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PLANNING A GAP YEAR

Planning a Gap Year

Introduction

There are many reasons for considering a gap year. They range from taking time out to improve your financial situation before starting your university course to wanting to discover different cultures, gain specific experiences or develop new skills. A gap year can be a positive and sometimes life-changing period of your life. University admission tutors and employers look favourably on a year out, providing it is organised and well-structured. They increasingly attach importance to evidence of enterprise, maturity and sustained commitment both within and outside formal education. A gap year allows you to stretch yourself in more ways than you can imagine – why not see where it takes you? How you choose to spend your gap year is up to you, but the key to success is to research and plan your time in as much detail as possible.

Travelling

If you want to go travelling then the key is preparation. It doesn't matter how free you want to be to take up opportunities en route, you will still need a passport to go anywhere. You will also need visas for many countries you want to visit and it is often much less trouble to organise a visa before you set out than to try to do it en route.

Passport

If you need to get yourself a passport for the first time, application forms are available from Post Offices or you can apply online.

You can use the Passport Office 'Check and Send' service at selected Post Offices throughout the UK or send it direct. The 'Check and Send' services gets your application checked for completeness (including documentation and fee) and given priority by the Identity and Passport Service. For more information, please go to www.ips.gov.uk.

Visas and permits

Each country has its own rules about entry and whether you can work or not. You will need to check with each embassy and the Foreign and Commonwealth website (www.fco.gov.uk) has a list of contacts for all foreign embassies in the UK.

Country information

The economic and political situations can change very quickly and we recommend that you check with the FCO for the latest information and whether it is still safe to travel right up until you go. Travel advice for individual countries is updated regularly on the FCO website (www.fco.gov.uk).

Register online with the FCO so that the British Embassy knows where you are in the event of a crisis like a tsunami or a terrorist attack (www.fco.gov.uk/locate).

Get a good guidebook and carry out some research into your destination(s) before you go, including its laws, customs and language, especially those relating to alcohol and drugs. This will help you avoid offending people or breaking local laws, however unwittingly.

- *Don't blow your nose in public in Japan as this is offensive.*
- *Never pass or accept anything with your left hand in Indonesia as this is very rude.*
- *Don't chew gum, drop litter or spit in Singapore as this is illegal.*

Insurance

Make sure you get comprehensive travel and medical insurance and that it provides adequate cover for any activities you may be doing. Your policy also needs to cover all your medical and repatriation costs. If you do not take out proper insurance, you will normally have to pay the costs of any emergency yourself.

Health

Make sure you visit your GP as soon as possible before going abroad. Find out what jabs you need and get advice on any additional health precautions you may need. The vaccinations will vary according to your current state of health, your destination and how long you are going away for.

Check with the embassy of the country you are going to that any medication you are taking with you will be legal in that country. Inhalers and other common prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines are banned in some countries! If you need to take medication you should ensure that you have a note from your doctor and that the medicine is in its original packaging.

Useful websites:

- www.dh.gov.uk/travellers - NHS website
- www.fco.gov.uk/travel - Foreign Office travel website
- www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk - website giving information on travel health issues for each country of the world.
- www.iamat.org – names and addresses of English-speaking doctors and clinics all over the world.

Finance

Before you go abroad you will need to think about how much money you will need and what format you will take it in. Some pre-trip research will make it easier to work this out and think about how much you will need on a daily basis, such as food, accommodation and any additional activities.

It is worth noting that, if you don't have a return ticket, many countries will refuse you entry unless you can prove you have enough money to buy one. British consular staff can not send you home for free if you run out of money!

Gap year companies

If you decide to organise your trip with a gap year company, research it thoroughly before committing. Find out how long they have been operating and how many people they have taken abroad in the past. This is one time when word of mouth and personal recommendations are useful. It is a good idea to talk to someone who has been on a gap year with the company you are considering before you sign up for anything and make sure you read the reviews online.

Working Abroad

You have decided to spend part of your gap year abroad working, but what to do and how to go about it?

Europe is by far the easiest place to work. British citizens can work in any EU country plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein without restriction. Of course, you will normally need to speak the local language and demonstrate some other tangible benefit to the employer before you get taken on. It always pays to be enthusiastic, flexible and open-minded.

Many countries have specific immigration programmes that allow young travellers from Britain to take paid training positions with local companies. Most of these programmes must be arranged through a sponsoring organisation such as BUNAC and typically you have to have relevant work experience to qualify. The USA has strict and complicated regulations on visas and work permits. It is advisable to use a placement organisation to assist you with the paperwork. Make sure you check with the US embassy that you can get a visa or work permit for the job you fancy (<http://london.usembassy.gov/>).

Australia, New Zealand and Japan offer useful working holiday visas that allow you to work and travel for up to a year. These schemes are designed for people who want to take on casual work while they travel to top up their funds; just surfing the internet from the UK (using keywords like 'Australia jobs' or 'vacation work Australia' gives you an idea of what is on offer. You can find information on all types of visas, including the Student Visa, on the Australian High Commission website www.australia.org.uk.

Top tips on working abroad

- Be prepared – find out what paperwork and permits you need in advance. If you arrive in Australia without a work permit, you will need to leave the country to get one.
- Learn the language – few employers will hire you without a good grasp of the language.
- Persistence – sometimes it is tough to find work, but do not give up. If you have got the skills and the right to work, there is probably a job out of there for you.

Working in the UK

An increasing number of students are now choosing to spend their gap year in the UK and there are plenty of reasons to use it for work:

- Saving money for university – going to university is an expensive thing to do and many graduates end up heavily in debt. Earning just a little bit now could really help cut student debt later.
- Showing commitment – popular professions like medicine and law are incredibly competitive and hard to get into, so it could be a good idea to grab any experience you can, paid or unpaid.
- Work experience – avoid the vicious circle of having no experience and being rejected at interview 'because of a lack of work experience'. A gap year is an ideal opportunity to build up initial experience of work culture.
- Not sure what you want to do – a gap year can be a great time to try out different jobs and to get a feel for what you might want to do in the future.

The Year in Industry (www.yini.org.uk)

The Year in Industry organises paid pre-university work placements in the UK that last for 12 months. Work is real, challenging and paid (students currently earn on average between £8,000 and £12,000 per year). Areas of work include Engineering, Sciences, IT and Business and a £25 registration fee applies.

To help you with the job search, here are a few links:

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| Student summer jobs - | www.student-jobs.co.uk |
| Graduate careers - | www.jobs.guardian.co.uk |
| General vacancies - | www.reed.co.uk |
| | www.fish4jobs.co.uk |
| | www.monster.com |

Volunteering

Volunteering abroad

Voluntary work abroad can be a most rewarding way to spend all or part of your gap year. By taking part in an organised work project you can learn about a different culture, meet new people and learn to communicate with people who may not understand your way of life, let alone your language.

You need to decide what you want from your experience – a holiday with a bit of volunteering on the side (so-called ‘voluntourism’) or full-time involvement in a serious project. You also need to work out how much you want to spend as paradoxically volunteering can be hugely pricey (to cover the costs of local representation, assistance with travel arrangements, administration and so on). Due to the daily media reports on poverty in the developing world and various global threats to the planet’s climate, ecology and environment, more and more people are becoming interested in doing something worthwhile during their gap year and competition for places is getting fiercer.

A good place to start is the Year Out Group (www.yearoutgroup.org), an umbrella association for more than 35 gap year organisations. You can search by company, project or destination. Check out what you will be expected to do, whether you need any particular skill or experience, and what training is provided. Is the company willing to provide contact details of returned volunteers and not just direct you to the glowing reports on its website?

Try also:

Worldwide Volunteering - <http://www.org.uk>
 Ecoteer - www.ecoteer.com
 Lattitude - www.lattitude.org
 Voluntary Service Overseas - www.vso.org.uk

Voluntourism

Companies such as i-to-i (www.i-to-i.com), Real Gap (www.realgap.co.uk) and Hands Up Holidays (www.handsupholidays.com) have helped to create ‘voluntourism’ (the combined holiday/short volunteering option). Trips with i-to-i, for example, cost around £1,000-£1,800 for between two and six weeks, including some meals, hostel accommodation and activities, but excluding flights, insurance and visas.

Medical

If you are considering a career as a medical or nursing professional, exploring these areas during a gap year abroad will give you invaluable, hands-on insight before fully committing to a degree, while also providing CV-boosting experience in the field. The benefits to the local communities you are serving can be enormous. Often these communities have scant access to healthcare and even a little medical experience can provide tremendous assistance to those who need it most.

Gap Medics (www.gapmedics.com) offers gap year students the safest and greatest opportunity to gain genuine medical experience, whilst travelling to some of the most beautiful destinations in the world. Following intensive pre-placement training, students become part of the team, gaining on-the-job experience alongside an appointed supervisor, as well as making a real contribution to the local community.

Medforce (www.medforce.info) offers a large variety of projects in a wide range of countries. You can choose to work in a hospital or a clinic, raise awareness on health issues at schools, or provide medical support in remote communities. In addition, they offer the opportunity to work in specialised medical areas, such as dentistry, physiotherapy and neurosurgery.

Volunteering in the UK

Volunteering does not have to be done in a developing country to bring a sense of satisfaction. You can combine volunteering with a study course or part-time job or you can get experience before committing to a project abroad. The following websites provide useful links and information about volunteering:

www.do-it.org.uk
www.ncvo-vol.org.uk
www.timebank.org.uk
www.vois.org.uk
<http://volunteering.org.uk>

If you are planning to spend all or part of your gap year in the UK, why not join one of the following volunteer projects:

- Wildlife Trusts (www.wildlifetrusts.org) - the largest voluntary organisation working in the UK on all aspects of nature conservation. Large, but local too - the chances are there is plenty you can do close to home which will benefit the environment and wildlife in your area, through working with your local Wildlife Trust. Opportunities do not have to be outdoors either – you could find yourself making good use of your organisational, IT, administrative or financial skills too.
- Help Exchange (<http://helpx.net/>) brings together hosts usually living on farms and volunteers who get free accommodation and food in return for work. It has opportunities in the UK as well as around the world.
- Camphill England and Wales (www.camphill.org.uk) offers volunteering opportunities working with people with learning disabilities, mental health problems and other special needs in independent residential and day schools.

Learning New Skills

If you want your gap year to be about personal growth, you could build on this by using it as an opportunity to combine living and studying abroad.

- Learn a new skill and gain a qualification.
- Pursue an interest, hobby or passion you have not had time for.
- Explore and enrich your knowledge in your own way rather than following a curriculum.
- Add another dimension to your CV.

Here are some suggestions:

- Learn a language in a country.
- Do a sport instructor course.
- Attend music or drama summer schools.
- Explore art/music culture.
- Learn about conservation.

TEFL (www.tefl.com)

TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) is one of the most popular ways of earning when you travel, but you need to have a recognised qualification. It also has the advantage that if you were thinking of teaching as a career it is a good chance to find out if you like it.

The two best-known qualifications are:

- TESOL (a certificate from Trinity College, London)
- CELTA (Cambridge University certificate)

Many colleges around the UK offer TEFL courses, but you should check the certificate is one of these two. You can take the course online (<http://www.teflonline.com>), but it is worth doing it with an accredited training centre if it also helps you find a placement once you qualify.

Fundraising

Fundraising is recognised as being a major element of taking a gap year. Raising enough money to meet your needs while you are on your gap year placement and/or travelling independently is seen as part of the challenge. It takes time, energy, determination and planning to reach your target.

Planning

Start planning early. Try to give yourself at least six months, but really the earlier the better. Work out how much money. Make a plan; set yourself targets to raise a certain amount each month. Break the total amount down into chunks so that you can ask for a specific amount to cover an item such as your air fare, insurance, clothing, part of your gap year placement etc.

Get a job

This is recognised as the best way to raise money. Remember you are seeking work for a purpose and this should make it easier to take on even the most menial of jobs. It should also help you to find the energy to take on two jobs or more if that is what is needed to fulfil your ambition.

Hold an event

Plan an event around something you enjoy or hobbies. Events such as barn dances and sporting events have helped many previous gap year students raise significant amounts. Go to www.ideasfundraising.co.uk for more inspiration.

Grant giving bodies

Make contact with grant giving bodies in the local area. Research and write to grant making trusts and charities. The Directory of Grant Giving Trusts published by the Charities Aid Foundation is an excellent source of information and should be available in the reference section of your local library. The charitable aims of these trusts vary so look at every possible angle that applies to you. Your home town/city/county, young people, sport, conservation, education, child care and your destination country are all examples of where these trusts can apply their funds. You can also look at www.grantsonline.org.uk to get an idea of what is on offer.

Enhancing your CV

A gap year can boost a CV with key skills. Employers look for confidence, problem solving, creativity and a sense of adventure. A gap year shows you have the confidence to try something new and to do something worthwhile with your time out. Volunteering or paid work is a great way to improve a CV. Below are some examples of how a gap year may give you the relevant experience:

- Negotiation skills – may be acquired from fundraising activities such as approaching companies for donations.
- Soft skills (communication, teamwork and motivation) - would be developed through activities such as teaching in a school or working with local communities, or from experiences of travelling through a country where you did not speak the language.

- Confidence and self-awareness – in relating to others will be achieved from the challenges of your gap year. Many ‘returners’ speak of being stretched beyond their expectations and finding they could rise to the situation.
- Adaptability, self-reliance, self-motivation, independence and flexibility – can all be demonstrated by your achievements during your time out. You may have had to change your travel plans to avoid a conflict zone or you may have applied your skills in a variety of ways volunteering at home or abroad. Opportunities in a gap year for developing personal qualities are countless and you should think about how to show that you have taken advantage of them.
- Organisation skills – are vital for all aspects of taking time out, from making applications through to ensuring you have adequate accommodation along the way.
- Problem solving skills – record examples of how you overcame setbacks, such as your passport being lost or stolen, or projects that do not work out as you planned. They provide evidence of your initiative and resilience.

Recommended Websites

- www.gap-year.com
- www.yearoutgroup.com
- www.gogapyear.com
- www.gapyeardirectory.co.uk
- www.gapyearjobs.co.uk
- www.gapwork.com