

# TAKING A GAP YEAR?

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*The Rank Foundation Youth Work Schemes*

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# Introduction

For young people aged 17 – 20 the question “are you thinking of going to university?” was asked frequently. Today it is increasingly likely that the inquiry will be “are you thinking of taking a gap year?” The idea of the gap year i.e. taking time out between the finishing one stage of education and starting the next or entering employment, has been around for a while but has flourished in the last decade to the point that it has almost become ‘the norm’ (Pedrick 2002)<sup>1</sup>.

It seems that a growing number of young people are subscribing to the adage that ‘experience is the best teacher’ and are taking time out between school and/ or higher education and/ or employment. The statistics show that the majority of young people use their ‘time out’ to travel or to earn some money to help pay their way through college or with their day to day living costs. A recent survey of further and higher education students conducted by the Community Service Volunteers, examined the options for gap years, volunteering and the contribution (if any) made to the UK local community. It determined that:

- 53% of respondents would travel abroad,
- 39% planned to work abroad,
- 6% said they would consider volunteering overseas and
- 2% would want to spend their year volunteering in the UK. (Community Service Volunteers)<sup>2</sup>

The report highlights the ‘gap’ in UK volunteering but how can the voluntary sector attract young people away from the backpacking trips to warmer climates? Also, why is it that such a high number feel they need to travel overseas to gain maximum potential from a gap year? Where did the trend for travelling abroad begin? Tom Griffith founder of the company Gapyear Company Ltd. defines the history of the ‘gap year’ in Appendix 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Pedrick, P. & Griffith, T. (2002) 2002 UK Gapyear report, The Gap Year Company Ltd.

<sup>2</sup> Community Service Volunteers (2001) Home and Away – national report on [www.csv.org.uk](http://www.csv.org.uk)

## Taking a GAP Year?

With the growth in numbers of young people taking time out and wanting to travel, the business industry developed to fill the gap in the market and provide for those potential gap year adventurers. As the market increased, the competition between companies grew, as did their advertising techniques. More thrilling and exciting international adventures were offered by the gap year companies. The UK voluntary organisations did not jump on this band wagon and this is where the main focus of travelling abroad in gap years began.

There is a range of UK voluntary initiatives readily available for young people, who can testify to the potential that volunteering has to transform life chances and life choices. Some examples of organisations offering a UK experience are: Save the Children – Saying Power Scheme and Community Service Volunteers, who encourage young people to take action in their communities, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (B.C.T.V.), who work with people to bring about positive environmental change and The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme, which develops leadership in young people through practical work opportunities. For this study, I will be focusing on one of those initiatives: The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme.

The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme is one of many programmes that offer volunteer placements involving young people in real activity and real-life situations. The Rank Foundation advocates learning from experience as central to their philosophy and quote a high success rate for young people who participate on their scheme. The term ‘success’ in this context and for this report is defined as: young people developing holistically i.e. physically, emotionally and socially, and a key measurement of that success is what happens to the young people after their time as volunteers (Rank 1996)<sup>3</sup>. The Foundation report that in the last few years over 90% of ex-gappers have gone into further education or more permanent employment (Rank 2002)<sup>4</sup>. This is an impressive percentage especially for those who quantify results by statistics. My interest lies with what exactly it was that made the young volunteers (‘gappers’), flourish on this scheme? Why does the Gap Scheme work? Is there actually something real that you can publicise and say ‘this is why the scheme is a success’, which perhaps the voluntary sector can learn from and in turn, may be of benefit to future developing volunteer gap schemes. Also, if the voluntary sector is to make UK volunteering a more attractive option to gap year volunteers what are the benefits that they need to be selling and can they compete with an overseas experience? In other words, what makes ‘taking a year out’ a valuable learning experience for young people?

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<sup>3</sup> The Rank Foundation (1996) *On the Gap: Youth leadership through volunteering*, London: YMCA George Williams College

<sup>4</sup> The Rank Foundation Promotional Literature (2002) *Voluntary Leadership in the Community*

### Reason for study

I have previously been involved with The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme worked as a Project Manager for the Cumbria Youth Alliance, who run a pilot franchise Gap Scheme. I have been in the position of developing gap placements for young people who were taking time out and wished to undertake volunteering in the UK, specifically Cumbria. As I was fostering learning environments for 'gappers' to flourish, I felt it was relevant to understand the processes behind why taking a year out and doing a voluntary placement is a valuable learning experience for young people. My hypothesis was that a successful gap year is not just about offering experiential learning but involved the individual having a positive attitude towards personal development, as well as having the necessary support/ mentoring mechanisms in place for the gapper to grow.

I was also interested with the significant value that government authorities, employers, higher education establishments etc., placed on volunteer gap years. By using my own experiences and observations from working on the Rank Gap Scheme and by interviewing those young people who have already had that experience i.e. ex-gappers, I hoped to be able to discover how effective this scheme was in the longer term. In other words, what was life like after the Gap experience and had it really had any impact on their future?

### Aim of study

This study is specifically concerned with exploring the value of a gap year, which is spent volunteering in the UK. I examined varying aspects for this report concentrating on the following areas:

- What conditions need to be in place for a volunteer placement to be a success,
- What importance is attached to gap years in the world of employment and education,
- The longer term effects for ex-gappers specific to The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme, by carrying out a survey of ex-gappers,
- How should the voluntary sector sell the benefits of gap placements in the UK
- The relevance of my findings and recommendations for future study.

### Methodology

The research process was divided into two major areas: a literature review and fieldwork.

### *Literature Review*

1. **Initial review of relevant information.** This involved reading around the subject of gap years and volunteering schemes and drawing together any relevant concepts and models that are already in the field. I also explored theories that informed my original hypothesis – experiential learning, positive mental attitudes and support/ mentoring. The information available was so vast, I felt it was important to pinpoint the main concepts that connected with my study. With regard to learning from the experience the main theorists were: Dewey (who emphasised the need for learning to be grounded in experience)<sup>5</sup>; Lewin (who stressed the importance of people being active in learning)<sup>6</sup>; Rogers (who stated that experiential learning is equivalent to personal change and growth)<sup>7</sup> and Kolb (who described learning as a four-step process)<sup>8</sup>.

I also reviewed various pieces in newspapers, reports and journals. The Journal of Youth and Adolescence highlighted the subject of ‘Positive Psychology in Youth Development’. This was of great interest to me as it tackled the issue that young people can be ‘motivated from within to direct attention and effort towards their own development’ (Larson 2000: 170)<sup>9</sup>. This connected to my hypothesis because it suggested that young people often wanted to be responsible for their own learning. I will elaborate on this point further, in Part four.

2. **Historical research and fact finding.** This was undertaken with particular reference to the gap year phenomenon which highlights a gap industry that now exists, as well as a ‘learning from experience’ approach to learning. The outcomes are discussed more in Part four. Other investigatory work included exploring statistics quoted by governing bodies, in addition to the general opinion in the world of employment and education regarding the usefulness of gap years. This included making direct contact with the Department of Education and Skills, the Small Business Service and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey J. (1938) *Experience and Education*, New York: Touchstone

<sup>6</sup> Lewin K. (1951) *Field Theory in Social Science*, New York: Harper Collins

<sup>7</sup> Rogers C. (1961) *On Becoming a Person*,

<sup>8</sup> Kolb D. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall

<sup>9</sup> Larson, R. (2000) *Towards a Psychology of Positive Youth Development*, *American Psychologist*, 55: 170 – 183

The Rank Gap Scheme is the programme I have had most involvement with and has been the main point of representation in my research. I therefore, made enquiries to The Rank Foundation to discover how their Gap Scheme came into being and the philosophy behind it.

### *Fieldwork*

Having previously had first hand experience of observing a volunteer gap scheme in action, my aim was now to interview young people who had previously been volunteers to find out what they had gained from their placement and exactly how much of their learning had been transferable. In other words, had they learned from their experience and had it been valuable?

1. **Sample group.** Those ex-gappers that were interviewed were of a variety of ages, from diverse background and different geographical places within the UK but had all taken part on the Rank Foundation Gap Scheme. The number of people i.e. the size of the study population, was chosen specifically to enable me to identify any patterns that appeared in the results. I wanted enough people to make an informed judgement but not too many that the data became unmanageable.
2. **Creating a questionnaire.** The questionnaire I created was in a format to access information for different purposes. The first part was to establish statistical information with questions in the *list* and *category* format (Youngman 1986)<sup>10</sup>. This was to establish points such as how long it was since their placement or whether the ex-gappers were in further education or full time employment, as The Rank Foundation quoted that over 90% are. The second part was in a *Likert scale* format, which was aimed at discovering strength of feeling or attitude towards the gap placement. The third part was a *quantity* format which focused on the amount of some characteristics i.e. how many gappers felt certain skills, identified as important by employing organisations, had been developed. The final part of the questionnaire was of a qualitative perspective. There were three open questions that were more focused on understanding the individuals' perceptions of their volunteering experience (Bell 1993: 6)<sup>11</sup>. The questionnaire I used is attached as Appendix 2.
3. **Control measures.** Due to the fact that the sample group to be interviewed was spread across the UK the questionnaires were administered via a structured telephone interview. The questions were asked from the pre-designed questionnaire and a script so as to maintain uniformity and

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<sup>10</sup> Youngman, M. B. (1986) *Analysing Questionnaires*, University of Nottingham School of Education

<sup>11</sup> Bell, J. (1993) *Doing Your Research Project*, Buckingham: Open University Press

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consistency. Confidentiality was also agreed between myself and the ex-gappers interviewed. This enabled the respondents to offer an honest opinion, without the fear of the information influencing their present situation or relationship with any of the organisations involved.

4. **Working with the data.** The raw data taken from the questionnaires and interviews was recorded, analysed and interpreted. To assist with this process I devised spreadsheets which would give me statistical information, easily displayed in tables, charts and graphs, seen in Part 3 of this study.
5. **Interviews.** It was necessary to explore certain issues in more depth. To do this I conducted three telephone semi-structured interviews. These were not chosen at random but were targeted based on the ex-gappers experiences.

## Limitations of the study

Due to boundaries of time, I was only able to scratch the surface of what had become a far more complex study than I ever imagined. The 'gap year' concept is a vast arena of information, mostly based around travelling abroad. I chose to concentrate on the one area: volunteer gap placements in the UK. For my research, I mostly interviewed ex-gappers, who had all volunteered on the same scheme – The Rank Gap Scheme. Although, this gave me very useful data to work with, in reflection it would have been helpful to interview more young people who had participated on a variety of schemes, to give an overall picture of UK volunteering. However, due to time restraints, this was not realistically achievable on this occasion but could be useful for a further study.

The information received from the open questions (qualitative research), gave me much more workable information, with regard to understanding 'why' the Rank gap scheme was beneficial to those who had taken part. Realising this, as I was researching, I was able to diversify slightly by conducting a further three more in depth interviews, which enabled me to further develop this piece of work.

Because of all these points I have drawn a boundary around my findings to concentrate on analysing what information I do have. This study is by no means conclusive, however I do feel that it offers some answers to why taking a year out, volunteering on a gap scheme in the UK is a valuable learning experience for young people.

## *Working with bias*

In this study, I found it easier to acknowledge at the start that bias could creep in rather than eliminate it altogether. The reasons being:

- I was personally involved in the Rank Gap Scheme and believed it works well

- I had a hunch at the start of the study regarding volunteer gap placements in the UK
- All the people interviewed had volunteered on the same scheme
- There was a danger of my mannerisms differing between the respondents that I knew and those that I didn't.

Some of these problems I was able to overcome and others I just had to accept. For example, I was particularly careful about the way the questions were asked, as well as my intonation when interviewing. This was because I was aware of the difference in literacy practices i.e. reading and speaking. By verbally asking the question the listener would respond to how I asked the question, rather than reading the words and using their own interpretations. In other words, how I asked the question may lead the respondent to answer in a certain way.

Also, my conversation differed between people that I knew compared to those that I did not. However, there was little I could do to eliminate that except when it came to the interview part of the conversation I changed my behaviour, plus I exercised constant self control!

Who is this report aimed at?

Part one of this report is an introduction to the subject I have chosen to study. In short, the aim is to provide an exploration of the concept of gap years spent volunteering in the UK and to analyse the reasons why it can be a valuable learning experience.

It is impossible in the space of a few pages to do justice to the whole area of a 'gap year industry' but the following report will at least provide material which I hope will be useful to those who have a vested interest in this subject, perhaps about to undertake a gap year, or part of an organisation who offers opportunities for UK volunteering and experiential learning. The hope is that this report may provoke thought amongst those that read it and will also give consideration as to whether UK organisations should be publicising the gap year opportunities more.

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## Part two: Taking a Gap year

There are many who are sceptical about the concept of 'gap years'. They are sometimes presented as being only about travelling abroad, or that they are only for the wealthy few. According to the *Mail on Sunday* (2000) others ponder the character-building experiences gained by 'merely frequenting the pubs of Sydney'. Even Prince Charles is known to have said that he did not want to see his son 'cavorting around the globe' (*Mail on Sunday* 2000). Another train of thought is that the young person is 'wasting time' and 'putting off the inevitable' of going into further/ higher education or trying to find a job (BBC News 2001)<sup>12</sup>.

It is easy to see how some of these thoughts are brought about as an average gap year abroad, to the most favoured destination Australia, costs on average £3000 +, an amount which is not readily affordable to everyone. The statistics quoted by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) show that one in three school leavers are delaying their entry into university to 'experience life' (UCAS 2000). Even a conversation with colleagues in my office based around this fact brought up the question: Are young people really taking time to consider their future or simply avoiding making a decision? (Personal recordings 10<sup>th</sup> April 2003). There is also a comparison between UK volunteering and travelling abroad. Why take the less glamorous option of volunteering in the UK, when you could have a year of adventure through international volunteering and travel (if you can afford it)? One fact is that the media representation of poverty in developing countries perhaps implies that the UK faces less urgent social problems. This has resulted in UK volunteering receiving less attention within the gap industry (Ramrayka 2001)<sup>13</sup>. The promotion by gap year provider organisations of what constitutes a 'fun' year out and a 'constructive' year out has dramatically increased. One example of this promotion can be found on the website [www.yearoutgroup.com](http://www.yearoutgroup.com), where out of 29 organisations offering gap year experiences, only three of those are UK based.

Are these criticisms about taking a gap year based purely on myths or is there real cause for concern around the future direction of young people aged 17 - 25? Although there will always be an element of scepticism, generally 'gap years' are

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<sup>12</sup> BBC News Online (2001) It's not Patagonia, but it pays the bills, Article dated 17<sup>th</sup> August 2001

<sup>13</sup> Ramrayka, L. (2001) Charities urged to woo gap year volunteers on [www.society.guardian.co.uk](http://www.society.guardian.co.uk)

considered a positive step if used as a valuable learning experience. It is a fact that governing authorities, higher education establishments and employers do look favourably on young people who have had experience outside the school environment and have used their time constructively. This I will discuss more in the next section.

Gap year volunteering as work related learning

*The Governments position*

The government's policy on gap years is one of encouragement. Margaret Hodge, Minister of State at the Department for Education and Skills stated: 'I know how valuable the experience of a year out between education and work can be for some young people' (Hodge 2000)<sup>14</sup>. I contacted the DfES directly for their position on volunteering in the UK through gap years, they responded by saying:

***The Government is convinced of the positive contribution young people can make to their communities through volunteering and of the benefits young people can gain in terms of self-esteem, confidence and communication skills.***

***The Government believe that every young person can be an active citizen, make a difference to their community, gain recognition for their achievements, enhance their self-development and work-related skills and retain an interest in voluntary action throughout their lives.*** (Humphreys, DfES 2003)<sup>15</sup>.

For some time now the Government have proposed to get more people involved with volunteering. The Chancellor and Home Secretary recently announced, in the Discussion Document 'Next Steps on Volunteering and Giving in the UK' on the 4<sup>th</sup> December 2002, a new pilot scheme to support volunteering gap years for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The DfES will be piloting a 'gap year scheme' which will seek to provide developmental experience for young people (DfES 2002)<sup>16</sup>. Their scheme will aim to tackle three of the most important challenges, according to current policies, facing young people and our education system:

- Learning citizenship and developing values

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<sup>14</sup> Hodge, M. (2000) Gap Year Information, the Year Out Group on [www.yearoutgroup.org](http://www.yearoutgroup.org)

<sup>15</sup> Humphreys, L. (2003) Correspondence directly received from Department for Education and Skills

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) Next Steps on Volunteering and Giving in the UK, paragraph 3.27

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- Improving employability
- Tackling underachievement and exclusion

The Governments' hope is that after a year spent volunteering ending with a financial reward, it will encourage poorer young people to consider further education and university as an option. The DfES see this as a way to widening the contribution towards participation, as it is expanding its' higher education plan.

The Government state that volunteering is an important focus for tackling the current challenges listed above, why then have they not helped UK organisations before now? What is it that has aroused their interest at this point? Could it be that Universities are quoting reduced recruitment figures (UCAS, (BBC News 2000))<sup>17</sup> and the DfES see the gap year as possible road back into education for those who have dropped out? My concern regarding the Government's pilot scheme is that it is re-inventing the wheel i.e. developing their own Volunteer Gap Scheme, rather than assisting existing provision. Their plan to invest 5 million in their own pilot Gap Year Scheme, in my opinion, is misguided. I feel this because in their proposal there is an emphasis on pre-determining outcomes to further economic growth, simply put, increasing numbers in universities and reducing unemployment figures. On the one hand, it is good to see UK gap year volunteering being acknowledged. However, it would have benefited more from the Government supporting those organisations from the voluntary sector which use more informal approaches to the work. This work takes time, is hard to measure and involves working with heart, association and well-being.

#### *The higher education institutions' perspective*

One of the purposes of higher education other than academic qualification, is supposedly to help students improve their higher level competencies and skills to enhance their long-term employability. The relationship between academic and experiential learning is central to much of the Higher Education curriculum. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals states that if a 'year out' is planned and structured, many higher education institutions see it as a positive benefit. However, they warn that gap years should be put to 'good use' if young people want to impress future admissions tutors or employers. The Committee define 'good use' as: preferring to see that 'gap years are used most productively – as a learning experience' (BBC News 2000)<sup>18</sup>. In other words, if a year out is planned and structured, organisations such as the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), see it as a advantage to developing an individual's soft skills e.g. self-

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<sup>17</sup> BBC News Online (2003) Education: More Students opt for 'gap year', Article dated 13<sup>th</sup> September 2000 on [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news)

<sup>18</sup> BBC News Online (2003) Education: More Students opt for 'gap year', Article dated 13<sup>th</sup> September 2000 on [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news)

confidence, leadership and social skills. Tony Higgins, head of the admission service stated that taking a gap year was a trend that was likely to continue. He stated that the confidence and maturity that can result from gap years can help students' clarity and motivation, but there are still concerns about them losing the habit of studying. Taking 'time out' can often result in difficulty getting started again. There is also the apprehension that the individual may opt not to return to higher education at all, at that point in their life. These are the two main concerns for UCAS on gap years (Brown 2000: 10)<sup>19</sup>. As an educator, my reaction to these concerns would be to question why not returning to higher education should be considered a negative point. It may be a concern to the higher education system as their recruitment numbers could reduce, however we should not consider the young person to be 'losing out' if they decide to follow a certain life path at that point. We are informed that learning is now life-long and returning to academic qualifications is encouraged and acceptable at any point in our lives. I can speak from experience having started this academic journey in my late 20's. Therefore, if someone through a gap year is able to find their vocation or chooses to develop a life skill, then this should be considered a positive step towards:

- Learning citizenship and developing values
- Improving employability
- Tackling underachievement and exclusion

#### *The issues for employing organisations*

What are employers looking for in today's workforce? According to the Small Business Service (SBS) and the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) employers look for people who have played an active role in life, who have broadened their perspectives in ways such as volunteering and who have developed their interpersonal and social skills. Above all, employers want individuals who can reflect on their experiences and understand what they have learned (AGR 2000)<sup>20</sup>. From my own experiences with the Cumbria Rural Enterprise Agency I was always informed that small businesses, in particular, needed employees that could 'hit the ground running and that can add value to their organisation, as a result of their previous experiences' (Personal recordings from Small Business Forum meeting, 9<sup>th</sup> November 2000).

Employers value work-related learning because it helps develop personal and interpersonal skills, foster attributes such as self-motivation, sharpen analytical skills, enhance subject knowledge and provide an insight into what makes business

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, R. (2000) Work-related learning report, DfES: Work Experience Group

<sup>20</sup> Association of Graduate Recruiters (2000) Graduate Salaries and Vacancies from the Association of Graduate Recruiters report

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tick. Every one of the 89 top companies questioned by the AGR said voluntary work gave gappers valuable confidence and leadership skills. For the purpose of this study I interviewed a spokesperson for the Cumbria Inward Investment Agency who said:

***Employers particularly value forms of work-related learning or gap year experiences where:***

- § ***there is a process of reflection and incorporation of learning, which is more likely to lead to transferable learning***
- § ***that young people are able to draw their attention to their learning and verbalize their experiences, without any prompting***

(Personal recordings, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2003)

There is a fear by recruiters that more than a third of graduates are poor at building relationships. Volunteer gap years enable young people to experience real-life situations in a way that cannot be taught. Organisations are interested in reflective, creative people who add value and help to transform their organisation. Individual attributes are as important as the development of specific skills, as is the ability to integrate knowledge, skills and attitudes (Skills *plus* Project: 2001)<sup>21</sup>, something which can be gained through constructive gap year experiences.

The Rank Foundation Gap Scheme

With the Government, higher education institutions and employing organisations all stating that young people need to be more adaptable, focusing on developing their personal qualities and social skills, and with a long list of companies and websites available to young people offering 'gap opportunities', it appears that taking a gap year is a trend that is likely to continue.

The Rank Foundation is one organisation that has offered a gap scheme for young people from differing backgrounds, since the mid 1980s. The Rank Foundation started its gap scheme in a time of industrial unrest when the 'gap' between the richer and poorer members of society became increasingly concerning. It originally involved young volunteers from public schools working with other young people in communities where there was deprivation and poverty. The young volunteers were involved in real activities and real-life situations, their experiences being the source of learning for personal growth. This was usually done in a gap year between school and higher education, hence the name 'Gap Scheme'.

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, A. Professor (2002) Skills plus: employability in higher education - Report of the external evaluator on [www.lancs.ac.uk/users/edres/research/skillsplus/](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/edres/research/skillsplus/) and [www.open.ac.uk/vqportal/Skills-Plus/home.htm](http://www.open.ac.uk/vqportal/Skills-Plus/home.htm)

Since then, progress and need has developed their Gap Scheme into two programmes: the Independent School Gap Scheme and the Community Gap Scheme. On both programmes the ‘Gappers’, undertake six to nine months of full-time voluntary work within youth organisations, supported by The Rank Charities and undertake a considerable amount of training. The Gappers recruited may be between school and further education, unemployed, or experiencing a gap in their lives through circumstance, lack of opportunity or choice and have the potential for leadership, for taking initiative and responsibility. The components of the Rank Volunteer Community Gap Scheme are set out in Appendix 5.

As mentioned in Part one of this paper, the Rank Foundation Gap Scheme quotes high success rates of young people moving into higher education or employment. However, this scheme is not just about statistics. As a worker and mentor for this scheme I have observed physical, emotional and social development of young people who have participated on a gap placement. I conducted some fieldwork to find out if gappers did gain from the Gap Scheme experience, everything that is promoted by Rank, The Government, UCAS, and the Association of Recruiters etc. Who better to ask than ex-gappers i.e. young people who had participated on the scheme, to find out what part, if any, taking ‘time out’, volunteering and experiential learning had played to their personal development.

The focus was on exploring their feelings around their experience, finding out where it had taken them (education/ employment etc), what skills they felt they had developed and what did they believe were the essential elements that made their placement a success. The next section of this report concentrates on the results of my research conducted with ex-gappers, which explores whether taking a year out was a valuable learning experience for them. The results are discussed in Part three.

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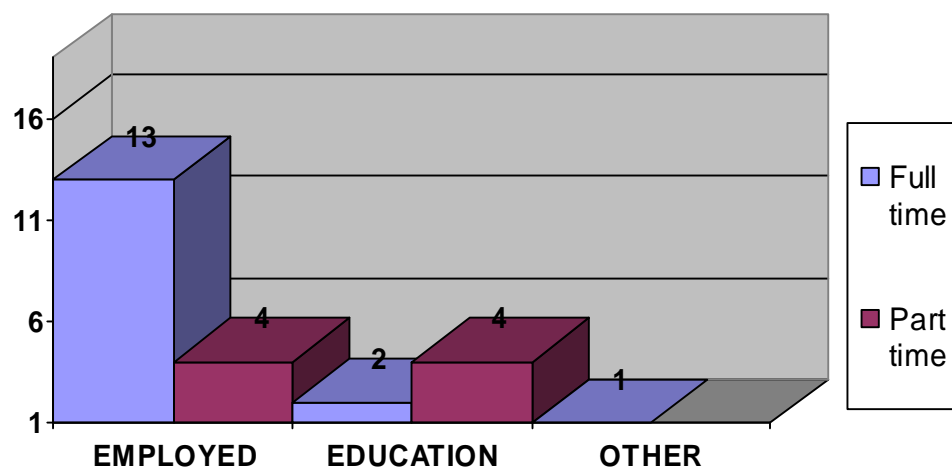
## Part three – research results

Research questionnaire – part one results

### Question 1 – Figure 1.0

What is your current status after leaving the gap scheme?

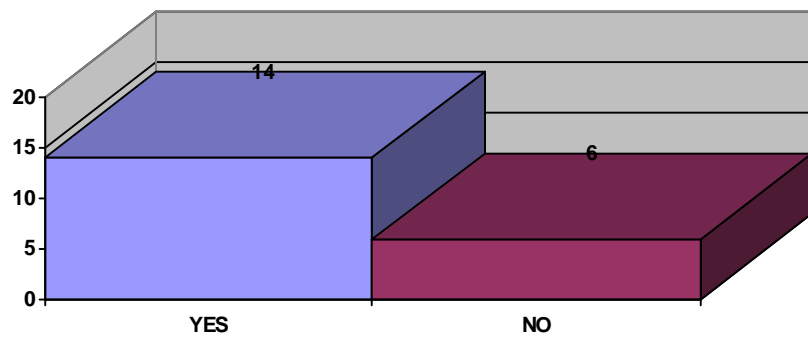
STATUS	NUMBER
Employed: full time	13
Employed: part time	4
Education: full time	2
Education: part time	4
Other	1



**Question 2 – Figure 1.1**

Have you done any other voluntary work since the gap scheme?

ANSWER:	NUMBER
YES	14
NO	6

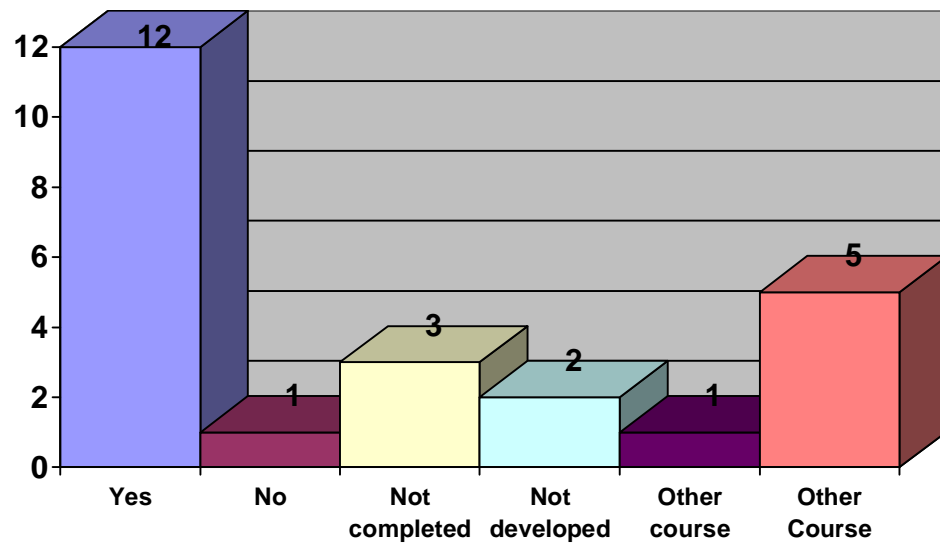


Taking a GAP Year?

**Question 3 – Figure 1.2**

**Did you do Foundation Studies or any other qualifications on your placement?**

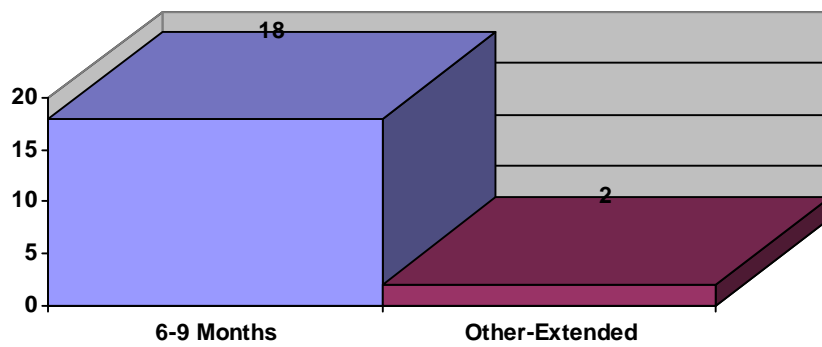
ANSWER	NUMBER
Yes	12
No	1
Course not completed	3
Course not developed	2
Didn't cater for learning disabilities	1
Other course undertaken	1



**Question 4 – Figure 1.3**

How long was your placement for?

LENGTH	NUMBER
6 – 9 Months	18
Other – Extended	2

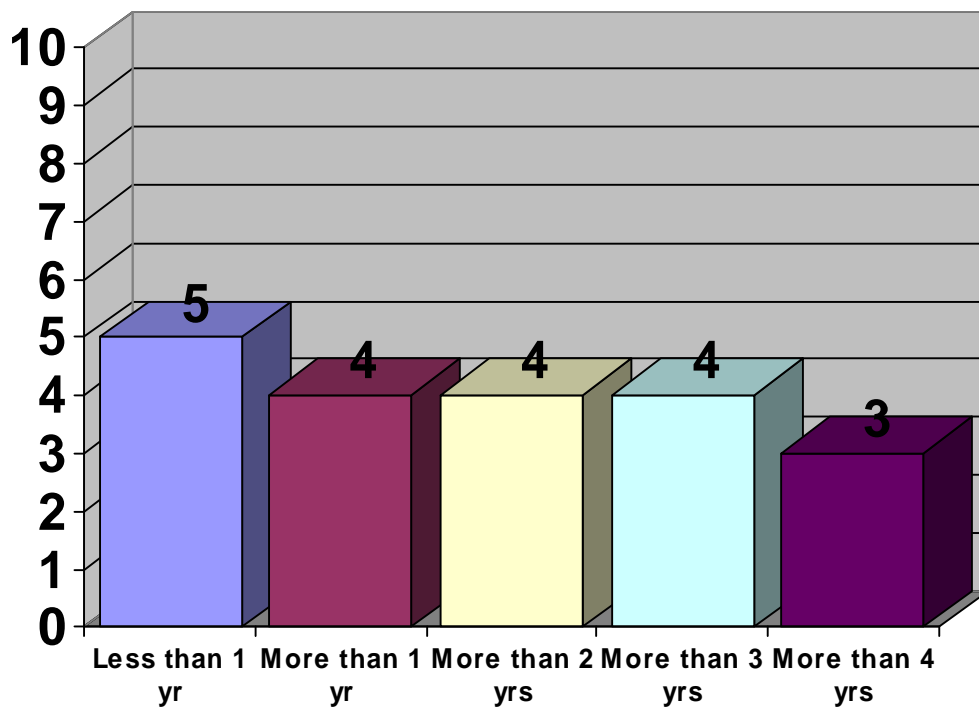


Taking a GAP Year?

**Question 5 – Figure 1.4**

How long is it since your gap placement?

YEARS	NUMBER
Less than 1 year	5
More than 1 year	4
More than 2 years	4
More than 3 years	4
More than 4 years	3

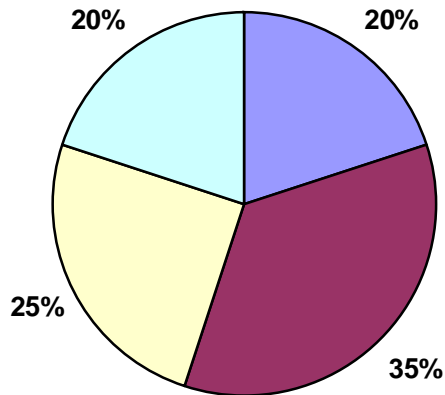
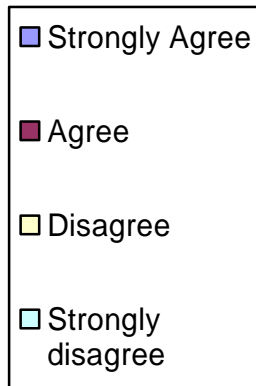


Research questionnaire – part two results

**Statement 1 – Figure 2.0**

I felt left to cope on my own

ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly agree	4
Agree	7
Disagree	5
Strongly disagree	4

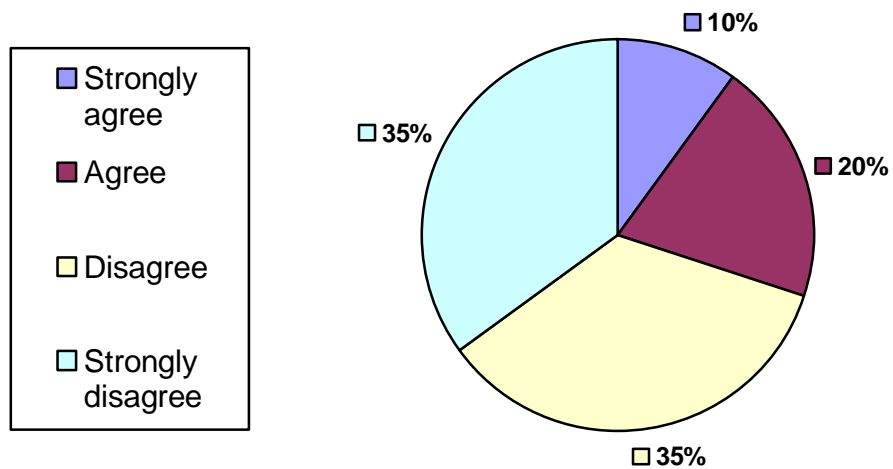


Taking a GAP Year?

**Statement 2 – Figure 2.1**

**I felt let down**

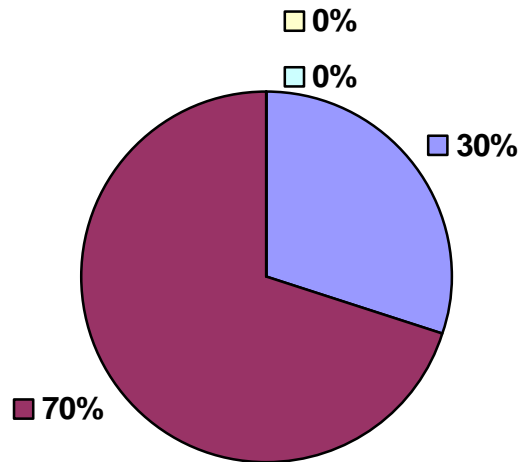
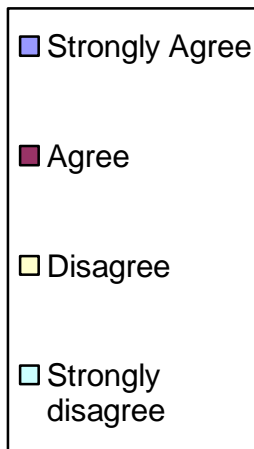
ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	2
Agree	4
Disagree	7
Strongly Disagree	7



**Statement 3 – Figure 2.2**

**I experienced challenges after I left**

ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	6
Agree	14
Disagree	-
Strongly Disagree	-

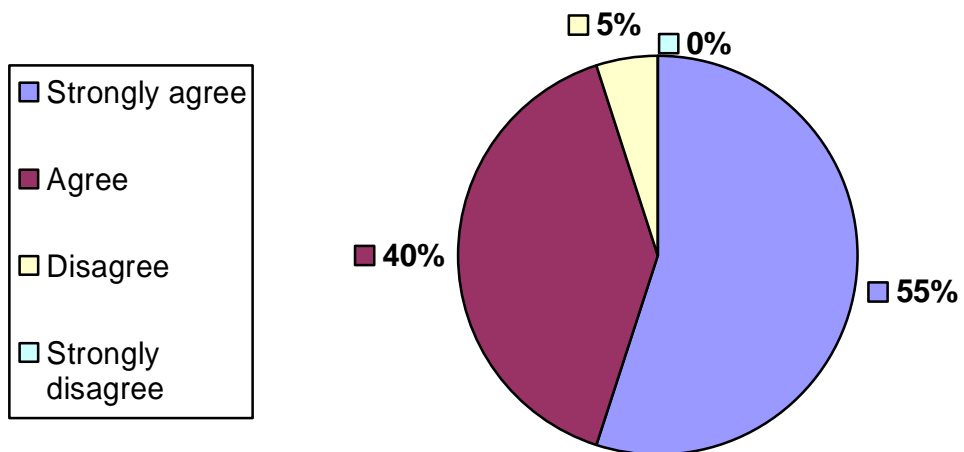


Taking a GAP Year?

**Statement 4 – Figure 2.3**

**I had more self-confidence**

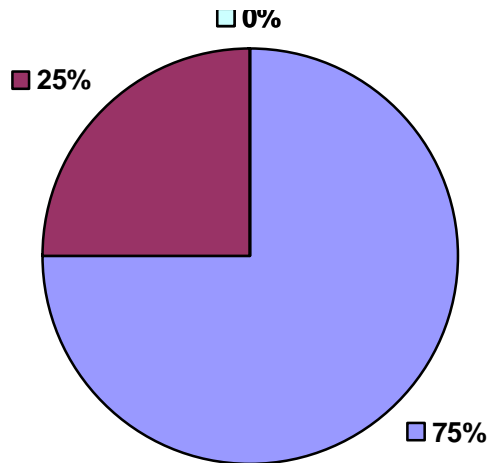
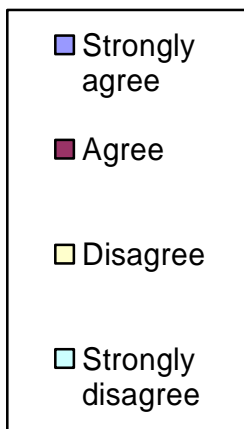
ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	11
Agree	8
Disagree	1
Strongly Disagree	-



**Statement 5 - Figure 2.4**

**It had a positive impact on my life**

ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	15
Agree	5
Disagree	-
Strongly Disagree	-

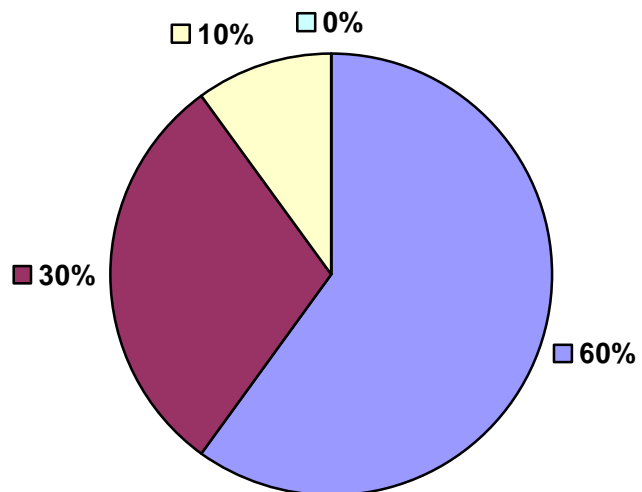
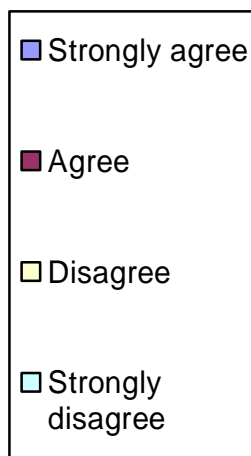


Taking a GAP Year?

**Statement 6 – Figure 2.5**

**I have become more aware of how I learn**

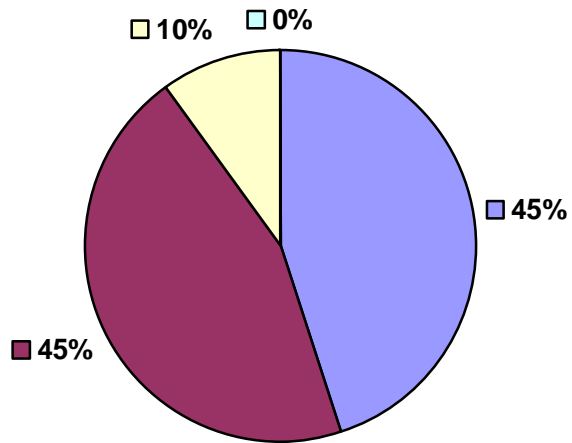
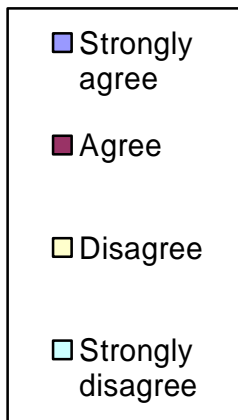
ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	12
Agree	6
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	-



**Statement 7 – Figure 2.6**

**It allowed me to focus on my future/ career path**

ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	9
Agree	9
Disagree	2
Strongly Disagree	-

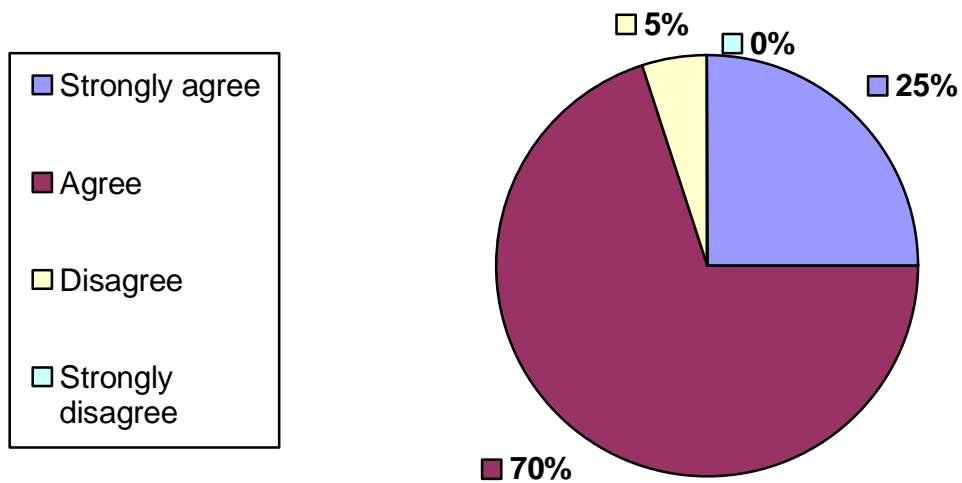


Taking a GAP Year?

**Statement 8 – Figure 2.7**

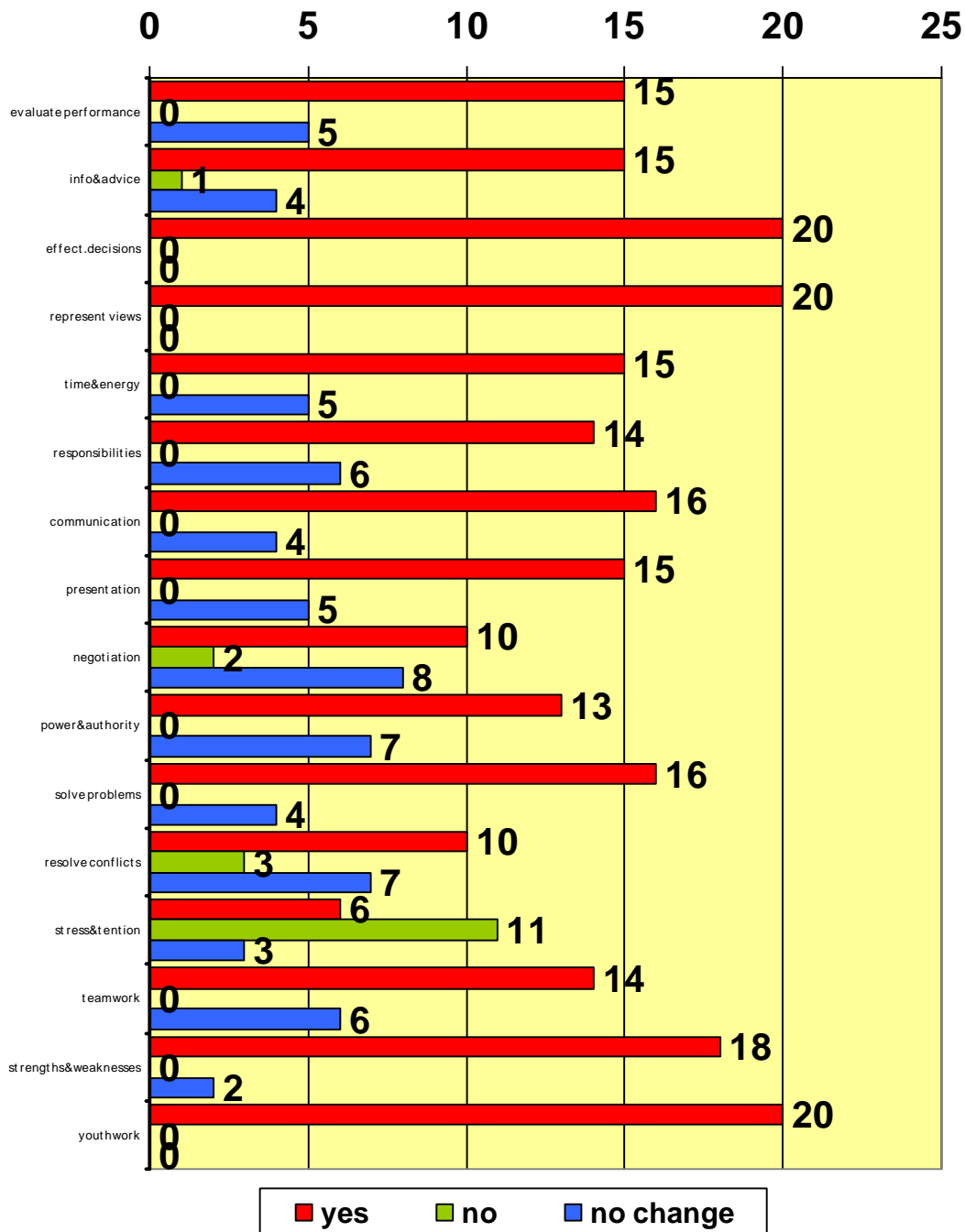
**I actively use self-reflection as a tool for personal development**

ANSWER	NUMBER
Strongly Agree	5
Agree	14
Disagree	1
Strongly Disagree	-



Research questionnaire - part three results

SKILLS GAINED FROM PARTICIPATING ON THE GAP SCHEME



Research questionnaire – part four results

**Question 1 – Figure 4.0**

What would you say was the MAIN BENEFIT from your experience of being on the Gap Scheme?

MAIN ANSWERS	NUMBERS	%
Having an opportunity to change/ space to change – develop/ space to think about the future	9 out 20	45%
A chance to do some REAL youth work	10 out 20	50%
Having access to training and personal development opportunities	9 out 20	45%
Networking: A chance to meet other people also on the scheme, to mix with different organisations, agencies, youth workers	6 out 20	30%

**Question 2 – Figure 4.1**

Why do you think the gap scheme was a valuable learning experience for you?

MAIN ANSWERS	NUMBERS	%
Having an opportunity to change/ space to change – develop/ space to think about the future	13 out of 20	65%
Support from the organisation/ line manager/ mentor	11 out of 20	55%
Somebody had a belief in me	4 out of 20	20%
A chance to develop my skills and to network/ meet and learn from others	11 out of 20	55%
Be given the opportunity to do some REAL work, inc. face to face, admin, planning, fundraising etc.	4 out of 20	20%

Taking a GAP Year?

**Question 3 - Figure 4.2**

What do you think are the conditions needed for a successful volunteer gap placement?

MAIN ANSWERS	NUMBERS	%
The gapper needs to be in the right frame of mind to change/ make the most of the placement and grab any opportunity that comes to them	9 out of 20	45%
There must be good regular support from the line manager/ organisation/ mentor etc	20 out of 20	100%
Full opportunities to develop personally and offer a variety of different training options	7 out of 20	35%
Have regular contact with others: gappers, agencies, youth workers, networking at residentials, conferences etc.	6 out of 20	30%
Be given the chance to do some REAL work, especially face to face work with other young people	6 out of 20	30%
Work out an exit strategy for when the placement is finished	5 out of 20	25%

Main outcomes of research

Part 1

- From the gappers interviewed, the longest period of time since being on the gap scheme was 8 years, the least time 2 months
- 95% of gappers are in employment (full/ part time) or education (full time). This verifies The Rank Foundation statistic.
- 70% continued with voluntary work after their placement
- 60% completed the YMCA Foundation Studies course.

Part 2

- 55% of gappers felt left to cope on their own after the placement and 30% felt let down i.e. no continued support
- 100% **agreed** and **strongly agreed** that they experienced challenges after they left. This ranged from personality differences, questions in the workplace, coping with workloads, trying to find alternative work and moving from full-time volunteer to full-time worker.
- Only one gapper **disagreed** that they had gained more self-confidence from being on a gap placement (19 **agreed** with 12 of those **strongly agreeing**).
- 100% **agreed** that it had had a positive impact on their lives (75% **strongly agreed**).
- 90% agreed that through the scheme they had become more aware of how they learn
- 90% agreed it allowed them to focus on their futures
- 95% agreed that they actively use self-reflection as a tool for personal development.

Part 3

- From the set of skills listed, ALL 20 gappers agreed that they had developed the following:
  - youth work
  - making effective decisions

## Taking a GAP Year?

- representing the views of others
- The next high-ranking skills were:
  - Assess own strengths and weaknesses (90%)
  - Problem solving (80%)
  - Using communication skills (80%)
- On the other hand, the least developed skill was 'coping with stress and tension':
  - 55% stated that they had not learnt how to handle pressure and tension
  - 15% felt they had not changed in this area, specifically not being able to 'cope in the first place'; therefore -
  - 70% felt they had not progressed in this area.

## Part 4

All three questions brought out similar themes around:

- Positive mental attitude
  - The gapper needs to be in the right frame of mind to change/ make the most of the placement and grab any opportunity that comes to them
- Personal development: personal qualities and social skills
  - Having access to training and personal development opportunities,
  - Networking and learning from others
- Real activities and work experiences
  - Be given the opportunity to do some REAL work, inc. face to face, admin, planning, fundraising etc.
- Support from organisation
  - There must be good regular support from the line manager/
  - organisation/ mentor etc

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# Part four – Analysis of findings and discussion

The aim of this study was to explore what makes taking a year out a valuable learning experience for young people and questioned whether the voluntary sector should make UK volunteering a more attractive option to gappers. This section concentrates on investigating the findings of the research undertaken in an attempt to answer these questions. Space does not permit a discussion on all the points highlighted, so I have selected those that I feel are most relevant. I begin this discussion with some general observations about how the gappers perceived being interviewed as part of this study, focusing on four specific themes that were identified from the results:

- 1) Support from organisations/ agencies
- 2) Personal motivation
- 3) Real work and responsibility
- 4) Interaction with other people within the field

## Original hypothesis

Initially before undertaking this study, I had a hunch as to why a gap year spent volunteering was a valuable learning experience. My hypothesis was that a successful gap year placement was not just about offering experiential learning but concerned the individual having a positive attitude towards personal development, as well as having the necessary support/ mentoring mechanisms in place for the gapper to grow. Through my research I also found that the government, higher education institutions and employers all stated that a gap year spent volunteering can be 'beneficial' to all involved.

The ex-gappers who participated in the research appeared to enjoy the fact that they were able to tell their stories and that their ideas were being solicited and valued. The research I conducted with 20 ex-gappers proved that my original thoughts were the case. However, two themes arose that I had previously underestimated. The first was that the ex-gappers placed a great emphasis on the *work* that was accomplished

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by each gapper, described as ‘having real responsibility’ by the majority of those questioned. A second point was the need of the ex-gappers to ‘network’ with their peers, other organisations and agencies, as well as existing professionals within the field. These were both points that I had recognised but underrated the importance of in my original hypothesis.

The key findings from the research

### *Support*

As shown in figure 4.2, support was viewed as of fundamental importance. All the ex-gappers interviewed, 100%, stated that support from the line manager had been crucial, if not central to their development. They stated it played a central role because it enabled the ex-gappers to reflect on different aspects of their placement and personal development.

***“Having someone who I could talk to regularly, within the organisation, helped me to work through my thoughts and experiences. It gave me a chance to talk out problems and explore solutions that I had not even thought of.”***

***(Fig. 5.0, Interview with Gapper, see Appendix 3)***

In my experience, an important contribution that facilitators can make to the learning situation is to give free and undivided attention to the learner, what Rogers describes as ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers, 1961)<sup>22</sup>. Ex-gappers spoke of how their line manager had allocated time aside to discuss their work progress, personal development and offer encouragement for achievements. It was obvious from the interviews that ex-gappers appreciated being able to bring to the sessions issues that were of priority to them.

Previously, I have written favourably about the process of reflection and the importance it can have in the development of an individual, however, through this study I have understood more fully the importance of the role of ‘facilitator’ and the part they played in enabling the ex-gapper to return to their experiences, attend to their feelings and then re-evaluate experiences (Boud et al)<sup>23</sup>. The experience of one ex-gapper who had not had that support, also acknowledged the fundamental role the line manager played in facilitating the individuals learning on a gap placement. When asked what conditions need to be in place for a successful gap placement, they said:

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<sup>22</sup> Rogers, C. R. (1961) *On Becoming a Person*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>23</sup> Boud et al. (eds) (1985) *Reflection. Turning experience into learning*, London: Kogan Page

***“Definitely having a supportive line manager – I didn’t have this and the placement was really hard for me. I couldn’t talk to anyone in the organisation about what I was doing, learning, feeling etc. Everyone was either too busy or just didn’t want to know. I had a mentor outside of the organisation who helped me, otherwise I’m not sure if I would have been able to learn anything. Of course looking back now I can see lots of learning, in particular how NOT to line-manage someone!!”***

***(Fig. 5.1, Interview with Gapper, see Appendix 3)***

The results suggest that information I gained around support not only talked about the role of reflection and facilitation, there were comments about advice on ‘training opportunities’ (Gapper G), ‘encouragement and praise’ (Gapper M), ‘knowledge of the work’ (Gapper Q), ‘reassurance of ability’ (Gapper B), ‘coping with change’ (Gapper J) etc. The support was all-rounded and individualised, focusing on the needs of the gapper.

It is important to mention the integral part ‘support’ played on the gap scheme because after the ex-gappers’ placements, no matter what they progressed to, they stated the transition had been difficult. The research showed that 11 out of 20 gappers (55%) had felt left to cope on their own after the placement and 6 out of 20 (30%) had felt let down. Elaborating further, they were aware that they had not received as much support for their personal development in their new positions, as they had received on the gap placement and this had left them with a sense of disregard:

***“When I got my job after my gap placement, I hardly ever had meetings with my line manager and when I did we certainly didn’t talk about my learning. It was all about figures and how many young people I would be having to my sessions and how I was going to increase the number of volunteers in the centre. It was a shock really because I had been used to exploring my experiences, I used to try and assess my own strengths and weaknesses”***

***(Fig. 5.2, Interview with Gapper, see Appendix 3)***

This I found to be interesting because it made me consider how an intensive support system had really prepared the gappers for the next step in their lives. For some it had helped to enable self-reflection, for others it had left them with a sense of confusion in their new roles:

***“I asked my new line manger, ‘how often do we have sessions to explore my learning and development?’. They said that they haven’t done anything like that in the past. I was shocked. They suggested that perhaps it should be introduced” (Fig. 5.3, Interview with Gapper, see Appendix 3)***

I feel this is important to mention because after being on the gap scheme and having that 360° support i.e. line manager, supervisor, colleagues, peers etc., I interpreted

that it was difficult for the ex-gappers to adapt to a new situation where the support system was not as intensive. However, I also wondered if the gappers were looking for more than what is in some cases available? In other words, had the gappers really progressed if they were transferring dependability for their learning to a third party or at that stage should they be taking responsibility for their own learning? It is difficult to answer this question because in reality I think it is a bit of both.

Nevertheless, from this study, I do feel I can highlight this valuable learning point and draw the attention of those with a vested interest. My recommendation would be that organisations or line managers explain clearly, at the start of the gap year, the concentrated support system that the gappers might receive, which perhaps may not be available in their next position. However, I would also stress to gappers that there is no reason why the individual can not transfer their learning and explain the benefits of a comprehensive support system to the new organisation, hence disseminating good practice, as with the case of the ex-gapper (Appendix 3).

#### *Personal Motivation*

Motivation is a curious concept. We know that what works for one person will not necessarily work for the next. You can motivate someone else or be highly motivated yourself. Yet, we also know in reality some things get us excited, energetic and enthusiastic, while other things do not. Knowing what it is that releases that excitement and energy can help create an environment where gappers will work at their best (Handy, 1988: 27)<sup>24</sup>. As I have previously stated motivation is generally individualised, although during the research I was able to explore some common factors that motivated the gappers throughout their placement: accomplishment, acknowledgment, real responsibility and career development.

The majority of ex- gappers interviewed talked about having a positive mental attitude and portrayed themselves as agents of their own development. Whether they were recounting processes of identity work, emotional growth, learning teamwork skills, or making connections with other people, they described the processes in which growth emanated from their own thoughts and actions:

***“I was given the opportunity to move away and have a fresh start. I had to adjust to independent living but had been given the opportunity to change – I needed to!”***

***(Fig. 5.4, Gapper B)***

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<sup>24</sup> Handy, C. (1988) Understanding Voluntary Organisations, Pelican .....

***“It was a bridge for me from lack of clarity to a career move”***

***(Fig. 5.5, Gapper G)***

***Being given the opportunity to change, I had the time to make the best of my life and pass on my experiences to other young people – telling them to make the most of their lives”***  
***(Fig. 5.6, Gapper J)***

There was frequent mention of ‘personal change’, ‘making the best of the opportunity’ and having ‘space to make mistakes but having support to help learning’ (Gapper H). This research study was able to explore the type of developmental changes that were salient for the ex-gappers. I was able to capture in their own concepts and words, the changes that had occurred, as oppose to the jargon and authoritative speak of government and organisations etc. (see Appendix 3 for ex-gappers comments).

One of the important attributes of creating that personal motivation mentioned by the ex-gappers was that everything about the gap scheme was ‘real’. They found the life changing situations, face to face work with like minded young people and the individual responsibility both satisfying and rewarding.

***“It was great having real work and responsibility (face to face, admin, planning etc) being involved with everything behind the scenes not just turning up to events”*** (Fig. 5.7, Gapper M)

I can compare the ex-gappers need to make the most of the gap placement opportunities, to fulfil their potential, capabilities and desire for growth, with theories of motivation suggested by Maslow and Herzberg. The concept of *self-actualisation* proposed by Maslow highlights the inherent need for a person to use their capacities and skills in a productive way (Maslow, 1971)<sup>25</sup>. The features of Herzberg’s theory of motivation show a parallel between his main factors: achievement, recognition, growth/ advancement and interest in the job (Herzberg, 1959)<sup>26</sup>, with those mentioned by the ex-gappers, see table 5.8 below for further comparisons:

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<sup>25</sup> Maslow, A. (1971) *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York: Viking

<sup>26</sup> Herzberg, F. Mausner B. and Snyderman, B. (1959) *The Motivation to Work*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

**HERZBERG'S THEORY  
OF MOTIVATION**

**GAPPERS QUOTES**

• Achievement

***“Having someone believe in me for 6-9 months. No one back home thought I’d amount to anything” (Gapper N)***

***“It helped me create self-belief. I had more faith and confidence in my ability” (Gapper R)***

***“I loved doing the face to face work, it was such an achievement” (Gapper S)***

• Recognition

***“The main benefit was ... getting recognition for the work I was doing” (Gapper A, H,)***

§ Growth/ advancement

***“The level and access to training and career development was a main benefit” (Gapper D)***

***“It gave me the opportunity to discover if I wanted to have a career in working with young people” (Gapper K)***

***“It was an opportunity to develop in a system of youth work, especially after being unemployed” (Gapper Q)***

§ Interest in the job

***“It opened my eyes to the varied work undertaken around the UK” (Gapper C)***

***“It was great being responsible for the work, having real projects to work on” (Gapper T)***

***Figure 5.8 Herzberg’s theory of motivation in comparison to ex-gapper research***

In this section I have discussed various points the ex-gappers made on personal motivation. It may seem like an avoidance to suggest that in the end there are no universal answers because gappers’ motivations will vary. However, I am able to conclude from the research that when gappers are engaged both cognitively and emotionally, they are likely to be involved in actively constructing and recognising

personal change. This could be seen as one of the 'benefits' searched for by employers and higher education institutions, as discussed on pages 20 - 22.

It is my opinion that each potential gap placement needs to be looked at individually, in terms of what is needed to motivate that gapper. My recommendation for line managers of UK voluntary organisations is to ascertain the needs of the individual gappers, ensuring they are given real responsibility, clear and achievable goals, recognition for their achievement and most importantly enough freedom for personal growth.

#### *Real work and responsibility*

A gap year can help prepare young people for the work place. Being involved in real-life situations and being responsible for the development of projects equips the gappers with 'soft skills' such as communication, problem solving, relationship building and decision making. It also gives them a sense of what it feels like to be an employee, part of a team, having to work with targets and deadlines. In my research, the ex-gappers used the words 'real work' to describe their practice. In a further discussion, one ex-gapper explained why they used the term 'real':

***“There was a great difference between this work and the other I have done in the past e.g. work experience. On this placement, everything you did was real, not pretend, the people you spoke to, the money you spent, the decisions you made... you were responsible for intervening in people’s lives. That’s a huge responsibility, the best way I can think of to describe it, is that it’s REAL work” (Fig. 5.9, Interview with Gapper Appendix 3.)***

A core debate could ensue at this point for the progressive educationalists who would argue that being involved and reflecting on real work denotes real life experience, which according to Dewey is central to the way we learn. The results of the research showed that on a Rank gap year, emphasis that is given to the review of experience, the transfer of learning, group process and individual growth, will lead to a systematic and purposeful development of the whole person – body, mind and spirit. It encourages active participative learning on the grounds that 'the most effective way to stimulate learning is to link it to the individuals own experiences and concerns': (Udall et al 1990: 3)<sup>27</sup>:

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<sup>27</sup> Udall, Stopol & Holcombe, (1990) The New York City OB Centre Guide to Program Planning cited in Journal of Ecosophy WNSS, Vol.14 No.2 pgs 87 – 89

***“the experience of face to face work was daunting and that’s what I learnt most of all – it’s not like reading text books – anything can happen in groups and the conversation can go anywhere. The work was real and sometimes scary but I felt my responsibility was learning from my experiences, learning from what I did right or wrong and then trying again next time” (Fig. 5.10, Gapper M)***

Considering the advantages stated by the employing organisations who offered the ‘real work’ undertaken by the gappers and by the results of my interviews with ex-gappers, I feel that experiential learning is being accepted more widely nowadays in real-life working situations. The increase in vocational assessments compared to exams and the increase in young people taking time out to experience and develop personal and social skills indicates a change in our culture. It would appear that experiential education is evolving as part of our formal education system. This is an interesting phenomena and one which could reflect a cultural shift towards the way we learn in our society. My research shows that 50% of ex-gappers stated, without prompting, that the real work situations were a valuable learning experience, compared to their formal education:

***“this style of work was different for me – it was real work, all the time, not like work experience, where you show up for 2 weeks and they get you to file and make coffee” (Fig. 5.11, Gapper M)***

***“I wasn’t interested in school and learning, I hated exams. I learnt more in my work place than all of my school days” (Fig. 5.12, Gapper L)***

From the result of the research, I would say that providing the gappers with real work and responsibility gives a dynamic introduction to the world of work. My recommendation would be to encourage UK voluntary organisations to provide work placements and assign real responsibility to young people. My study suggests that the modern working society and higher educational institutions still present daunting challenges. However, in my opinion, those who have experienced a constructive gap year volunteering are more likely to be able to manage themselves in the work place.

All the same, I feel this section has left me with unanswered questions about how and why our culture and learning styles are changing. What will be the implications on the workforce in years to come? What attitudes will there be towards experiential learning, working, formal qualifications etc? What effect will this have on the field of informal education? I feel unable to resolve these questions at this point but it is may be something I will return to in future studies.

#### *Interaction with other people within the field*

Alongside support, personal motivation and reality, the ex-gappers stressed how important interacting with other people had been in their gap year. On closer scrutiny there were many relationships and associations involved. Some examples

discussed by ex-gappers throughout the research were, the gapper and: line manager, colleagues, peers, clients, experts, other organisations and agencies, etc. From my experience and learning, I can say that some relationships can allow us to flourish and involves an emotional connection with other people. Through sharing our thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings we can learn about others, ourselves and find our place in the world. In short, this means developing conversations that involves others, deepening our understanding, which in turn can help us make sound judgements and decisions:

***“I was able to pass on my experiences to others when I met other people who were on the gap scheme. It was good to find others that had similar issues – it wasn’t just me – it made me feel great and determined to succeed.” (Fig. 5.13, Gapper J)***

***“Attending the residentials, meeting people from different projects from around the UK and learning about the different work that is being done, was definitely one of the main benefits of my placement” (Fig. 5.14, Gapper D)***

Undertaking a gap placement can produce individualised work for a gapper. In fact, already in this discussion I have mentioned the necessity to address the individuals’ needs in terms of support and personal motivation. However, there is an essential topic the ex-gappers frequently mentioned and that was the need to have a sense of belonging and identity. They gained this from the different networking opportunities that were provided on their placement for example, residentials, conferences, and meetings etc. For some of the ex-gappers, their placements were in the same area where they had been raised so for them ‘mixing’ with others from different areas enabled the ex-gappers to see the bigger picture and identify with a sense of the wider world:

***“It opened my eyes to the varied work that was being undertaken around the UK, work can get very area focused. Working in Belfast everything is centred around religion and cross community work, whereas in other parts of the UK there are allsorts of activities and with different needs and agendas”***

***(Fig. 5.15, Gapper C)***

An important issue that arose for me out of the information gained throughout the research was the comparison of personal lives. A number of the ex-gappers had joined the gap placements from disaffected backgrounds and had seized their gap year as an opportunity to change. In terms of interacting with other people, having the place to share experiences and discuss personal circumstances enhanced their sense of identity and belonging, as one ex-gapper described it as ‘feeling normal’:

***“I needed a fresh start - the gap scheme allowed me to overcome personal barriers and get a wider picture of the work that was being done around the country. I wasn't proud of my past but speaking to other gappers who had had similar, even worse experiences than me, made me feel normal!”***

***(Fig. 5.16, Gapper N)***

***“I had a chance to turn my life around. Meeting other gappers at residential and finding out their personal stories helped me change my behaviour”***

***(Fig. 5.17, Gapper S)***

This section for me feels very powerful because it emphasises the need for relationships and the strength we have to influence and help each other when equal, open and trustworthy associations are made. Because people are around us everyday and are involved in every aspect of our life it is sometimes easy to forget the importance of the role they play in our life journey. Being honest, I had underestimated this point which was identified as essential, by the ex-gappers. For me, this emphasised the need as informal educators to promote ‘relationships’ as both a medium through which informal educators work, and a state that they want to foster, to enable the individual to flourish. My recommendations to UK voluntary organisations offering gap placements would be to encourage the gappers to attend residential and network with their peers i.e. interact with other people, exchange ideas, make contact with individuals, particularly those on the similar schemes. Engaging with people and building relationships are skills that are not only required in the workplace but are essential for life. If managed effectively by both the gapper and the organisation, the gap year can provide a stable learning ground for developing these skills. The quotes used in this section alone, would be enough to convince me that taking a gap year was a valuable learning experience for those young people.

Should the voluntary sector promote UK volunteering?

In the previous section, I have explored the benefits of being on a gap scheme from a gappers point of view. I have offered recommendations to UK voluntary organisations that may provide gap years to young people, to enable consideration on what conditions need to be in place for constructive placements. It is these main learning points that define what makes taking a year out a valuable experience for young people. The following section concentrates on exploring the question: should the voluntary sector promote UK volunteering for gap year volunteers?

After having considered all the options I would say, yes, the voluntary sector should promote the opportunities of gap year volunteering. I feel this should be done, not to conform to government, university or employing organisational issues, but because of the benefits to young people to participate on a gap scheme. Volunteering is one

way of enabling young people to experience at first hand the wider social issues facing communities.

Having undertaken research for this report I have discovered that indeed a number of voluntary organisations do promote their gap year opportunities e.g. CSV, BCTV. However, I am left questioning whether these organisations are really selling the benefits of participating on a gap scheme, given the present number of UK volunteers. My research study has produced relevant information which could enable UK voluntary organisations to make volunteer gap placements more attractive to young people and more effective for their own organisations. I would recommend that organisations focus on the nature of the work involved and advertise the benefits on offer. These benefits include:

- § In reality our formal education system still uses a learning-by-telling or learning-by-observing method, which means that organisations that use a learning-by-doing approach are, in my opinion, at the cutting-edge of holistic development.
- § The opportunity to learn from experience, develop basic key skills which make the difference between building relationships with people and merely co-existing, as well as self-discipline, responsibility and common sense, reflects the importance of factors earlier generations would have approved of and are crucial to being functional in a modern world.
- § I would advise organisations to think about the motivations gappers have for becoming volunteers (such as personal change, self-development, improving key skills, considering career options etc.) as these can help design volunteering opportunities and inform recruitment.
- § Organisations should review the medium by which volunteer gap years are promoted. Use of media, websites, literature and leaflets are all effectively used by that part of the international gap year industry and some UK organisations. On some websites e.g. [www.yearoutgroup.org](http://www.yearoutgroup.org) three UK organisations mingle with international options.
- § A full national review of UK gap year opportunities is conducted to enable a more structured approach to presenting UK volunteering. This may include developing a website entirely for UK volunteering gap year organisations, or even a directory which is easily accessible to all. I would suggest that the Government carry out and conduct this study, especially as the DfES has stated they are launching a ‘full review of gap year provision, as a whole, to help develop plans to get people involved in volunteering’ (DfES 2002: par 3.27)<sup>28</sup>. This could provide a tool for

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<sup>28</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) Next Steps on Volunteering and Giving in the UK, paragraph 3.27

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voluntary organisations and young people to use and would validate the Government's statement on the benefits of a 'year out':

***the benefits of a 'year out' – particularly where it involves voluntary activity – should be more widely understood and more widely available. (Humphreys, DfES 2003)<sup>29</sup>***

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<sup>29</sup> Humphreys, L. (2003) Correspondence directly received from Department for Education and Skills

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## Part five - conclusion

This study investigated the gap year industry, specifically concentrating on UK volunteering and looking at how the voluntary sector can make UK gap schemes a more attractive option to gap year volunteers.

Before I undertook my initial research I had an idea of what I thought were the main conditions that needed to be present to make the gap placement a valuable learning experience. My findings have provided evidence that these thoughts were correct, however it also highlighted some other important points that I had originally overlooked:

- § The need to network – a sharing of experiences, finding a sense of identity and belonging
- § Real work and responsibility – the emphasis on learning from all the practical aspects of work, developing skills, trustworthiness, being part of a team and individual accountability
- § A shift in society's approach to experiential learning

My findings have also proved that although some UK voluntary organisations promote their gap year opportunities, this could be improved. Existing information on UK opportunities is currently sporadic and I would recommend that this be an area for future development. I also feel that the Government should be actively involved in this process.

As for my personal learning, completing this study has been a journey. I feel that through my praxis and newly acquired knowledge I am able to contribute to the field valid points of learning, which could affect informal practice among UK voluntary organisations. However, through this study I have also highlighted a number of questions which I would consider points for further study.

I have learned that in a report of this type it is difficult to remove bias. Limitations have arisen at different points of this study as discussed in part one of this report, however I do feel my greatest limitation was my research base. Although the information gained was very interesting and useful, it would have been more helpful to my analysis to interview ex-gappers that had experiences from partaking on other voluntary organisations' schemes. Also to speak to gappers that had

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travelled abroad, to compare learning experiences and ask why they chose that option. However, reviewing the Rank Gap Scheme has proved to be significant as it has verified that this scheme is unique in that it is 'person centred'. In other words, the 'work' is not the primary concern, as it may be in other organisations. This scheme invests in developing people. It is a system that works and I feel that it should be promoted as such. Other organisations and the Government should use this scheme as an example that benefits all involved: the gapper, the organisation and the wider communities.

I have also learned how I felt that there was not enough time to do all the research that I deemed to be essential in order to do a thorough job. One example of this was that the reading took longer than anticipated. Books and articles had to be located and for me the temptation to read just one more book was strong. There was also the reality that this is a relatively new phenomenon and obtaining information was difficult. At one stage a decision had to be made to stop reading and researching. Forcing myself to move on, was a discipline that I had to develop.

How does this study add to the field of informal education? I have questioned whether our learning culture is slowly changing away from academia and exams to a more informal way of learning. Although unable to follow through on those thoughts in this particular study, I was able to confirm that the Government, higher education institutions and employers all stated that a constructive gap year is a positive occurrence for the future of an individual, as well as the country's workforce. Could this influence a shift in learning styles offered for the future?

In my opinion, the research has shown that if organisations that provide gap year volunteering opportunities attempt to take on ideas like leadership, relationship building and well-being, they are uniquely placed to cultivate a valuable learning experience for young people, like for example The Rank Gap Scheme. In other words, there is a need to pay attention to creating the environment and building relationships in which gappers can learn about themselves and their environments, in a way that leaves them with more options than what they arrived with. I will end on this significant proposal to workers, educators, agencies etc that focus may be best directed, not at teaching the gappers, but supporting them to teach themselves.

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# APPENDIX 1: History of the gap year

*1960's: Started with the baby boomers heading to the Indian hippie trails*

*1970's: Tailed off as baby boomers settled down*

*1980's: Virtually non existent – make money money money! Not travel...*

*1990's: Baby boomer children hit 18, encouraged to take gap years*

*Acceleration early 1990's, exploded late 1990's*

*2000-2002: Pre university gaps booming*

*(Griffith 2002, on [www.gapyear.com](http://www.gapyear.com))<sup>1</sup>*



(Likert Scale - the next set of questions I will read a statement and would like you to choose an answer strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree etc)

After experiencing the gap scheme:

1. I felt left to cope on my own

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2. I felt let down

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

3. I experienced challenges after I left

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

4. I had more self – confidence

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

5. It had a positive impact on my life

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
----------------	-------	----------	-------------------

6. I have become more aware of how I learn

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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7. It allowed me to focus on my future/ career path

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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**8. I actively use self-reflection as a tool for personal development**

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
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**6) What skills have you acquired through the gap scheme that you have been able to take with you after the placement**

<b>SKILLS</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>NO CHANGE</b>
<b>Evaluate performance</b>			
<b>Seek information and advice</b>			
<b>Make effective decisions</b>			
<b>Represent the views of others</b>			
<b>Plan time and energy</b>			
<b>Carry through responsibilities</b>			
<b>Use communication skills to give and take feedback</b>			
<b>Use presentation skills to present issues and argue cases</b>			
<b>Negotiate effectively</b>			
<b>Deal with people in power and authority</b>			
<b>Solve problems</b>			
<b>Resolve conflicts</b>			
<b>Cope with stress and tension</b>			
<b>Work effectively as a team</b>			
<b>Assess strengths and weaknesses</b>			
<b>Youth work</b>			

**7) What would you say was the main benefit for you of being on the gap scheme?**

**(in your own words)**

**8) Why do you think the gap scheme was a valuable learning experience for you?**

**9) What do you think are the conditions needed for a successful gap placement?**

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## Appendix 3 – Extracts of transcribed interviews with ex-gappers

How did having support from your line manager make a difference to your placement and personal development?

*“The support I got from my line manager was brilliant. For me that support was the key part to my placement, along side doing some real work. But my line manager encouraged me to reflect on my learning, especially my mistakes. I didn’t get told off when things went wrong we just examined what had gone wrong and how I should do it next time. I was treated equally like a worker not like a child.”*

**Gapper M**

*“Having someone who I could talk to regularly, within the organisation, helped me to work through my thoughts and experiences. It gave me a chance to talk out problems and explore solutions and experiences that I had not even thought of.”*

**Gapper R**

*“I didn’t have any kind of support throughout my placement, even though I was supposed to. My line manager was also too busy with other priorities and because I just got on with the work they just let me get on with it. However, the placement was really hard for me. I couldn’t talk to anyone in the organisation about what I was doing, learning, feeling etc. everyone was either too busy or just didn’t understand the support system that should be in place. Fortunately, I had a mentor outside of the organisation who was involved in Rank and new what the Gap Scheme was about. They helped me, otherwise I’m not sure if I would have been able to learn anything. Of course looking back now I can see lots of learning, in particular how NOT to line manage someone!”*

**Gapper O**

You answered ‘strongly agree’ to feeling left to cope on your own after the placement, can you explain the reasons behind why you felt like that?

*“When I got my job after my gap placement, I hardly ever had meetings with my line manager and when I did we certainly didn’t talk about my learning. It was all about figures and how many young people I would be having to my sessions and how I was going to increase the number of volunteers in the centre. It was a shock really because I had been used to exploring my experiences, I used to try and assess my own strengths and weaknesses”*

***“I was feeling strange not having regular sessions. I didn’t feel that I was able to assess if I was developing my new role because I had become that used to going through everything. Eventually I asked my new line manger, ‘how often do we have sessions to explore my learning and development?’ They said that they haven’t done anything like that in the past. I was shocked. I then explained what had happened on my gap placement and how useful it had been. They suggested that perhaps it should be introduced into their system”***

***Gapper K***

Throughout my research you, as well as other ex-gappers, have used the term ‘real work’, when describing your gap placements. What do you mean by the term ‘real work’?

***“There was a great difference between this work and the other I have done in the past e.g. work experience. On this placement, everything you did was real, not pretend, the people you spoke to, the money you spent, the decisions you made... you were responsible for intervening in people’s lives. That’s a huge responsibility, the best way I can think of to describe it, is that it is REAL work”***

***Gapper R***

***“this style of work was different for me – it was real work, all the time, not like work experience, where you show up for 2 weeks and they get you to file and make coffee”***

***Gapper M***

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Personal recordings

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This report examines the growth of the gap year industry and the concept that taking a year out could be considered a valuable learning experience for young people.

Part one explores the theory of gap years, the reason why this study was undertaken and who the report is aimed at. It focuses on the different methodology used, which centred on a research survey of twenty young people who experienced a gap placement. It provides an evaluation of the limitations experienced in the action research and creation of this report.

Part two reviews some critical perceptions of gap years. In particular I examine gap year volunteering as work related learning and explore the Government's position, a higher educational perspective and issues for employing organisations.

Part three reports on my survey and interviews. The four main areas identified by the ex-gappers as being essential to their placement and UK volunteering experience, were having: support from their organisation; a positive mental attitude; interaction with other people within the field; and being involved in real-life working situations.

Part four is an analysis and discussion of the key findings. It includes making recommendations and offering best practices to the UK voluntary sector providing gap year placements. It also explores a shift in society's approach to experiential learning and whether the UK voluntary sector should be more pro-active in promoting UK volunteering.

The report concludes in Part five with an overall assessment of the research undertaken and focuses on the individual learning of the author, as well as the contribution this study makes to the field of informal education.