

Dis-comfort: how 14 Year 11s coped with life on the road in Nepal

ET Staff



Haileybury is one of Victoria's largest independent schools; 3600 students attend its three campuses in Brighton, Keysborough and Berwick, and there are 200 Chinese students at the new campus in Beijing [opened in 2013].

The school values an 'International Outlook' as part of a student's personal development and aims to build a sense of social justice with expeditions organised to destinations that take the participants well outside their comfort zone – as 14 Year 11 students who went on last year's 28-day World Challenge expedition to Nepal discovered.

World Challenge expeditions are different from the usual school trip in that they are student-led from the outset. They choose where to go to, fundraise as much as they can of the cost during the 12 months leading up to the departure, plan the itinerary and manage the group's activities day by day.

Two Haileybury staffers Mark Mathieson and Tess Kerekes, with Hannah Mayley and Chris Halsall from World Challenge accompanied the Nepal group.

Mathieson is the School's psychologist and is experienced in risk assessment from his time in the Australian military. He says: "The adults' role is to make sure that students are safe and to

I have noticed that people at home complain about really small things a lot and I am now a lot more conscious of that

step in if it's clearly too difficult or danger lurks, but not to lead – it's up to the group to make their own decisions."

Taking charge started at the airport when each of the students was handed \$1000 in cash and reminded that this had to last for the 28 days to pay for travel, food and accommodation, so the first group decision was to select a finance manager to monitor and manage the money.

"They soon learned that if they forgot to book somewhere to stay, or to buy food, they could end up cold and hungry," Mathieson says. "It's a strong motivation to get it right."

"It was interesting to see how the group dynamic changed. For the first few days they would approach the adults expecting to be told what to do next and when we asked them 'What do you think you should do?' were surprised and a bit annoyed '...but you're the teachers!' would come back; they soon learned to discuss and make their own decisions."

In common with all World Challenge expeditions, the 28 days in Nepal were split into

four phases: acclimatisation; project; trekking; and rest and relaxation.

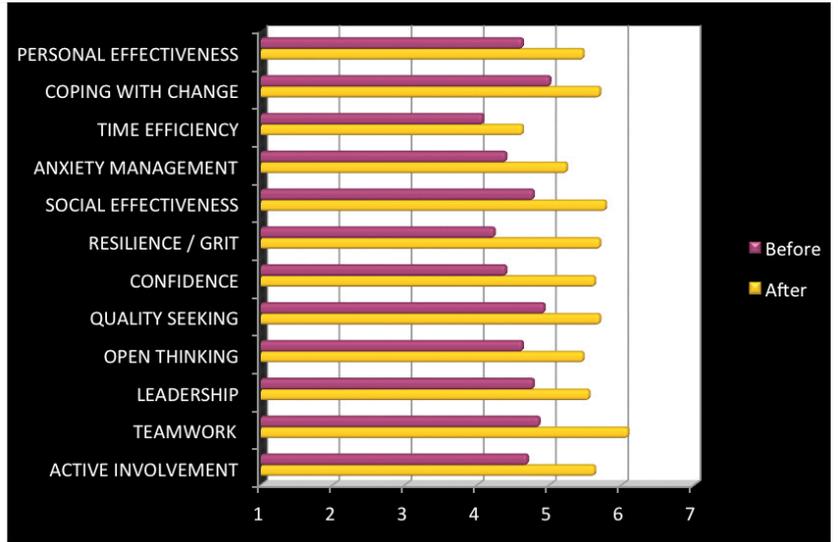
Acclimatisation was over four days in Kathmandu staying in a basic downtown hotel and exploring the city.

An eight-hour bus trip from Kathmandu to Pokhara was the prelude to five days working and living at The Nagajuna School, a primary boarding school located in the rice paddies on the outskirts of the city. Here the students ran classes and social and sporting activities, as well as helping in the ongoing construction of the school itself, a project that has been supported by the school's Jackson House for a number of years.

Mathieson says: "To see Nepalese kids so motivated that they get out of bed before dawn to study was a real eye-opener for our teenagers."

Moving on from the feel good days at the school saw the group undertake a tough 12-day trek in the Annapurna Range where they climbed to over 4130m and learned a lot about themselves and their fellow group members.

"It was interesting to watch how the individuals coped when pushed close to their level of discomfort. One boy who had been very unsure about being the team leader [the role was handed over from one day to the next] turned out to have real leadership qualities and



a very self-centred girl lacking in self confidence realised that she didn't need to be friends with her clique back at school to be comfortable with who she is."

Four days of R&R back in Kathmandu was a welcome break to rest, reflect and wind down before returning to Melbourne.

In place of a general report to parents

Mathieson surveyed the students using a qualitative survey to draw out what they had brought back in terms of Grit – capacity to find passions and develop perseverance in the face of difficulty / challenge. Two weeks after returning home the results were satisfyingly positive with average 14% improvements from pre- to post trip across 11 measurements (table).

With the objective of discovering how much of what they learned about themselves in Nepal has stuck, Mathieson is planning to survey the 14 students again as they start Year 12 and to follow up with a final survey in the middle of the year. It's still early days, he says, but the signs are good.

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