

Options for Taking a Year Out After The Leaving Certificate.

What is a Gap Year?

Those who have travelled on the London underground will be familiar with the announcement that reminds all passengers to 'mind the gap'. The notion of a Gap Year has also been around for many years in the United Kingdom but it is only recently that the idea has begun to catch on in Ireland. A gap year can provide a breathing space or "time out" from the pressures of studying, to enable students to do something that they really want to do - be it travel, work abroad, participate in an exchange, do voluntary work or learn a new skill or language. The whole purpose of a gap year is that it is time out between school and further or higher education. It assumes that participating students will be returning to full-time education the following year. The gap year should be regarded as an opportunity for self-development and not as a means of escaping studying.

What are the Available Options?

Opinions range from *'once you take a year out you will never go back to full-time education'* to *'a gap year will make you a better, more rounded, broad-minded, confident individual'*

The truth probably lies somewhere between these two statements. There are those who pack their bags and head for Australia and once they catch the travel bug they may be inclined to postpone their return.

The age factor is probably one of the main reasons why students opt for a year out. If you feel that you are not ready to continue your studies then a 'gap' year becomes a real option. Hopefully, you will be more mature and willing to get the head down after your year's break.

If you decide to take a year out then good planning is of the essence. Start by making a 'wish list' of all the things you would like to do, believing that they are all possible. Some of these plans will require finance, others may involve travelling on a tight budget in places that are not always as safe as they are made out to be.

The list of what you can do is endless, and may involve some of the following:

- Travel
- Volunteer work

- Working with children
- Working with the disabled
- Working in well-paid employment
- Learning a language
- Working on environmental or conservation projects

The list of web addresses given in this supplement will give you some idea as to the range of options open to you. This factsheet by its nature can only provide the student with an overview of the many possibilities that exist.

Should I Take a Year Out?

Tony Higgins, chief executive of UCAS believes that *"students who take a well-planned, structured year out are more likely to be satisfied with, and complete, their chosen course. The benefits of a well-structured year out are now widely recognised by universities and colleges and cannot fail to stand you in good stead in later life"*.

However, there are as many opinions about taking a year out between sitting your Leaving Certificate and proceeding to further education as there are about graduating and postponing looking for your first job. Each student is different, therefore one of the first things you should do is to decide whether the idea of taking a break from your studies is what you really want to do.

Independent travel is one that may be frowned on by parents. On the plus side there is the opportunity of meeting people, experiencing other cultures and self-development.

On the other hand you may be accused by some of being selfish by not including in your plans some time working with the marginalised.

It is important to think positively when planning your year off. Is there an opportunity to make a difference to the lives of others? If you plan to work with volunteer organisations, remember that these require people with energy and enthusiasm who are willing to get 'stuck in' and help in any way they can. What they don't need is someone who will sit around philosophising about world poverty! On the plus side, working as a volunteer enables you to visit the places of your dreams.

Answering the following questions may help you decide on whether the option of a gap year is really for you or not.

- ◆ Have you been influenced by friends?
- ◆ Why do you want to take a year out?
- ◆ How long do you want to take off?
- ◆ Does the idea of starting/finishing college a year after your friends bother you?
- ◆ Can you defer your college place?
- ◆ Are you guaranteed a place the following year on your return?
- ◆ Will it be difficult to resume study after a year travelling/working/volunteering?
- ◆ Can you financially afford to take a year out?
- ◆ How will the year out benefit you?
- ◆ Do you have the time to plan the year adequately?
- ◆ When would you like to begin?

You need to be able to give yourself answers to these (and possibly other) questions, before proceeding any further.

What are the Advantages of a Gap Year?

- ◆ Gives you a break from studying - after the Leaving Certificate, more study might be too much for you immediately.
- ◆ May help you decide / confirm what you want to study at college.
- ◆ Enhances your CV.
- ◆ Gives you experience of independent living.
- ◆ Gives you experience of the world of work.
- ◆ Possibility of foreign travel.
- ◆ Gives you the experience of new cultures / people / ways of life.
- ◆ Enables you to learn new skills / languages.
- ◆ Enhances character.
- ◆ Offers exciting challenges.
- ◆ Enables you to learn more about yourself / discover your personality.
- ◆ Develops self-confidence and maturity.
- ◆ Some people may find voluntary work very rewarding.

What are the Disadvantages of a Gap Year?

- ◆ Financially you may have difficulty both during the year and on your return.
- ◆ The work may be boring, mundane and/or repetitive.
- ◆ You may not be able to get a placement / job in the area you are interested in or in the country you wish to go to.
- ◆ You may not wish to return to college the following year.
- ◆ Some people may find voluntary work emotionally straining.
- ◆ May lose touch with school friends.

Planning Stage

If you decide to proceed with the idea of taking a year out, you then move on to the crucial planning stage. Proper and extensive planning is the key to a successful year out. Ideally students who are intending to take a year out should be planning it from the beginning of Leaving Certificate year (or even before).

With detailed advance planning, a gap year can be a fulfilling, adventure-filled and exciting year. An unplanned, "ad-hoc" year out however, could be one of frustration, worry and boredom.

You must first ask yourself such basic questions as:

- What is the best time of the year to go?
- What are the starting dates of projects?
- What are the best travel deals?
- Will you need to work for part of the year to finance your gap activity?
- If so what are your chances of getting work?
- What is the total time commitment?

You must also think about which organisation you are going to go with.

Would you feel safer with a group, some close friends or on your own? Remember sharing an experience with others can be great, but it can also be hell if you don't get on well with the group.

You must work out what the year out will cost you in accommodation, travel, living expenses

If you are going with an organisation check out what is paid for and what expenses you must meet yourself.

Taking a year out has immediate implications in that you must firstly achieve the points necessary to get a place on the course of your choice. You must then be able to defer this course offer so that you will have a course to attend on your return from the gap year.

Finally you must keep your parents informed as to what you intend to do. It is unfair if the first they know of your plans is when they see Russian Roubles strewn on your bedroom floor! It is important to

have a plan before you talk to them. This is important, as they may fear for your safety.

In general the positive aspects of a year out outweigh the negatives, but careful research and forward planning is essential.

Planning Checklist - Research Stage

1. Draw up a shortlist of activities you would like to be involved in (paid work, volunteer work, exchange, au-pair, work experience, training, further study, language learning, etc.).
2. Decide where you would like to work/travel (staying in your own area, travel in Ireland, travel to an English speaking country, other international travel).
3. Work out all costs (immunisations, travel, passport, etc.).
4. Make plans (if necessary) to earn the costs associated with the year, in advance of travel.
5. Decide on which agencies you will contact.
6. Get as much information as possible from the agencies about:
 - ◆ the nature of the work,
 - ◆ what exactly you will be doing,
 - ◆ duties and responsibilities,
 - ◆ the cost of participation,
 - ◆ living conditions - food and accommodation,
 - ◆ salary if any,
 - ◆ choice of location,
 - ◆ insurance (to cover health, repatriation, cancellation and personal belongings),
 - ◆ age range of participants,
 - ◆ selection criteria for participants,
 - ◆ number of participants per project, etc.
7. Find out as much about the agency/organisation as possible:
 - ◆ Is it a limited company, a not-for-profit agency, a registered charity, etc.?

- ◆ What is the mission statement / aim / rationale of the organisation?
 - ◆ Do you agree with it?
 - ◆ How would the company deal if you were in an emergency situation?
 - ◆ Do they have contingency plans?
 - ◆ Whether a written contract / agreement will be involved.
8. Try and speak to someone who has just returned from the country / job / activity / agency in question.
 9. Ask yourself what benefits you will obtain from participation.
 7. Book your travel tickets as early as possible to avail of cheapest prices.
 8. Prior to departure confirm all departure times.
 9. Confirm arrival dates/times and meeting arrangements with host agency / employer / charity / volunteer organisation before departure from Ireland, by telephone fax or e-mail.
 10. Bring written details of arrival dates/times and meeting arrangements with you.
 11. Contact the relevant Embassy or Consular mission for as much information as possible before departure. (Note. Many countries do not have a diplomatic mission in Ireland, consult the O1 telephone directory under Diplomatic and Consular Missions.)

Planning Checklist of Practical Things of Do before Commencement of Year Out

1. Defer any offer of a college place you have received (if necessary).
2. If you intend to commence a gap year before the results of the Leaving Certificate are issued in August, make arrangements with someone else to act on your behalf in deferring college place.
3. Make arrangements to reapply to CAO / PLC / UCAS the following year if necessary.
4. Have a plan B in case something goes wrong at the last minute.

Planning Checklist if Travelling Abroad

1. Get written confirmation as to who is responsible for all the travel arrangements, visa and work permits if necessary.
2. Get an International Student Identity Card (ISIC) from USIT.
3. Arrange to obtain / renew passport if necessary (allow three weeks).
4. Arrange visa if necessary.
5. Arrange vaccinations / inoculations if necessary.
6. If organisation is not arranging travel, use the Internet to compare travel costs with different carriers in advance of booking.

Planning Checklist if Considering Additional Travel During Year Out

1. Plan a realistic itinerary - however vague.
2. Take your interests into account.
3. Work out your travel budget.
4. Work out how much time you will spend travelling.
5. Obtain guidebooks for the countries /regions you plan to visit.
6. Obtain any visas required in advance of departure if possible.
7. Buy a return ticket before departure.

Planning Checklist if Considering Additional Paid Employment While Abroad

1. Prepare a CV in advance of departure and make approximately 10 copies.
2. Find out if work permits and/or visas will be required for the countries you intend to seek work in (including casual work).
3. Inform yourself of the risks of working illegally in countries you intend to visit.

Helpful Websites:

www.yearoutgroup.org

www.eilireland.org

www.volunteeringireland.ie

www.vsiireland.org

www.foroige.ie

www.concern.net

www.cvi.ie

www.friendsoftheelderly.ie

www.redcross.ie

www.svp.ie

www.aaiuk.com

www.conservationafrica.net

www.aventure.co.uk

www.cesalanguages.com

www.bunac.org.uk

www.csv.org.uk

www.cvni.org.uk

www.world-challenge.co.uk

www.councilexchanges.org

www.ivs-gb.org.uk/

www.teaching-abroad.co.uk

www.trekforce.org.uk/

www.vsb.org.uk

www.i-to-i.com

www.yearoutdrama.com/

www.workexperienceusa.com