

CPD activities and international development

Promotion of partnership working, best practice and lifelong learning helps organisations achieve specific development aims. This holds true whether the organisation is a professional body or an international development charity. There is no escaping CPD, as Rita Drobner found out when she took up a Voluntary Service Overseas placement.

It is the stated purpose of Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) to bring people together to share skills, creativity and learning in order to build a fairer world. Openness to learning is one of the charity's core values and it has to form part of all its work. But how is this realised in the preparation programme? The following article is an account of how VSO training and learning facilities support CPD during the preparation phase for volunteers, before they are dispatched to their placement countries.

Preparation consists of a series of courses, structured self-study and individual self-briefing, spread over a couple of months. The structured course programme takes between 10 and 14 days to complete, depending on the professional group, and is mandatory.

The courses could cover facilitation skills, training the trainers, or health management.

Also mandatory are parts of the self-briefing. Volunteers need to become familiar with the rules of engagement between themselves, VSO and the employing partner organisation. They also need to read the Strategic Plan, the Country Briefing Report,

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specific health and safety instructions, and other policies relevant to a particular posting.

PLACEMENT ANALYSIS

Reflective learning is encouraged throughout the recruitment process. After initial assessment, and if deemed suitable by VSO, volunteers receive a placement outline.

The outline consists of the objectives of a development programme, a job description, a person specification and background information about the geographical and cultural context.

Prospective volunteers complete a placement analysis form on which they research the placement, self-assess their own suitability, highlight gaps in skills and plan

training and further self-briefing. Also, they are encouraged to discuss issues arising from their personality, their needs, attitudes or cultural background.

This written document forms the basis on which VSO and the volunteer decide whether or not they might be a good choice for a given placement. The final decision to accept a volunteer lies with the employing partner organisation in the developing country. As is the case with any employer, acceptance by the partner organisation depends largely on the applicant's curriculum vitae, supporting statements and a suitable recommendation.

ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

Voluntary Service Overseas operates two learning and information centres in the UK, one in London and one at the residential training centre in Harborne Hall near Birmingham. The residential training centre has library and internet facilities that are available 24 hours a day.

The London Resource Centre logs project reports six months into the placement and also the final report when the volunteer completes their placement. These are indexed according to country and profession.



The library at the Birmingham Training and Resource Centre is open 24 hours a day.

It has proved captivating to read reports from biomedical scientists in Indonesia or Tanzania, including their learning points, reflections on their own professionalism (or lack of it) and the constraints they encountered.

In the Birmingham library, background information on a country is shelved side by side with its Strategic Plan, regional project reports and documentary texts and works of fiction. Depending on the individual, the proximity of work-related briefing to recreational browsing will be perceived either as distracting or as motivating and stimulating.

PROFESSION-SPECIFIC CPD

Only a few biomedical scientists are dispatched each year, therefore laboratory-specific resources in the library are limited. The range is considerably wider on tropical medicine, public health, management, disability and HIV/AIDS. Nurses and teachers are recruited more commonly for overseas development, and VSO has prepared profession-specific resource packs and eTools for these two professional groups.

So, how could the preparation programme for a biomedical scientist fit in with the IBMS CPD categories of 'personal' and 'vocational' development? A four-day course entitled 'Personal Preparation' and a half-day course on 'Safety and Security' deal with the perception of the volunteer's role and any adjustments required, and would fit in the personal category.

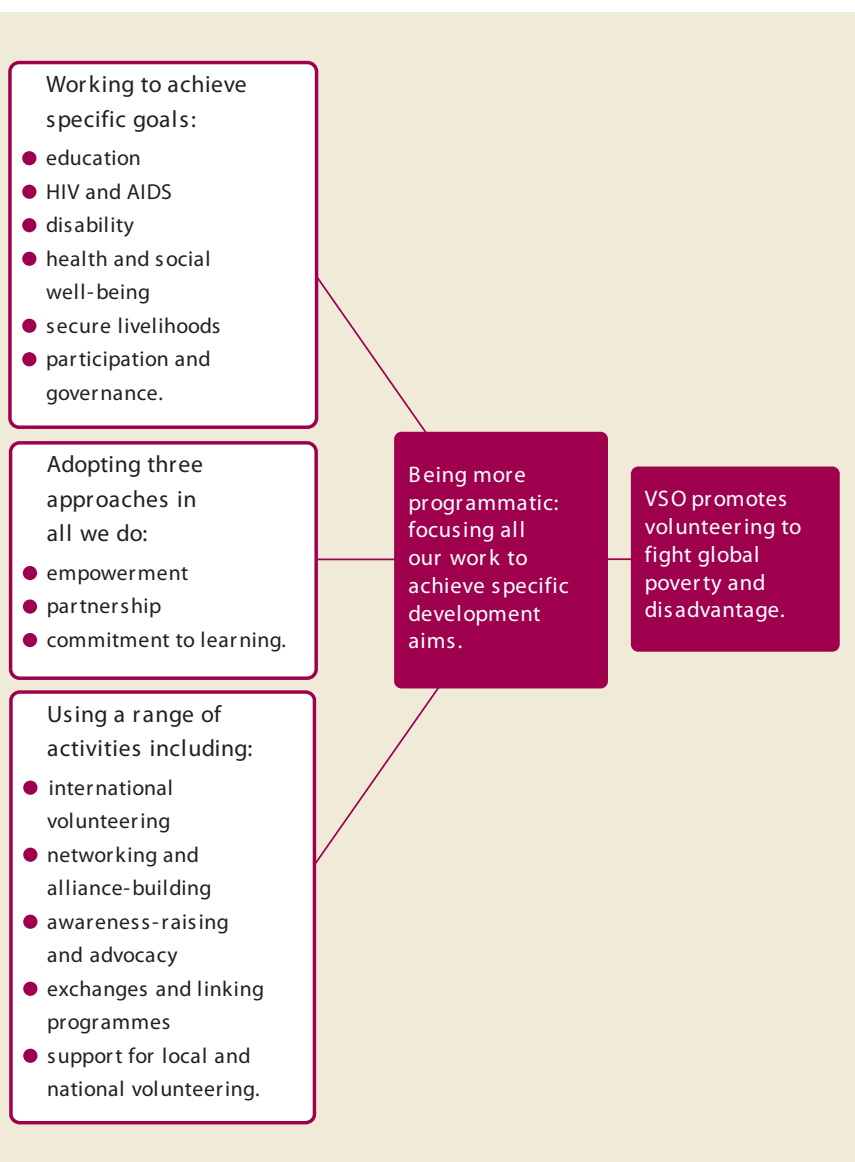
'Skills for Working in Development' (five days) and 'Skills for Working in Health' (two days) could be counted as vocational learning, and would have a positive impact on future employment in the health sector. Facilitation skills are practised in various scenarios, and teams conduct root cause analysis, design review cycles and practise negotiation skills in role play.

USE OF REAL CASE STUDIES

The scenarios utilised in team work are all real-life situations, which volunteers have reported when faced with difficult decisions (eg sufficient training, lack of resources, protective clothing and expiry dates). Apart from raising awareness of potential constraints and ethical dilemmas in the posting, the skills courses are highly constructive.

Facilitation exercises cover appropriate

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Voluntary Service Overseas teaches its volunteers to adopt three approaches to all they do.

forms of consultation, participation and joint ownership. The main achievement of the 'Skills in Development' course is to provide examples of how to consult and how to implement meaningful review cycles. Several participants stated that they wished they had been on this course years ago, as it would have proved useful to the post they were just about to leave.

EVALUATION OF STRUCTURED LEARNING RESOURCES

Structured resources are the courses, self-study packs and eTools. All conclude with an assessment of the resource, which is returned to VSO. Each course day finishes with a short reflective session. At the end of the course, participants complete assessment sheets on which they are asked for feedback on the trainers and on the course content.

Separately, volunteers fill in a learning summary for the logbook. The generic learning and development log has a portfolio

design. As with the IBMS CPD portfolio, the VSO log contains proformas to record self-briefing material, useful contacts, web resources, reflective notes, points to remember, strategic goals and actions to take.

The log is used extensively during the preparation phase and volunteers are advised to take the folder with them for in-country training overseas during their placement and at the regular volunteer conferences and workshops. As one of the trainers explained: "It is a flexible folder, it weighs less than a pound and it will fit in your backpack". ■

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