GUIDELINES FOR
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH,
FIELD STUDIES, AND INDEPENDENT
STUDY PROJECTS ABROAD
ABOUT THE FORUM ON EDUCATION ABROAD

The Forum on Education Abroad is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, membership association recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission as the Standards Development Organization (SDO) for the field of education abroad. The Forum’s institutional members include U.S. colleges and universities, overseas institutions, consortia, agencies, provider organizations and foundations.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Forum on Education Abroad serves as the collective voice of U.S. post-secondary education abroad. To benefit students, The Forum develops and disseminates comprehensive standards of good practice, resources and training, advocates for education abroad and its value, and engages the field in critical dialogue.
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A companion to the Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad
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, foster a deeper engagement with the local culture, and provide unique, location-based research opportunities. 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, and sometimes faculty mentors, 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 are designed to 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, recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission as the Standards Development Organization (SDO) for the field of education abroad. They are higher education’s benchmark for education abroad program excellence and accountability.

KEY TERMS

research abroad: an activity abroad that typically pairs a student or students with an on-site faculty mentor and/or other local experts to pursue a specific topic or research question in a systematic investigation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge; such research typically results in the writing of an academic paper or presentation, whether to fulfill requirements for academic credit or other degree requirements or with an eye to publication in a peer-reviewed journal or presentation at an academic conference; the research may be undertaken as part of an organized study abroad program (i.e., a research-based course or independent project) or in a completely independent manner outside the structure of a program1

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

field study: structured learning outside the classroom; includes such experiences as internships, service-learning projects, nature observation and research, small-team field assignments, and individual research projects; can also be referred to as field experience1

independent study: a research project or other individualized project that a student pursues; this may be offered as part of the curriculum on an overseas program, or the student may be doing the project independent of a program1

1. Adapted from The Forum's Glossary: www.forumea.org/resources/glossary
human subjects research: “human subjects research is research involving a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains [either] data through intervention or interaction with the individual, [and/] or identifiable private information,” also called human participants research\(^2\)

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

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

coodinating organization or institution: the institution or organization responsible for identifying research sites and connecting students to research opportunities; these organizations sometimes, but not always, also provide students with mentors

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

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2. As defined by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH): 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 natural environment, 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, resource managers, 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 subjects 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, the objectives of the research, the procedures to be followed, and potential risks and benefits to research subjects and others prior to their participation.

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.:
   - the effect of how a question is asked on the answer given, or how the phrasing of a hypothesis can influence the conclusion;
   - the filters through which students interpret the information they receive;
   - cultural and political differences and power hierarchies;
   - ability to interpret nuance.

o. Clearly explain to students who are joining an established research project or group how their contribution fits into the overall project.

p. Remind students that there is value in learning new skills and research methods, even if the outcomes of their project are incremental or incomplete.

q. Over the course of the research experience and afterwards, guide and encourage students to reflect on how the experience is contributing to their academic and personal development and worldview.

r. Ensure that research results, project reports, and audio/visual products meet ethical review, legal, and professional requirements. Provide credit and acknowledgment for all authors and contributors, including students and local partners.

s. Ensure that agreements are in place about the distribution of any final reports, presentations, etc. Share reports with coordinating organization and/or experiential site and other local institutions or organizations where possible and appropriate.
GUIDELINES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH, FIELD EXPERIENCES, AND INDEPENDENT STUDY PROJECTS ABROAD

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

1. MISSION AND GOALS FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Clearly articulate how the research project or field experience abroad relates to, supports, and enhances the institution or education abroad organization’s mission and goals.
- Help student(s) involved in research-related experiences abroad to establish hypotheses and specific goals related to the project they will undertake.
- Guide students to set clear and reasonable goals for the research experience, especially related to, e.g.:
  - learning through observation;
  - learning and practicing proper research methodologies;
  - practicing ethical data collection methods;
  - familiarizing themselves with the natural environment, local community and/or to the discipline-specific culture of research; and
  - examining their own research positionality and how that influences the research process and results.
2. **STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT DURING UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD**

- Identify appropriate student learning and development outcomes specific to the experience.
- Ask students to identify and outline their own academic and personal goals for the experience in addition to those set by the program, institution, or organization.
- Assign well-defined roles in the research process to each student appropriate to their ability and knowledge of the discipline and location.
- Ensure that students are adequately supervised by a faculty member or expert with knowledge of the research being done and the locale in which it is being conducted, and the safety, cultural, and regulatory expectations of the local community and the student’s home and/or sponsoring institution.
- Offer frequent feedback on student work throughout the project.
- Ensure that faculty, staff, and/or research collaborators are prepared to help students navigate, reflect on, and learn from issues of power, privilege, and positionality, cultural adjustment, cultural bias, and conflict resolution that can arise among research teams and with community members.
- Ensure that faculty, staff, and/or research collaborators are prepared to help students develop an understanding of the geography, history, and current status of the natural environment in which they may work, including their responsibility for sustaining natural communities.
3. ACADEMIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Clearly articulate the reason for conducting the research in the selected location.

- If the experience is credit-bearing, clearly communicate criteria for the awarding of credit and identify who will evaluate the student on these criteria, which may include:
  - number of research hours required;
  - method of verifying hours;
  - attendance in an in-person or online class, seminar or meetings, as required;
  - readings, assignments, reflective journals, or other academic components as required;
  - criteria, including deadlines, for evaluating assignments; and
  - post-program academic expectations.

- Match student capacity, including knowledge, skills, and competencies, with the capacity necessary for the experience so that community wellbeing is not compromised.

- Assure that all projects are reviewed by the appropriate research oversight body for every entity involved before any research activities begin. This may include institutional and governmental committees covering issues of site access, personal safety, specimen collection, animal care, biosafety, research with human participants, confidentiality, open access of data, and data archiving.

- Ensure that projects are overseen by one or more faculty/research collaborators with expertise in the academic discipline, the research methods employed, and the location and cultural communities of study.
4. STUDENT SELECTION, PREPARATION, AND ADVISING FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Clearly articulate the expected knowledge and competencies needed to be successful in the experiential setting, such as language and interpersonal skills, cultural knowledge, research methodologies, applicable academics, and how these will be measured.

- Clearly articulate the physical and emotional demands and appropriate attitudes and motivations essential to the research experience in order to allow students to make an informed decision about their participation in the research on-site.

- Involve host organizations and research collaborators in the student selection and preparation process as much as possible, so that both student and host have as much information as possible prior to the research experience.

- Where necessary, ensure that participants meet language competency requirements or that translation and interpretation services are available at the research site(s).

- Confirm visa requirements, which may be different from traditional student visas.

- Research teams (including students) and sponsoring or approving organizations: verify important information about the research context and work before departure, including:
  - name and description of the research site(s);
  - a description of the scope and nature of the specific research participants will be engaged in;
  - expected outcomes appropriate to the timeframe allotted to the research experience;
  - respective roles of the student, faculty, and any other research partners or collaborating organizations;
  - requirements for approval from Institutional Review Boards (IRB) or other similar research oversight boards or government offices;
  - a description of the location and environment where student(s) will be staying during the research project, including climate, housing conditions, etc.;
  - contact information for the students’ primary on-site coordinator or supervisor (name, email, phone number);
expected time commitment (schedule, hours per day, number of weeks, acceptable time off);

requirements and competencies that will impact student success (e.g., skills, academic background, language ability);

expectations of professionalism and appropriate conduct unique to the host culture;

essential eligibility requirements, including but not limited to: physical abilities, certifications, personal background checks, drug testing, confidentiality, privacy, and non-compete policies and agreements;

learning objectives for the research experience;

post-program academic and reporting requirements;

requirements for the granting of academic credit (if applicable); and

requirements tied to the use of grant funding (if applicable).

Encourage student researchers and research teams to identify expectations and cultural differences that may impact their research, including:

- dress code
- punctuality
- interactions with on-site collaborators and community members
- language specific to the project
- gender roles
- attitudes toward LGBTQ+ community
- interactions with members of the opposite sex
- attitudes or stereotypes of foreigners (by community members)
- racial/ethnic differences
- social, economic, and political contexts of the research project
- appropriate use of technology/social media and sharing information about the research site, research subjects, and community members

Ensure a clear, direct line of communication between students and the staff or faculty member to contact in case of an issue or emergency at the research site.

Verify student training in research methods and techniques relevant to their work, which may include:

- proper orientation to field sites, modes of transport, and laboratories
- hypothesis formulation and testing
- interview techniques
- participant observation
- use of instruments, chemicals, and field gear
- how to keep a field journal or lab notes
- qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed research methods
- data storage and protection, particularly of sensitive or personally identifiable information
- research ethics
- patience, persistence, flexibility
- research positionality
- mindfulness of limitations

- Provide research partners with relevant background information on students’ previous research training, experience, and abilities prior to arrival to facilitate faster and more effective integration of the student on-site and ensure that all partners have the same information.

- Offer and encourage opportunities for reflection on the progress of students’ research and their personal perspectives throughout the experience and after returning.
5. STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT AND DISCIPLINARY MEASURES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Make students aware of their obligation to act appropriately and not engage in activities beyond their education, training, knowledge, and skills level, and the consequences for such actions.
- Ensure that students are made aware in writing of consequences for violating the established norms for professional and appropriate behavior in the research setting.
- Establish disciplinary measures to address students who engage in activities outside their scope of education, training, knowledge, and skills, and clearly articulate those disciplinary measures to students in addition to other unacceptable behaviors.
- For research or independent studies with a health care connection, it is important to consult the Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad as well.

3. Guidelines for Undergraduate Health-Related Experiences Abroad available at: www.forumea.org/guidelines/undergraduate-health-related-experiences
6. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Provide a clear set of policies and procedures to guide students as they develop research proposals, design research, and conduct the research.

- Clearly articulate review and approval processes for research proposals, including a timeline for approval by appropriate committees, boards, and offices (e.g., Institutional Review Board (IRB), Animal Care Committee, agencies overseeing specimen collection and transport, if applicable).

- Ensure that students understand and comply with all applicable licensing and certification policies, privacy regulations, collection permits, visa policies, research ethics, data security procedures, and any other policy applicable to their research.

- Ensure research partners and/or host institutions adhere to international, national, and local laws regarding privacy training, human subjects research, ethical treatment of animals, etc.

- Establish policies on the creation and distribution of final products such as research results, reports, audio/visual products, including processes for sharing such projects with coordinating organizations, home or sponsoring institutions, and the local community when appropriate.

- Establish policies on the use of facilities, intellectual property ownership, and the fair use of research results.
7. ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROGRAM RESOURCES FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Establish research objectives that engage the intellectual resources of faculty and local experts such that the research creates significant collaborative opportunities for students, faculty, and local experts.
- Select research guides or mentors who are knowledgeable about the natural environment and/or the host community and who can assist the student with adhering to proper research techniques, ethics, and local norms, and respecting local values systems.
- Encourage and support faculty mentorship of research projects in order to maximize the level of academic support provided throughout the research experience.
- Establish qualifications and eligibility for all staff, faculty, and experts supervising and leading undergraduate research abroad.
- Require training and orientation for all faculty, staff and experts supervising and leading undergraduate research abroad, relating both to the research and administration, including training in IRB policies and research ethics.
- Ensure that institutional capacity, including human, financial and material resources, is adequate to support students and faculty throughout the process from initial enquiry, to research design, to implementation on site, to re-entry to the campus community.
- Recognize the implicit power differential that exists in educational partnerships that involve partners with disparate levels of resources and influence, as well as the potential impact of student presence on local and organizational resources, economics, and social/cultural/political power hierarchies; consider these factors when making decisions related to research projects.
- Assure experiences that take into consideration the assets and needs of the community in coordination with the student’s learning goals.
- Strive to build long-term relationships between institutions, organizations, and communities in order to ensure sustainable, mutual benefit for all parties involved.
- Compensate translators and other persons supporting researchers fairly and in a mutually agreed upon fashion.
- Maintain appropriate staffing levels to train, oversee, and ensure the safety of students while conducting research.
- Make participants aware of the limits of a site or partner’s resources and of being respectful of the resources they use. Check in regularly with collaborators and students during the course of the project to ensure this is being done.
8. HEALTH, SAFETY, SECURITY, AND RISK MANAGEMENT FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Establish procedures for approving or denying student research projects depending on the risks posed to student researchers and others; include consideration of the following:
  - individual students’ physical abilities and their previous research experience in the discipline and abroad,
  - potential impacts on members of the host community,
  - the safety of the research location(s), research facilities, and equipment,
  - the qualifications of on-site research guides, mentors, technicians, and other staff associated with the research.

- Establish reporting procedures for travel associated with sponsored or approved research.

- Provide participants with information about potential health or safety risks specific to the field site.

- Require health and safety training and orientation for all faculty, staff, students, and any other research collaborators.

- Maintain appropriate insurance policies related to the specific research activities or locations where research is being conducted, e.g., dive insurance, air ambulance insurance, etc.
9. ETHICS OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES ABROAD

- Identify an applicable ethical framework for undergraduate research.
- Instruct students in the fundamentals of research ethics appropriate for their field of research.
- Establish a review process to ensure students’ compliance with the adopted ethical standards, either through the student’s home, sponsoring, or coordinating institution/organization, an off-campus review board, or a third party.
- Ensure that research tools and methods are appropriate for the local context and setting.
- Ensure appropriate and full disclosure to the community about who the student is and what they are researching.
- Avoid situations that present a conflict of interest for the student, the community, and/or any of the institutions and organizations involved in the research.
- Consider power relationships between or among community members in the design and implementation of the project.
- Where applicable, develop a process to assess the validity of responses from informants and/or on surveys.
- Train translators or interpreters, when used, on principles and procedures for maintaining confidentiality.
- Ensure adequate protections for the natural environment, including the protection of native species.
- Ensure adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects/informants and to maintain confidentiality of data and images including photography, video, and voice recording.
- Include adequate provisions in the research plan for monitoring the data collection to ensure the safety of subjects/informants.
- When the human subject of research is likely to be vulnerable to coercion or undue influence, incorporate additional safeguards to protect the rights and welfare of these subjects.
- Avoid research that exposes human participants to unnecessary risk in any way.
- Establish a clear policy about research involving children. Ensure that informed consent is obtained from children in addition to permission from the child’s parent or legal guardian.
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