

Bill – retired University lecturer & Head of Department – education volunteer in South Africa and then in The Gambia



I spent the last 6 years of my education career (modern languages) as head of department, and when I took early retirement from the University a couple of years ago, I intended to spend time in travelling and playing golf ... but I wanted more than that. I planned to make some continuing contribution to education on a voluntary basis, helping young people around the world to develop their potential.

During my working years, I'd done far more than teach, of course – I'd managed a large and complex department, built professional development programmes, and established activities to help staff to develop their potential too.

My first overseas volunteer experience with *people and places* was in a South African township working with the Principal of a High School which had been identified as 'failing' according to the recently introduced national quality assurance system. The school had no understanding of quality assurance systems and little idea how to respond.

I worked as a management consultant and mentor to the Principal and was able to provide help and guidance on a wide range of issues including school discipline (pupil and teacher), team building, assessment, health and security. I worked with the Principal to help him to analyse and redistribute workloads within his school and address human resources and budget issues. I worked with senior members of his staff to try to address language issues, which were at the root of many of the school's failings. I also devised and implemented a computerised system to enable the school to produce termly and annual academic progress reports for all pupils. My initial stay lasted two months and the school invited me to return, which I did the next year, when I was able to follow up on some of the policy and staffing-related issues.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in South Africa. It was a challenge initially to identify the role I could play in the school, but I found many of my skills adapted easily to the new environment, and working with teachers and pupils in the school was immensely enjoyable and satisfying. The school continues to face many challenges, but they now have systems in place to help them deliver a curriculum in English when this is not the first language of either teachers or pupils.

I lived with a family in the township and particularly enjoyed the opportunities this provided to meet local people. I also spent several weeks touring South Africa and learned a lot about the history and politics of the country.

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When I'd been back home for a while, I started talking with *people and places* about the next possibility for me to contribute – and this time, we agreed on The Gambia as the destination where my skills and experience were needed in working with the Principal of ITTOG, the Institute of Travel & Tourism of the Gambia.

After a few months of correspondence to & fro with Kate at *people and places*, dealing with all the admin and planning of my placement, we had a fairly detailed idea of what my work would involve (although I also knew that my own 'flexibility & adaptability' would be high on the list of needs!) My preparation also included meetings with an FE college in the UK which subsidises and supports ITTOG. Then Kate put me in touch with the local team and we sorted out the final details of my accommodation and general work schedule – I was off to Africa again!

On arrival, I was greeted with real warmth, and it was obvious yet again that the local project management team were not only professional and capable, but would also give me all the support and help needed to complete my placement effectively. Adama, Lisong and Tejan are all wonderful people.

I wrote to *people and places* at the end of my first week: *"Work is also going very well, although the first week was a bit slow (probably inevitably) as we discussed what we could do, although I did go through Tejan's finances with him and sat in on some classes and gave some feedback to the teachers. Tejan's IT skills are very limited but as I share an office with him, I can coach him on various problems as he comes across them. By the end of the week, Tejan and I had identified and agreed a particular area where I could 'get stuck in' – ITTOG proposes to offer short courses to industry practitioners in a number of areas, some of which they have good expertise in (customer care, bar management etc) but they also want some higher level courses in entrepreneurship and business management. The courses are intended to improve business skills of local people, especially women. So my job is to design the curriculum and then develop appropriate learning materials. This is challenging but enormously enjoyable.*

"On Friday, we're going on an extended trip to Jufure. This will be my first experience of the real Gambia and an opportunity to appreciate local customs, food, life in general, but we're also taking part in a brainstorming group to try to tackle the problem of children begging from tourists in the village, so getting involved with the local community will be a great experience.

"I'll let you know how I get on, but so far so good (indeed, so far, brilliant!)"

I'd initially planned on a 4-week placement, but was getting on so well, that I decided to extend my stay to 6 weeks – so much to do! It's a good thing that I'd approached this placement with 'flexibility & adaptability' – I wasn't going to be doing exactly what I'd thought, but as my role had developed, it was clear that we had attainable targets.

This from my final report to *people and places*: *"Lots of opportunities were provided to meet other professionals (in tourism and in education) to develop and exchange ideas. I developed a full range of short course materials in business management and provided a range of tasks with a local flavour which I left with Tejan at ITTOG and also with people and places.*

Further volunteers will need to continue with staff development, classroom management, course assessment etc – and this will need to be done in close collaboration with their partner FE College in the UK."

And who knows – I may well return ...