Things to consider before you volunteer overseas

Voluntourism – travel that involves volunteering for a charitable cause – is fast becoming the travel trend of the millennium. New organisations that offer international volunteer experiences to university students crop up every day. The following information is for general guidance only to help QUT students with information and issues to consider before applying for a volunteering role.

Safety First!

Check the Smart Traveller website for country specific information, to help determine how safe it is to travel to certain destinations. This website provides up-to-date information about the risks you might face overseas, helping you to make well-informed decisions about whether, when and where to travel.

Investigate the Voluntourism Provider

Conduct extensive research on the company you are considering volunteering with, to confirm that they are reputable and reliable, that they have a good track record and that their values and goals are aligned with your own.

Where to look?

- Start with the organisation’s website.
- The organisation’s facebook site is not only a good place to get information from the company, but also it can be a great avenue to connect with past volunteers – find out about their experiences, read their comments and check out their photos. You could even private message people who you can see have volunteered on the project before.
- If the volunteer project has been running for a while, chances are someone has blogged about it. Search on google to see if you can find any, and read about someone’s experiences first hand.
- Most organisations who offer voluntourism opportunities will happily connect you with past volunteers if you ask. Email them any questions you can think of – talking to people who have volunteered there already is a great way to find out the ins and outs of each project.

What to look for?

- What are the values and goals of the organisation? (If the organisation partners with local NGOs around the world, look into the values and goals of the local partner too.)
- If there is a cost involved, exactly where does your money go? How much goes to the project/community and how much goes towards administrative costs? Are they transparent with this information?
- What kind of pre-departure and in-country support do they offer?
- What is included in your volunteer fee? It’s fairly standard that the fee will not include flights or travel insurance, but does it include all your food, accommodation and training? And what kind of living standard do they provide – is it camping or private rooms? What is the food like? Can they cater to dietary requirements?
- Exactly what kind of work will you be doing day-to-day? You want to look for a role that is clear and specific about the tasks involved.

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Establish Expectations

Be realistic about what you want to get out of this experience. If all you’re after is a very unique holiday, the chance to meet interesting locals and have brand new experiences, then there are probably a lot of different volunteer programs that would satisfy you. But...

- If helping people and making a **positive impact** is the most important thing for you, then you should do further research into how the project aims to achieve sustainable conservation or community development. The following article from the Metador Network raises some very interesting points to consider about how voluntourism may actually cause more harm than good: [http://matadornetwork.com/change/why-you-shouldnt-participate-in-voluntourism/](http://matadornetwork.com/change/why-you-shouldnt-participate-in-voluntourism/)

- If you are looking at this as an opportunity to gain **work experience** in your chosen discipline, you need to look very carefully at exactly what skills and experience you will gain. You will probably get more out of projects which require their volunteers to have relevant skills or knowledge prior to participating in the project, rather than projects that accept unskilled volunteers. And be wary of organisations stating that you will receive course credit for your volunteer efforts – QUT has strict guidelines relating to what you can and cannot receive course credit for, so make sure you talk to your Course Coordinator before assuming that you will receive credit.

Do Your Own Research

The volunteer opportunities and information compiled by QUT on the QUT CareerHub website is provided in good faith and it is passed on to students as a guide only. While QUT endeavours to assess the suitability and legitimacy of all volunteer opportunities advertised through QUT CareerHub, students are expected to thoroughly undertake their own research and investigations to determine the reputation, safety and suitability of any opportunity before considering to apply. QUT does not take any responsibility for and makes no representations about the accuracy, currency or authenticity of this information or of volunteer opportunities. QUT does not necessarily recommend or endorse a particular employer, advertiser or service provider featured on the QUT CareerHub website, and does not act as an agent for any prospective employer.