

1. Introduction

The 'Gap Year' concept whereby pre-university students take a 'year out' to work or travel overseas has gathered momentum over the last decade or so. Taking time out before university, whether to work, travel, volunteer or get non-paid work experience can have enormous benefits. A 'year out' can give young people the opportunity to learn new 'life skills', become more independent, increase their confidence, make new friends and start university with often a greater sense of purpose and more maturity than those moving straight on to university from school or college.

Starting out: aims and objectives

A Which? University report from 16th July 2014 about gap years sought advice from the Higher Education Liaison Officers Association (HELOA), made up of admissions tutors and university staff (source: <http://university.which.co.uk/advice/how-do-universities-view-gap-years>). Which? University reported that "most universities see the advantages of deferred entry and welcome the maturity and motivation, as well as the additional experience that an applicant who has taken a gap year can bring to their degree".

However, the report goes on to say that in order to give the best impression to the establishments you're applying to, it is crucial to make your time out 'count'. You can do this by trying to gain some relevant experience and/or by earning money to fund your studies and doing something that will help you "discover yourself". Whatever you do, a gap year should not be just wasted time!

The questions below are intended to help you plan your gap year so it counts! Having a plan and remembering that there is a clear link between your gap year experiences and how they can help you as you move into Higher Education is important.

Start by thinking about what you want to do on your gap year and why. This will help you establish your overall aims and objectives, and from these you can research what sort of activities you might undertake to achieve these. You should then think about these aspirations in the context of your previous experience and the practicalities of what you have in mind. You may have to modify your ideas or even start all over again! If this happens, don't be disheartened, it is all part of the planning and learning process and should help you plan a gap year that best fits your aspirations.

Exploratory questions to ask yourself: Previous experiences, aims and objectives

- What is my previous experience of independent and overseas travel; different locations, countries and environments; and of fieldwork or volunteer activities?
- What are my current interests?
- What are my aspirations for the future?
- What are my concerns or apprehensions about my gap year? E.g. particular locations, types of experiences, being alone, group activities, safety, health
- What are my aims and objectives for my gap year?
What do I hope to achieve in terms of:
 - my personal development
 - my geographical knowledge, understanding and skills
 - preparing for university
 - gaining work experience
 - researching particular careers?

It is useful to spend some time establishing your aims and objectives for your gap year. Your aims are your general broad goals and objectives are the activities you set out to do to work

towards your aims. Choose objectives that are achievable. You may find that your objectives may change as you start planning, but try to set aims that will remain broadly the same.

Your aims may be to improve your geographical knowledge, understanding and skills, to increase your confidence and other personal skills or to increase your employability. Your objectives will be activities you can do on your gap year to help achieve these aims.

Here are some examples from previous RGS-IBG Learning and Leading Gap Scholars:

Mark's aims were to improve his geographical knowledge and specifically his knowledge of cryospheric processes before studying physical geography at university. He also wanted to work with different people and to experience a remote environment. He chose to go on an expedition with a provider to the Arctic Circle for 2 months to take part in a variety of glaciological, biological and adventure activities which included mapping glaciers and measuring snow depths. This gave him valuable skills and knowledge for university and a certainty that he wanted to pursue this area of interest. The opportunity to work with different people had the unexpected outcome of Mark discovering that he enjoyed leading groups and intended to undertake leadership training in the future. The activity gave him the opportunity to access an environment that he could not otherwise have been to.

Mark's tip: *'Go for something unusual. Not just the standard trip to Australia or New Zealand. The further off the beaten track you go, the bigger and more exciting your adventures will be.'*

Annabelle wanted to develop her geographical skills and knowledge and specifically to gain a deeper understanding of geomorphological processes and their impact on people. She also wanted to build her confidence and initiative. She decided to work towards these aims by carrying out her own research project. She travelled to New Zealand and Japan to carry out research through guided tours, visiting key locations and organisations and interviewing professionals. She gained confidence by organising this independently and from talking to academics and professionals in the field she wants to go into and felt much more confident to do this in the future.

Annabelle's tip: *'Don't be afraid to push yourself out of your comfort zone and try something new, e.g. travelling around a country on your own is not as scary as it sounds. If opportunities you were not expecting arise, go for them. Try and get away from the tourist haunts, and talk to locals, it gives you a much deeper flavour of the country you are visiting.'*

Peter wanted to prepare for his Geomatics degree which involves mapping and GIS usage and he also wanted to experience a new environment. He found an opportunity with a provider to go to a game reserve in South Africa for 3 months. Prior to departing he undertook a short GIS course. When on the volunteering project he joined in the day to day monitoring of the reserve and he was also able to work alongside a PHD student who gave him GIS tutorials. Peter produced maps of the reserve and gained an understanding of the mapping software and applications he would be using during his Geomatics degree.

Alina wanted to build her geographical knowledge ready for university and wanted to learn Korean which was important for her future goal to work for the UN. She spent 3 semesters studying the Korean language and culture at Yonsei University (Korean Language Institute). Since starting university it has inspired her to learn another language alongside her geographical studies.

Alina's tip: *'Plan out a gap experience based around personal interests and the particular skills you want to develop. Make your gap year different from usual gap experiences in order to stand out.'*

Chris wanted to gain more independence, improve his knowledge before university and to gain a diving qualification which would be useful to his future career and studies. He went to Indonesia to work on a marine conservation project. He gained an open water dive qualification, took a reef ecology course, assisted in scientific research on the reef and performed reef checks and monitoring. This experience in studying reef ecology influenced him to select modules in coastal conservation and marine biology. The experience made him more confident and he no longer felt intimidated by independent travel. He fulfilled a life-long dream of learning to scuba dive and developed a passion for coastal conservation.

Achieving your aims

Exploratory questions to ask yourself: How am I going to achieve this?

Activity

- What kind of activity would meet my aims during my gap year? E.g. volunteering, paid work, internship in an organisation relevant to my degree, taking part in a particular activity or course, travel, or a combination of these?
- Do I want to experience a particular environment; undertake a challenging activity; work in a team or independently; do an activity that would help with future geographical studies or intended career?
- Are there any constraints on how I might achieve this? E.g. health/fitness, previous experience, specialist equipment, price, time of year.
- Would participation in the activity need any special preparation (fitness training, building skills in the activity etc)? How could I work towards this before departure and would I have the time and/or funds to prepare?

Location

- Do I want to travel/work/volunteer in the UK or abroad or a combination?
- What countries/regions interest me and would meet my aims? Am I interested in learning a particular language or experiencing a particular culture or way of life, experiencing the developed or developing world or a certain environment (urban/rural, desert/rainforest/marine etc)?
- Is there a location that is known to be particularly good for the activities I would like to do?
- Are there any restrictions on visiting the country(s) or region(s) I would like to visit? (check www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice)
- Do I hold a British passport or other? (This could affect where you go and what visas/permits you require)

Structure

- Do I want to travel alone, with friends or in a group?
- Would I like to travel independently, with a provider, or a combination? Consider:
 - your previous experience of travel
 - your own self-confidence
 - the type of activity/experience you are seeking (some may only be possible with an organisation)
 - safety considerations
 - support: before, during and after your gap year
 - your wish to travel with others of your own age
 - value for money
- How long do I want each phase to last and how long do I want to be away altogether?
- Do I want to undertake more than one trip, coming back to the UK in-between?
- Do I want to keep dates and plans flexible to allow for changes or spontaneous trips?

Getting there/getting around

- Is my trip more about the destination or do I want to get 'creative' about the actual journey?
- Are there other ways of getting the most out of my experience rather than just jumping on and off plane, trains or buses? Do I want to, for instance, explore other methods of transport such as: bicycle, canoe, travelling on foot, container ship, horseback, for example? Consider, again:
 - Your previous experience and confidence/whether a certain level of skill is needed
 - Cost
 - Safety considerations
 - Weather considerations
 - Whether any specialist equipment or clothing will be required