

# Developing sustainable field courses

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Image courtesy of the University of Exeter. Photographer: John Freddy Jones

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## 1. Overview Infographic



**Figure 1 - An infographic demonstrating community engagement on sustainability in the curriculum**

Image Caption: Timeline arrow recommending involvement with wider community throughout all stages.

Stage 1: Planning (Consider responsibilities, find a focus, plan actions)

Stage 2: Implement (consider deadlines, scales of action and community information)

Curriculum transformation enables field course learning content to be reconsidered, with reference to QAA subject benchmarks and (where relevant) PSRB requirements. Importantly, it also provides an opportunity to consider how field course design and practice meets legal obligations regarding protected characteristics, as well as other personal characteristics or circumstances not included within the Equality Act (2010). For example, supporting students with caring responsibilities or care leaver experience that may impact learning opportunities.

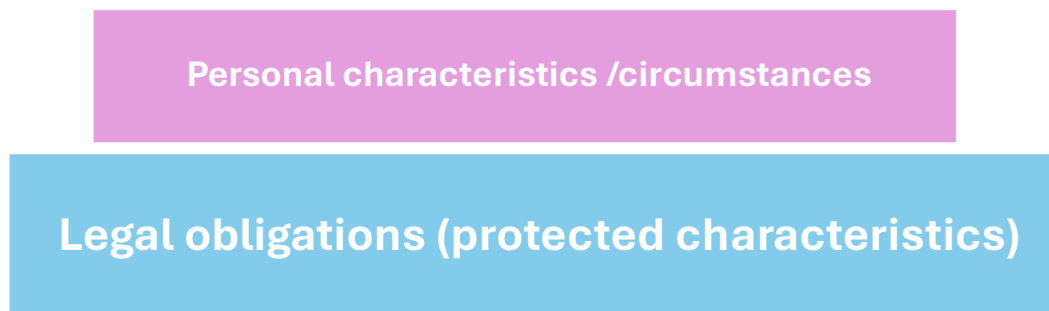


**Figure 2 - Development of courses, including field courses, by building on baseline legal obligations.**

Image Caption: Figure showing 2 boxes, one pink one blue, with the words 'legal obligations (protected characteristics)' and 'personal characteristics/circumstances' written in them. The box titled 'personal characteristics/circumstances' is smaller and positioned above the box titled 'legal obligations (protected characteristics)'.

Work on developing *sustainable* fieldwork practices is an area of active academic research. It is important that such work results in tangible change to activities instead of continuously arguing the need for transformation without significant changes to resulting educational practice. To achieve this, actions must be supported by the wider university community and planned through an informed, critical reappraisal of current programmes.

### **Case Study Example - University of Exeter: Curriculum for Change**

As part of this programme, field courses and associated travel have been “critically reappraised”. A two-year University of Exeter Field Course Task & Finish Group, chaired by Dr Ewan Woodley, examined how field courses could be made more sustainable, accessible and inclusive for students and staff. The *Ethic of Practice* that resulted from this collaboration led to the development of the Exeter Fieldwork checklist, a document that supports colleagues in field course design and delivery.

Alongside these requirements, changes in field course practice must be considered in terms of the value they bring for course marketing and improving student employability. Such concerns are routinely evaluated, as highlighted in the university’s rationale for curriculum transformation (‘Optimisation’) and the 'Exeter’s Transformative Education Design Principles' (e.g.: Principle 3 refers to ‘good practice and guidance on Accessibility and Inclusion, travel and sustainability and on ethical practice’ in field courses).

**You may wish to highlight other areas of focus using your own organisation’s project rationale as a guide.**



Image courtesy of the University of Exeter. Photographer: J. Wileman.

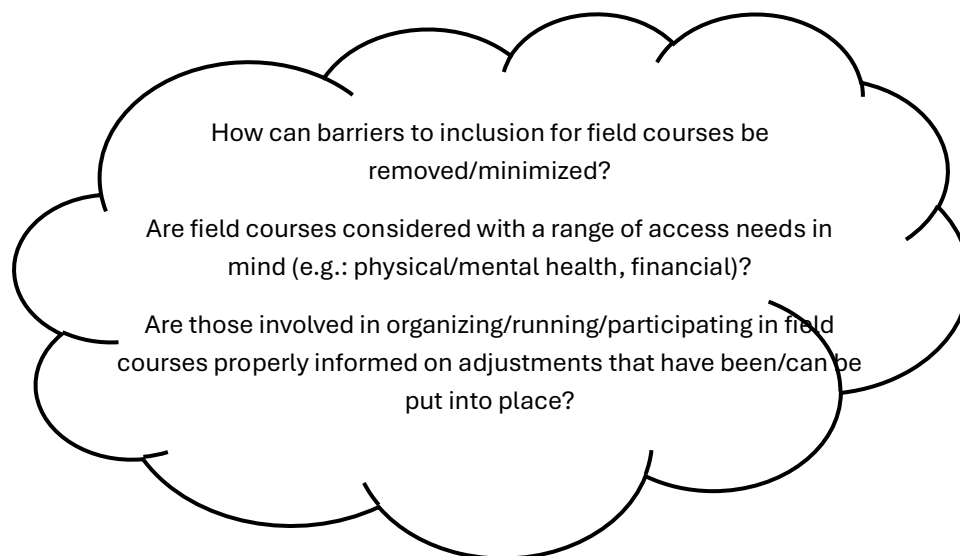
## 2. On Planning Actions

When planning actions for field course transformation, a range of factors must be considered by law (e.g. Equality Act, 2010). In addition, other personal characteristics or circumstances may be considered during planning to further enhance the accessibility and inclusion of a field course.

Universities have many responsibilities to balance alongside their educational role and considering these can support a focus on transformation. Responsibilities include:

- **Access Needs**

Universities are required by law to make reasonable adjustments for attendants (and potential attendants) of field courses.



- **Environmental and Social Responsibilities**

Particularly relevant for meeting climate goals, such as the UK's target for a net-zero 2050, universities have a responsibility to reduce their emissions and ecological impact while maintaining a positive relationship with their wider community.

Upon deciding on an area for focus, actions can then be discussed. The type of action, what it addresses and how it is developed will be specific to your organisation and local context.

Reflecting on the questions above will provide a starting point for this process, but to increase the impact and likely success of a change, your wider communities should be engaged to allow issues and concerns to be raised and feedback to be given.

- **Community involvement**

Engaging stakeholders in planning provides a good opportunity to discuss key issues and brainstorm solutions. This may involve varying levels of structure, such as interviews and workshops or more informal gatherings such as drop-in sessions.

Upon deciding on a plan of action, timelines for implementing plans can be arranged-based around final deadlines, the scale of tasks, and the need for continued community involvement.

### 3. On Implementing Actions

Upon deciding on your actions, a timeline for their implementation must be made. Final deadlines for implementation (likely pre-decided) provide a general timeframe within which to complete all changes.

Different tasks will require varying lengths of time to complete based on their complexity and surrounding requirements (e.g.: you will need to investigate potential travel routes/modes of travel, infrastructure and institutional policies and travel providers before suggesting new field course destinations).

Questions to ask when sorting tasks like this:

- How long will this task take to implement?
- Will this action involve lots of different people/stakeholders?
- Who/what is impacted by this change?
- Does this task rely on any preceding changes?

- **Scale and timelines**

Actions identified will have differing depths of impact on the curriculum. Some actions will be easier to implement as they add to existing structures, however, others may be more complex- particularly those requiring major structural change to courses. These differences should be considered and reflected in the time allotted for their completion.

#### Examples of different scales of action

| Smaller scale                                            | Larger scale                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| First aid training for staff attending field courses     | Implementing no-fly (low carbon) travel practices |
| Provision of first aid kits and menstrual packs to staff | Developing/changing course structures             |

|                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Information for participants on toilet locations, break timings and eating arrangements | <p>Enabling staff to develop experience and confidence using low-carbon travel (e.g. high-speed rail in Europe)</p> <p>Changing programme/module marketing for prospective students</p> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Any structural changes should also include more flexibility or ‘buffer’ time between the desired date of competition and final deadlines, in case unforeseen problems arise.

*Note: larger changes may raise more concerns for stakeholders and should be considered collaboratively throughout planning and implementation phases to allow these concerns to be shared and fully considered prior to the completion of changes.*

#### **Case Study Example- University of Exeter: Curriculum for Change**

Change at various scales have been undertaken as part of Exeter’s field course transformation, often with larger changes proving to be more challenging to implement. Smaller changes such as later start times, timetabled breaks or provision of toilet information, required less drastic changes; while travel arrangements (e.g.: moving from flying to low-carbon travel) needed significant investment of staff time and resources over a number of years.

**Note that smaller changes can still have large impacts. Giving advanced notice of timetables for field courses, for example, can improve confidence and attendance rates on courses, by allowing individuals with extra responsibilities/requirements to plan around activities.**

- **Community involvement**

Continued community support during the implementation of transformations is essential to ensure that:

- A) Intended outcomes are addressed by changes
- B) Concerns around changes are addressed and resolved

Feedback events (including workshops, interactive lectures, module surveys and drop-in sessions) allow progress towards goals to be monitored and improvements to be suggested. Such events also allow conflicts to be addressed and resolved through effective communication, education and alteration of plans.

### **Case Study Example- University of Exeter: Curriculum For Change**

The Department of Geography recognizes the importance of providing a clear rationale for its transition to low-carbon travel for field courses. All first year Geography students (GEO1319: Fieldwork in Geography) learn about the research and scholarship underpinning flying as an embedded academic and societal practice, as well as educational research arguing for low-carbon travel for field courses. Geography also engages students with the departmental approach to low-carbon travel – its educational practice.

To visualise how to implement actions, a hypothetical timeline has been produced to showing 3 projects being implemented. It presents how these tasks could be organised with embedded opportunities for feedback and improvements.

**Project 1- structurally significant project** (requires a longer time to implement, with multiple feedback sessions due to its large impact as well as an addition gap between it and a linked project (3) to account for potential delays).

**Project 2- a small-scale project, adding to existing structures** (implemented early on with a later call for feedback and improvements after its initial implementation)

**Project 3 – a smaller scale project leading on from project 1** (positioned to start after project 1 is fully implemented, includes a feedback session towards the end of its implementation).

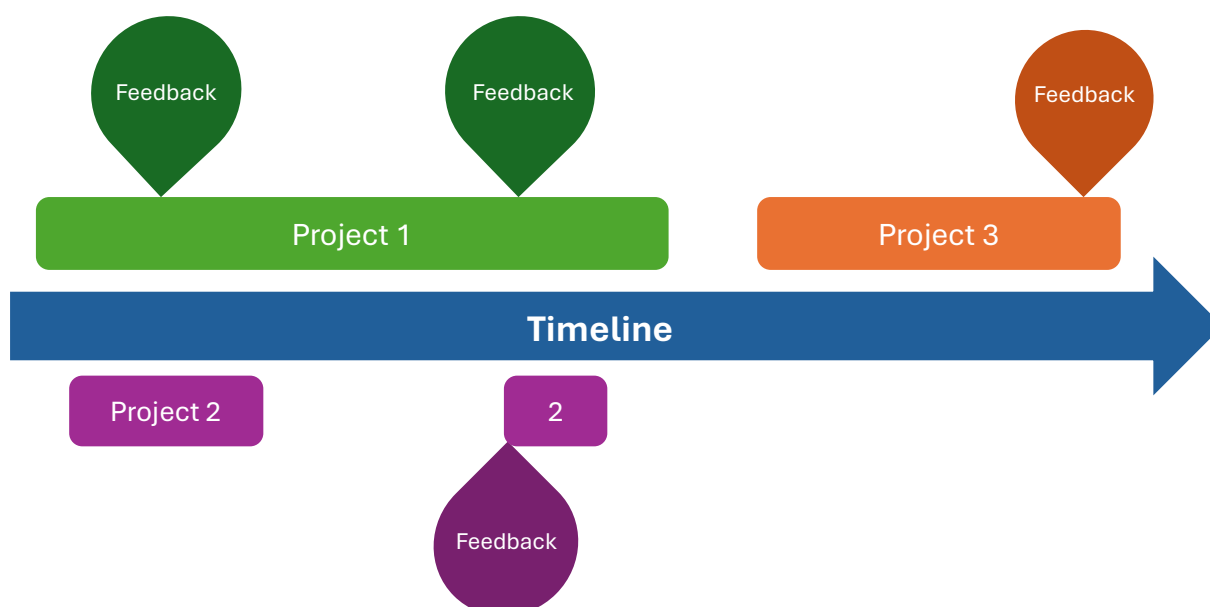


**Figure 3 – Example timeline showing project implementation and feedback stages**

Image Caption: Timeline showing 3 projects of various lengths. The longest (green) is positioned to start first, with 2 feedback sessions added near the beginning and end of its implementation. The 2nd project (purple) is shorter, broken into 2 parts positioned as the 1st project starts and finishes with a feedback

session noted before the second stage begins. The 3rd project (orange) occurs after the others (a mid length project) with a feedback session towards the end of implementation.

### **Further Resources:**

#### **Environmental sustainability**

Higham, J. & Font, X. (2020) Decarbonising academia: Confronting our climate hypocrisy. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 28(1), 1–9. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1695132>

Telford, A., Valentine, A. & Godby, S. (2024) The paradox of the ‘sustainable fieldcourse’? Exploring the links between geography fieldcourses and environmental sustainability. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 48(1), 115–132. Available from: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098265.2023.2190961>

Woodley, E. (2025, January) From plane to train: promoting low-carbon travel for geography field courses in UK higher education. *Geography Directions*. <https://doi.org/10.55203/LJNQ3502>

#### **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

Atchison, C.L., Marshall, A.M. & Collins, T.D. (2019) A multiple case study of inclusive learning communities enabling active participation in geoscience field courses for students with physical disabilities. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 67(4), 472–486. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2019.1600962>

Giles, S., Jackson, C. & Stephen, N. (2020) Barriers to fieldwork in undergraduate geoscience degrees. *Nature Reviews Earth and Environment*, 1(2), 77–78. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0022-5>

Kingsbury, C.G., Sibert, E.C., Killingback, Z. & Atchison, C.L. (2020) “Nothing about us without us”: The perspectives of autistic geoscientists on inclusive instructional practices in geoscience education. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 68(4), 302–310. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2020.1768017>

Woodley, E., Barr, S., Batty, L., Bickerstaff, K., Darvill, C., Ferdous, R., ... & Yorke, L. (2024). The future of geography field course pedagogy in UK higher education. *Geo: Geography and Environment*, 11(2), e00158. Available from: <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/geo2.158>

## 4. Frequently Asked Questions

The following FAQs were developed through a conversation between Rose Blackburn, undergraduate at the University of Exeter, and Dr Ewan Woodley, Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Exeter.

| Question                                                                                                                       | Answer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Which tasks can be achieved easily?</b>                                                                                     | <p>Small-scale interventions, particularly additions to current practices, tend to be easier to implement but can have a large, positive impact on reducing barriers to fieldwork.</p> <p>These may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- First aid/Mental First Aid training for field course staff, alongside mandatory provision of First Aid kits.</li> <li>- Access to personal hygiene products (e.g.: menstrual pads or hand sanitiser).</li> <li>- Improving energy awareness (e.g.: provision of information on transport emissions).</li> <li>- Early information provision (e.g.: on toilets, break timings, eating arrangements).</li> <li>- Collection and action on dietary information.</li> </ul> |
| <b>What activities should be given more time/resource for planning and implementation?</b>                                     | <p>Larger changes will often need more consideration before implementation, particularly if they require structural changes.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changes to travel practises (e.g.: ‘no-fly’ transport choices)</li> <li>- Structural changes to field course design</li> <li>- Energy sources (e.g.: EV prioritisation, lab equipment suppliers)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>What struggles or challenges have previously been faced in field course transformation? (In design, implementation etc)</b> | <p>The transition to ‘no-fly’ field courses in Geography at Exeter has involved addressing a number of key challenges. These have included:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Infrastructure and systems</b> – Making sure that universities have Travel Management Companies that can effectively manage and advise on rail travel, particularly handling bookings for large groups of students.</li> <li>2. <b>Tacit institutional knowledge</b> – Ensuring that universities (academic and professional services</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                     |

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|                                                                                                                     | <p>staff) can develop experiential knowledge of low-carbon travel and become confident in transitioning away from flying for field courses.</p> <p>3. <b>Support from colleagues / students about the pedagogic value of sustainable travel</b> - Enabling space for discussion on the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable travel and how to make pragmatic improvements to the experience.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>How were stakeholders brought together to raise and discuss concerns and opportunities in previous projects?</b> | <p>Various engagement opportunities have been provided for community voices to be embedded in the transformation process.</p> <p>Including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Departmental staff discussions</li> <li>- Discussions with students (during module selection and within modules)</li> <li>- Feedback surveys</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Key considerations in sustainable fieldwork changes</b>                                                          | <p>Ensure that the wider departmental and university community is engaged in and informed about activities throughout the planning and implementation of actions.</p> <p><u>In preparation for plans:</u></p> <p>Ensure that wider university legal criteria are being met to a high level (e.g.: QAA subject benchmarks, where relevant - PSRB, risk assessment) as well as considering the university's vision for sustainability education.</p> <p>Consider further obligations of the university under wider legal (e.g.: Equality Act of 2010) and ethical (e.g.: removing access barriers) banners.</p> <p>Ensure that there is engagement with wider university systems and processes (e.g. Travel management Companies, Travel Policies, Risk assessment frameworks etc.).</p> <p><u>In planning and implementation:</u></p> <p>Consider key timings and deadlines for activities prior to implementation.</p> <p>Provide room for feedback from various stakeholders at various stages of planning and implementation.</p> |

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| <p><b>What additional resources would you share for colleagues who would like to follow up?</b></p> | <p><b>Environmental Sustainability:</b></p> <p>Barr, S. &amp; Shaw, G. (2024) Addicted to flying: Why it's so hard to kick this carbon-intensive habit. <i>The Academic</i>. Available from: <a href="https://theacademic.com/why-its-so-hard-to-kick-this-carbon-intensive-habit/">https://theacademic.com/why-its-so-hard-to-kick-this-carbon-intensive-habit/</a></p> <p>Higham, J. &amp; Font, X. (2020) Decarbonising academia: Confronting our climate hypocrisy. <i>Journal of Sustainable Tourism</i>, 28(1), 1–9. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1695132">https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1695132</a></p> <p>Telford, A., Valentine, A. &amp; Godby, S. (2024) The paradox of the ‘sustainable fieldcourse’? Exploring the links between geography fieldcourses and environmental sustainability. <i>Journal of Geography in Higher Education</i>, 48(1), 115–132. Available from: <a href="https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098265.2023.2190961">https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098265.2023.2190961</a></p> <p>Woodley, E. (2025, January) From plane to train: promoting low-carbon travel for geography field courses in UK higher education. <i>Geography Directions</i>. <a href="https://doi.org/10.55203/LJNQ3502">https://doi.org/10.55203/LJNQ3502</a></p> <p><b>Equality, Diversity &amp; Inclusivity:</b></p> <p>Atchison, C.L., Marshall, A.M. &amp; Collins, T.D. (2019) A multiple case study of inclusive learning communities enabling active participation in geoscience field courses for students with physical disabilities. <i>Journal of Geoscience Education</i>, 67(4), 472–486. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2019.1600962">https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2019.1600962</a></p> <p>Giles, S., Jackson, C. &amp; Stephen, N. (2020) Barriers to fieldwork in undergraduate geoscience degrees. <i>Nature Reviews Earth and Environment</i>, 1(2), 77–78. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0022-5">https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0022-5</a></p> <p>Greene, S., Ashley, K., Dunne, E., Edgar, K., Giles, S. &amp; Hanson, E. (2020) Toilet stops in the field: An educational primer and recommended best practices for field-based teaching. <a href="https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/gnhj2">https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/gnhj2</a></p> <p>Kingsbury, C.G., Sibert, E.C., Killingback, Z. &amp; Atchison, C.L. (2020) “Nothing about us without us”: The perspectives of autistic geoscientists on inclusive instructional practices in geoscience education. <i>Journal of Geoscience Education</i>, 68(4), 302–310. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2020.1768017">https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2020.1768017</a></p> <p>Lawrence, A. &amp; Dowey, N. (2022) Six simple steps towards making GEES fieldwork more accessible and inclusive. <i>Area</i>, 54(1), 52–59. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12747">https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12747</a></p> <p>Swanton, D., Batty, L., &amp; France, D. (2026). Manifesto for fieldwork. <i>Journal of Geography in Higher Education</i>, 1-12.</p> <p>Tucker, F., Waite, C. &amp; Horton, J. (2022) Not just muddy and not always gleeful? Thinking about the physicality of fieldwork, mental health, and marginality. <i>Area</i>, 54(4), 563–568. Available from: <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12836">https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12836</a></p> |
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|  | <p>Woodley, E., Barr, S., Batty, L., Bickerstaff, K., Darvill, C., Ferdous, R., ... &amp; Yorke, L. (2024). The future of geography field course pedagogy in UK higher education. <i>Geo: Geography and Environment</i>, 11(2), e00158. Available from: <a href="https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/geo2.158">https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/geo2.158</a></p> <p>Yorke, L., Hutchinson, S. &amp; Hurrell, L. (2022b) 10 ways to make fieldwork more inclusive and accessible: A guide for educators. Available from: <a href="https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/70783381">https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/70783381</a></p> |
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## Checklist for fieldwork

**All stages should be successfully completed.**

- ☐ **The field course is necessary.**
  - Does the field course have educative value for students related to module intended learning outcomes?
  - Is it the most realistic location for this learning to occur given costs environmentally and financially?
- ☐ **Field course practices align with the environmental policies of the institution.**
  - Could a less carbon-intensive mode of transport be taken (e.g. train)?
  - Is action taken to lessen environmental impacts where possible (e.g.: reminders to 'leave no trace')?
- ☐ **All involved are aware of any and all environmental impacts of the course.**
  - Are staff and students informed of carbon emissions associated with travel to and from the field site?
  - Do risk assessments include any risks to the environment and their likelihood?
  - Are risk assessments provided to staff and students well in advance of the field course's start date?
- ☐ **Barriers to field course access have been considered in detail and with respect to personal circumstances.**
  - Are protected characteristics considered in fieldwork design to prevent discrimination (Equality Act, 2010)?
  - Are other personal characteristics and personal circumstances that could prevent access considered (such as caring responsibilities or socioeconomic status)?
  - Is the treatment of various cultural groups considered in depth and with sensitivity, particularly regarding international travel?
- ☐ **Management of planning, approval, information provision, and feedback processes for field courses is clear, effective and timely.**
  - Are clear lines of responsibility maintained for assessing and managing field work risk?
  - Are approval processes and associated communications clear and timely?
  - Is there a clear, formal process for students to discuss and resolve learning and travel requirements prior to a course?

- Is needed information provided to all parties prior to module selection (including accessibility statements (see below), costs and transport arrangements) and field course start date (including an updated risk assessment).
- Are there opportunities for all involved parties to offer positive feedback and/or constructive criticism/suggestions for improvements on the field course?

## **6. Field Trip Accessibility Statements.**

Making field courses sustainable also involves making them fairer, by addressing the accessibility needs of participants. A detailed accessibility statement is important in supporting all students in understanding the environments encountered during a field course. The document must recognise that accessibility not only refers to physical environments and accessibility, but also to student mental health and wellbeing. Accessibility statements for all field course modules must clearly demonstrate how students can access meetings with module/professional services staff to discuss and (where possible) address student concerns at the earliest possible stage. The information below relates to residential field courses; however, many of the considerations should also be observed for shorter duration field courses.

Colleagues leading field courses should aim to provide a comprehensive level of information at the point of module advertisement (or prior to module enrolment, if a core module).

This could include information like:

- Dates and times, plus a schedule of activities
- Costs to the student, including subsistence costs such as lunch
- Clothing and equipment (e.g. sun protection) needed
- Likely weather conditions for all environments
- Modes of transport, travel times and accessibility considerations
- Information on terrain to support mobility/accessibility needs
- Information about learning, travel and accommodation environments to support those with sensory/access needs – including information about transit countries
- Accommodation and sleeping arrangements
- Mealtimes and processes for managing dietary requirements
- Which staff are carrying first aid kits and/or menstrual packs, and which staff have first aid / mental health first aid training
- Which staff are carrying ‘in case of emergency (student health)’ information.



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