

The Royal Holloway Travel Award granted me the opportunity to travel to the beautiful island of Sri Lanka, in order to embark on a five-week mental health placement. I travelled with a company called SLV.Global, who endeavour to not only provide volunteers with highly valuable, and practical experience in mental health, and teaching sectors, but to also provide maximum support to a number of projects set up within the local community. SLV.Global was founded in 2010, after a team of recent psychology graduates, including the organisation's co-founder Lucy Nightingale, recognised that there is very little psychological work experience available to graduates within the United Kingdom. Alongside Sri Lankan youth worker, Yasintha, they combined whatever resources and experience they had, and SLV.Global and Mental Health placements were born.

From Tuesday to Thursday of each week, every volunteer visited two projects a day. These were separated into three categories: English for Development, Community Outreach, and Special Needs Projects.

In most 'English for Development', and 'Community Outreach' Projects, volunteers devised and led their own lesson teaching English. No two projects were the same, so we would have to plan, and provide resources that were appropriate for each project. For example, I taught advanced English at a local college for male motor mechanic students aged 17-25, but I also taught very basic English at a local orphanage for boys aged 5-10. Both of these projects were challenging for different reasons, but both were obviously also very rewarding.

For Special Needs Projects, our main focus was to provide fun, interactive and creative sessions that involved a vast amount of sensory stimulation. Activities included singing, dancing, crafts, story telling and drama, as well as some basic English teaching. Due to the stigma still attached to individuals with special needs within Sri Lanka, there seemed to be very few projects available to those in the local community. Therefore, we would often be leading sessions to people of all ages, and disabilities. This could often be very challenging as the needs of a toddler are very different to the needs of a senior citizen. Furthermore, we found that activities which would benefit those with autism, would not necessarily benefit those who suffer from physical disabilities alone. However, as a group we were able to overcome these challenges as we gained insight and knowledge from local professionals that provide daily support to these individuals.



On Mondays and Fridays, we volunteered within Mental Health Institutes, working alongside individuals diagnosed with a range of disorders, including depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar. The wards we worked on were separated by gender, and whether the individual was suffering with an acute, or intermediate classification of the disorder. However, due to confidentiality, we had no insight into each individual's background, or diagnosis. Our role within these wards was to provide a relaxed

environment in which the service users could be creative, participate in a sport activity, or simply read and chat with volunteers. All of the service users we met lived within the Institutes. The conditions in which they lived were extremely eye-opening, and most were often highly medicated which made conversation and interaction sometimes impossible. Despite this, I consider my work experience here to be highly valuable, and something I will never forget.

SLV, alongside 'Samutthana', the King's College London Resource Centre for Trauma, Displacement and Mental Health in Sri Lanka, also provided a number of workshops, and field trips. Whilst in Sri Lanka, I completed a creative therapies and meditation workshop, delivered by a qualified art therapist for children, and a monk. Furthermore, I was given the opportunity to shadow one of the very few clinical psychiatrists within Sri Lanka, and was therefore able to observe and ask questions throughout one of his morning clinics. Experience of this sort is something that I would never have been able to gain in the UK.

Finally, a key, and unique benefit of travelling with SLV, is that you have the opportunity to truly live like a local. Throughout my own time in Sri Lanka, I was based in the community area of Kotte, an urban area just outside of Colombo. Here, I felt that I was fully immersed in the culture, as I lived, ate and travelled throughout this area everyday. From Monday to Friday, I lived in a local homestay with other volunteers. I was lucky enough to form a real connection to the family I stayed with, who turned out to be some of the most giving, and caring people you could ever wish to meet. Every evening, we would settle down to a home cooked meal, that would be eaten with only our hands, whilst every morning we would pile on to a local bus and pay the equivalent to 5p for our journey. After five weeks, I had become so used to this lifestyle, that adjusting back to the UK was a lot more difficult than I imagined. My time in Sri Lanka is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life, as I pushed myself completely out of my comfort zone, and gained the most valuable skills and experiences. I learnt about myself and my own capabilities, and was able to meet the most inspiring people along the way. None of this would have been possible without SLV.Global, who I hope are able to continue their incredible work.

