

Experience Story

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Project coordinator LWEI – Batch III 2018

1. Introduction

From September – December 2018, I have been volunteering as a project coordinator at the Lideke Wery Educational Institute in Induruwa, Sri Lanka. It has been a valuable experience in many ways, on which I will elaborate more in this document.

2. Tasks

As a project coordinator at the Lideke Wery Educational Institute, my tasks can be broadly categorized into three different activities. Firstly, I was responsible for teaching the ‘achiever’ class. This was a class consisting of 18 students that had an English level ranging between B1 – C1. I would teach them English for two hours each day, preparing them for the British Council’s ‘APTIS’ exam at the end of the batch.

Secondly, I was part of the daily board of the institute. Together with the headmaster Dinesh, the institute’s consultant Joris, and the administrator Akushla, we made sure that the institute kept running on a day-to-day basis. For me this mostly meant doing the administrative tasks. These included but are not limited to; writing the annual report, processing the teacher’s feedback, making financial checks, organising school events, presiding over and making minutes of the meetings with the Sri Lankan board, writing newsletters for sponsors, writing monthly updates and contributing to compose the annual budget.

Thirdly, I was tasked to help find a long-term solution for the housing of the institute. As the current rental agreement would soon expire there was a need for a stable solution for the future. Together with the ‘building-team’ we explored all the different available options, ranging from extending the current rental contract, to buying an empty land plot and building our own building. As doing business in Sri Lanka works much less straightforward than in the Netherlands, we experienced many difficulties which we had to overcome in order to come to a well-founded decision. Eventually, I wrote a clear report to the Dutch board that included all the pros and cons of every available option. The board then came to a decision to renew the rental agreement with different conditions. I ended my period by starting the negotiations with the landlord.

3. Cultural experience

Living in a rural village in Sri Lanka meant that I was constantly confronted with the cultural differences between The Netherlands and Sri Lanka. Some of them, such as the wonderful food and the relaxed pace of life, are easily adjusted to. But others, such as the differences between gender, social status and ethnicity, will never feel comfortable. Luckily, the institute promotes equality and encourages all the students to follow their dreams and achieve their ambitions, regardless of their background.

As I was treated as a local by the staff and other residents, I got a unique opportunity to experience the Sri Lankan culture in ways that would not be possible as a regular tourist. For example; I went to a traditional Sri Lankan wedding, enjoyed local family dinners, and even spectated a devil expulsion ritual! Furthermore, by taking the time to get to know some of the locals and gaining their trust, it was possible to have a couple of very deep conversations that made me appreciate the safe environment back home even more.

Apart from all these experiences, the thing that I will remember the most is the endless positivity that prevails in the country. Even people that lost almost everything in the civil war and the tsunami keep going to work with a smile, enjoying the little things in life. This is something that I will take with me for the rest of my life.

4. Personal Development

One of the reasons that I wanted to do this internship is that it provided me with a unique opportunity for personal development. As the internship consisted of three different tasks, the range of necessary competences was quite broad. I already had some experience with teaching/coaching, project-management and stakeholder-management, but only in a non-professional setting. My period as project coordinator was therefore the perfect opportunity to bring these competences into practice in a professional environment. As I am a conflict-averse person, it was sometimes hard for me to tell things to people that they might not want to hear. However, as I was working in a professional environment, I felt that doing this was part of my responsibilities. Therefore, this internship taught me that it is sometimes necessary to step out of my comfort zone in order to get the best possible result.

Apart from developing my skills, I also wanted to use the internship to see how I would react to new experiences, which could help me in figuring out what I would like or dislike in a future job. One of these questions was if I would be able to adapt to working in a different culture with its unique challenges. Looking back, I think it took me less time than expected to adapt to the different way of working. In the first two weeks it felt frustrating that I didn't get things done because agreements were not honoured. However, after these weeks I realised that I would accomplish nothing by feeling this way, and instead of fighting the system I chose to embrace it. This saved me a lot of stress and frustration, and also made me come up with some creative solutions in order to get things done.

Another thing I learned about myself was that I find it hard to say no to an employer. As there is always more work to be done, this eventually meant that I found myself working in the evenings and the weekends as well. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing, but I noticed that after a while this became the standard for me. Eventually I realised that this didn't make me happy as I had no time and energy left for sports or relaxing. Fortunately, I found that the employers at the LWEl are very reasonable if you explain why you can't do all the assignments at once. From then on, I started prioritizing and planning better, which allowed me to enjoy the internship much more. This strengthened me in my resolve that no matter how hard you work, you must always make time for yourself in order to reload your energy.

5. Impact

One of the most enjoyable parts of the internship was that, as a project coordinator, you get a unique chance to make a big impact on the lives of many people. Sometimes it seemed like a small effort on my part could mean the world to others. Some examples are that I helped a former teacher with her job application for a management position, for which she was eventually selected. Additionally, there are of course the students that have a better position in life after enjoying the free education and obtaining their certificates. And finally, there is the institute, to which I feel I contributed to by being part of the building-team and helped with finding a long-term solution for the housing of the institute.

6. Conclusion

In the end it feels incredible that all these experiences happened over the course of only three and a half months. In this short time, I've met so many interesting and incredible people, enjoyed a completely new cultural experience, seen beautiful places and got the opportunity to share my knowledge and help others. Because of this I will never forget this experience and will happily recommend this internship to everyone!