Where did you go?
Over the summer I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to go to Sri Lanka for a five week mental health placement with a company called Sri Lanka Volunteers (SLV).

Was your trip organised by a third party?
Yes, it was organised by an organisation called SLV (Sri Lanka Volunteers).

What did you do?
Whist in Sri Lanka I worked in a variety of different places ranging from mental health institutions to a drama and dance therapy group for people with special needs, we were also given the opportunity to teach English as a foreign language in schools. We attended various workshops, one on the trauma that Sri Lanka has experienced with events such as the civil war that only ended in 2009 and the tsunami in 2004, one on children's homes in Sri Lanka and another on working with people with special needs. As a psychology student I found that all the experiences I had in Sri Lanka helped me understand what I had learnt in lectures in a much more practical way. As Sri Lanka's health care system is not as advanced as the UK's NHS, you have to rely on simpler therapeutic activities, so this is why a lot of activities we ran were creative therapy based. We would make all manner of things that matched with the theme of our session, for instance one day our theme was colour so we made rainbows our of paper plates, feathers and pipe cleaners. After a huge amount of tiring work in the weekdays you have the weekends off to travel; Sri Lanka is a beautiful country and there is so much to see.

How long did you go for?
My placement was 5 weeks.

How did you find out about the opportunity?
I found out about SLV after seeing an advertisement for the company on Facebook, however, they have a website which has a huge amount of information on about all the different type of placements they run including Occupational Therapy, Performing arts and Teaching. They also run talks in universities about their placements, so if you check their page you can see if and when there is one in York.
How was it funded?
They run trips for differing amount of time, there are 4, 5, 8, 10, and 12 week placements. All of them cost a different amount of money, the five week placement I went on cost £1400, not including flights or expenses whilst in Sri Lanka. However, for that you get accommodation, breakfast and dinner Monday- Friday, workshops, field trips and your resident visa. You stay in a homestay with other volunteers where your host family (who become like a second mother and father to you), will cook for you. The weekends are where most of you money gets spent as you have to pay for travel to wherever you’re going to, food and hotel; however, nothing in Sri Lanka is that expensive and it is easy to do this cheaply.

What was the best thing about your trip?
My favourite part of the placement was the field trip where we shadowed one of Sri Lanka's very few psychiatrists, we went with him to the hospitals and sat in whilst he saw the patients. We saw patients with a wide variety of mental health disorders, and even went on some home visits to see patients that didn’t attend the clinic. Travelling at the weekends was fantastic, there are some amazing places to see, the culture is so rich, the people are all so friendly and willing to help, not to mention the food which is all so delicious!

Were there any negatives?
My advice is that this placement is hard work, the week days are exhausting and when you’re not on projects you’re often planning for another one. This is not 'voluntourism', this is a work placement; the work you do in Sri Lanka is valued by the clients and viewed as a job whilst you’re out there.

Did you learn anything new about yourself as a result of this trip?
The projects can be hard work, but they are so much fun as well, the more you put into a project the more you will get out of it. All the other volunteers and in country SLV staff are there to support you, it is the work of the amazing staff that makes the placement so great.

Any advice for other York students thinking of doing something similar?
I would definitely recommend the placement to any psychology student wishing to gain experience in mental health as every day is different and you’re constantly learning new things. Although the placement was tiring, I could not have asked for a better place to do it, Sri Lanka is a beautiful country with a rich culture and amazing food, and I would love to go back and see more of the country!