students navigate and reflect on the cultural, economic, social, and physical differences they encounter.
- n. Alert student researchers to issues of research positionality, e.g.:
 - a. Cultural and political differences and power hierarchies,
 - b. The effect of how a question is asked on the answer given,
 - c. The filters through which students interpret the information they receive,
 - d. Ability to interpret nuance.
- o. Remind students that there is value in learning new skills and research methods, even if the outcomes of their project are incremental or incomplete.

- 1 p. Over the course of the research experience and afterwards, guide and encourage students
2 to reflect on how the experience is contributing to their academic and personal
3 development and worldview.
- 4 q. Ensure that research results, project reports, and audio/visual products meet ethical review,
5 legal, and professional requirements. Provide credit and acknowledgment for all authors
6 and contributors, including students and local partners.
- 7 r. Ensure that agreements are in place about the distribution of any final reports, etc. and
8 provide reports back to coordinating organization and/or experiential site where possible
9 and appropriate.

12 **GUIDELINES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH, FIELD EXPERIENCES, AND INDEPENDENT** 13 **STUDY PROJECTS ABROAD**

14
15 Use the following guidelines, along with the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*, when
16 developing research experiences for undergraduate students abroad, preparing students to pursue
17 independent study projects abroad, or vetting potential partners who offer research and field
18 experience opportunities for students.

20 **1 . Mission and Goals for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 21 • Help student(s) involved in research-related experiences abroad to establish hypothesis and
22 specific goals related to the project they will undertake.
- 23 • Guide students to set clear and reasonable goals for their research experience, especially
24 related to, e.g.:
- 25 ○ learning through observation;
 - 26 ○ learning and practicing proper research methodologies;
 - 27 ○ practicing ethical data collection methods;
 - 28 ○ familiarizing themselves with the local community and/or to the discipline specific
29 culture of research; and
 - 30 ○ examining their own research positionality and how that influences the research
31 process and results.
- 32 • Clearly articulate how the research project or field experience abroad relates to,
33 supports, and enhances the institution or education abroad organization's mission and
34 goals.

36 **2. Student Learning and Development during Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 37 • Identify appropriate student learning and development outcomes specific to the experience.
- 38 • Ask students to identify and outline their own academic and personal goals for the
39 experience in addition to those set by the program, institution, or organization.
- 40 • Assign well-defined roles in the research process to each student appropriate to their ability
41 and knowledge of the discipline and location.
- 42 • Ensure that students are adequately supervised by a faculty member or expert with
43 knowledge of the research being done and the locale in which it is being conducted, and the
44 cultural and regulatory expectations of the local community and the student's home and/or
45 sponsoring institution.
- 46 • Offer frequent feedback on student work throughout the project.
- 47 • Ensure that faculty, staff, and/or research collaborators are prepared to help students
48 navigate, reflect on, and learn from issues of power, privilege, and positionality, cultural

1 adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among research teams and
2 with community members.

3 4 **3. Academic Framework for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 5 • Clearly articulate the reason for conducting the research in the selected location.
- 6 • If the experience is credit-bearing, clearly communicate criteria for the awarding of
7 credit and identify who will evaluate the student on these criteria, which may include:
 - 8 ○ Number of research hours required;
 - 9 ○ Method of verifying hours;
 - 10 ○ Attendance in an in-person or online class, seminar or meetings, as required;
 - 11 ○ Readings, assignments, reflective journals, or other academic components as
12 required;
 - 13 ○ Criteria, including deadlines, for evaluating assignments; and
 - 14 ○ Post-program academic expectations.
- 15 • Match student capacity, including knowledge, skills, and competencies, with the
16 capacity necessary for the experience so that community wellbeing is not compromised.
- 17 • Assure that all projects are reviewed by the appropriate research oversight body for
18 every entity involved before any research activities begin.
- 19 • Ensure that projects are overseen by one or more faculty/research collaborator with
20 expertise in the academic discipline, the research methods employed, and the location
21 and cultural communities of study.

22 23 **4. Student Selection, Preparation, and Advising for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 24 • Clearly articulate the expected knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in
25 the experiential setting, such as language and interpersonal skills, cultural knowledge,
26 research methodologies, applicable academics, and how these will be measured.
- 27 • Clearly articulate the physical and emotional demands and appropriate attitudes and
28 motivations essential to the research experience in order to allow students to make an
29 informed decision about their participation in the research on-site.
- 30 • Involve host organizations and research collaborators in the student selection and
31 preparation process as much as possible, so that both student and host have as much
32 information as possible prior to the research experience.
- 33 • Ensure that participants meet language competency requirements or that translation
34 and interpretation services are available at the research site(s).
- 35 • Confirm visa requirements, which may be different from traditional student visas.
- 36 • Research teams (including students) and sponsoring or approving organizations: verify
37 important information about the research context and work before departure,
38 including:
 - 39 ○ Name and description of the research site(s);
 - 40 ○ A description of the scope and nature of the specific research participants will
41 be engaged in;
 - 42 ○ Expected outcomes appropriate to the timeframe allotted to the research
43 experience;
 - 44 ○ Respective roles of the student, faculty, and any other research partners or
45 collaborating organizations;
 - 46 ○ Requirements for approval from Institutional Review Boards (IRB) or other
47 similar research oversight boards;

- 1 ○ A description of the location and environment where student(s) will be staying
- 2 during the research project, including climate, housing conditions, etc.;
- 3 ○ Contact information for the students' primary on-site coordinator or supervisor
- 4 (name, email, phone number);
- 5 ○ Expected time commitment (schedule, hours per day, number of weeks,
- 6 acceptable time off);
- 7 ○ Requirements and competencies that will impact student success (skills,
- 8 academic background, language ability);
- 9 ○ Expectations of professionalism and appropriate conduct unique to the host
- 10 culture;
- 11 ○ Essential eligibility requirements, including but not limited to: physical abilities,
- 12 personal background checks, drug testing, confidentiality, privacy, and non-
- 13 competence policies and agreements;
- 14 ○ Learning objectives for the research experience;
- 15 ○ Post-program academic and reporting requirements;
- 16 ○ Requirements for the granting of academic credit (if applicable); and
- 17 ○ Requirements tied to the use of grant funding (if applicable).
- 18 ● Encourage student researchers and research teams to identify expectations and cultural
- 19 differences that may impact their research, including:
 - 20 ○ dress code
 - 21 ○ punctuality
 - 22 ○ interactions with on-site collaborators and community members
 - 23 ○ language specific to the project
 - 24 ○ gender roles
 - 25 ○ attitudes toward LGBTQ+
 - 26 ○ interactions with members of the opposite sex
 - 27 ○ attitudes or stereotypes of foreigners (by community members)
 - 28 ○ racial/ethnic differences
 - 29 ○ social, economic, and political contexts of the research project
 - 30 ○ appropriate use of technology/social media and sharing information about the
 - 31 research site, research subjects, and community members
- 32 ● Ensure a clear, direct line of communication between students and the staff or faculty
- 33 member to contact in case of an issue or emergency at the research site.
- 34 ● Verify student training in research methods and techniques relevant to their work,
- 35 which may include:
 - 36 ○ Interview techniques
 - 37 ○ Participant observation
 - 38 ○ How to keep a field journal or lab notes
 - 39 ○ Qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed research methods
 - 40 ○ Data storage and protection, particularly of sensitive or personally identifiable
 - 41 information
 - 42 ○ Research ethics
 - 43 ○ Hypothesis formulation and testing
 - 44 ○ Patience, persistence, flexibility
 - 45 ○ Research positionality
 - 46 ○ Mindfulness of limitations
- 47 ● Provide research partners with relevant background information on students' previous
- 48 research training, experience, and abilities prior to arrival to facilitate faster and more

1 effective integration of the student on-site and ensure that all partners have the same
2 information.

- 3 • Offer and encourage opportunities for reflection on the progress of students' research
4 and their personal perspectives throughout the experience and after returning.

5. Student Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Measures for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad

- 8 • Ensure that students are made aware in writing of consequences for acting unprofessionally
9 or inappropriately in the research setting.
- 10 • Make students aware of their obligation to act appropriately and not engage in activities
11 beyond their education, training, knowledge, and skills level, and the consequences for such
12 actions
- 13 • Establish disciplinary measures to address students who engage in activities outside their
14 scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills, and clearly articulate those disciplinary
15 measures to students in addition to other unacceptable behaviors.
- 16 • For research or independent studies with a health care connection, it is important to consult
17 the *Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad** as well.

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19 *Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad available at: [www.forumea.org/guidelines/undergraduate-](http://www.forumea.org/guidelines/undergraduate-health-related-experiences)
20 [health-related-experiences](http://www.forumea.org/guidelines/undergraduate-health-related-experiences)

6. Policies and Procedures for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad

- 23 • Provide a clear set of policies and procedures to guide students as they develop research
24 proposals, design research, and conduct the research.
- 25 • Clearly articulate review and approval processes for research proposals, including an
26 Institutional Review Board (IRB) timeline for approval (if applicable).
- 27 • Ensure that students understand and comply with all applicable licensing and certification
28 policies, privacy regulations, visa policies, research ethics, data security procedures, and any
29 other policy applicable to their research.
- 30 • Ensure research partners and/or host institutions adhere to international, national, and local
31 laws regarding privacy training, human subjects research, etc.
- 32 • Establish policies on the creation and distribution of final products such as research results,
33 reports, audio/visual products, including processes for sharing such projects with
34 coordinating organizations, home or sponsoring institutions, and the local community when
35 appropriate.
- 36 • Establish policies on the use of facilities, intellectual property ownership, and the fair use of
37 research results.

7. Organizational and Program Resources for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad

- 40 • Establish research objectives that engage the intellectual resources of faculty and local
41 experts such that the research creates significant collaborative opportunities for students,
42 faculty, and local experts.
- 43 • Select research guides or mentors who are knowledgeable about the host community and
44 who can assist the student with adhering to proper research techniques, ethics, and local
45 norms, and respecting local values systems.
- 46 • Encourage and support faculty mentorship of given research projects in order to maximize
47 the level of academic support provided throughout the research experience.
- 48 • Establish qualifications and eligibility for all staff, faculty, and experts supervising and
49 leading undergraduate research abroad;

- 1 • Require training and orientation for all faculty, staff and experts supervising and leading
2 undergraduate research abroad, relating both to the research and administration, including
3 training in IRB policies and research ethics;
- 4 • Ensure that institutional capacity, including human, financial and material resources, is
5 adequate to support students and faculty throughout the process of undergraduate
6 research abroad, from initial enquiry, to research design, to implementation on site, to re-
7 entry to the campus community.
- 8 • Recognize the implicit power differential that exists in educational partnerships that involve
9 partners with disparate levels of resources and influence, as well as the potential impact of
10 student presence on local and organizational resources, economics, and social/
11 cultural/political power hierarchies; consider these factors when making decisions related to
12 research projects.
- 13 • Assure experiences that take into consideration the assets and needs of the community in
14 coordination with the student's learning goals.
- 15 • Strive to build long-term relationships between institutions, organizations, and communities
16 in order to ensure sustainable mutual benefit for all parties involved.
- 17 • Compensate translators and other persons supporting researchers fairly and in a mutually
18 agreed upon fashion.
- 19 • Maintain appropriate staffing levels to train, oversee, and ensure the safety of students
20 while conducting research.
- 21 • Make participants aware of the limits of a site or partner's resources and of being respectful
22 of the resources they use. Check in regularly with collaborators and students during the
23 course of the project to ensure this is being done.

24 25 **8. Health, Safety, Security, and Risk Management for Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 26 • Establish procedures for approving or denying student research projects depending on the risks posed to
27 student researchers and others; include consideration of the following:
 - 28 ○ individual students' previous research experience in the discipline and/or abroad,
 - 29 ○ potential impacts on members of the host community,
 - 30 ○ the safety of the research location(s), research facilities, and equipment,
 - 31 ○ the qualifications of on-site research guides, mentors, technicians, and other staff
32 associated with the research.
- 33 • Establish reporting procedures for travel associated with sponsored or approved research.

34 35 **9. Ethics of Undergraduate Research Experiences Abroad**

- 36 • Identify an applicable ethical framework for undergraduate research.
- 37 • Instruct students in the fundamentals of research ethics appropriate for their field of
38 research.
- 39 • Establish a review process to ensure students' compliance with the adopted ethical
40 standards, either through the student's home, sponsoring, or coordinating
41 institution/organization, an off-campus review board, or a third party.
- 42 • Ensure that research tools and methods are appropriate for the local context and setting.
- 43 • Ensure appropriate and full disclosure to the community about who the student is and what s/he is
44 researching.
- 45 • Avoid situations that present a conflict of interest for the student, the community, and/or any of the
46 institutions and organizations involved in the research.
- 47 • Consider power relationships between or among community members in the design and
48 implementation of the project.

- 1 • Where applicable, develop a process to assess the validity of responses from informants and/or on
2 surveys.
- 3 • Train translators or interpreters, when used, on principles and procedures for maintaining
4 confidentiality.
- 5 • Ensure adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects/informants and to maintain confidentiality
6 of data and images including photography, video, and voice recording.
- 7 • Include adequate provisions in the research plan for monitoring the data collection to ensure the safety
8 of subjects/informants.
- 9 • When the human subject of research is likely to be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence,
10 incorporate additional safeguards to protect the rights and welfare of these subjects.
- 11 • Avoid research that exposes human participants to unnecessary risk in any way.
- 12 • Establish a clear policy about research involving children. Ensure that informed consent is obtained from
13 children in addition to permission from the child's parent or legal guardian.

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