



Becoming a volunteer and gap years

The dictionary definition of a **volunteer** is 'one who undertakes a service of their own free will.'

Voluntary work is something that you choose to do, so it's a good thing there is plenty of choice. There are many companies organising both voluntary work and what has come to be known as 'gap years', although the two overlap and you will need to do plenty of research before you choose the one for you.

Who is volunteering for?

There are projects for young people, young professionals, silver surfers and those who've taken early retirement. It could be for a year, a few weeks or months or if you're volunteering in this country it could be a few hours a week for however long it takes.

Who benefits?

The answer to that is just about everyone!

- The community, project or individual you serve stands to gain a huge amount. The practical service you offer, building or teaching or caring, whether in this country or abroad, will not only help but will develop friendship too.
- The employer or lecturer you work with on your return benefits from having a more mature considerate and experienced employee or student.
- And you, the volunteer, probably stand to gain the most in terms of character building, renewed confidence, new skills, fresh work ideas and a wider understanding of people and opportunities.

The entrepreneur, Duncan Bannatyne, of Dragons' Den fame, wrote "Young people keen to get a competitive edge in the job market should volunteer abroad. When I employ someone, I look for initiative and drive, someone who is a self-starter and can work well as part of a team. These are qualities employers are looking for on a CV and they show more about the person than qualifications alone."

For this reason Duncan is backing Platform2, a free global volunteering scheme for 18-25 year olds who might otherwise not have the opportunity to serve abroad. If you're accepted on to the programme, you will spend 10 weeks volunteering overseas with a team of other volunteers; then a three day residential on your return. This will include workshops and opportunities for you to figure out how you want to express your experience.

www.myplatform2.com

Gap Years

Platform 2 takes a few weeks not a whole year but there are many more projects working in different countries and timeframes and on a variety of projects. There are also organizations that simply facilitate safe travel abroad.

If you are thinking of volunteering or doing a Gap Year, you'd be wise to access unbiased information and guidance on things like where you can go, what you can do and how you can stay healthy and safe. Ask yourself some of these questions before you research your options:

- What is my purpose in doing this - what do I want to achieve?
- What skills can I contribute?
- What would I like to learn?
- How long do I want to do it for?
- Do I want to work in the UK or abroad?
- What countries am I interested in?
- What sort of work would I like to do?
- Do I hope to gain a qualification? (If so check carefully the claims of what's on offer.)
- Will I need to re-sit exams? And if so when do I need to be in the UK?
- Do I want to go it alone or join a group?
- Am I healthy - is there anything I should avoid in terms of food or climate?
- What is the cost and what does that cover?
- Once you have thought about your answers to some of these questions you are ready to start looking at some of the gap year and volunteering websites. Here are some of the more useful ones:

Gap year websites:

www.gapadvice.org An unbiased source of gap year information, individual advice and placements

www.yearoutgroup.org An association of 35 UK registered organisations

www.gogapyear.com Advice & information on gap year travel from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office

www.gapyear.com Range of gap year projects

www.CrossCulturalSolutions.org.uk Opportunities in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Russia

www.go-gap.com Publishers of the Gap Year Guide Book, planning gap year

www.realgap.co.uk Supply free advice brochure

www.raleighinternational.org Overseas expeditions: Community & Environmental

www.yearoutgroup.org Planning your gap year UK and abroad, gap year organisations

www.yini.org.uk Year in Industry-UK placement experts, before or during degree course.

The British Foreign Office provides reliable information on travel and conditions in any country at any time.

www.fco.gov.uk/travel

Volunteering websites:

www.volunteering.org.uk Voluntary opportunities in the UK

www.timebank.org.uk Information on working in the Arts, Health, Sports, Mentoring, Youth, Environment & Conservation. Sign up for ideas!

www.do-it.org.uk A huge database of volunteering opportunities in the UK

www.direct.gov.uk Go to volunteering

www.csv.org.uk/volunteering Full time opportunities for 4-12 months for 18-35 year olds

www.youth-action.org.uk Develop and lead your own project

www.vinspired.com Volunteering opportunities for those aged 16-25