



Maintenance of ATCO skills

Guidelines in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Revision record

Issue	Date of issue	Summary of changes
01	31.05.2021	Initial issue

1. Purpose of these guidelines

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is having a significant effect on aviation including ATCO training and the maintenance of ATCO competence. The majority of the European Union (EU) Member States (MS) applied the flexibility provision as per the EASA Template 1 and Template 1a¹ and its guidance as an immediate reaction and temporary solution to the pandemic.

EASA has already published safety promotion material on erosion of ATCO skills. However, within the Recovery to Normal Operations (RNO) project and due to a possible ramp up of operations for the summer season of 2021, it has been decided to convert the existing material into guidance material.

2. Scope

This guidance material focuses on the maintenance of required skills for ATCOs to perform their duties.

It is not intended to change the existing regulatory requirements, but to complement them by providing additional advice on the possible options to deal with a specific situation, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Recovery scenarios

During this period of reduced activity, ATCOs are expected to experience reduced currency and potentially competency, should the period be prolonged. ATCOs may not be able to maintain their operational skills and with that their confidence during COVID-19 lockdown period due to:

- Low levels of traffic resulting in a limited number of ATCO duty shifts and hours in position.
- Exposure to different traffic patterns (e.g. no more holdings needed), modes of operations, e.g. medical flights, and aircraft with different performance specifications.
- Additional local constraints (e.g.: occupied taxiways by aircraft storage)
- Long periods of working combined sectors resulting in a loss of knowledge of coordination procedures that are only in effect when all sectors are open.

In addition, ATCOs are required to be up to date with the latest changes in airspace, procedures, and equipment. However, many recent changes may not have been experienced in the live environment because of lack of traffic. Means to gain the information after an extended period of absence are a refresher or conversion training course, a briefing (self-briefing) on the specific changes and/or an on-the-job period for re-accommodation, or a combination of the last two.

The key concern for this profession is the pace at which ATCOs can regain the necessary currency and/or competences to adapt to higher levels of traffic. This concerns the frequency at which training, on the job training (OJT), simulator and classroom, can be organised and conducted in a manner which complies with prevailing health restrictions. A thorough assessment of training alternatives should be done based on the following scenarios:

¹ <https://www.easa.europa.eu/document-library/general-publications/templates-exemptions-related-covid-19>

3.1 Gradual recovery

If the traffic recovery is smooth, daily practice could help in refreshing competencies, complemented by theoretical and practical training about the less common scenarios, including unusual runway configurations and high traffic demand. In this scenario, there will be months of reduced traffic, fewer operational demands, and increased availability of training hours throughout the year. However, the lower levels of traffic will probably be an impediment to fulfilling the unit endorsement requirements required in normal circumstances. Consideration should also be given to introduce shift patterns that allow more staff exposure to the available traffic in order to remain current.

3.2 Rapid recovery

Any sudden recovery would imply that there would be insufficient time for ATCOs to readapt to new working conditions without specific training and/or mitigating measures (e.g. ATFM measures, opening of more sectors to distribute the traffic more evenly, etc). In addition, rapid recovery increases the difficulty in forecasting traffic which reduces the ANSP's ability to plan, organise necessary training and roster sufficient ATCOs to meet the operational demand.

Another key concern is the erosion of OJT Instructors' (OJTIs) competence after a prolonged period of not providing OJT to ATCO trainees as little or no OJT will have been conducted during the pandemic period. In addition to this, the mode of operation in which an instructor has to provide the OJT may not be fully compatible with required physical distancing measures. This concern is also valid for competence assessors. Emphasis should be given to these professionals retaining their own skills.

4. What can you do as an ANSP?

- During periods of low traffic:
 - Organise refresher training on synthetic training devices for operational matters such as procedures and recent changes;
 - Assess together with your ATCOs what the most important issues are. Use this information to develop targeted retraining;
 - In addition to the simulator sessions pre-recorded sessions or case-studies can be used;
 - Implement tactical rostering which takes into account ATCO experience and skills;
 - Roster simulator sessions with high traffic loads and with emphasis on less common operations as part of regular shifts;
 - Ensure Assessors and OJTIs retain competence through refresher training and by prioritising them on shift;
 - Encourage just culture incident reporting to be able to quickly address emerging issues
 - In addition, from the SMS point of view, ensure that a risk assessment function captures evolving risks.

- As traffic increases (to consider in addition to the best practices for low traffic):
 - Have a recovery plan for potential increase of traffic during the summer period (both gradual and rapid recovery);
 - Plan a buffer in the capacity scenario e.g.: 10 % above foreseen traffic;

- Modify the roster to increase the number of ATCOs on shift every day or shorten the duration of the shifts;
 - Ensure sufficient stand-by shifts;
 - Ensure availability of OJTIs to support staff that are in doubt of their competence.
- In general terms:
 - Review the UCS and UTP to reflect the current scenario or the ‘new normal’;
 - Monitor operations to detect potential operational drift that may show competence fade;
 - Identify personal and teamwork strategies adapted to local needs and potential competence fade e.g.: awareness events, seminars, webinar sessions.

5. What can you do as an ATCO?

1. Brief yourself thoroughly before each shift;
2. Identify operational areas less practiced during this period;
3. Ask for simulator sessions, OJT hours or other support when you doubt your competence;
4. Use the process within the ANSP if competence is in doubt, e.g. provisional inability;
5. Use existing safety reporting schemes to identify any lack of competence.

6. What you can do as a CA/NSA?

1. Review and approve the modified UCS and UTP to reflect current traffic scenarios or the ‘new normal’;
2. Verify readiness of the ATSP for a potential traffic increase;
3. Check if a recovery scenario is developed by the ATSP;
4. Ensure necessary information exchange with the ATSPs;
5. Ensure that the ATSP’s SMS captures the evolving risks.

7. Additional reference and material

- [Eurocontrol Network Operations Recovery Plan - 2020](#)
- [ICAO Quick Reference Guide on ATCO Recency Requirement Extension](#)
- [ICAO Quick Reference Guide on ATCO Training Alleviation as a Consequence of COVID-19 Spread](#)
- [EASA Guidelines - Virtual classroom instruction and distance learning](#)
- [EASA/EUROCONTROL Guideline-vaccinations-air-traffic](#)
- [IFATCA 2020 Covid 2.0](#)
- <https://www.easa.europa.eu/newsroom-and-events/news/easa-updates-review-aviation-safety-issues-arising-covid-19-pandemic>