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Student gap years – the advisers weigh in

Your family may try to discourage you from taking time out before university but, as our advisers confirm, you can further your skills and employability – as well as have fun

Lucy Tobin
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Don't mind the gap ... student volunteers due to undertake gap year charity projects in Tanzania. Photograph: Graham Turner

Once upon a time, in a land devoid of the credit crunch, the gap year was the preserve of rucksack-schlepping, Jesus-sandal wearing teenagers who would doss around South America or Asia for a few months before uni. No longer. Today's tough job market means gappers must ensure a year out will leave behind a sprinkling of CV fairy dust.

That doesn't mean it has to be boring. Whether you're considering a gap year before or after uni, or much later on in life, there are plenty of ways to make it boost your employability while having fun. Spend a few months doing work experience and making contacts in a field that interests you before jumping on that plane to Thailand. Test out different industries. Turn that business idea you've been talking about into reality. If it takes off, it could save you a student loan, or the need to find a "real job". If not, it will show future employers your acumen.

Don't be put off if you haven't been incubating a gap-year dream since birth: there's still time to arrange a year out in 2010. My gap year, for example, was a last-minute rush. I had applied for politics at uni, decided very late on that I wanted to study English, and when I called up Ucas, I was told I'd have to take a gap year.

I'd spent the summer celebrating the end of A-levels with friends, so when September

there are (although don't ask too many questions: gappers tend to go on a bit). While I was commuting into London every day, my friends were doing radically diverse things. One sold make-up at Harrods before saving vultures in Africa; another promoted classical music to kids, yet another was an intern in parliament, and two travelled around Asia for a year, turning down numerous marriage proposals from dodgy businessmen.

But – as your family and friends will undoubtedly remind you when you mention a gap year – these are tough economic times. Graduate employment is down: a quarter of graduate job vacancies have disappeared and the competition for each job has grown, according to the Associate of Graduate Recruiters. The job market doesn't look like it will improve overnight, so use a gap year to help yourself stand out.

You don't need to give up ideas of travelling – a year is a long time, and you might not have the chance to go away for that long again. Think about combining a trip with six months' work.

A tough labour market means you'll need to be imaginative. Have a look at specific gap-year roles, such as the well-paid schemes offered by big firms including PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte and KPMG. Ask your friends and family if they know of any jobs, and look out for maternity-leave positions – those few months could be perfect for you. Take a look at [Year in Industry](#), which matches school-leavers with jobs in 250 UK engineering, science and IT businesses. [Gapyear.com](#) also has details of paid and unpaid UK work experience.

If there's something you've always wanted to do but been held back by a lack of time, a gap year is the time to do it. Learn to drive, type or cook. Go to hairdressing school and build up a side business in cutting friends' hair. Become fluent in another language: employers love linguists. Or take a distance-learning course in your spare time. Check out the BBC's myriad courses, both online and face to face, on topics like news writing for radio: bbc.co.uk/learning/onlinecourses.

Voluntary work abroad will benefit you and your CV, as well as the community or project you're helping. Make sure you choose a reputable company; do plenty of research, and ask for personal recommendations. A good starting point is the [Year Out Group](#), whose members sign up to a code of practice. It lists gap-year companies and the locations of gap-year fairs, which many firms attend.

If you're staying in the UK, there are lots of rewarding and enjoyable charity work options. Check out opportunities at [Community Service Volunteers](#), one of the UK's biggest [volunteering](#) organisations, and [V Inspired](#).

It's worth thinking about what you want to get out of your gap year. At the start of mine, a fellow gapper and I listed things we wanted to do: big plans, like achieving at least three months' relevant work experience, but also things like making our way through a list of 50 films to see before you die, and partying with friends at local unis to make sure we had the chance to meet lots of new people.

Last, be sure to have fun on your gap year, whatever you do. It's an incredible opportunity to see the world, work out what you want to do with your life, and help you on your way to achieving it. Good luck – and have a great time.

Case studies

The advisers

Karin Peeters is a personal and professional life coach at [Vitalis Coaching](#). She also had two [gap years](#), one studying in Paris when she was 19, and a sabbatical in India and Nepal aged 30 that led to her re-training as a life coach. **Sonja Stockton** is head of student recruitment at professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The earner

Penny Hurst (above), 20, from Dorset, has just finished her first year studying biomedical science at Southampton University.

What was involved? Four months working for Marks and Spencer, eight months as a health care support worker at Salisbury district hospital.

Why? "I wanted to earn enough for a good start to uni life, as well as get professional medical experience."

How much? Around £2,500 from M&S and £8,000 from the hospital job. "That left me with £1,000 as I spent quite a bit as I went along."

Penny's Verdict: "It really helped me prepare for living independently. I found out how hard it is to save, as well as gained some experience and made useful contacts."

Life coach's verdict: "Penny has learned to be part of a team, deal with working life, how to reach deadlines and receive feedback on performance."

Employer's verdict: "At interviews, employers will be looking for examples to illustrate her experience, like how she dealt with difficult people."

The charity fundraiser

Harry McGahan, 19, from West Sussex, studied A-levels at Ardingly College, Sussex. He is going to do history at Lincoln College, Oxford in October.

What? The Bobby Moore Fund, part of Cancer Research UK (CRUK), raising money for bowel cancer research. Renovating a school and football pitch for the community near Cape Town, South Africa.

Why? "To experience a variety of countries and cultures, and do something charitable."

How much? "I got £3,250 for CRUK from donations ... I added some wages from working in Starbucks and a local pub. The rest – £3,500 – went on travelling around South Africa afterwards."

Harry's verdict: "I learned about local issues, made new friends and picked up a few building skills."

Life coach's verdict: "When Harry has a goal, he goes for it. That's how he should sell his gap year in his CV."

Employer's verdict: "He can give great examples that demonstrate leadership or teamworking ... times when he built relationships and skills or communicated in

unfamiliar situations."

CRUK tinyurl.com/ng2gph

The Tefl teacher

Nicola McCabe, 22, from London. Graduated with a degree in Latin with English from King's College London.

What? Studied a four-week Teaching English as a Foreign Language qualification, Cambridge Celta. Moved to Paris to learn French and teach English.

Why? "I've always wanted to live in Paris and learn French, so I decided to seize the day."

How much? The course cost £800, and the Paris flat €500 (£429) a month. "I had savings because I lived at home while at university."

Nicola's verdict: "The main skills have ranged from teaching the present perfect tense, to how to make people feel comfortable."

Life coach's verdict: "Nicola has shown she can go to a new place and start from scratch. Language skills are very valuable, too."

Employer's verdict: "Grappling with complex information, and communicating it effectively, is a core skill to teaching – but also relevant to any working environment."

Cactus Tefl www.cactustefl.com

The professional intern

Crystal Eisinger, 19, from London, studied the International Baccalaureate at Godolphin and Latymer in Hammersmith. She has a place at Cambridge to study archaeology and anthropology in October.

What? A 30-week job on business advisory firm Deloitte's Scholar Scheme.

Why? "I had a place on the scheme. The skills will provide the best possible springboard for my future."

How much? Thought to be around £1,500/month for seven months. Plus £1,500 travel bursary at the end, and a £1,500 annual bursary at uni.

Crystal's verdict: "Leaving university with a year's work experience is extremely rare, and puts me in a great position. When I finish, I'm going to travel to India and the Middle East."

Life coach's verdict: "Youngsters who go very fast on the career ladder should step back and evaluate. Travelling will be good for that."

Employer's verdict: "The kind of practical experience available to students on professional internships can really complement academic studies: it brings the theory learned in a classroom to life, and builds a network of contacts. Students should maximise each opportunity by keeping in touch with contacts in the long term."

Deloitte Scholars tinyurl.com/lwqmy

The Traveller

Ray Hearne, 23, left Ashburton Community School in Croydon with seven GCSEs in 2002 and has since been working in telesales.

What? Travelled to New Zealand for four months, where he met up with friends. Went on a road trip for two months, did skydiving, bungee jumping and snowboarding. Also spent time working on a vineyard.

Why? Ray suffers from the digestive disorder Crohn's disease, and took a gap year last year after a serious operation improved his health. "I'd been suffering badly since I was 15, and when I started to feel better, I began to rethink my life. Everyone always had stories to tell, whereas I had nothing. So I decided to do some travelling."

How much? The initial cost was £349 through Realgap. "For that, they sorted my visa and a hostel for the first seven nights." Another £800 on flights, and £80/week on hostels. "I paid for it with a bank loan, which I'm still paying off – but the experience was worth it."

Ray's verdict: "Being ill, I'd lost a lot of confidence, but I got it back: I was forced to just go up to people and start talking to them."

Life coach's verdict: "An employer might not see the benefit in the trip itself, but the effects on Ray are clear. It has boosted his self-esteem enormously."

Employer's verdict: "Personal goals and objectives are really important in a gap year – Ray should emphasise them to help an employer understand that it was time well spent."

Realgap www.realgap.co.uk/

The Year-Abroad Gapper

Alex Esterkin, 19, from Altrincham, Manchester, took A-levels at Manchester Grammar School and will study economics with Spanish at Nottingham University from September.

What? A nine-month Israel programme with the Jewish youth movement FZY. Studied Hebrew and history, travelled around the country, and spent three months volunteering in an inner-city school helping eastern European migrants to learn English.

Why? "I was quite sheltered at home with my family, and wanted to do something before uni to become a bit more independent and outgoing."

How much? The year cost £10,000, including food and accommodation. "Most of my funding came from my family. I made sure not to waste any money, since I felt guilty for the cost."

Alex's verdict: "Undoubtedly one the best times of my life."

Life coach's verdict: "Alex has shown a lot of flexibility to manage in a country where the structure and order is unlike the UK. This kind of project shows a person can handle unexpected twists and turns. There's a good, broad picture of different things: volunteering, language-learning, travel. That will help him to discover where his heart

lies while still young."

Employer's verdict: "Alex has identified three clear outcomes that any employer would welcome. It's important to be clear about how a gap year experience provided skills that would benefit an employer: for Alex, that might be learning quickly, or adaptability, for example."

FZY www.yearcourse.org.uk

The Wildlife Volunteer

Oliver Lock, 20, from Cirencester, Gloucestershire, has just finished his first year at Birmingham University reading history.

What? African Conservation Experience's Moholoholo, Tuli and game capture schemes, which involve rehabilitating wildlife including lions and hippos; also conservation work, and working alongside indigenous South Africans to relocate animals.

Why? "I've wanted to work with wildlife for a long time. I also knew that I had a lot of hard work to do in the years ahead so I wanted time to relax and enjoy myself."

How much? The three-month placement cost £4,800, including flights, meals and accommodation. "I paid for it with some of my savings, help from my parents, which I am gradually paying back, and a £600 travel scholarship from my school."

Oli's verdict: "It was some of the best months of my life! Although I don't think it will directly influence my chances of getting the law job I'm aiming for, I'll have something unique to talk about in my interviews."

Life coach's verdict: "This gap year would have led Oli to deal with things from a very different culture, and possibly to appreciate the standard of living at home much more. This new perspective may influence his career choices in a positive way."

Employer's verdict: "This is a classic case of the completely different experiences you can gain on a gap year. For future jobs, Oli should examine what his employer is looking for, and consider how the personal skills and experiences he has had – such as working in unusual situations – can be aligned to that."

African Conservation Experience www.conservationafrica.net

Lucy Tobin's book for students, A Guide to Uni Life: The One-Stop Guide to What University Life Is Really Like (Trotman, £9.99), is available now

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