

FILL THAT GAP



(1) People who take a year out before going to university and use that time to gain more skills are more attractive candidates for jobs than those who go straight from school to university, according to research for the Department for Education. The research says that employers are particularly interested in the skills that students pick up when traveling, volunteering and working, because they do not trust universities to teach the arts of communication, teamwork and leadership.

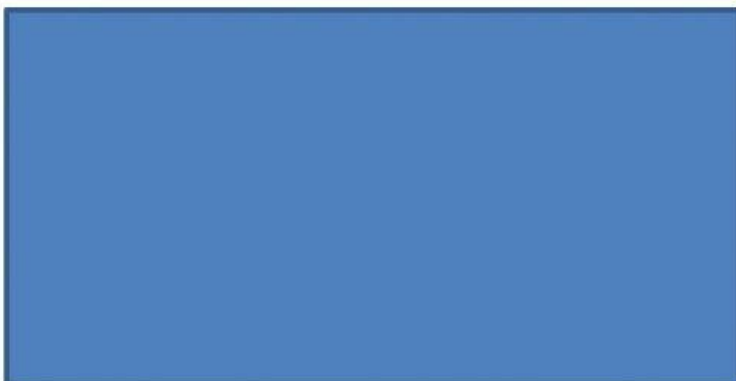
(2) There are many reasons why there is a growing number of students who take a gap year. There are school-leavers who are happy to be out of the school system at last and want to have some time to do something interesting or crazy before they go back into the educational system. There are those who want to earn money to pay their university fees. There are those who feel they want to do something useful with their lives and there are those who want to get away from home and see the world while they can. Finally, there are those who want to prepare themselves better for the job market once they get their degrees. Jamie Underwood, a founder of a gap year agency, says It's a brilliant thing to do. If you're focusing on getting ahead, employers love it it shows character, confidence, achieving goals and persistence

(3) School-leavers can choose from a wide range of activities for their gap year. They can take part in an adventure project, like an expedition to some remote corner of the earth, which can be really exciting and it has the advantage of travelling as part of a group and making some life-long friends. They can work on a conservation or environmental project, like conducting an underwater survey of a coral reef or monitoring an endangered species. They can do temporary or seasonal work abroad and this way get insight into a very different way of life. They can join a humanitarian project, such as doing social work with people in need. Or they can join a structured work experience programme and gain valuable experience and practical skills in their chosen field. Mr Underwood says, "I matured during my gap year. I grew up. You come back with a real sense of achievement and a new perspective on life."

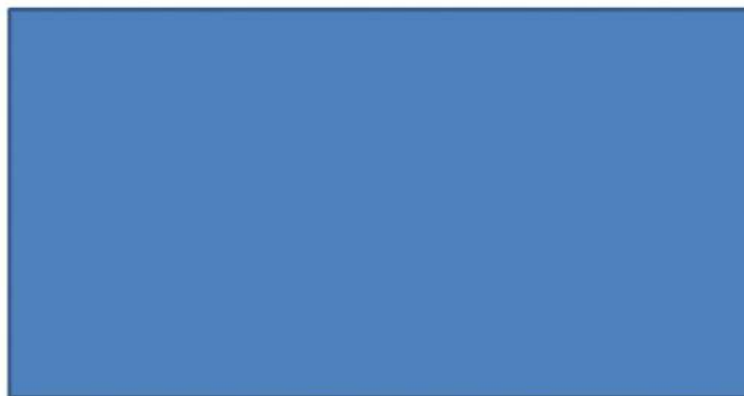
(4) But some locations aren't for the faint-hearted. Voluntary work can be tough. You may be out in the middle of nowhere, feeling isolated and having trouble coping with the complete culture shock. So it's important to research the opportunities fully and take time to read what other 'gappers' have to say about their experience of volunteering overseas. And it's also important to plan the year properly. According to the research of the Department for Education and skills, too many students fail to properly and do not take advantage of the opportunities on offer. This can turn the gap into a blank hole. As Mr Underwood says, "There's a great difference between doing a structured placement and going on an extended holiday in some exotic place. Students who are doing volunteering get an awful lot of good experiences. Employers are falling over themselves for those maturing skills, which they think universities don't give."

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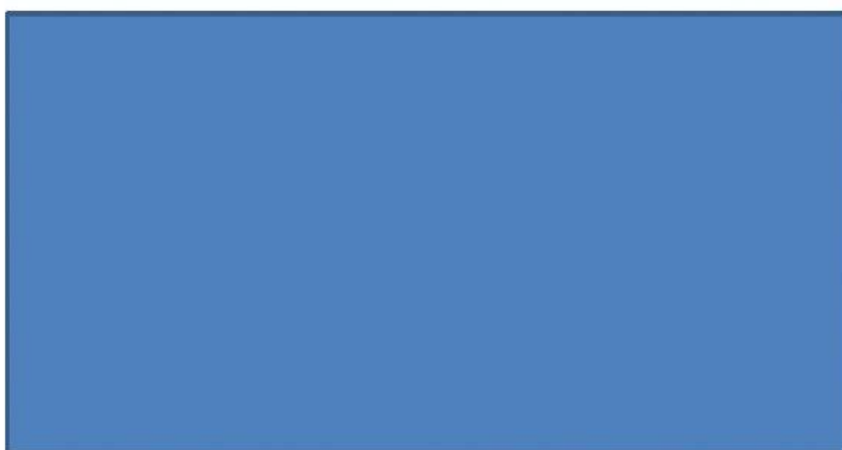
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