

Nepal Travel Grant Report

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On the 30th of June 2018 I set off from home to jet half way around the world to Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. A small charity called Hindu Vidyapeeth Nepal-UK (HVP) provides a link between the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham and three schools which are run by HVP itself. I had been paired with the central school in Balkumari, a suburb in the south east of the city.

Arrival was somewhat overwhelming. Having never been out of western Europe before, it certainly was a culture-shock. Me and two other volunteers, Nick and Lucas, were greeted by a teacher and a student (Jagannath and Jagat) who helped us barter for a taxi back to the school. The journey was mainly on the ring road surrounding Kathmandu. This road was not a double, but a triple carriageway, where the two outermost lanes were (mostly) one-way traffic and the middle lane was a terrifying entanglement of buses, tuk tuks, motorbikes and taxis that weaved around each other with no regard to any sort of highway code. To make things more thrilling, parts of the road weren't paved, and the rough bumpy terrain was bad news for Lucas as his suitcase had been placed unstrapped on the roof of the taxi.

When we eventually arrived at the school we were greeted by the headmaster, Vishnu, and another senior member of staff, Ghanshyam. Bright yellow scarves were gently placed over our heads and there were hugs, smiles and laughter all round. This level of joy and affection in greeting others on first acquaintance was unlike what I had experienced in the UK, but it was a Nepali tendency that I gradually came to love during my stay.

We were given a couple of days to settle in, getting to know everyone and adjusting to a new lifestyle before teaching, becoming familiar with the local transport and new diet, as well as meeting the thirty or so children who boarded in the school. Fleur Conway (Pembroke, Engineering) also came to Nepal with me and we were paired up to teach together. Apart from the opportunity to teach in pairs, the teaching experience was uncompromised. We were given the same responsibilities as any other teacher in the school, having to plan lessons, mark homework and even set their termly exam.

One issue we noticed very early on was in our grade 9 maths class. After setting a short piece of homework we quickly noticed that a culture of copying each other was huge amongst students. We asked Vishnu about it and it wasn't something that the school tolerated, but it did also sound like disciplining for doing so was quite lax. You could see why some children copied. All of them feel a pressure to do well but in a mixed ability class of forty-two, often taught by only one teacher, a huge range of capabilities can arise and where a select few blossom in the subject, the cramped classroom makes it convenient enough for others to simply copy them. Even after instruction not to copy each other from Fleur and I, copying persisted, eventually leading us to the decision to dedicate an entire lesson to copying, why people copy and why it should be discouraged. Fleur and I had to think hard about what the motive for this would be. Of course, the obvious suspicion is simply laziness, but we did also discuss with the children about the idea of failure and how it is okay to get something wrong if you learn from it. We made a real effort to try and praise students not only on their attainment, but also their effort. After this lesson copying did seem to decrease, but it is hard to know if this lesson has stayed with the children now Fleur and I are no longer there.

The other issue we noticed, especially in the older years, was the unequal participation of boys and girls in the classroom. Boys and girls are made to sit on opposites sides of the class room. This seems to lead to a bit of a detachment between the boys and girls, with both parties becoming completely

mortified if asked to sit together. Perhaps in addition to this, it meant that a lack of sensitivity to each other's feelings was shown and we often noticed that on the incorrect answer from one of the girls would result in snickers from the boys' side. Fleur and I initially took no notice of this, but once we recognised the overall quietness of the girls we decided that this wasn't something that should be tolerated and occasionally had to take groups of boys outside to have a word with them.

We were, of course, in Nepal to teach, but we did learn a great deal about the culture ourselves. One thing I was particularly warmed by is the evening prayers, lead by Vishnu and participated by the boarders and the volunteers. The prayer sessions were very informal and generally consisted of an hour of singing and dancing, accompanied by some drumming on a madal by one of the pupils. What impressed me most was the way children would be happily called up to dance by themselves with no reservations to express themselves. The fact that for the borders dancing was effectively compulsory removes any sort of "too cool for school" attitude. What I didn't know initially was that I would also have to overcome my conservative British tendencies and get up and dance too!

As well as teaching we had around 10 days to see a small part of Nepal outside Kathmandu, for which I did a 3-day cycle tour of the Pasang-Llamu highway. being chased by dogs and negotiating landslides were two of the many obstacles to covering any distance but I did get close enough to the Langtang range to see some mountains over 7000 m high. I then met up with the other volunteers in Chitwan national park where we did a walking tour (one of the only places in the world where this is allowed) and got within ten metres of a rhino before it scampered away.

What I will miss most about Nepal is everyone's kindness. Not just the teachers and students in the school, but everyone else I met: the young men in the barbers I used to go to, those who took me into their homes for tea when I went off on cycle trips, the shopkeepers and locals I met on morning runs. It really is a wonderful country.



Teachers day, 27th July 2018. Children gathered to sing and dance, as well as getting involved in the annual tradition of smearing cake on teachers' faces!