

International Volunteering Guide

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KCLSU International Volunteering Guide

Although we don't run or recommend any international volunteering opportunities, we want you to have all the information you need to make the best decision about volunteering overseas. Take a look at our advice and tips to make sure your overseas adventure gets off to the best start.

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Understanding International Volunteering

Volunteering abroad has loads of potential benefits but it's also important to bear in mind the potential downsides.

The benefits

- As a volunteer, you'll get experiences and opportunities you can't have at home.
- A well-run volunteer project can have huge benefits to the local community.
- Working with the local community can give you new skills and knowledge.
- A great project will really build understanding and relationships across cultures.

Things to consider

As well as the benefits, international volunteering can involve some ethical dilemmas. It's important to think about these issues so you can make as informed a decision as possible. Here are a few things to think about:

- How much impact will you have in a few weeks or months?
- As someone from a different background and culture, do you have the right skills to help?
- Is the project sustainable and will it keep going once you've left?
- Does the placement take jobs from the local community?
- Is the project genuinely needed by the host country?
- Are you getting the best experience for your money?

Find out more

You can find out more about the debate and issues around overseas volunteering in these articles:

The Rewards and Risks of Volunteering

Beware: Voluntourists Doing Good

Tourism Concern

Is Gap Year Volunteering a Bad Thing?

Orphanages No: The Impact Of Volunteering On Orphanages in Cambodia

What's Wrong With Volunteer Travel?

Finding the Right Organisation

Before committing to any International Volunteering Project it's important to do your research on the organisation you're thinking of volunteering for. We've put together a list of ten things to think about before you commit. It can be difficult keeping all this in mind while you're researching different placements. We've put together a **Before You Commit Checklist** to help you keep track!

1. Is it right for you?

A project might look great on paper but still not be the right one for you. Think about what you really want to get out of volunteering abroad, which part of the world you'd like to visit and what skills you can offer. Once you know what you're looking for, researching the right project will be much easier!

2. Ready to learn?

You might be prepared to head overseas and share your knowledge with others, but are you prepared to learn from them too? Mutual learning is at the heart of international volunteering and you'll need to be ready to learn from the local community too.

3. Your money

International volunteering trips can be pricey, with more and more providers offering trips overseas. Make sure your money is going to the right places by picking an organisation that's transparent about where your money goes. Will it go to the host family you stay with, or keeping your project going, or does most of it stay in the UK?

4. Volunteering training

If you're not given any training, it will be much harder to make a positive impact. Find out about the recruitment process and how much training you'll be given before you leave. It's also important to know how much support you'll have when you arrive in your host country and when you return home.

5. Community ownership

Some projects are more focused on the needs of the volunteer rather than the needs of the local community and this can lead to projects being set up where they're not needed. Ask why the project was set up and how much local investment there is in it. It's also worth thinking about who's in charge, the organisation or the local community.

6. The project and the local community

A huge ethical dilemma facing international volunteers is if they're filling jobs that could be done by local people. When you're looking at the volunteer description, think about whether a volunteer should be doing that job. For example, an untrained volunteer probably isn't the best person to teach a class but they could be the right person to offer support as a teaching assistant alongside a local teacher. A lot of volunteer projects also include free housing and meals so don't forget to make sure the organisation is covering the cost of this and not passing the financial burden onto the community you're there to help.

7. The organisation and the local community

How the organisation speaks about the community they're working with is really important. Look for an organisation that gives you respectful and honest descriptions of the host community and has contributions from local staff, as well as an in-depth look at the issues the project deals with and testimonials from past volunteers.

8. Sustainability

Volunteer projects can't carry on forever and at some point the volunteer organisation will probably move on. If a project relies too heavily on overseas volunteers, it won't last once the organisation stops sending volunteers. Sustainable projects are ones that have a plan for when they leave a country and share skills between their volunteers and the local community.

9. Impact

If you don't measure what you're doing how can you know if it's working? Ask the organisation you're thinking of volunteering with if they have any reports on their projects and have a look at their overall aims.

10. Accountability

It's important to know who has overall responsibility for the project you're thinking of volunteering for. The local community should define what makes the project a success and the organisation should be measuring how they're meeting these needs.

Staying Safe

It seems obvious to say that you need to stay safe overseas but it's definitely worth bearing your safety in mind when you're booking your volunteering opportunity.

Looking after your health

Before you travel make sure you:

- Find out the health risks of your destination from the **World Health Organisation**.
- Talk to your doctor and see if you'll need vaccinations and malaria treatment.
- Make sure you've got travel insurance that covers everything you'll be doing (remember that some policies don't cover extreme sports or backpacking).

Make sure you pack:

- A basic first aid kit, including a travel thermometer, antiseptic cream, plasters and pain killers.
- Diarrhoea tablets and rehydration salts.
- Water purification tablets.
- Sun cream and after sun.
- Insect repellent and a mosquito net.

Here are some useful websites to help you stay healthy while you're travelling:

- **Travel Independent** have a list of travel essentials.
- **Volunteer Advisor** have checklists and online guides about looking after your health abroad.
- **Inter Health Worldwide** are a charity that focus on looking after your wellbeing.

Coping with homesickness

It's natural to miss friends and family when you're away. Here are some things you can do to make sure feeling homesick doesn't stop you from enjoying your experience:

- Arrange a way to contact home easily and regularly.
- Take advantage of the home comforts available, whether that's free WiFi or a hot shower.
- Becoming friends with the people you're travelling with will make it easier when you start missing home.
- Keep a blog about your trip so you can share your experiences with your friends and family back home.

Culture shock and reverse culture shock

Volunteering in an unfamiliar place can make you feel disorientated or out of place. This can sometime be because of a language barrier, cultural differences or experiencing extreme poverty for the first time. Here are some steps you can take to minimise culture shock:

- Speak to previous volunteers to find out more about the country you'll be travelling to.
- Invest in a good guide book with lots of cultural information.
- Learn some important phrases in the local language so you can get by when you arrive.
- Be open-minded and try not to have too many preconceptions about the country or the project you'll be joining.

You might also experience reverse culture shock when you get home. This can be a feeling of missing the experiences you had abroad or difficulty readjusting to life at home. Here are some things that can help:

- Keep in touch with the people you met while you were travelling, especially in your host community.
- Share your experiences with friends and family.
- Look over photos and journals from your time abroad (or even that blog you kept!).
- Take a look at our information for **returning volunteers**.
- Start planning your next trip!

Funding Your Trip

Please be aware that KCLSU can't support any individual fundraising for international volunteering.

International volunteering organisations usually ask you to make a contribution to the cost of your placement. How much you pay depends on which organisation you travel with. As with any type of travel, it's important to find out exactly how your money will be spent and what costs you'll be expected to cover. Here are some useful articles about funding your trip:

- [Ethical Volunteering](#)
- [Volunteering Options](#)

Every volunteer pays for their placement differently, from saving hard to fundraising through sponsored feats. The organisation you choose is bound to have loads of fundraising ideas and tips to inspire you.

Some organisations offer bursaries to help cover the cost of a placement. Find out more on their websites:

- [Latitude](#)
- [Omprakash](#)
- [Raleigh International](#)
- [Rotary International](#)
- [Winston Churchill Memorial Trust](#)

You might be able to get discounts on some part of your travel with [NUS Extra](#). Check out the [NUS advice and guidance](#) and pick up an NUS Extra card from one of our [Student Centres](#). While you're there, you can also get an NUS International Student Identity Card (ISIC).

Our travel partner [Student Universe](#) has great student discounts and [inspiring travel blogs](#).

Action At Home: Returning Volunteers

You've just got back from an international volunteering experience and you're itching to do more to support the community you've spent so much of your time with. But how do you go about it?

International volunteering isn't just the time you spend abroad, it can also be about offering a community continued support after your placement. Action at home is arguably the most important impact an international volunteer can have, as it can be more wide-reaching.

Why is volunteering at home so important?

Volunteering abroad and experiencing life overseas first hand can make you really passionate about a cause or a community. Bringing that passion back home can help make real impact by:

- Giving you a way to turn a short term international volunteering placement into a sustainable commitment to a community.
- As someone with first hand experiences you can give a really engaging, persuasive and moving account of an international issue or the positive impact of volunteering.
- Spreading this message when you get home can help raise awareness and encourage others to get involved in the project you care about.

Sometimes, when you come home you can feel a bit deflated about how much impact you had and at being so far away from the people you worked with. Getting involved with volunteering opportunities when you return can help bridge the gap between 'home' and 'away' and can mean that you continue to make a real difference.

What can you do when you get home?

There are lots of ways to continue supporting the community you've developed a relationship with or the international issues you've experienced:

- Check out our **student activity groups and societies**. Are any working with the communities or issues you want to support?
- **Start a new society** and encourage more people to volunteer with you.
- Check out our **volunteering opportunities**.
- Find a graduate network in the area you want to work in.
- Research the jobs available in this area once you graduate.
- If you want to work on the big issues that have an impact on students, take a look at the **campaigns** at KCLSU or think about starting your own campaign.
- Research any national campaigns you can get involved in.

Plan of action

Want to keep making a difference? Fill in our **Action at Home: Plan of Action**. It's full of hints to help you decide what action to take and how to make it as beneficial as possible.

Resources

There are loads of places you can get information on overseas travel and volunteering. Here are a few suggestions.

Books

- Collins.J. (2001) *How to Live Your Dream Volunteering Abroad*, London: Penguin Publishers.
- Fabio. A & McCloskey.E (2008). *World Volunteers*, London: Universe.
- Kruempelmann.E. (2010) *The Global Citizen's Get Started Guide to Working Abroad*, The Global Citizen Press.
- Pybus. V. (2000) *The International Directory of Voluntary Work (International Voluntary Work)*, London: The Orchard Shop.

Websites

- **Do-it** provides comprehensive volunteering guidance and opportunities.
- **The International Citizen Service** offers a global volunteering experience for 18-22 year olds.
- Guidelines and help on selecting an **Ethical international** volunteering placement.
- Useful **articles and insightful case studies** of volunteers' experiences overseas.
- Read **articles on voluntary work** from all over the world.
- Detailed **guidelines and advice** on things to consider before deciding to volunteer overseas.
- Information about **organisations and vacancies** in different regions.

Articles

Article on ethical volunteering in The Guardian
National Post article about voluntourism
International volunteering resource and advice

Before You Commit Checklist

Before committing to any International Volunteering Project it's important to do your research. We've put together a checklist of things you should find out about before you book your place.

The organisation

- Do they have a good reputation?
- What benefits do they bring to the local community?
- Is the organisation and volunteering project ethical?
- What are the organisations priorities and aims?
- What training will you get?
- Will the organisation ask for your feedback after your placement?

The volunteer role

- What will your main duties be?
- What commitment is expected of you?
- Are there any specific skills you'll need?
- Are travel, accommodation and food included in the programme?
- Can you contact past volunteers to hear about their experiences?

What you want to gain

- How long do you want to volunteer for?
- What type of volunteering project are you interested in – education, conservation, medical, community building?
- How will you pay for your trip?
- Why do you want to volunteer?
- What are your expectations of the project?

Funding

- How much will the placement cost?
- How will your money be used by the organisation?
- What fundraising ideas does the organisation suggest?
- Are there any bursaries available?

Your safety

- What are the laws of the country?
- Are there any customs or cultural differences you need to be sensitive of?
- What's the current political situation and is it safe to travel?
- Does the organisation's insurance policy cover you or do you need private cover?
- What's the organisation's Health and Safety Policy for the Project?
- Will you need any vaccinations or medical tests?
- Is healthcare easy to reach from your placement?

Action at Home: Plan of Action

So, you've volunteered abroad and you're wondering what you can do to help raise awareness of the issues you've experienced now that you're home. Good news! There's loads of different ways you can keep making a difference, from fundraisers to lobbying your MP.

Creating a plan of action will help you think through your ideas and consider the resources and support available to you. This will mean your event or activity has the impact you want it to. Take your time to fill in this plan and see where it leads you!

If you have any questions or want to find out more about taking your plan further, get in touch with volunteering@kclsu.org

<p>What do you want to achieve?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What issue do you most care about?• How will you know if you've been successful?• What do you want to gain personally by taking action at home?	
<p>What strengths or experiences do you have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What did you learn when you volunteered?• What other skills do you have which you could use? e.g public speaking/ photography/ writing.• What networks or contacts could help your spread the word?	
<p>What can you do to help raise awareness?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What's your vision?• What's realistically achievable?• Would you like to fundraise too?	

<p>Who?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who's your target audience?• Think about other students, lecturers, friends, family and the wider public.	
<p>Where?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What would be a suitable venue?• Consider capacity, facilities, location and cost.	
<p>When?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When would you like to hold the activity/event?• What date and time would be best for getting people to come along?	
<p>How are you going to make it happen?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What resources will you need?• When will need to recruit volunteers?• Will you set deadlines?	
<p>What help will you need from other people?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any skills you'll need but don't have yourself?• Who can you get involved – friends, family, other volunteers?	

Next steps

Now you can start to plan what needs to be done to make sure your event/activity is a success. Jot down everything you can think of: