

Get the gap year lift

“Scratch an itch that you’ve wanted to scratch someday”



Reading, writing and arithmetic all have their uses but often get in the way of learning from the school of hard knocks. There are many styles of education and some cannot be found within the boundaries of school walls.

This is why students are now, more than ever, seeking to spread their wings and cut their teeth out in the world by taking a gap year – and they are vastly improving their chances in the highly competitive employment market.

A year taken off from study to work, travel or volunteer can give graduates an edge over their competitors, provided they are able to positively demonstrate the benefits of their career progression.

At 17, gap student Claire Berry found the decision to take a year off easy.

“My friend did her gap year in Thailand and I thought it would be a really interesting thing to do.”

Berry says the idea to study abroad appealed because she “wanted to do something challenging and a bit out of the ordinary.”

And out of the ordinary it was. She found herself placed in Bolivia – her fifth choice of location. Berry was located in La Paz, the world’s highest capital city and the administrative center of what is one of South America’s poorest countries.

Like the Bolivian landscape, parts of it are so altitude high that one struggles to walk up a slight incline without reaching for the asthma pump. Berry found it difficult to adapt to what was to be her new stomping ground for the next 12

months. Passed with ease by the local Cholita women as she gasped for air around the streets of the city was just one of many challenges she faced, which included learning a new language and adjusting to a vastly different culture to that of Australia.

Upon arrival she was placed with a host family that spoke no English and she no Spanish. She also found that her host family had quite traditional values, which at first she struggled to adjust to.

“It was pretty tough not seeing people from home and adjusting to a family that you have never met before as well as the language,” says Berry

“You were expected to move into their life and live by their rules and when I came from a country where people had extremely different values, I found it hard that I was expected to live a certain way.”

However, moving in with a host family isn’t the only option available to students considering doing a gap year. Many students might choose to volunteer, travel solo or even stay within their own country and conduct an internship in their chosen field. Relatively cheap hostel accommodation is available, particularly in developing countries. But that all depends on what luxuries you decide you can do without and how much time you spend planning and researching your available options.

Co-author of four *Harvard Business Review* articles Tammy Erickson, whose daughter’s decision to take a gap year was an extremely beneficial one writes:

“Just living in the world, doing

manual labor, figuring how to make ends meet, gave her a calm confidence that is palpably different from many of her current college cohorts who raced from high pressured high school classes into the intense college setting.”

But students need to choose from their options wisely. A year spent sitting on a beach or on your parents couch watching *Dr Phil* won’t read favourably on your CV. Neither will taking a year off simply because you didn’t get the marks you required. The key is to decide what you want to do before you get your results.

Erickson says “the criteria for your search should, if possible, be weighted toward options that will give you the most exposure and challenge — and perhaps scratch an itch that you’ve wanted to scratch someday.”

Thinking about how a year off can assist with future career progression is the best way to start. If you want to be an environmental scientist, try volunteering with the turtles off the coast of Costa Rica. Perhaps you want to be a diplomat? Then spend your time in a country where English is rarely spoken and become fluent in the local language.

Recruitment specialist, Jennifer Bailey from Jennifer Bailey and Associates, says that a gap year is only positive “If they can show what they learned from the experience and can articulate what they can bring to the organisation.” 

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