



A VSO experience

Steven Barlow had been progressing up the NHS career ladder when he hit a promotion ceiling. 'I couldn't go any further because I didn't have any medical qualifications,' said Steven. Until then his career had used transferable skills from his degree in agricultural marketing and management. 'At first I thought that what I wanted was to work overseas but when I was offered a well paid logistics job in Saudi Arabia I realised it wasn't simply about being overseas.'

Fairly quickly Steven had made contact with VSO and had the offer of an overseas posting to Malawi using his management experience and his agricultural degree. 'My friends had two responses shock and disbelief that I could give up a well paid career followed quickly by 'we're jealous''. In Malawi Steven helped out in a project that had been set up to encourage cooperation between small farmers. "Most farmers had small parcels of land, typically 0.4 of an hectare. They grew barely enough maize to feed their own families. Our project was very practical. Encouraging the setting up of cooperatives to buy and sell at a better price for example and building granaries to sell and store grain locally rather have it disappear into the cities. We also introduced book keeping, credit schemes and business plans. The project wasn't without its difficulties but was definitely a success."

Steven then moved on to another project helping people resettle who had been moved out of a conservation area.. "This started out as a VSO placing" said Steven, "but I transferred across as an employee and took on a more senior role. Again the project was focused on small business development. Utilising the skills and resources in villages to help communities thrive. This wasn't just about technical development but had an emphasis on social development." Steven stayed on in Malawi for over 5 years. "It was an absolutely fantastic experience," he says. "I've never worked so hard in my life. It wasn't a gap year type experience with heaps of leisure time spent at the lake but the 5 years flew past. In fact I enjoyed it so much I thought I might never leave."

Ironically Steven left because a senior colleague told him, 'if you're serious about staying in Development you have to leave.' 'It was pretty clear' says Steven, 'that my next career step would have to be a MA in Development. I chose Reading University because I

wanted a course that would allow me to deepen my involvement with agriculture and the modular nature of the Reading course easily allowed me to do this. Also the Reading course had a high percentage of overseas students on it and part of my approach to Development work is about recognising and utilising the talents that exist locally.'

The next challenge for Steven is finding that first post after his MSc. 'I'm looking for a role using my small business development experience. Possibly overseas or more likely UK based in the first instance.' Steven does not regret what his VSO experience opened up. 'It has changed my life,' says Steven, 'but part of that change is readjusting to life back in the UK. To be honest I thought I'd breeze into a job. I have more relevant international work experience than many on the course but it is tough. In retrospect I can see that my period of study was also a great networking opportunity. It's a great way of making contact with potential employers without having that 'job seeking' badge. The VSO have helped by providing some careers support which has helped me in my applications and while I haven't found the post for me yet I haven't given up.'

Jeff Riley – SOAS Careers Service.

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More Case Studies like this are available in the book, 'Getting Into Development' published April 2006. Buy a copy online at www.careers.lon.ac.uk/output/Page612.asp or call in to your university careers office.

