

# A QMSU Guide to Volunteering Abroad

Volunteering abroad is a great opportunity for you to discover the world, to immerse yourself in the habitats of other cultures, and to offer your time and skills to make a lasting difference to those in need. If you are considering international volunteering then here is our guidebook, full of hints and tips and links to useful websites that may help you to plan a safe adventure; one that will be a positive life changing experience for both you and your host community.

## THE ETHICS AND IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

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The increase in the number of people volunteering abroad is often automatically considered as a good thing. Although there is no doubt that international volunteers are needed and can have a positive impact abroad it is worth being aware of the debate on the ethics and impact of volunteering internationally.

Here are a few articles and resources which will hopefully give you an insight into the debate:

### **Cambodia's Orphan Business**

"...how 'voluntourism' could be fuelling the exploitation of Cambodian children."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/201252243030438171.html>

### **The dubious altruism of volunteer abroad projects**

"Contrast Britain: no-one in their right mind would expect or allow a young girl, completely untrained, to join a building project or teach a class."

<http://www.varsity.co.uk/lifestyle/5230>

### **Is gap year volunteering a bad thing?**

"People often say, 'doing something is better than doing nothing'. But it isn't."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22294205>

### **Please Mind the Gap**

“An alternative look into the growing gap year industry”

<http://vimeo.com/20281526>

According to the authors of *Alternatives to the Peace Corps* (Food First Books), ‘While a volunteer may wish to feed the hungry, heal the sick, or house the homeless, these social and political problems are often more complex than they may seem.’ The following websites might also be useful if you’re interested in engaging more broadly with international development topics and putting international volunteering into context:

#### **The Guardian’s International Development page**

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development>

#### **Overseas Development Institute (ODI) website**

<http://www.odi.org/>

## **DECIDING WHETHER TO VOLUNTEER ABROAD**

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Here are some things to consider when deciding on what sort of volunteering you’d like to do:

### **Have you volunteered locally?**

What is it that you want to achieve from volunteering? Is volunteering abroad the only way to achieve this, or can volunteering locally also help you to achieve your aims?

Emily Lomax, Volunteer Support Team Manager at Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), says she looks for local volunteering experience in applicants. It demonstrates that people possess the crucial 'softer skills' required in development work: patience, determination, the ability to think quickly and communicate effectively in the most challenging circumstances.

To look at the local volunteering opportunities that we have on our website, please visit:

<http://www.qmsu.org/volunteering/>

### **Your interests and skills?**

International volunteering can often be divided into 4 categories: animals, children, communities, conservation. Where do your interests lie?

What are your strengths and skills and what sort of role would allow you to best utilise your strengths to make a difference abroad? Do you speak another language, perhaps?

### **Time?**

Can you take out enough time from studying, paid work, or family life? Volunteering abroad can often require you to dedicate a significant amount of time- Especially if you’re looking for an opportunity to really get stuck into a project and make a lasting impact.

## Money?

Many organisations charge volunteers a fee or set volunteers a fundraising target which needs to be met before the trip - How much money do you have to spend on a volunteering abroad placement and/or will you be able to raise the required funds?

The University does offer funding assistance for undergraduate or postgraduate students who may wish to undertake expeditions during the summer vacation. Please contact [Queen Mary's Expeditions Fund](#) for more details.

## Your motivations?

It is important that you are realistic with what you want to achieve whilst abroad. See our section on attitudes and expectations for some more information.

## CHOOSING A VOLUNTEERING PLACEMENT

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Especially you're new to International Volunteering you might be overwhelmed by the huge number of number of organisations offering different volunteering abroad projects. Before committing to any volunteering abroad placement it's important to do some research and investigative work into some International Voluntary Organisations (IVOs), and comparing them with some other organisations perhaps, to make sure you're choosing to volunteer with an ethical organisation that have their volunteers' and their host communities' best interests at heart.

We've devised a series of questions which you might like to consider asking when speaking to any IVOs about volunteering with them. Any responsible IVO would encourage you to be asking these sorts of questions and should be able to provide you with the answers if the information you require is not available on their website.

### 1. Is the organisation having a positive impact aboard?

- What is the track record of the organisation how have they benefited the local community, and how have they monitored their impact?
- What are the values of an organisation? Look at their mission statement and their main aims and goals.

### 2. Is there any community ownership?

- Has the IVO consulted and involved the local community in setting up the project to gain a nuanced and in-depth view of local issues and contexts to ensure that the project is meeting a locally defined need?
- Are the contributions of local staff and volunteers included and celebrated in the IVOs success stories, alongside the contributions of foreign volunteers?

### **3. Is the organisation accountable?**

- How does the IVO monitor and evaluate their projects, who do they report to and how are the findings used?

### **4. Is the project sustainable?**

- Does the IVO involve or train local staff or volunteers in/on the project in order to increase the local communities' capacity to manage and sustain projects and to avoid dependency on international volunteers?

### **5. What are the volunteers costing the host community?**

Hosting international volunteers can sometimes burden host communities. Some things to consider include:

- Who will be providing your food and accommodation and will this be at a cost to the local community- do they have sufficient finances and recourses?
- Are international volunteers and/or volunteering projects disrupting the local job market (for example, by providing free resources- human or material- which could be accessed or purchased locally)?

### **6. How does the organisation allocate their funding?**

Different organisations allocate money differently, and their allocation of finance should be transparent. Can you get a breakdown funds are being spent on?

- Where the money is going, and who it is helping?
- Are you happy with how money is allocated?
- It is also important to find out whether or not the organisation will be making a profit from your involvement, or whether the money that you've raised will be going further, to help the community you are about to immerse yourself in.

### **7. How are volunteers recruited and allocated?**

Organisations should take an interest in volunteers' skills, strengths and expertise and assigning them to projects accordingly. Good IVOs should also be providing training to enable volunteers to undertake their roles safely and to the best of their abilities.

- What selection criteria does the organisation adhere to when choosing volunteers?

### **8. Does the organisation invest in the wellbeing of their volunteers?**

- Is the organisation able to give you a detailed description of the volunteer role along with details of planned pre-placement, on-placement and post-placement training and support?

- What are the general conditions that volunteers will be living and working in, and what are the organisations contingency arrangements and insurance agreements in case something goes wrong?
- Getting in touch with previous volunteers or searching online for reviews will help you to assess an organisation.

## **PREPARING YOURSELF FOR A VOLUNTEERING PLACEMENT ABROAD**

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Especially if you're new to volunteering abroad it's important to remember that volunteering abroad is nothing like a holiday! Volunteers can be faced with a range of physical and mental challenges while away and it's important to prepare yourself to either avoid or overcome these challenges in order to make sure that you have a rewarding and fulfilling experience- one that is memorable for all the right reasons.

### **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

#### Travel health

The first thing you should do once you know where you are going to volunteer is to book an appointment to visit your doctor in order to get some professional medical advice. This is a very important step in the preparation process and one which should most certainly not be overlooked! You may need to get vaccinations to protect yourself against the risk of a number of different diseases and you may also need to take medication to protect yourself from malaria. This step should be started as soon as possible as some vaccinations require more than one application over a period of time.

This interactive map provides a nice overview of health risks in countries all around the world: <http://apps.who.int/ithmap/>

And the NHS webpage provides some good information and comparisons on malaria prevention medication: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/malaria/pages/treatment.aspx>

#### Travel safety

It's a good idea to check the safety risks specific for the areas that you will be travelling to. All good guidebooks have sections on staying safe and the UK government's advisory website provides some good travel advice, too: <https://www.gov.uk/government/world>. Here are also some common sense travel safety tips- some may seem really obvious...but it's better to be safe than sorry: <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/africa/travel-tips-and-articles/76192>

### Packing

Deciding what to pack for your trip can be a complicated task- you don't want to forget anything important but also don't want to over pack. This Travel Independent website provides a comprehensive list of travel essentials

<http://www.travelindependant.info/whattopack.htm>. Volunteer Advisor also provide a useful packing checklist <http://volunteeradvisor.co.uk/checklists.html>

### Insurance

Do not go volunteering abroad without any travel insurance- it's not worth the risk, accidents happen. The type and level of travel insurance you need depends on where you are going and what you intend to do. There are lots of companies and banks that offer travel insurance so it's worth researching into a few. Be sure to read the terms and conditions and small print of any insurance you take out to make sure that you've covered for volunteer work and to be aware of any restrictions that apply. The following website provides some excellent impartial advice and guidance on the best travel insurance for your circumstances: [Travel Insurance Guide \(UK\)](#)

### And a few other practical considerations

What we've provided so far is a very basic practical preparation guide. This checklist mentions some other practical things you need to consider before traveling:

<http://volunteeradvisor.co.uk/checklists.html>

## **ATTITUDE AND EXPECTATIONS**

Preparing yourself mentally for a volunteer abroad placement is just as important as preparing yourself practically. Managing your expectations and going into your placement with a positive outlook, an open mind and a keen willingness to help, as well as considering the following points, is key to having a positive experience abroad.

### Culture shock

New volunteers especially, may experience a lack of familiarity when travelling abroad and may also get frustrated by the disparities between what they expected their experience of a new culture to be like and what it's likely to be in reality. Here are a few tips on how to reduce the risk of culture shock:

- *Do some research.* Invest in a good guidebook you get an overview of the destination including, historical and cultural information.
- *Learn some key phrases.* This will help you to establish friendly relationships with locals and reduces the chance of being considered an outsider.
- *Contact past volunteers.* To get a firsthand account of what the destination and the project are like.

### Homesickness

When in an unfamiliar and challenging environment it can be a natural instinct miss home. Don't let homesickness get in the way of having a wonderful time abroad. Here are some simple suggestions which might help:

- Arrange a way to contact home easily.
- Don't underestimate the importance of friendship with other volunteers- they might be experiencing some similar feelings to what you are.
- Do something familiar- take advantage of home comforts when you get the opportunity or listen to your favorite music.
- Write a blog or keep a diary- this will help you to channel your frustrations. Also try and consider something positive which happens everyday- reading back on this will help you to see how far you've come and the progress that you've made.

### Disempowerment

Knowing that your work can be significantly changing the lives of people or animals and their environments can be an incredibly rewarding experience but volunteers going abroad can easily get frustrated by how difficult they might find it to make a lasting and impactful difference abroad. Here are some ideas on how to prevent disappointment and disempowerment:

- Before choosing a placement ask yourself what it is that you want to achieve- will this project enable you to achieve that?
- Ask for a role description and figure out what advance planning you can do (ie, planning lessons)
- Pass on your knowledge and skills to local staff and volunteers
- Use social media to help local organizations set up and manage Facebook and Twitter accounts to raise awareness of their cause
- When your return back home, reflect upon your experiences and seek out ways in which you can continue to engage with the cause you were working on back at home
- Share your experiences with others and raise awareness of the issues you faced

## GETTING INTO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Careers Tagged

An online library for a curated list of recommended links. Search on International Development and then narrow the search.

<http://www.careerstagged.co.uk/home>

### Getting Into International Development

For an array of links, tips and articles

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/internationaldevelopment>

Blog: <http://www.careers.lon.ac.uk/blog/development/>

### The Careers Group

An online guide which includes links for the above blog and Facebook page as well as additional information about routes and roles in the sector.

<http://www.gradsintocareers.co.uk/development>

### Queen Mary's Careers & Enterprise Centre

Vacancy service that includes opportunities in the International Development sector

<http://bit.ly/1vAms2O>

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QMSU Volunteering are not able to recommend or endorse any particular international volunteering opportunities however if you do wish to discuss your plans to volunteer abroad before committing to do so then please contact QMSU Volunteering on [su-volunteering@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:su-volunteering@qmul.ac.uk)