I applied to a volunteering programme called ICS with VSO from June 17th to September 1st, 2019. In order to be accepted I had to fundraise 800 GBP for the VSO project that goes towards all the resources for the projects they do and other costs. The money from the expedition bursary helped me very much as I didn’t have much time to fundraise due to exam seasons. I arrived in Dar es salaam excited to be in another culture, country and even continent. I had a week induction to the culture, the living arrangements and the programme as well as meeting the people who I would be working with. We got along very well and were already bonding through the team building activities that we did together as well as the training.

The project is based on increasing children participation in learning in primary schools (ICLP) and we were briefed about the schools each team would go into, what we would do and where would live. So, from the capital we went to Bukoba where we had this placement induction and then during this, the UK volunteers were paired with Tanzanian volunteer counterparts.

After Bukoba we went to the rural communities, I went to a town called Kemondo with 8 others and the rest went to a village called Muruku, both a fair commute from the town centre. When we started the school placement with my team, it was fair to say that I was very nervous because of the language barriers and cultural differences that I had not only with the children but also with the teachers. I felt completely comfortable to confide in any social issues I had with my Tanzanian counterparts in my team regarding the community members, so I quickly came over this barrier with their help. I didn’t need to feel apprehensive at all, the children loved us and were very excited to see us. They played with us and taught us some of their games and some of them who spoke English always helped us. They were so happy to see us all the time and this in turn made me eager to teach them everything I could and try and bond with them over the eight weeks of placement.

When I first met my host family, I was very shy and reserved because I didn’t want to accidently break any cultural customs or traditions, so I just observed how my counterpart behaved and did my best to follow. At first speaking to them was very difficult and every conversation was through my counterpart. However they were very understanding of my situation and tried to speak to me in English and in Swahili very slowly.
The work we did at the school included making teaching aids; posters of pictures from the syllabus books so that the whole class can see it as they often shared one book between a class of 30 to 50 students and teaching extracurricular clubs every week. While the teachers taught the core subjects like maths and English, our teams would lead the club sessions; girls, child rights, sports and environment club. We would plan topics to teach them every week whilst trying to make them engaging for young children as it was often be difficult to hold the attention of 50 young children. We would use interactive activities like roleplay or group work and creative posters to introduce different and exciting ways for children to learn instead of listening to a teacher and writing things down all the time.

After the first month of learning how to teach and communicate in another language I got very used to my environment and soon I was speaking Swahili almost fluently! Our host homes loved us, and we even visited each other’s homes and their family. Everyone was having fun in their placement, but people were still adjusting to the food, climate and waters. Thankfully everyone got over the illnesses, but we were really worried about each other as this was mostly our first encounter with typhoid and parasitic infestations.

Every week we were continuously doing team work to complete many different activities and submit deadlines. This was a very intense project that I learnt so many skills in such a short amount of time. The transferable skills I learnt here includes how to utilise people in your team, communicating efficiently, giving and taking on constructive criticism and conflict resolution especially. Teams will always have problem but learning how to adapt to the situation and being flexible in your environment as a team will help you very much to overcome problems. It was easy to forget the goals we set out to do but motivating and encouraging others was also important in helping us to achieve our aims. These skills will definitely be used when I do project work at University.

By the end of this project we had, as a team organised three community outreach events with even some regional recognition and exceeded out targets for making good quality teaching aids. We were feeling very proud of ourselves and each other and we really felt like a family by the end of this trip. The most difficult part was saying goodbye to our host homes and most definitely the people we called brother and sister for 3 months. There were definitely a few tears and mine were most of them!