

PROJECT REPORT

July 2013

Introduction

Over the academic year 2012/13, a team of around 30 Imperial College students fundraised a total of over £7,400. This was sourced from a range of events and organisations, including charitable trusts, Nepal themed parties and personal sponsorship. At the beginning of the year, it was decided to direct our fundraising and volunteering efforts towards the Maya Universe Academy (MUA). All of the money raised was spent exclusively on the materials required to build three new classrooms.

The Maya Universe Academy

The MUA seeks to address the chronic shortage of affordable, quality education in rural Nepal. With many families unable to afford to send their children to private schools, or in places too rural to make a private school 'economically viable', state schools are the only option. However, the level of educational attainment in state schools is, largely, quite poor.



MUA STUDENTS AT WORK

Instead of charging for tuition, the MUA require two days of labour from the parents in exchange for teaching their children. The parents help with maintenance of the school and partake in activities that raise money to support it. For example, the school owns corn fields and land for animal rearing so parents tend the fields or care for the livestock. MUA now have three schools operating under this model. Whilst we were with them, MUA were beginning a new venture, collaborating with a social enterprise in South Korea. Parents would create artisanal products, such as

Nepalese jewellery which would be retailed in South Korea for a significant margin. All of this entrepreneurial activity draws on the experience and knowledge of the villagers and strives to establish a new model for education in Nepal, where the power of the community is used to empower its youngest members.

Project Nepal - July 2013

Living in Tanahun

After convening on Kathmandu, the 18 members of Project Nepal's overseas volunteering team wound their way through the Himalayan foothills to the site of MUA's Central school, in Tanahun district. All of us were taken aback by the charm of the main school building, where we would spend the next 3 weeks eating, relaxing and playing with the kids.



DANCE DEMONSTRATION IN FRONT OF MAIN BUILDING

For the duration of the project, the team were split into groups and housed in the surrounding village, giving each of us an insight into their rural way of life. Not many of us had ever had the chance to be woken by the bleating of goats or the call of cockerels, and, even for a team of students, the sight of a forested valley teeming with fog was a worthy reward for rising with the sun at 5am. The adjustment was not always easy, with the language barrier, monsoon rains and illness conspiring to produce some memorable feats of self motivation. However, even those that struggled the most with the lifestyle of the village will reflect on the generosity and warmth of its inhabitants.

The Volunteering

Upon arrival at the school, the team were taught how to build classrooms Nepali style within about 20 minutes. It was surprisingly simple in principle although it certainly did not prove to be in practice. We were to build three classrooms of various sizes but all with a distinctive hexagonal shape. Sites had been selected near the main building.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Most of the trees had been sawn down to stumps, but their roots remained, ensnared on the inclined banks of forest ground that we were to level.

Our first task was to clear the floor down to mud, before displacing enough mud to create a level, stable platform for the foundations to be based on. With inclines of up to 20° and a number of

boulders and tree roots to dispatch, this work took several days. We would attack the ground with pick axes and ploughs to break up the cloying, monsoon sodden mud before shovelling it down to build up the low side of the bank on which our classroom would sit. It would then be raked, stamped and cajoled into place to form a flat circle with a diameter of roughly 20 feet. Although frustrating at times, the regular monsoon rains would at least form puddles on the lowest points of our patch, indicating where more mud was required.



A FIENDISH HEXAGONAL JIGSAW

We next dug a hexagonal trench across the space, 1.5 feet wide and 1 foot deep. This was tightly filled with rocks, such that they would not move against each other. We then filled the hexagon that the trenches formed with a layer of rocks of a precise height, using a hosepipe as a spirit guide to aid us. It was like constructing a jigsaw that had been left out in the rain. Fortunately, there were few problems that enthusiastic use of a sledgehammer could not solve.

Alas, there was little the sledgehammer could do to ease what was probably the biggest frustration that we faced during the project. Whilst the village bus, injurious to ride as it was, could bravely make the journey up to the top of the hill on which our village resides, the tractors carrying our raw materials often struggled. Of course, transportation infrastructure in Nepal is weak. It was down to the resourceful of local people, rather than local authorities, to remedy roads that regularly suffered during the monsoons. With heavy loads of sand, rocks and granite, encouraging a tractor up the hill often took hours of road maintenance, unloading and pushing. This sometimes lead to team members having to wait around for longer than we would have liked to progress with the project. It has to be said, though, that there are few experiences more satisfying or teambuilding than successfully pushing a tractor up a muddy hill.



ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT PLEASURES

Because of the tractor issues that we faced, resources were not always precisely where we needed them. This required some backbreaking work moving rocks in human chains, or hauling bags of cement through the forest.



FOUNDATION AND FRAME BOTH IN PLACE

The final stage of the foundations was filling the trenches and the hexagon with a layer of concrete. Rather than using a cement mixer, we were taught how to build a 'cement volcano', where water is incorporated into a pile of the cement mix from the inside, out. Meanwhile, some of the team members assisted in the production of the steel frames that would be used to support the classrooms. One of the classrooms reached the stage where the frame

could be erected, and the bottom rung of it surrounded by breezeblocks, to form the heart of the walls. They will then be finished off with aluminium walls, tin roofs and windows.

Our work rate impressed the Nepalis that oversaw the project, offering advice and support as we carried out the project. We left the classrooms in a more complete state than expected, and they will be finished off by the MUA's handiwork staff and parent supporters.

The Children

Without being surrounded by the students of the MUA, the experience would not have been as memorable as it was. On school days, we would join in with the morning assembly that involved games, arts recitals and a chorus of some of the schools anthems. Rarely has Bob Marley's *Three Little Birds* been so delightful as when the kids broke out into it on our first day there. The school has taken in some children as borders. Some of them are orphans and some of them just cannot be



TAKING THE STUDENTS TO BANDIPUR

supported by their family, or live too far from the school to make the journey every day.

One of the weekends, we took a group of the oldest borders to see some of Nepal's most famous sites. This included a cablecar ride up to the important temple of Manakamana, a visit to the historic city of Gorkha and a stay in the glorious Newari village of Bandipur, where we caught our first proper sight of the snow-capped Himalayan range.

We provided a range of new materials for the school, ranging from stationary, to sport equipment to a play parachute. Some of the volunteers also taught the children activities such as cat's cradle and friendship bracelets.

Spending Breakdown

The majority of the spending went on the structural components and furniture for the three classrooms. Small amounts also went on the raw materials used for the foundations, skilled labour and tools. The following spending summary, below, was converted from Nepalese Rupees at an exchange rate of 158NR to £1. The detailed bill produced by Maya Universe Academy is also attached.

Item	Spend
Raw Materials	£805
Tools	£164
Walls & Roofs	£1,547
Bookshelves	£1,215
Windows & Doors	£3,049
Skilled Labour	£475
Total	£7,255

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF SPENDING

Outlook for 2014

Following the enjoyment and success of this year's project, we have decided to continue working with and support the MUA. Demand for school places is still outstripping supply so there remains significant room and need for further expansion. By



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developing a long term partnership with MUA, we hope that can help to advance their project and provide advice from our experiences in the British and other educational systems.

The goal of the MUA is to become completely self-sustaining once all of their revenue streams are fully established. They will then not have to rely on the support of overseas groups like our own. We strive to bring the MUA project to the point where it no longer needs our support. In the meantime, however, the funds that overseas visitors and volunteers bring are still necessary.

Imperial's Project Nepal Society has already started fundraising again. For next year, we have the option of supporting one or more of the schools in the MUA family and carrying out more formal teaching work.