

Zochonis Special Enterprise Fund: Volunteer with SLV.Global (Sri Lanka)

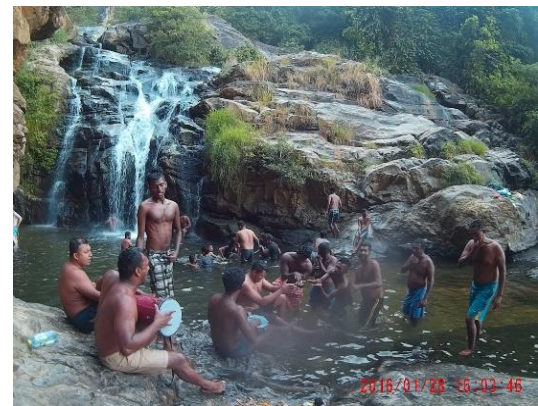
In this report, I will outline the main goals of my Level One Mental Health Placement, how I achieved these goals and discuss the wider, cultural experience that I was extremely fortunate to experience in the magnificent country of Sri Lanka. Lastly, I will summarise my funding and expenditure.



I planned and successfully ran 8 weekly sessions for five weeks in a variety of facilities including rehabilitation centres, children homes, centres for special needs and temples. My goal as a volunteer teacher was to improve service users quality of life by providing enjoyable activities, increasing their general wellbeing and helping them to develop certain skills. Some of these skills included memory, socialisation, spatial awareness and motor skills. As well as this, I continued to build upon their self-esteem and self-worth. This placement gave me a unique opportunity to gain valuable psychology work experience in a new and exciting culture as well as share my skills in a community that valued my knowledge. Furthermore, I took part in a series of workshops and training sessions ran by a team of mental health professionals which widened my understanding of global mental health.

Volunteering within Sri Lanka's Mental Health system allowed me to deepen my understanding of the issue of stigma within mental health. As a British Indian, I am aware that this is particularly pronounced within South Asian communities in Britain with the rate of suicide amongst Indian women in England and Wales being two to three times higher than the national average (1). This experience has allowed me to deepen my knowledge of barriers that marginalised communities face in accessing mental health support. I will develop this knowledge and experience into my expertise as I strive to become a clinical psychologist. I was particularly interested in investigating the differences between Eurocentric and Asian subcontinent approaches towards accessing and formulating treatment plans.

Volunteering within Sri Lanka's Mental Health system also allowed me to gain experience and understanding of trauma. Sri Lanka's turbulent history of the civil war and tsunami meant that I was given the opportunity to understand how trauma is dealt with within developing countries. This will also enhance my skill set as a psychologist in the UK as the pressure on psychologists to respond to large scale traumas is increasing. After the terror attacks in Manchester, it follows that provision of timely and effective support and, when needed, mental healthcare should be an essential element of the UK's preparedness to deal with terrorist threat.



My initial worries at departure mainly revolved around my physical health as I had never travelled alone nor visited the East. I was concerned about whether I could manage the climate difference and handle the spicy food whilst carrying out challenging work. Within a few days, I felt incredibly happy as I formed very close relationships with the volunteers I lived with and I felt so comfortable with the laid back attitudes and calmness of the Sri Lankan people. I surprised myself with my ability to adapt quickly in most situations, for example, it was common for things not to go to plan e.g. hectic travelling or having twenty more service users than last week but like the locals, I shrugged my shoulders smiling and simply always got on with it. From this trip, I hope I can implement the patient nature of this community into my daily routines. NHS services are increasingly being stretched, maintaining a focussed and calm manner will be essential for me.

(1) SONI RALEIGH, V. (1996). Suicide patterns and trends in people of Indian subcontinent and Caribbean origin in England and Wales. *Ethnicity and Health*, 1, 55–64.



Throughout the weeks, what amazed me the most was the supportive relationships that service users formed amongst themselves. Every Thursday, I visited a psycho-social rehabilitation centre for adult women. One service user, who was diagnosed with chronic schizophrenia, was always very chatty, she asked many questions e.g. where I was from and smiled throughout all our creative therapeutic sessions. I observed her decline in mood and engagement one week but noticed how other women in the group called for her and said caring things such as “would you like to sit in your seat?” and we passed her resources to give her the opportunity to get involved, which she

did. These acts of kindness reflected the general nature of the nation and its attitudes toward wellbeing. On busy buses, people would offer to hold your bag if you were squashed whilst standing and wherever I stayed at the weekends, I was always offered plenty of food and drink. They took so much interest in our volunteering and helped a lot with our travel plans. This taught me the importance of compassion towards patients and others at large .

Every Monday morning we carefully planned our sessions to suit each service users needs as each group was diverse in their ability and interests. We usually started with dance routines to improve concentration and mood elevation then began therapeutic activities. For a small group of young adults we decided to decorate and write wishing trees. Using arts and crafts improved creativity and hand/eye coordination. Writing wishes meant we carefully reflected on things important in our lives. It felt enriching to listen to each service user because we shared both common and different wishes. One service user wished to have a water well (like the one in my photo, taken from my homestay house) whilst one hoped to have a daughter and house. This provided me with understanding on the importance of basic amenities and family.



Taking part in a trauma workshop hosted by a counselling psychologist allowed me to appreciate the cross-cultural perspectives towards handling aftermaths of war and natural events. What was greatly emphasised was the resilience demonstrated by those effected. I noticed this when I visited the Tsunami museum and saw children grinning in photos whilst in make shift classrooms where land was hit the hardest. I learnt the importance of organisations entering rural areas and empowering locals to become councillors, consequently leading to capacity building in Sri Lanka’s disaster preparedness and mental health care in general. As well as this, I understood how Sri Lanka benefited from using locally and culturally more appropriate approaches such as art therapy for addressing confusing and emotional issues. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about how this can benefit certain groups of people and I was given the chance to try out activities used to help people describe their identity. I chose to draw long curly hair as my self symbol because not only did this represent my appearance but for me, it highlighted the continuous growth and learning in my life.



I lived with a local family whom I bonded with so closely. They cooked us traditional and delicious food with most of the ingredients being grown in their modest outdoor space. Most evenings we chatted as they shared photo albums and when I bought local CDs, we would all dance and laugh until it got late. The hardest part about leaving Sri Lanka was saying

side patterns and trends in people of Indian subcontinent and Wales. Ethnicity and Health, 1, 55–64.

goodbye to my loving homestay family. We all sobbed together but promised to stay in touch. On the last day, I knelt down to the grandparents as a mark of mutual respect. During my teaching projects, my pupils would do this at the end of the class and in return you tap their heads and say “bodu sarani” which means may the blessings of Lord Buddha be with you.

We made the most of our weekend travels by exploring the many different depths of this green island. My friends and I attempted surfing, discovered coral life within the Indian ocean, visited a tea factory and released turtles into the sea after learning about the black market. Everywhere we went, we enjoyed locals bringing out their drums and singing and dancing together!

Although this placement was challenging, it was massively rewarding both personally and professionally. I have developed strong leadership skills and flexibility as well as hone essential psychological skills such as empathy, listening and identifying needs and responding appropriately. I enjoyed exploring the fundamental differences between the UK and Sri Lanka and finding positive and productive ways to engage and benefit individuals with unique needs and backgrounds.

My time in Sri Lanka was truly humbling and I know that I will come back again in the future. I would like to say a huge thank you to the Zochonis Special Enterprise award for providing me with some crucial and greatly valued funding towards this work experience which will support my ambitions of becoming a Clinical Psychologist within the NHS.



Expenditure

Flights: £550.99

Vaccinations: £300

Visa: £57

Placement fee: £1,500

Spending money (living costs, weekend travelling): £627

Total: £3034.99

Other sources of funding

Zochonis Special Enterprise fund: £400

Careers department work experience fund: £500