

# FEEDBACK FROM UGANDA 2024



When we return from Uganda, we are always asked what we do, which isn't always the easiest question to answer, but here is an attempt! Rather than spending three weeks working on some practical project, a lot of our work is community and relationship based. Although the trip is three weeks in July, the project begins nearly two years earlier - this time we began in September 2022. With a core of students willing to commit to the project, we began planning our fundraising schedule with different ideas to raise money for the numerous communities we support.

Over the next two academic years, this included hundreds of ice creams sold, many parish visits, a race night, a concert, and more, all coming together to raise over £20,000, some of which went to St. John's Hospice too. Thanks to the generosity of many people who donated items, we were also able to take many science resources, primary school resources, baby clothes, medical equipment, guitars, and even a drumkit! This meant a very lengthy check-in at Manchester Airport!



One of the fantastic things about the Uganda Project is that all of the money raised is able to be donated to the communities we support, and this is thanks to the Turing Scheme: funding from the UK Government that is used to help students become "global citizens" by immersing themselves in another culture and hence develop their soft skills (such as adaptability, time management, team-working, etc.). This has helped us fully or partially fund places on the trip for students from very low income families, as well as making sure all donations received to the project go directly to the communities we serve. Mrs. Lowe works incredibly hard to achieve this grant, so a big thank you goes to her for all her work!

So, our first stop when we land in Uganda is the Ulrika Guest House in Kisubi, which is always a welcome overnight rest after flying for approximately 14 hours! The house is run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix and they are always very welcoming and give us the best start to our time in Uganda!

After a good night's sleep in Kisubi, we made our way to St. Paul's Secondary School in Bukinda (pronounced "Boo-chin-da") - a seven hour drive from Kisubi. We made a stop at the equator on the way (see picture in the top left) and for lunch in Mbarara city. We were welcomed at St. Paul's by their marching band and other students who danced to the music all the way up their driveway - a sort of welcome that we would quickly become accustomed to!



We spent eight nights at St. Paul's and our time included both UK and Ugandan students delivering workshops on climate change, music, youth culture, biodiversity, and sport. This was a key part of the students developing their soft skills, as they had to plan and present these workshops. We also spent time participating in their lessons (pictured left), as well as interacting and bonding with the St. Paul's students through dancing, football, basketball (on the court resurfaced using donations from the Uganda Project), and chatting.

During these eight days, we visited some other schools too. We visited Giants Secondary School, which is across the road from St. Paul's. This is a private school, meaning that it doesn't receive government funding like St. Paul's does, so it was good for us to see the difference between their facilities and what lessons were like here compared to St. Paul's. They are currently levelling ground for a playing field, which we have donated £500 towards. We were also treated to some traditional dancing during an assembly and we also performed a "traditional" British dance - the Cha Cha Slide!



Another school we visited was the Home of Divine Mercy, which is a school for vulnerable girls that cannot attend mainstream school for a variety of reasons. It is run by nuns belonging to the Consolers of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who teach the girls vocational skills like hairdressing, sewing, knitting, and carpentry. We got to have a go at the sewing machines - although we were nowhere near as good as the girls were! It was amazing to see the joy the girls had and the deep appreciation they had for the school, despite the challenges they face in life. A lot of our students and staff found this school very inspiring and it no doubt had a profound impact on the way we view education too. Again, there was a lot of dancing and we all joined in with the traditional dancing, which was great fun!

The final school we visited during our time in Bukinda was St. Mary's Primary School in Shagasha. Some of our fundraising over this cycle of the Uganda Project has been donated to this school to fund the construction of a bore hole (pictured right), a solar lighting system, and bunk beds. It was amazing to see both of these in place at the school, as this was one of our hopes from our visit in 2022, so seeing how the school is progressing was very encouraging. We spent time leading activities with the students too: parachute games, kick-rounders, music, and crafts all went down a treat - the St. Mary's students loved them and leading the activities really helped our students develop their communication skills as the younger children spoke limited English, forcing our students to think and act outside the box.





Last but not least on the list of visits in Bukinda was the Kakatunda Health Centre. Here, we saw the fantastic work of a dedicated team of health professionals that serve the local community in such a valuable way, especially as the nearest hospital is approximately 30km away in Kabale and, with no ambulances, this is too far to walk! They are currently building a new maternity ward, to which the Uganda Project has donated £500 towards a new scanner, and they were just finishing the roof as we were visiting. The health centre was also very accommodating to our students who had an interest in health-related careers, allowing them the opportunity to spend a morning or afternoon shadowing and helping staff at the centre, gaining valuable experience and skills within their chosen field.

Our next stop on the trip was Rubuguri, a village in the south-west corner of Uganda, close to the borders of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. We stayed in Fr. Sunday's family compound during this visit and the group instantly felt at home as we spent time with his family. We visited three more schools, including St. Joseph's Secondary School, where we had time to interact with the students, run a chemistry workshop (Mrs. Lowe and some of our chemistry students), and see how the STEM Centre is coming along (see right), which the project has already donated over £3000 towards.



To see that the exterior was finished and work about to begin on the interior was great to see, and a sign of hope for the students and wider community - made possible by the generous donations to the Uganda Project. We also visited St. Peter's Primary School, where we lead the students in the same activity carousel as at St. Mary's in Shagasha. This helped our students with their soft skills as they were sometimes running sessions with up to 90 children who spoke very little English! Despite the organizational challenges, it was great fun working with the children and they all enjoyed it too! We repeated the activity carousel one final time at St. Kizito's Primary School (named after one of the Ugandan martyrs), and this was particularly special to see as our students were very tired at this point, but still worked incredibly hard to ensure the pupils at St. Kizito's had an enjoyable afternoon. A project we contributed to as a group included planting mango, avocado, Africana, and pawpaw trees in each of these schools as a means of providing shade for outdoor study, food to consume, and a greener space. We planted more of these trees around the village to kickstart the "Go Green Rubuguri" project, as Fr. Sunday has called it, with a further £1000 donated towards providing more trees for the area.

Our final stop in Rubuguri was the health centre which, like Kakatunda, was extremely welcoming of our students (only the ones pursuing health careers attended this time). It was very interesting to see how healthcare works in such a small, remote setting, compared to the slightly more connected Kakatunda Health Centre. Thanks to the donations given to the Uganda Project, we were able to donate an oxygen concentrator to the health centre, which was very gratefully received with joy throughout the village.

A new experience for many people on the team was attending Mass in Africa, which we did on both Sundays we were in Uganda, as well as some members going to weekday Mass in Bukinda. Many students enjoyed the lively nature of Mass, during which there was plenty of singing and even some dancing! It had an impact on our students, with many of them commenting in their feedback forms that they liked how it felt like faith was “celebrated” in Uganda, and how Mass was a big occasion in the community. This was the case on both Sundays; we had Mass with over 1,000 students plus staff from St. Paul’s in Bukinda, and with similar numbers in the village of Rubuguri.

After we attended Mass on the Sunday we were in Bukinda, we went for the first of our treat days - a trip to Lake Bunyonyi. This is a very large lake in the hills of the Kabale district and we took around 40 St. Paul’s students with us (as well as some staff) as many of them don’t get the opportunities for days out having come from very disadvantaged backgrounds. This was another great opportunity for the students and staff to bond and form the connections that keep the Uganda Project alive, as well as learning a bit about the natural and historical side of Lake Bunyonyi.



The second of our treat days (well, it was an overnight really!) was at the Mihingo Safari Lodge in the Lake Mburo National Park. This was a truly beautiful place and a magical experience for us all! We had the excitement of seeing baboons, giraffes, hippos, African fish eagles, kingfishers, Nile crocodiles, buffalo, water bucks, bush bucks, impalas, warthogs (a Pumba for any Lion King fans among you!), and more. This was complimented by the first warm water we had access to for a fortnight, so everyone was extremely grateful for that! The staff were so welcoming and the whole place had been built by hand using materials found in the surrounding area, making it very eco-friendly too. We were all very appreciative of the luxury we experienced at the lodge and made us reflect deeply on the uncomfortable nature of having such a privilege when so many others will never have the opportunity. It inspired us not to take anything for granted in our lives and to work all the more towards a just world.



The final chapter of our trip took place back in Kisubi, where we welcomed our good friend and deputy headteacher of Lolachat Seed Secondary School in the Nabilatuk district of Karamoja, Gyaviira Kakuru, as well as four of his students, to stay for two nights with us at the Ulrika Guest House. We all took part in a mini climate change conference, which involved a talk from Derrick Mugisha - national coordinator of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network Uganda, as well as workshops delivered by Derrick and Juliette Bone, who came as a volunteer having worked in environmental justice and currently works providing support to refugees and asylum seekers. We were also treated to a presentation by Gyaviira and one of his students, Patience,

about the challenges they face in the Karamoja region due to climate change and what they are doing to limit the effects of climate change and pollution - particularly single use plastics. This was fascinating and definitely inspired us seeing what they were doing with such little resources and money! The conference was enjoyed by all and certainly left us all wanting to do more in our communities to tackle the global ecological issues we face as a human family.

As Juliette works with refugees and asylum seekers, she, Mrs. Lowe and Mr. Cody led a group of students to visit the Multipurpose Hall in Kampala, which supports Catholic refugee communities in the city. We were welcomed by priests into Mazzoldi House and given a brief history of the centre, whilst outside the choir were practising songs for Mass, including a beautiful rendition of “Jesus Remember Me”. We then took part in presentations where the Congolese community presented a traditional welcome song and dance which our students joined in with. This was followed by a speech about the importance of the centre, introductions from our team and thank yous. Amid everything going on in the UK with regards to refugees and asylum seekers, it was interesting to see how the matter was handled in Uganda, a country with less resources than the UK, but still hosts more refugees than the UK (Uganda hosted 1,561,634 as of June 2023, whereas the UK only hosted 231,597 as of November 2022).



In conclusion, Uganda 2024 was a huge success, filling people from the UK and Uganda with a lot of hope for the future across the many projects we have supported over the past two years and beyond. To finish, here are some quotes from our students about the trip.

“I loved how involved the students were especially with the singing and dancing. I also noticed a lot of the students wearing a rosary around their neck. From my observation it has made me want to become closer to God and participate more in church.”

“This project has made me realise that I don’t need my phone to have fun as I’ve been able to speak to people I’ve never had conversations with. It was lovely to have a break from social media for a few weeks; it made me more self aware as I had the time to reflect on my life and how to change my way of thinking and stop taking things for granted.”

“The project has had such a big impact on my life as we have spent the last year preparing and fundraising so it was amazing to visit the places and people that the money and resources had gone to. It has been so interesting to learn about a new culture and build relationships with the people there. This experience has broadened my perspectives and encouraged me to educate myself further about other countries and cultures... I’m so grateful to have had this opportunity.”

This really is the last note, but a huge thank you has to go to everyone who has been involved in any way shape or form over the past two years to make Uganda 2024 the success it has been. We couldn't have done it without your generosity and support, whether that's been donating money, resources, time, or even a van to carry the luggage! On behalf of everyone on the UK team and everyone in the Ugandan communities we support, we cannot thank you enough and we want you to know what a huge difference you are making and continue to make in the lives of so many people. Thank you and God bless,

## **TEAM UGANDA 24**

