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The University of Life...

Making a difference during a gap year.

A briefing from Tearfund

Tearfund is one of the UK's leading relief and development charities, working in partnership with Christian agencies and churches around the world to tackle the causes and effects of poverty. Tearfund works with partners in over 80 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Central America, the UK and Ireland.

For further information on Tearfund's work visit www.tearfund.org.

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Executive summary

Universities and employers are extremely positive towards gap years, *as long as they are well planned and structured*. Nine in ten vice-chancellors in a recent survey think a structured year out benefits the personal development of undergraduates. The view is that students who have undertaken a gap year are more mature and disciplined, and therefore more likely to complete their course. Currently 13% of students drop out of university.

At the moment around one in twenty of those who take a gap year go on structured projects or placements overseas. This is surely set to change as young people realise the benefits that such schemes can offer. A voluntary scheme like Tearfund's Transform Programme can solve many of the worries young people and parents have about money and safety. A properly run, professional scheme will bring great benefits to the participants, in terms of personal development as well as their future careers.

Employers rate voluntary work experience among potential employees very highly. A survey of more than 200 top businesses showed that **three-quarters** of employers prefer applicants with voluntary work experience. By contrast a gap year in itself with no evidence of constructive activity is not particularly sought after. Another survey confirms this, finding that every one of the companies questioned said voluntary work gave gappers valuable confidence and leadership skills.

Those in our Tearfund survey who have taken part in the Transform scheme provide much evidence of transferable skills learnt while on the project. These attributes are:

- Teamwork. Respondents learn to work as a team.
- Broad outlook. Participants become more tolerant, flexible and adaptable and experience another culture.
- Leadership. Participants find out how to delegate and bring out the best in others.

Such schemes are a life-changing experience. Participants report that they have become less materialistic, less interested in consumer possessions and more aware of our comparative riches in the West. They are more aware of issues facing the developing world, and have a deeper understanding of poverty.

This is why Tearfund is calling for greater numbers of young people to take part in voluntary work overseas. The Government is trying to promote voluntary work in the UK with its "Millennium Volunteers" scheme for those aged 16-24 to get involved with local issues. Volunteering overseas can change your life, broaden your outlook and bring maturity. Those who have taken part are valued by employers and universities, and most important, they have grown in confidence, knowledge and leadership.

Introduction

More than 200,000 18-25 year olds will leave the country to explore the globe this year. Many older people decide to take time out from a career and head for new horizons. The gap year phenomenon is a growing trend that shows no sign of abating. But is it worthwhile? That depends on how you spend your time. You may spend the year backpacking in remote regions and acquiring a suntan. But another option is to join a structured project that helps transform the lives of local peoples of developing nations.

Gappers who do something beneficial rather than just play are highly sought after by employers and universities.

Competition for university and college places is more intense than ever before. The number of students who took up places for the academic year 2001-02 was the highest ever, and the number of applicants for 2002 has increased again. National initiatives to widen participation in higher education are clearly starting to bear fruit.

It is clear those employers and universities consider the gap year of immense value, if the time is used wisely. This report identifies the value of structured gap year schemes to the individual taking part, to the universities who gain better students and to employers who gain future employees who already have experience of managing teams and problem-solving. . At a time when corporate social responsibility is fast becoming a key issue for business, future employees with volunteering experience will help British companies to become more ethical.

A structured project or placement may provide the answer to the problems of safety and money which beset some gappers. In addition, voluntary work in developing countries can mean a variety of development work including education, building, working with children and healthcare. Work of real practical help can be accomplished, and participants come back with a deeper understanding and concern for justice and poor people the world over.

Transform is a scheme run by Tearfund, which this year is sending more than 270 people, ranging in age from 18 to 59, off to aid projects in Africa, Asia and South America. The participants are put into teams, and each team will spend four to six weeks on their project, preceded by an intensive 3 day orientation programme. Individuals can also volunteer for up to four months on many assignments.

The effects can be life-changing. This report draws on the experience of people who have taken part in *Transform* in previous years. Forty-nine of these individuals have completed a written questionnaire during May/June 2002 in which they describe in detail their experience and the effect it has had on them. The report also shows ways in which the outside world regards gap year activities, and in particular voluntary projects.

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“I learned about myself, learned about other people. I wasn’t an adult at 18. I was cocky and arrogant. After I came back I felt I’d turned into an adult.”

Tom Griffith, founder of gapyear.com

Gap year - how to make a difference

The context

A greater number of people than ever before are applying to universities and higher education colleges, in response to Government initiatives to widen participation. The number increased by 5% by 2001, and is set to rise again when the 2002 figures are published. Competition for good places is becoming more intense.

In the graduate job market, gap year experience can give you the edge; Tom Griffith, Chief executive of Gapyear.com feels that it helps to have experience of the world of work. *"If you compete for a job against graduates with the same qualifications as you, gap year work experience lets you say to employers: I've already worked with clients."*

Companies are now feeling pressure from three directions - from consumers, investors and the Government - to become more socially responsible. Future members of staff who have voluntary work experience are much sought after by businesses; one survey shows that three employers in five (60%) are more likely to promote and give pay rises to employees who have volunteering experience. Over two-thirds of companies in the survey (69%) see employee volunteering as a way of enhancing the community profile of their company. Participation in a structured gap year scheme shows evidence of a commitment to voluntary work at a key time in life, and is valued by employers.

Taking a year out before starting university is growing in popularity, with the number of people taking a deferred entry university place starting in 2002 up **15%** on 2001. His Royal Highness, Prince William famously deferred university for his gap year, and began it with a 10-week trip to Chile with Raleigh International.

Universities - a positive view

The universities are encouraging “Character-building” gap years. A survey of vice-chancellors found **90%** considered a “structured” year out benefited the personal development of undergraduates. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals warns that gap years should be put to good use if teenagers want to impress admissions tutors. A spokeswoman from the Committee commented:

“They prefer to see that gap years are used most productively - a learning experience that bears some resemblance to study.”

A worrying 13% of students leave their first university prematurely. Gap year experience can help counteract this, according to the Committee spokeswoman, as:

“The confidence and maturity that can result from gap years can help students’ clarity and motivation while at university.”

The Chief Executive of the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Tony Higgins, is in favour of gap years - with a proviso:

“Students who take a well-planned structured year out are more likely to be satisfied with, and complete, their chosen course. Students who take a gap year are often more mature, responsible and disciplined.”

The message from the universities is that gap years are a good thing, but they can be much more than simply cavorting round the globe on a very long holiday. The gap year can provide knowledge of another culture and (possibly) language, maturity, confidence, a broad mind, tolerance, respect, possible experience of work and an awareness of issues in other parts of the world. Such qualities help students to complete their university course, motivate other students and provide a helping hand into the world of work.

Certainly, 80% of those surveyed by Tearfund who have taken part in Transform have completed their university course, with another 14% still doing so. No-one has failed to complete a course. The range of occupations taken up by the Tearfund volunteers spans the professions, including teachers, trainee solicitors, doctors, nurses and physiotherapists. Among other jobs are vet, occupational therapist, civil servant and IT consultant.

Taking part in a well-structured project such as Transform can give the maturity to decide what a person really wants to do with their life in terms of your career and direction.

Voluntary work in gap year

Voluntary work is currently not a particularly popular option among young people considering a gap year. Yet volunteering can offer:

- Job satisfaction
- A chance to contribute to issues you care about
- An opportunity to get to know new people and places.

The number of organisations offering opportunities at home and overseas has grown rapidly over the last decade, and you can volunteer for a few weeks or several months, abroad or in the UK.

A recent survey of further and higher education students for community volunteering charity CSV found that just under a third said they would seek work abroad, and only **one in twenty** would consider volunteering overseas. A mere 2% would consider voluntary work in the UK.

Bearing this out is a finding from Gapyear.com which states that only **5%** of those taking a year off go on structured projects or placements. Gap year volunteering is thought of as less glamorous than backpacking in remote areas, but it can help solve some of the issues of safety which are a concern to young travellers and their parents.

It may be that financial considerations deter young people from voluntary work overseas. They have to raise their own funds, and are usually not paid for their efforts. With students now typically graduating around £10,000 in debt, an increasing number of gap year students could be looking for rewards of a financial kind. One research body - the Social Market Foundation - has recommended that students who do community work during their gap year should be paid to help them fund their time at university. Researchers recommend that students should receive between £6,000 and £10,000 for the year's work.

The level of volunteering among young people has dropped in recent years, and this scheme could ensure a steady flow of volunteers. This is one issue the Government is keen to tackle with its Millennium Volunteers initiative. This scheme enables young people aged 16 to 24 to get involved with local issues they care about, and at the same time gain experience, confidence and skills.

A majority of young people in the Gapyear.com survey who have taken a year off believe that the experience changed their lives, broadened their outlook and gave them confidence and maturity. This is undeniably true, yet evidence from employers shows that **voluntary work** rather than a gap year is one of the most sought after attributes in potential employees. A survey of more than 200 top businesses showed that **three-quarters** of employers prefer applicants with voluntary work experience, and over half (58%) thought this experience was actually more valuable than that gained in paid employment. Over nine in ten employers felt that volunteering added to the skills of their workforce.

Another survey confirms this, finding that every one of the top 89 companies questioned by the Association of Graduate Recruiters said voluntary work gave gappers valuable confidence and leadership skills. A “constructive” gap year can provide young people with “soft skills” - such as initiative, decision-making and problem-solving - which other university graduates lack. Commenting on the survey, Carl Gilleard, Chief Executive of AGR said, “*Competition for jobs means employers increasingly looked at CVs for clues to people who were interesting and well-rounded, and with experience of leadership and teamwork in the real world.*”

This is why Tearfund believes greater numbers of young people should opt for volunteering overseas. The skills which result from voluntary work, such as problem solving, leadership and relationship building, are very much in demand by employers. This is why gappers who do something beneficial with their time, both for themselves and for others, are highly sought after.

A life-changing experience

A sizeable proportion of those who had taken part in Transform (30%) commented that joining Transform affected their career choice. Many others had a vocation or had “always wanted to be” what they chose to become. However, others found that Transform provided the guidance they needed at a crucial time.

Some felt that the Transform experience confirmed what they had always thought they wanted, by providing some experience. For example, one person who had applied for a medical degree felt inspired to complete it after working in Thailand on a project helping people with HIV/AIDS.

“I became more determined to pursue a career (medicine) that I had in the past become disillusioned with.” Ellie, Cheshire, Transform in 1999.

Several people felt Transform opened their eyes to the reality of poverty and injustice in many developing countries. This confirmed their wish to become solicitors or work in government, trying to alleviate some of the unjust situations.

“I wanted to work in a profession where I could have an impact on creating a more just society. During my time in developing countries I noticed how the deprivation was aggravated by corrupt governments.” Helen, London, Transform in 1999

Others felt that their experience of teaching on a Transform team strengthened their wish to become a teacher. Some wanted to work overseas again. The trip clarified their expectations and hopes for the future, sometimes giving a fresh perspective.

Participants were asked to explain the ways in which Transform has helped them in their life and ambitions. The main way in which Transform has made a difference is in opening participants’ eyes to another culture and way of life. As many comment, the experience has helped them discover other cultures and to see the real world.

Another important way in which taking part in Transform has made a difference is that it has channelled people's career ambitions into working overseas, often in developing countries and with disadvantaged people.

"It has enabled my international outlook to be widened and to therefore consider overseas work." Stephen, Wiltshire, Transform 2001

People comment that the experience of Transform has altered their perspective on the Western world. They have realised how people in other parts of the world have far less than we have, in our materialistic society. It has the effect of changing priorities and making participants more grateful for everything we have.

"It has made me aware of how people with little share what they have and are happy without the so-called necessities we take for granted here." Fiona, Devon, Transform 2001

TEAMWORK AND STRENGTH

The following case study tells the story of Elizabeth from Southampton, who travelled out to Kenya with Transform in 1999.

Elizabeth had done youth work before, but had no experience of developing countries before she went to Nairobi, Kenya to work with a Transform team there. She worked building foundations for a water container, which involved cement mixing, laying paving slabs and so on, as well as working creatively to upgrade a library building into a conference centre. She comments: *"It was an amazing experience of working in a team, helping others, learning new skills and learning about a different culture. All these things have affected how I live and work. It also gave me a wealth of knowledge about Kenya which is being passed on to my class!"* Elizabeth is now a primary school teacher.

She well remembers her experiences visiting the slums of Nairobi, where people were very touched that visitors to their country wanted to spend time with them and even visit their local church. Elizabeth feels that although the team made an impact on the building and conference centre, the *biggest impact* was on the lives of those in the team. All had grown in strength and knowledge.

Gap years are not exclusively for students or those who have just completed their university studies, but it seems that this is *predominantly* the case. At no other time in your life does there seem to exist such a window of opportunity and time. Among those people who have taken part in the Transform scheme, the vast majority (94%) have begun or completed a university course. Only one person in twenty who took part has not been a student.

It may also happen that older people take a break from an established career. One such person is Susan from Birmingham, who set off at the age of 56 with a Transform team to work in Zambia in Luanshya Prison Clinic. When asked what difference she felt the project made to the local community Susan answered:

"Wives, husbands and children felt that their loved ones in prison were not forgotten. Local people were glad to know us and to work with us."

Commenting on the effect of the experience on herself and the other volunteers Susan said:

"Volunteers gave money and time to make real friendships..."

The types of projects undertaken with Transform include working with street children in India and Brazil, repairing houses in Rwanda, health education in Mexico and a sports programme in Kenya. Participants have worked at a boys home in Beirut, teaching and

taking part in summer activities with the children there. Some have worked on special lawyers' teams working with Tearfund partners in Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda. A nurses' team has visited Ghana.

The benefits of Transform

Sara from Yateley, Hampshire is now an accountant in the overseas aid sector. She went on two projects with Transform in 1997 and 1999.

RESILIENCE AGAINST THE ODDS

Following her first experience with Transform travelling to Kenya in 1997, Sara was asked to be a team leader on the second trip she made to Kenya in 1999. Among the highs she counted in the project were watching team members grow and think about poverty issues, and the incredible team resilience in the face of tough accommodation and a distinct lack of water. Sara felt she learned new skills, including greater management awareness, and gained knowledge, in the form of a new culture, as well as higher self-awareness. She saw progress in her team, with greater confidence.

Sara commented: *"It (Transform) has helped me to gain credible experience in another country. It has given me proven management skills, as the leader, to state on my CV."*

The previous example shows that people who take part in Transform learn transferable skills like leadership. Another respondent stated that Transform had provided a fantastic experience and talking point, and was good on his CV as an example of initiative. Clearly, Transform can provide some of the qualities which future employers would like to see.

Participants were asked to say what they think they gained in terms of knowledge, skills or experience through going on a Transform project. The main aspects gained were:

- **Teamwork.** Respondents commented that they learned how to work as a team and co-operate together. They learned how to get on with each other and get the best out of everybody. All these attributes are much prized in the workforce, as the survey of employers cited earlier shows.
- **Broadening of outlook.** Participants said they realised how many people in the world live. They learned flexibility, adaptability and communication skills.
"Experience of relating to the people we met and adapting to new situations."
- **Knowledge of another culture.** Those who went on the schemes found out first hand about a different culture and way of life. They felt they learned a lot about how different people live.
- **Leadership.** Participants learned how to delegate and bring out the best in others.

Respondents commented that they now had a different world perspective and had a unique insight into life in a developing country.

Personally speaking, participants had found many aspects of the scheme satisfying. The main source of satisfaction was meeting local people, working alongside them and learning a lot from them.

"Meeting the local people running the projects is superb - their enthusiasm and commitment."

"Getting alongside people and while helping them also learning a lot from them at the same time."

In particular, many who worked with children enjoyed the chance to interact with children, and try to improve their quality of life.

"The kids having a good time made it worthwhile. Giving them one to one attention because they don't get a lot of that."

In addition, many participants commented that they enjoyed seeing how much support the local community gave the volunteers and how they appreciated their help.

"We were made to feel so welcome."

A new perspective

The Transform project has caused many participants to view life differently. There is no doubt that the changes have been positive. Respondents have become less materialistic, and more aware of how rich we all are in the UK. They have thought more about material wealth, and considered the disadvantages of the consumer society we all live in. Many said they had become more appreciative of what they have. Some have made actual changes like trying to buy more fair trade products and changing to the ethically conscious Co-op bank. Many try to spend money more responsibly.

"I have seen how people can still be happy with next to no material wealth."

"I was overwhelmed by the joy the people had in the face of poverty."

"It made me very much appreciate my life and blessings - and more determined to help those without such a situation."

Several commented that Transform had caused them to have a greater interest in development issues and to be able to put things in perspective.

The large majority of respondents consider their project was highly successful. The high points were both practical and emotional. Practical successes included seeing building work achieved and completed, while on an emotional level respondents mentioned seeing the impact on the local community, feeling that they and their team had grown and learnt a lot, and building relationships with local people.

Conclusion

Taking part in Transform is truly a transforming experience, with many participants experiencing personal growth and a change in their world view. They have become more practical, less materialistic and more appreciative of what we have here. They have also acquired skills such as team working, leadership, communication skills, problem solving and demonstrated initiative. These are presently much in demand in the world of work, and approved of by universities.

Those who have taken part in Transform show demonstrable success in their chosen field, with no one having failed to complete a course. The vast majority are currently working in many diverse fields, but with the emphasis on the caring professions, for example, doctors, teachers, nurses, therapists and lawyers with an interest in justice and human rights in developing countries. Many participants have a greater knowledge of and interest in developing nations than they had before, and they have a sharp appreciation of what it is like to live in a developing country. They comment on the fact that happiness does not come from material possessions and an uncomplicated life is as fulfilling as a complicated one. The motto quoted is "aspire not to have more but to be more".

In summary, Transform is an experience which is rightly valued by employers, brings benefit to people in the developing world, and also, brings knowledge, awareness and growth to those who take part.

Appendix

Jobs/professions of participants in Transform Survey

	Number
Doctor	3
Electronics design engineer	1
Vet	1
Physiotherapist	3
Teacher/deputy head	9
Youth Justice officer	1
Occupational therapist	1
Nurse	3
Restaurant staff	1
Support worker for people with disabilities	1
Trainee solicitor	4
Civil servant	1
PA at Tearfund	1
Part-time office admin assistant	1
Youth worker	1
IT support for Home Office	1
Part-time auxiliary nurse	1
Graphic designer	1
IT consultant	1
Scientist with Water research Company	1
Marketing assistant with charity	1
Teaching assistant	1
Carpentry	1
Manager at Accounting charity	1
Not working	2
Other	6

Base: 49