

**Do students in your country go directly to university or college after school or do they have a break first? Taking a gap year between school and uni is quite common in the UK and there are lots of different ways to spend your time.**

### **What is a gap year?**

A 'gap year' is a period of time, usually an academic year, when a student takes a break from formal education. It is often spent travelling or working.

### **Why?**

People used to think that taking a gap year was negative. In the past you took a gap year if you had to retake exams or had problems between finishing school and starting higher education and then starting a career. But now, universities positively encourage a gap year and employers are happy to give jobs to students who take a gap year. A year out between school or college and higher education or employment, or between higher education and a job, can give young people useful learning experiences, help them pick up new skills and make them more independent. Employers and universities want to see evidence of enterprise, maturity and commitment both in and outside formal education.

### **When?**

Young people in formal education usually take a gap year when they are about 18 years old, before going to university. They can also be taken at a different time, for example, by someone who wants to break up their degree course or to do something different before a postgraduate course.

### **Where and what?**

Many gap year students choose to do voluntary work. This could include teaching in the mountains in Nepal, a conservation project in Madagascar, an expedition in Costa Rica or an internship in Japan. There are plenty of gap year volunteer work options to choose from. There is also voluntary work closer to home for British students – both geographically and culturally – including the UK, Europe and North America.

Lots of gap year students just want to see more of the world. According to the British government's Gap Year website, the top five gap year travel destinations recently have been Tibet, Indonesia, Taiwan, Eastern Europe and Canada. Popular gap year activities for young people looking for adventure include surfing in Hawaii, wake boarding in Italy, kite surfing in Egypt or bungee jumping in New Zealand.

### **What about money?**

Most students who are planning a gap year take on a part-time job to save up for the trip. Some young people look for work when they get to their destination if they need to earn money to pay for accommodation, food and their other expenses. Popular jobs include bar work, fruit picking and being a tour guide. A gap year doesn't have to be a full year travelling or having adventures: some students travel for three or six months then work for the rest of the year.

## Organising a gap year

Because the gap year is so popular and needs to be cheap, travel companies now offer structured gap packages where your entire trip is worked out for you. There are three main categories of a structured gap year activity:

- Expeditions, often with a conservation element and usually to developing countries
- Courses to learn a skill such as a language or something that they can later teach others to do, for example windsurfing
- Voluntary work in the UK and abroad.

## An African experience

Julie Taylor graduated from Hull University. She now works as a manager in an international company. Julie tells us about her gap year:

‘During my gap year, I taught in a primary school in Kenya. I spent four months teaching children aged 8 to 18 in English, Art and Physical Education and I coached the school's netball team. As well as working, I also travelled the country and even climbed Mount Kenya. The trip was one of the best experiences of my life. I'm very happy that I didn't head off to university straight after school because I learnt a lot about myself in my year out. I was able to get by on very little money and to deal with problems without the support of my family and friends.

My trip to Africa also looks great on my CV. I worked to save up for the trip, which showed my employer that I had good self-motivation and organisational skills, which are essential in any job. My interviewers were really interested in how I managed to teach classes of 88 children (with lots of enthusiasm and promises of netball after class!). Employers see that climbing to an altitude of 4,985m up Mount Kenya shows self-motivation, strength and determination. Not everybody can put that on their CV.’

## The future

The British government has recently put up tuition fees for university degree courses. Students may have to pay many thousands of pounds a year for their education. How will these changes affect the gap year for future British students?