Deciding which international volunteering opportunity to take may seem daunting, so we have put together this guide to help you prepare and choose the right opportunity for you. The Careers and Employability Service does not advertise international volunteering opportunities but instead this document will give you the tools to research and find the right organisation for you.

What is it?

International volunteering is a fantastic and rewarding way to develop personal and professional skills whilst also helping others, experiencing new cultures and meeting new people. The skills and experience gained through volunteering can also help make you stand out to future employers. International volunteering is something that needs to be researched and planned carefully, so this handout will provide you with the information you need to choose an exciting, responsible and safe volunteering project.

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 others. 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
• Expanding course knowledge
• 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 the sort of role you would like to do.
Be realistic

Volunteering is a wonderful experience and when done responsibly you can make an impact on communities and the 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 and 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

If you are going to volunteer internationally you need to make sure you’re going to be spending your time and money responsibly. You will have the greatest impact when you are involved in something you are passionate about, so find a project that is of personal interest to you. 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. 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.

How do I choose a responsible organisation?

Volun-tourism is becoming increasingly popular and the number of opportunities is on the rise – so how do you choose responsibly? The check list below can help you identify a responsible volunteering opportunity. Organisations should highlight the following information in their promotional material or websites. If not, they should be able to answer any of these questions when asked.
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 local people.

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 it 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 over the phone.

What training will I receive?
A responsible programme that wants to make the most of your time should provide necessary information and/or training to carry out the role. This should cover health and safety, fundraising, cultural awareness, managing expectations and the organisation’s 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. 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, for example 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
• Write a blog on your experience
• Be open-minded and sensitive of cultural differences

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:

• Understand you are a different person
• 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

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.
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
- If you have been sponsored online then the charity can claim gift aid, meaning 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

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 checklist should help you to get started in preparing for your trip:

- 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 get enough prescription medicine for the length of your trip. 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 and buy a travel guidebook to help you get to know the area.
- Is your passport up to date? Book your flights and check your 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 plus other relevant documentation – make photocopies to email to yourself and to leave at home just in case of loss or 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 bring
▪ 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

Useful links to help you find an international volunteering opportunity

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.responsiblevolunteering.co.uk/choosing_a_placement.php
http://www.gooverseas.com/blog/40-fundraising-ideas-study-abroad