

## **Overseas student electives advice guide**

The chance to undertake an elective placement outside the UK as part of a pre-registration nursing course is now widely available to nursing students in the UK. This information is intended to help you plan your trip by pointing out the major factors you need to consider and where to obtain additional information. Many factors will influence your choice of destination, including finances, language ability and the area of nursing you want to look at. Allow yourself plenty of time to decide where you want to go, what your expected learning outcomes are and above all to make the necessary preparations.

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## Research your chosen country

It is important to start researching and planning your elective placement at the earliest opportunity, at least several months in advance. During the research stage you may wish to contact the following:

- RCN library - [www.rcn.org.uk/development/library\\_and\\_heritage\\_services](http://www.rcn.org.uk/development/library_and_heritage_services)
- Your local library
- Your university - they will have policies in place to help you plan your trip. They may also be able to put you in touch with other students who have already undertaken an overseas elective
- Your students union - they may have links with your chosen country

Please consider the steps below

1. Develop ideas about what you want from an elective
2. Gather information through literature and internet searches about how a particular subject is dealt with in other countries
3. Obtain background information and research various aspects of nursing and health care in overseas countries
4. Learn about the culture, religious beliefs and laws of the country that you are travelling to. This will prepare you for the differences in legislation and culture, minimising your risk of running into difficulty during your stay
5. Find out what kinds of dress/uniform you might be expected to wear when in clinical areas and who will provide this

Further information is available in the [useful websites/resources for student electives](#) section at the end of this guide.

## Consider the differences

Some students wonder whether they should go to another developed country or to a developing country. Valuable experience can be gained in either setting, but communication and arranging the elective may be easier with a potential host in a developed country.

It may also be difficult for a visitor from a developed country to accept some practices in a developing country; for example, shortage of resources may mean that disposable items are reused. You must be aware of and respect cultural differences.

## Language

If you want to undertake an elective in a non-English speaking country, you should have some knowledge of the language. Even if the other health care workers are able to speak English with you, patients and their carers may not. This lack of

communication could reduce the value of your elective experience and therefore affect your learning outcomes. It may also put your personal safety at risk.

You may already speak another language or have studied a second language at school. If you decide to go to a country where that language is spoken, use the months of preparation prior to your placement to study the language as much as possible in your spare time.

### **Making initial contact**

We recommend that you begin making contact with potential hosts several months before you hope to start the elective.

Key points to consider:

- It is much better to correspond with a named contact rather than sending a letter/email 'To whom it may concern'. It is worth telephoning to get the name of the best person to contact if you do not already have this.
- The letter/email should include the following
  - Dates of the proposed elective
  - What you hope to do during the elective
  - How the elective fits in with your course
  - How you have heard of the hospital/nursing association/organisation
  - Explain that you do not expect payment or to put the host to any expense. It may be confusing if you state that you want to 'work' as your host may think that you are applying for paid employment
  - Attach brief information about yourself, such as a curriculum vitae (CV) and a copy of a letter of support from your college of nursing/university
  - Up to date contact details so that the host can respond easily
- It may take some time to receive replies. If you have not received a reply after five or six weeks, write/email again, enclosing a copy of your original request.
- Keep copies of all correspondence.

### **Professional indemnity**

The RCN scheme will cover student members wishing to undertake elective placements abroad, subject to the conditions and exclusions of the scheme, and dependent on the type of activity the student is undertaking. Further information, including terms and conditions, is available at [www.rcn.org.uk/indemnity](http://www.rcn.org.uk/indemnity).

Please note that the scheme's territorial cover does not extend to any claim made in either the United States of America (USA) or Canada, irrespective of where the alleged negligence occurred.

## **Financial considerations**

Costs involved in undertaking an overseas elective include:

- return travel to the destination country
- charges for visas, vaccinations and medicals if required
- travel and health insurance
- living expenses while there, including food, accommodation, daily expenses, emergency funds
- telephone, internet and postal charges for communication involved in setting up the elective
- other items you may wish to buy specifically for the elective

Once you have worked out a rough budget, you may need to seek financial assistance. Any person or institution that you approach for funding will want to see that you have thought out carefully why you want that particular experience, that you have calculated the costs involved and that you intend to finance as much of the cost as possible.

Your university/college may be able to provide you with information about potential local assistance, ranging from funds held by the university itself, local NHS Trusts and local charitable organisations. There are various directories which contain information about possible sources of funding and which should be available as reference books in your nearest large public library.

The RCN supports a number of scholarships, bursaries and awards to provide professional development opportunities for nursing professionals. This information can be accessed at [www.rcn.org.uk/development/scholarshipsawards](http://www.rcn.org.uk/development/scholarshipsawards). This page also contains a link to other non-RCN scholarships and awards.

## **Passports and visas**

It is important to make sure that your passport will be current for the length of your trip abroad; some countries require your passport to be valid six months after departure.

You may need to obtain a visa to travel to the country of your choice. Embassies usually charge a fee for providing visas and some can take weeks to process visa applications. You may need to telephone, write and visit to follow this up. UK citizens do not need visas to visit other EU countries.

Go to the government website of the country you are interested in visiting or alternatively visit [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) and search 'foreign and commonwealth office' for travel advice and information.

If you state in your visa application that you want to 'work' in a health care setting for your elective, embassy staff and immigration officials will assume that you are looking for paid employment within the country. It is much more accurate to state that you want to spend time in a health care setting within the host country as part of your course of education in the UK. Misunderstandings can have serious consequences; in many countries immigration officials have the right to refuse you entry to the

country if they believe that you plan to work illegally. They can also fine the airline that brought you there.

### **Health care considerations**

The country you hope to visit may have very different health care facilities and health risks compared to the UK and you need to prepare yourself in advance. The following information will be useful:

- If you are staying within the European Economic Area (EEA) you will need to obtain a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). This will allow you to get state health care abroad for a reduced cost or sometimes for free. You can apply for free at [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). Please search 'EHIC'
- The Medical Advisory Service for Travellers Abroad (MASTA) provides written health briefs for tourists and travellers. Please go to [www.masta-travel-health.com](http://www.masta-travel-health.com) for more information.
- The Foreign & Commonwealth Office can also give you travel advice. Please visit [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) and search 'foreign and commonwealth office'

### **Travel insurance**

We strongly recommend that you buy travel insurance. Always shop around for the best price. You can also access information on the latest deals available to you as an RCN member from RCN Xtra: [www.rcn.org.uk/xtra](http://www.rcn.org.uk/xtra)

### **Remember: you are representing UK nursing**

Hosts who welcome you to their countries and workplaces are usually doing this to help you; it is not normally part of their job description. Repay this kindness by being friendly, flexible, punctual and respecting the culture of the country and the customs of the host. To them, you are an ambassador for UK nursing and they will remember what you have said and done for a long time. The following points may also help:

- Whether you are going to a developed or developing country, it is a good idea to take small gifts to give the people who are helping you. Examples include

postcards or brochures about the town/area of the UK where you are a student, literature about your college/university and lightweight gifts such as key rings, bookmarks, tea towels, paper, writing pens and pencils.

- In poorer countries it is very difficult for nurses and nursing students to get access to good quality education materials. Appropriate textbooks or learning aids would be a special and lasting gift as a memory of your visit.
- When writing to thank your hosts after your visit, include a copy of your report and copies of any photographs you may have taken during your visit.

### **Appendix 1: Useful resources for student electives**

[www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) - country profiles and contact details for the Embassy or High Commission both within the UK and the country you are planning to visit. Please search for 'Foreign and Commonwealth Office'

[www.euro.who.int/en/countries](http://www.euro.who.int/en/countries) - World Health Organisation country profiles

[www.icn.ch/Submit-a-Web-Link/National-Nursing-Associations](http://www.icn.ch/Submit-a-Web-Link/National-Nursing-Associations) - International Council of Nurses list of National Nursing Associations

The RCN advice guide 'General information on working abroad' may also provide additional, useful information

Charities which produce excellent materials especially for developing countries are listed below:

Durbin Plc - [www.durbin.co.uk](http://www.durbin.co.uk)

Teaching Aids at Low Cost (TALC) - [www.talcuk.org](http://www.talcuk.org)