

# Careers and Employability Service

## International Volunteering Guidelines

The list of things to think about before you make a decision about which international volunteering opportunity to take may seem daunting. That is why we have put together this guide to help you prepare and choose the right opportunity for you. The Careers & Employability Service does not advertise any organisation who charges for volunteering so instead this guide will give you the tools to research and find the right organisation for you.

At the bottom you will find a list of websites as a place to start researching which opportunity might be right for you. Once you have read this document and thought about the issues involved with volunteering abroad you will be able to make an informed decision about which option to choose. Should you have any further questions please contact the Volunteering Department within the Careers Service.

### What is it?

International volunteering is a fantastic and rewarding way to develop yourself whilst helping others experiencing new cultures, new adventures and meeting new people. It can also be a great way to develop new personal and professional skills over the vacation period whilst making you stand out to future employers. International volunteering is something that needs to be researched and planned carefully, however with such a large amount of international volunteering opportunities to choose from, we know this can be a big task. We hope this handout will provide you with the information you need to pick out an exciting, responsible and safe volunteering project - preparing you for your adventure.

Things to consider:

- What is my motivation for volunteering internationally?
- How am I going to choose a project?
- What is culture shock?
- What medical checks do I need to make?
- How much will it cost and how will I fund it?

### Why volunteer abroad?

International volunteering sounds fun, but why do you want to go? What are your motivations and objectives? If researched properly volunteering internationally can have life-changing benefits to yourself and underprivileged communities across the world. People volunteer abroad for a number of reasons. A few examples of why people volunteer are:

- Gaining employability skills
- Meeting new people and experiencing new cultures
- Expand course knowledge
- Gaining experience in the charity sector
- Helping a cause you are passionate about
- Travelling and exploring the world
- Learning a new language

Once you are able to identify what your motivations are for volunteering internationally you can set yourself goals and aims that you would like to achieve. This will help you to choose your volunteering project, length of time and what sort of role you would like to do.

### Saving the world in a weekend

Volunteering is a wonderful experience and when done responsibly you will make an impact on the communities and environment, but you won't save the world in the few weeks/months that you are volunteering.

You need to be realistic about what differences you can make and how you can make them. Look at the job description as an indication of what to expect, what hours you will be doing, what you are responsible for. You may also encounter real poverty for the first time, as well as complicated political and social situations. Being aware of your role and the external factors that may impact on the project will make your expectations more realistic.

## Do your research

'Choosing your volunteering project should not be like booking a last-minute holiday!'  
*Gapyear.com article' How to find a responsible volunteering project*

If you are going to volunteer internationally you want to make sure you're going to be spending your time and money responsibly, whilst volunteering with a project that will help the community. This is an exciting commitment so you should look to find a project that is of personal interest to you. You will have the greatest impact when you are involved in something you are passionate about. Spend time looking into what is available, where the projects are and whether it aligns with what you want to do and develops your existing skills.

Examples of opportunities are:

- Community Development
- Ecology
- Environmental and marine conservation
- Healthcare
- Sports and outdoor activities
- Youth work
- Teaching English as a foreign language

## A word of caution

Unfortunately, there are many volunteering programmes and scams that harm the communities they work with rather than benefit them. This is known as Volun-tourism, a cash-cow worth up to £1.3 billion attracting 1.6 million well-meaning volunteers!

Volun-tourism is promoted as an ethical holiday with responsible and meaningful experiences combining short-term volunteering with travel expeditions, in order to make a profit. Some of these projects are in fact damaging to the local environment and the communities that live there.

### Research

'Responsible Travel' recently began a campaign to end orphanage tourism due to concerns that well-meaning orphanage volunteers are part of the problem rather than the solution.

There is extensive evidence from UNICEF that documents the detrimental effect orphanages have on children's physical and emotional wellbeing. Instead of helping the situation, the orphanage volunteers reinforce a never-ending cycle of abandonment in the children as they regularly develop short-term relationships with strangers who often do not speak the local language and have no training in how to deal with the situations they are put in. The experience is not only distressing for the orphans but has also led to an increase in child trafficking.

Additionally, a "UN report from West Africa identifies the need to protect children from "Orphan Dealers", highlighting that over 90% of children in orphanages in Ghana are not actually orphans and 140 of 148 orphanages in the country operate without a license." We would strongly suggest **avoiding** volunteering with children and orphanages for a short-term volunteering project.

## So how do I choose a responsible organisation?

Volun-tourism is becoming increasingly popular and the number of opportunities is on the rise – so how are you meant to choose responsibly? There are many ways to help you research the right project for

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you, and the community you want to help. To help you on your search we have made a check list of critical criteria to help you identify a responsible volunteering opportunity. Organisations should promote the following information on their promotional material or websites. If not, they should be able to answer any of these questions when asked by a potential volunteer.

**Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions!**



### **How does my money get spent?**

Paying to volunteer may seem a little bizarre: you are donating your time and skills so why should you have to pay? Many international projects are dependent on donations to develop and sustain their projects. You should clearly be able to see how much money goes on the project itself and where the money is spent. If you can't, ask for their annual report.



### **Do they have a good reputation with NGO's and the local community?**

How can you really find out if the project is helping the community? Ask them! Check with the local community and other NGO's in the area about the programme. If the other NGO's and community can't vouch for them or confidently describe what they are doing, then this isn't a good sign. Responsible volunteering should benefit the community and not take jobs away from locals.



### **Building capacity, not dependency – is the project sustainable?**

Can the project run all year round and are there volunteers all year round? Does the project have long-term objectives that address the underlying problem and will continue when the volunteers go home? Any organisation working with development should essentially be working themselves out of a job by building capacity within the community to do the job they initially set out to do.



### **How do they select their volunteers?**

You have spent ages choosing and researching the right programme for you, so the programme should also make sure that they are choosing the right people for their project. This might be via interview, application form or just a long informal chat on the phone.



### **What training will I receive?**

A responsible programme that wants to make the most of your time volunteering for them should provide necessary information and/or training to carry out the role. This should cover health and safety, fundraising, cultural awareness, managing expectations (you can't save the world in a week) and the organisations code of practice or a volunteer charter. You should also be informed about details of relevant embassies or consulates.



### **What supervision and support will I be offered?**

Volunteering internationally can be overwhelming at times with so many new experiences and a new culture to integrate into. Therefore it is important to check that the programme you choose has a support/induction period for when you arrive and throughout your time volunteering. We are aware sometimes things go wrong, and you need to be sure there is someone to go to.

You should also check what physical support you will be offered. Do you need to sustain yourself or will the organisation provide you with food, accommodation and pocket-money? Check what is provided before you go and make sure that you have enough money to support yourself just in case.



### **Finishing your project**

To ensure you have had a fulfilling time and can tell friends, family and future employers what you have achieved, you should be able to clearly define what outcome you will accomplish by the end of your time with the project. Also, who is accountable if this isn't achieved?

**What is culture shock?**

Culture shock describes the impact of moving from familiar cultures to one which is unfamiliar. When you first arrive in a new country on your own, it can be quite a culture shock; most things are likely to be different, down to the language, public transport, and how you order food. Here are some handy tips to make the first few weeks easier:

- Learn some basic phrases in the local language
- Read a guide book and articles on the area you will be volunteering in
- Abide by the local culture and customs – behave appropriately
- Try local food, drinks and transport
- Write a blog on your experience
- Know what is happening for the first 24 hours after you have arrived
- Be open-minded and sensitive of cultural differences
- Make friends with others

### **Homesickness**

Feeling homesick is normal; most people will experience it at some point during the first few weeks/months of being away. Don't be afraid to admit this. Having a few home comforts like your favourite book, or a few photographs of friends and family can really help. Stay in contact with your friends and family back at home via skype or social media. If you can't access the internet, send letters or postcards. Also make the most of training - your project offers you and social opportunities with other volunteers and locals.

### **Reverse culture shock**

Believe it or not, when you come home you may struggle to readjust to home life and culture. You are a different person, you feel different, and you miss the people, food and way of life! This can sometimes be harder than moving away from home. There are a few things you can do to make this readjustment easier and get you out of that rut:

- Understand you are a different person  
Now  
Understand that, while you have changed, others at home may not have.
- Continue to engage with the key issues via further trips, fundraising or donating
- Share your photos and experiences
- Inspire others to help the cause
- Can the project support you post-trip?
- Volunteer for your local community
- Look into a career in the third sector
- Connect with likeminded people
- Explore your own country

### **Medical checks and vaccinations**

There are important things to consider once you have chosen your volunteering project such as your health, vaccinations and insurance. It is vital that you take a responsible approach to international volunteering as the purpose of your trip is not a holiday, and you will have a responsibility to the volunteering organisation and community to meet the requirements they ask of you.

At the end of this document we have listed some things you should look into as early as possible.

### **Costs and fundraising**

Each project varies from country to cause, so we cannot give you a rough guide on how much a project will cost. You know it won't be free but don't try and go for the cheapest option. Think about where the money is being spent and how much you will have to raise. Your research into the projects will help you.

You will most likely need to fundraise to be able to go on your volunteering expedition and there are many innovative ways that you can do this. Your organisation should give you a starter pack to get you going that may include promotional material for the cause.

Remember that people will donate for different reasons and are inspired by passion, drive and enthusiasm - so you need to get creative and think outside of the box whilst showing the reasons and the cause you are fundraising to support.

Here are a few tips:

- Know your charity well
- Use organised websites designed to help you fundraise such as [justgiving.com](http://justgiving.com)
- If you have been sponsored online then the charity can claim gift aid which means they will not have to pay tax on it

- Tell people about it via social media,
- You could fundraise by holding events such as parties, dances, fun runs
- Utilise your network of family, friends, colleagues and academics to help spread the word
- Show people that you know where the money will be spent – you did the research, so share it
- Get creative and research ways to fundraise

Online fundraising is becoming ever popular, through websites such as Justgiving.com, Virgin Money Giving and My Donate. It is an easy way to get people to donate instantly and via text message. You can link up your profile with the charities so people can understand what you are fundraising for and then donate instantly if they choose to.

Don't just rely on the internet, get out there and fundraise - share your passion to help this cause.

Remember to say thank you to everyone who helps you. If you are doing a blog or a vlog share the link with them so they can stay up to date with you and see how their donation is helping others.

### Checklist

Once you have chosen your project and been accepted this handy checklist should help you to get started in preparing for your trip:

*\* This checklist is to get you started there may be other/specific things you will need to prepare for depending on the project and country you will be volunteering with.*

- Check on the NHS and Government websites to see if there are any health risks or security warnings in the country you will be visiting
- Book an appointment with your GP well in advance of your trip to discuss what vaccinations you will need and to order malaria medication if you need to, and to get enough prescription medicine for the length of your trip maybe a little extra just in case
- If some vaccinations aren't free on the NHS shop around to find the best price
- Are you physically fit enough to do the role? If the role involves physical strength you may want to increase your fitness levels before you depart
- Research the country, buy a travel guidebook to help you get to know the area. This can also help you know where you have been and that local restaurant that makes your favourite meal
- Is your passport up to date, book your flights and check flight times, will anyone be there to meet you at the airport on arrival?
- If you are volunteering for academic reasons, see your personal tutor or supervisor, they may be able to help you plan your aims/objectives
- Get relevant visas and comprehensive travel insurance policy plus other relevant documentation – make photocopies to email to yourself and to leave at home just in case of loss and theft
- Photocopy your volunteering documents- provide your family with a copy as well
- Have copies of contact details for family at home, embassies, and your volunteering project
- Change your money before going to the airport, look into pre-paid travel cards and notify your banks you will be going away
- Research what you may need to bring such as, but not limited to, a first aid kit, water purifiers, sun protection, insect repellent. You can find packing lists on the internet or ask the organisation what they would recommend their volunteers to bring
- Create a packing list. There are lots of useful websites that will help you know what to bring or ask volunteers who are currently volunteering with your project
- What is the climate and terrain like? This will help you to pack appropriately. Will you need hiking boots? Summer clothes or winter clothes? Is the custom to have your shoulders covered?
- Research more about your role and charity - make a list of questions to ask when you arrive

- Plan your initial few days - do you know what you will be doing, where you will be staying?
- Find out if there is an exit strategy for the organisation you will be volunteering with if you are unable to travel to the region for any reason, or if there are any issues once you arrive
- We would suggest that you do not do any extreme activities that you could not do in the UK. Doing extreme sports abroad is not any safer than doing it in the UK and sometimes there might be more risks involved or more relaxed health and safety policies
- When you arrive tell your friends and family you have arrived safely

For a more comprehensive packing list check out this one on Projects Abroad:  
<http://www.projects-abroad.co.uk/blog/?content=2014/ultimate-travel-checklist>

## Careers and Employability Service International Volunteering Guidelines

### Useful Links to help you find an international volunteering opportunity:

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-100.pdf>

<http://www.gooverseas.com/blog/traits-of-responsible-volunteer-program>

<https://www.gapyear.com/articles/204568/how-to-find-a-responsible-volunteering-project>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/10630904/Expensive-voluntourism-trips-the-least-responsible.html>

[http://www.responsiblevolunteering.co.uk/choosing\\_a\\_placement.php](http://www.responsiblevolunteering.co.uk/choosing_a_placement.php)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/10209598/Orphanage-volunteering-part-of-the-problem.html>

<http://www.gooverseas.com/blog/40-fundraising-ideas-study-abroad>