



Willing VOLUNTEERS

Busy student **Lindsey Hall** admires the spirit of volunteering that is alive and well at LSE.

I am a student, with exams to study for, papers to write and people to interview. As I rush headlong down the Strand to meet one such interviewee, volunteering is the last thing on my mind.

Livia Ottisova, on the other hand, is calm and collected when I meet her, quietly sipping her coffee. She has recently been appointed coordinator of LSE's Volunteer Centre, taking over from Renata Albuquerque who had been steering it since 2005. Mobilising LSE's army of would-be student volunteers is no small feat, but with her passion for sharing LSE's energy and knowledge with the London community, a background that includes eight years of volunteering experience both home

and abroad, a continuing engagement with the humanitarian organisation Médecins du Monde and a recently completed degree in Health, Community and Development, Livia is up for the challenge.

The goal of the Volunteer Centre is to facilitate volunteering, she explains, turning students' eagerness to volunteer into reality by putting them in contact with existing projects around London. 'Students here are so committed to volunteering. My main goal is to make it easier.'

As a former LSE master's student, Livia is realistic about students' hectic lives. 'Projects need to fit into their schedules.' Nonetheless, she says the feedback the Volunteer Centre receives about them is consistently excellent. 'I'm always amazed

at their time management; they seem to do it all. School, work, and then something extra.' But surely with exams to study for and a dissertation to write, there's just no time?

In fact, even the most swamped student can break free from the Library and volunteer for a one-day project, Livia emphasises. She is actively seeking to create more one-off volunteer projects, as well as 'virtual' volunteering opportunities that can be done in students' own time. 'Once a person volunteers once and sees how easy and rewarding it is, that person is much more likely to volunteer again,' she reasons.

LSE volunteers come from a range of departments, from Social Policy and Law to Accounting,

behind to skateboard, play basketball and generally let loose with kids aged five to 11.

The one day a week participation meant volunteering didn't interfere with her studies. On the contrary, the experience went hand in hand with Katja's degree specialising in children's rights and protection. 'I wanted to volunteer with children in London, and preferably refugee children, as I planned to write my dissertation on child poverty in London, so I had both a research and a practical interest in the organisation,' she explained.

The experience was such a positive one that Katja immediately leapt into a new project after

graduating in 2008. She went on to volunteer with AfriKids, a children's rights organisation that works with communities in Ghana, while looking for a full-time job. 'Every opportunity of gaining practical experience will enhance your chances when you look for a job.'



ANDREANNA SEYMORE/GETTY IMAGES

International Relations and Economics. There are many more female volunteers than males and more graduate students than undergraduate ones. Livia tells me that the Volunteer Centre offers valuable opportunities for LSE's majority international student population to explore new parts of London and get involved with communities they wouldn't otherwise meet. For example, Street League is a project which gives student volunteers the chance to coach football teams made up of homeless men. The theory, she explains, is that providing these men with a sense of structure and teamwork will prepare them for the job market and encourage them to engage with society; it also gives volunteers valuable leadership experience.

Volunteering work can also bring students right up against complex issues. One such project is called Until the Violence Stops (UTVS). Based on the Eve Ensler drama *Vagina Monologues*, UTVS is an international network which pairs volunteers with children from communities marked by violence. Together, they use art and theatre to cope with violence in the children's lives. While these projects don't have obvious career benefits, the skills learned – for example leadership, teamwork and creative problem solving – are highly transferable. 'In terms of volunteering, you always get as much as you give,' Livia affirms. And while volunteering can be great for your CV, it is also highly rewarding on a personal level. 'Being part of the community and making a tangible contribution to issues you care about can be really satisfying – it just enriches the whole student experience.'

For those students truly devoted to building their CVs, the Volunteer Centre has a number of resources that help students translate the skills and experiences they gained through volunteering into language understood by employers. The Centre also recently developed an accreditation programme called Learn, Serve and Enjoy, which helps students reflect on their volunteering in a way that allows them to identify what they have gained and achieved. Student volunteers make a diary of their experiences, which they share periodically at meetings with Livia and their supervisors in the volunteer organisation. At the end of the year, students give a presentation about their experience and receive an LSE certificate.

Student volunteers often want to work for big, well-known organisations, which Livia admits can sometimes be a discouraging experience. The red tape of background checks can take several months to unravel, and once they are accepted, students may not be given much responsibility. Instead, Livia recommends students consider taking part in smaller scale, more straightforward volunteering opportunities, which can lead to the kind of meaningful relationships students wouldn't get with huge, impersonal organisations. Thanks both to Livia's efforts and those of her predecessors, the Volunteer Centre database currently holds about 200 organisations, ranging from micro-local to large, international ones. The UK office of Médecins du Monde, for example, has integrated

LSE students into its administration, community service and research.

Livia is particularly eager to develop relationships between student research and volunteer organisations. The Refugee Children Project (RCP) is one such successful example of an LSE student approaching an organisation with the Volunteer Centre's help; master's student Katja received funding to run focus groups with refugee parents for her dissertation, and the RCP benefited from her research. 'The Centre aims to facilitate such exciting, mutually beneficial projects, connecting theory to policy and action,' Livia says.

'Volunteering is a fantastic experience and we have lots of things on offer,' she says, genuinely excited about her job. Her enthusiasm has got me thinking that maybe I'm not so busy after all. ■



Lindsey Hall

has just completed her master's in Media and Communications at LSE and now works as an editorial assistant at the *Financial Times*.

For further information on student and staff volunteering, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/volunteerCentre

Yusuf Osman

Yusuf Osman graduated from LSE with an LLB in Law in 2007. At the time of our meeting he was sweating it out through the London summer and the heated job hunt. Yusuf first got volunteering experience in his home town of Leicester, and wanted to continue when he came to London. He heard about the Volunteer Centre at his Freshers' Fayre and when he saw the advertisement for Food Chain, he decided to try something new.

Food Chain is a volunteer organisation with six kitchens around London which cater to people who are HIV positive. Many Food Chain patients come from minority communities where HIV is a taboo, Yusuf explains. They cannot turn to their neighbourhoods for support, so Food Chain steps into the breach, helping families with HIV positive members who would otherwise have to cope alone. 'At least once a week, Food Chain gives these families the chance to have a nice meal together,' he says.

Every Sunday morning Yusuf and the kitchen team assemble to prepare the menu the lead cook has spent all week planning. The kitchen team works through the morning to make around 60 three course meals. They stop for a communal breakfast break around 10am, before the

navigators and drivers package and deliver the meals to homes throughout London.

'It's a nice social thing as well. When you're sitting around chopping a hundred carrots on a Sunday morning, you meet some interesting people,' Yusuf explains. These include volunteers of all ages and backgrounds – sometimes people studying for nutritionist degrees. What they all have in common is their commitment; Yusuf wakes up at half past six on Sunday mornings to make sure he's in by eight. 'I think there's a certain kind of person who volunteers,' he says. 'It might interfere with your social life, if you want to get drunk on a Saturday night. I see it as a social event in itself.' Then, looking slightly embarrassed he assures me: 'I don't see myself as doing a nice thing; it's purely selfish in a way.'

Volunteers complete a food hygiene course and get a certificate at the end. 'I learned to cook,' he grins, telling me that his speciality dish is bread and butter pudding.

The menus are not only traditional English, however. The team carefully caters to the needs of each family. This means kosher meat, halal meat, African dishes and roast dinners all get delivered on a Sunday afternoon. 'It's a lot of hard work,' he says, 'especially for the lead cook'. But he's quick to add, 'It's enjoyable. That's why people keep coming back'.



Above: Two new posters aimed at encouraging staff and students to volunteer

Opposite page, top: Livia Ottisova advises a client at Médecins du Monde's clinic in Bethnal Green, London