

# Dole fears keep gap year students abroad

**Jeremy Watson**

GAP year graduates are pleading for their overseas placements to be extended to avoid returning to Britain and rising levels of youth unemployment.

Projects Abroad, a company which arranges for young volunteers to work in different countries, says 130 students have asked to stay away from the UK because of grim job prospects back home.

The company says this is the first time since it was set up in 1991 that it has had such requests – some to stay indefinitely – from its volunteers working on community-based projects in Third World and less-developed countries.

The requests come amid fears of a “lost generation” as youth unemployment levels soar as a result of the global recession. Last week, it emerged in official UK government statistics that one in six young people aged 18-24 are so-called “neets” – not in education, employment or training. This amounts to 835,000 young people, 100,000 more than at the same time last year.

Projects Abroad sends more than 5,000 young gap year travellers

to work for periods of between two weeks and 12 months every year. The firm's founder and chairman, Dr Peter Slowe, said: “In nearly 20 years of operation we have never seen young people basically not wanting to come back home. This is a new phenomenon.

“The prospect of gap year travellers returning to bleak employment prospects in Britain is not particularly exciting. A number are requesting extended placements, which we are looking into providing.

“Ten weeks is simply not proving long enough for young people eager to work and make a difference. A lot of them are better off carving a career out or working on enterprises in the Third World and clearly want to stay there as long as possible,” Slowe said.

One former student who considered staying on placement in Shanghai is George Thomson, 24, from Bruntisfield, Edinburgh. After graduating from Glasgow University, Thomson took a temporary job with the civil service in Scotland before heading to China for a four-month internship with an English-language magazine.

Knowing he had to return home in March, he spent his last



**Next step: graduates are opting for more time in projects abroad**

few weeks receiving gloomy messages from friends in Scotland about job prospects.

“I was asking my friends to keep an eye out for jobs but all I was getting back was grim news,” he said. “I was seriously thinking about staying out there until the situation improved.” He eventually returned to a temporary job with the civil service.

He added: “But the prospects still aren't good for many people of my age and I am thinking about trying my luck abroad again next year, somewhere like South Africa.”

Figures from the Department

for Children, Schools and Families, showed that half the jobs lost over the last year were those of young people. The EU statistics body, Eurostat, has reported that Britain's youth unemployment is currently outstripping that of France, Germany and many other European countries.

A spokesman for the Scottish Government said it was concerned about graduate unemployment although a survey had indicated that there were more vacancies for university leavers in Scotland than in England at present. It was working with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services to ensure final year students and unemployed graduates receive appropriate advice and support to get into their first job, back into work or take up further studies.

“The development of the AGCAS Scotland website will meanwhile enable employers to advertise free to graduates seeking employment,” he added. “We will continue to monitor this situation and invest in skills and training as part of our commitment to produce a more skilled and successful workforce who can contribute to Scotland's economic recovery.”

■ jwatson@scotlandonsunday.com

