

I was a second year student when I was awarded the QMUL expeditions grant. This went directly into helping me ensure that I was able to continue my work with an NGO I've volunteered with previously, called Education Partnerships Africa. Thus, the money helped me pay for my flight to Nairobi, Kenya, from which I travelled to Mbarara (western Uganda).



Education Partnerships Africa (EPAfrica) is a UK charity, which was established by university students hoping to improve the lives of students in rural East African schools. As a result, the charity sends university students to pre-selected secondary schools in rural Kenya and Uganda each summer, for 10 weeks, in order to achieve this aim. The students work in teams of 2 or 3 and each fundraise for their living costs, health insurance, etc. but each bring with them the essential sum of £900 to go directly into the schools to INVEST. This is the key difference that EPAfrica has compared to other charities. We invest, not teach. Because the charity is aware of the fact that sending unqualified students to teach schools in sub-Saharan Africa for the summer can often do more harm than good. As such, different volunteers (or "Project Workers" as EPAfrica calls them) have the autonomy to decide on a range of options for investment. This can range from buying the school the textbooks needed for effective learning and teaching, to more innovative investments such as introducing iron and zinc rich beans into the school diet for improved student health.

Last year, I was lucky enough to be a Project Worker in Mbarara, Uganda and being able to return as a Project Manager was something beyond words. It meant being able to revisit my old partner school which I'd invested in, seeing teachers and students I'd kept in contact with, but also coming back with a different and more challenging position within the charity.

My role during all of these ongoing tasks was (fairly) simple. I was the Project Manager for the second half of the summer; meaning that I was responsible for guiding, managing and coordinating efforts that went into ensuring these Project Workers implemented projects as meaningfully and sustainably as possible. This sounds a bit abstract to those that aren't familiar with the organizational structure of EPAfrica, so just to summarise some of the tasks that come with being a Project Manager...

- **Pastoral care/support.** This required giving pastoral care to Project Workers when needed, whether they were home-sick or worried they'd contracted malaria. Discussing their problems and anxieties was a very important part of the role, as being in an unknown town for the whole summer with no sense of familiarity can be daunting for most people. Frequently accompanying them to the local health clinic was another element of this, due to everyday problems we all experienced like dehydration and bacterial infections (all of which were very easily curable as problems).
- This included ensuring that their projects ran smoothly, so being free to assist the Project Workers whenever reasonably appropriate. This was particularly valuable to

most Project Workers, as we'd all been in their position before. So we knew the best prices/quotes for different materials, the risk assessments that needed to be made with more concrete projects such as water systems, etc.

- **School visits.** This is the bulk of material work I was tasked with during the summer, and it mostly included making "school visits". These are the visits I'd made to potential schools the charity would like to partner with, assessing whether they are 'needy' enough to benefit from investment, but also 'established and organised' enough to maintain projects we potentially implement. Also, I'd made visits to "graduate schools" too, meaning the schools which had already been the recipient of EPAfrica investment in the past. This was probably my favourite task of the summer, not only because I got to see my previous school from 2017 and others which my fellow Project Workers partnered with, but schools from years ago. And seeing the long-standing impact our charity had in these schools, alongside the dedication of many head teachers to maintain and improve EPAfrica projects, was something that confirmed the committed work EPAfrica is able to deliver.
- **NGO/East Africa "contacts" liaising.** Keeping up relations with contacts we had in the region was vital, and something we'd not been very good at in the past. Simply because our Mbarara, Uganda site was newer than our Kenya ones (where the charity started out). So expanding to Uganda meant that we had a less established presence within the region we'd be working in, thus keeping up relations with friendly faces and strategic local contacts for emergencies and help with projects was something of the utmost importance for the charity's security.
- **Summer team project.** This was something rather new and innovative on the part of the summer team, and something I had a privilege in leading this summer.



### **Summer team project...**

This is a project that EPAfrica had organized for Summer Teams across both Kenyan and Ugandan sites to organize. What the charity envisioned for this pilot scheme was an upgrade of existing girls' toilets in previous/existing partner schools. Focus ranged from installing lighting (allowing girls to change their sanitary pads at night), to ventilation (to prevent bad odours). The overarching aim was to achieve an "EPAfrica standard" for all girls' toilets in partner

schools to match, for future standardized investment.

In short, the search for the ideal school to invest in was quite easy because we didn't have to look very far to find that St Benedict's Technical Institute (the school I'd invested in last year as a Project Worker) was more than keen for additional investment. And not just any investment. Head Teacher Benon had already attached great importance to girls' sanitation issues by planning to improve the girls' toilets following the construction of their new

dorms. The only problem he faced was a lack of funds, which this project fund had the potential to address. Accordingly, both myself (with the help of the Summer Team) and Head Teacher Benon teamed up to reach a shared vision for St Benedict's and it included a number of different small-scale investments in order to improve the toilet situation for girl students. One of the most important changes introduced was hydroelectric power lights, as this had the result of girls being able to change their pads in fully lit, enclosed spaces during the night when needed.

Although the investments we'd made were indeed small-scale, the impact has the potential to be large-scale. And because it was a pilot scheme, I hope that EPAfrica can learn from this potential success (or failure), to ensure that all EPAfrica toilet related ventures are up to scratch in the coming years...

Overall, being able to continue volunteering this summer in the field of Development, with such a dedicated charity, was a privilege. As it's not easy to gain on-the-ground experience in such a field, nor is it easy to raise the funds for such a commitment. I truly believe that the grant helped me attain such a productive summer, however seemingly small. As it helped me towards the cost of my flight, which was so expensive that any amount would've gone a long way in my eyes. Having completed volunteering with EPAfrica for the second time now, I can assuredly say that this summer definitely benefited me in terms of helping me to gain more experience in a field I'm very interested in, but also my personal development and project management skills.

→ for more information on the charity, potentially volunteering in summer 2019, and reading more on my "girl friendly toilets" project, visit the following link

<http://epafrica.org.uk/volunteer/>