

ARTICLE SUMMARY

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It's that time in the academic year when sixth form advisers ask post-16 students 'What Next?'. One option: take a gap year. Time was when the term 'gap year' meant a year-long break from formal education. Instead the mini gap experience is now the more popular choice: a few weeks of travel to exotic places with a week or two on a volunteering project.

Our credentials?

Callum Russell was a blind-from-birth student who volunteered on a challenging gap year project in Peru and travelled in Brazil and Argentina. He is founder of [CrystalEyes](#), a bespoke consultancy supporting blind and vision impaired young people to broaden their horizons and fulfil their ambitions in education or employment. He has taken over the day to day running of the organisation from **Lawrence Lockhart**, who was a teacher, economist and careers adviser. For twenty years after retirement, Lawrence worked as a volunteer in schools with inspirational ex-gap-year university students promoting the traditional gap year.

We offer impartial information and guidance online for post-16 students, schools and parents, as well as in-person and/or virtual presentations to schools and colleges, with the added mission to encourage and enable disabled and otherwise disadvantaged young people to enjoy the gap year experience. We receive no benefit from the organisations we recommend arising from any advice we offer.

We regularly talk with large or small groups of post-16 students and ask them what they expect to do next.

Option 1. Get a job? We include apprenticeships in this context. A few hands go up.

Option 2. Go straight to university? The majority raise their hands. Are they ready to decide what to study, and do they have a career in mind? Many of them look uncomfortable.

Option 3: Go travelling? Adults have been directing their lives, but now is the chance to break free, see the world, have fun, make mistakes, and let the future take care of itself. The response: broad grins from a few of them!

Option 4. Get career experience? Few have given this much thought. However, with so many applicants chasing too few genuine graduate jobs, might this strengthen and broaden their long-term employment prospects?

Option 5. Go volunteering? A few hands go up. We ask all those present, as UK citizens, to consider how privileged and advantaged we all are compared to the majority of the world's population. Might they consider contributing to other people's welfare through volunteering? Might this experience improve their own lifetime prospects?

We meet parents to discuss their expectations for their teenage children. Understandably, many of them wish their education to be completed as soon as possible, and some schools believe that their task ends by getting their post-16 students into good universities. It may be school policy not to get involved with gap year issues, but we respectfully suggest that they owe it to their students to be made aware of all post-18 options. Many schools and colleges do this brilliantly.

For most post-16 leavers a full gap year would last from the end of A levels / BTEC exams to 'Freshers Week' fifteen months later. We offer no prescription on how to use this time, but here is a possible plan:

- **June/July to December:** mainly fundraising and paid work, worthwhile skills-building in their own right. A target of around £5,000 is challenging but realistic. (Parents: we suggest you don't pay for your children's gap years.)
- **January to March/April:** 2 - 3 months or longer on a voluntary/career experience project in the UK or overseas.
- **April/May/June:** a month or two or more of independent travel, with a better understanding (after their project) of where to go, and how to live cheaply and safely.
- **June/July/August:** a USA children's camp, or paid work to build the bank balance before uni.

Of course, there are other ways of scheduling a gap year, and there are full-year projects in volunteering and career experience which still allow time for travel.

At this stage, let us introduce wary readers to the gap year market. It consists of a core of around a hundred established, reputable organisations, some of them long-established registered charities, and dedicated small to medium size private sector social enterprises. Outside this core are hundreds of large or small mostly commercial operators of variable repute and reliability. Beware of organisations that do not have a registered UK office. Beware of organisations that offer a fantastic range of projects in exotic places; they may have few if any projects of their own, and will take a percentage of fees for forwarding applicants' details to other organisations of questionable repute and reliability. Through this route an unwary applicant might arrive on a Caribbean island to witness the annual new-born turtle race to the safety of the sea, only to find that it happened last month. In all cases, try to contact recent participants, and ask searching questions about their experiences.

Times are changing. The perception that gap years are only for 'rich kids' is long dead. Social media and online applications have opened up the market. As more students from the state sector get involved, gap years have become genuine agents of social mobility. However, the trend towards mini gaps has forced many of the long-standing gap organisations, contrary to their inclinations but in order to stay in business, to offer projects from two weeks and upwards.

Then what are the potential benefits for young people of a well-spent gap year?

First, gaining work skills and developing personal qualities that employers and universities value, and that later will serve them in the jobs market. UCAS supports well-spent gap years.

Second, in an age when low self-esteem and anxiety about the future are prevalent among school leavers, a sense of self-worth and optimism through what they achieve.

Third, a chance to reassess their higher education and career plans in the light of new experiences. Many start gap years undecided on whether to go to university, but realise they should do so, and make late applications. Others, having made preliminary career and higher education plans at age 15/16 through their A level choices, have time to change direction. For example, an intending doctor on a gap year hospital placement in Japan came to realise that this was the wrong career choice for her. She was grateful for having discovered this on her gap year rather than later at medical school.

In this context, except for a minority committed at an early age to careers requiring specific qualifications, we want young people to have a range of experiences before settling into a career, maybe not until their mid-twenties. At a diving school on Zanzibar the Manager was on her fifth gap year, had decided on Occupational Therapy, and was looking forward to starting her degree course in the following September aged 24.

Fourth, a 'world view', and a realisation of how privileged we are as UK citizens, which may profoundly influence volunteers' later career choices.

Last but not least, after fourteen years of over-taught, over-assessed full-time education, a gap year is an opportunity to make mistakes, grow up fast, have fun and make new friends worldwide.

Some will settle for the travel experience on its own, and who can blame them, but we urge them to consider taking a substantial period of time involved in a career experience and/or volunteering project.

So what are the main options for a working project as part of a gap year?

- Teaching and other educational work overseas
- Orphanages, childcare, children's camps
- Conservation, community projects and expeditions
- Placements (paid /unpaid) in engineering, finance, business management
- Other career experience: medical, veterinary, law, journalism, tourism, and more
- Sports coaching, ski/snowboard courses, other outdoor pursuits

Of course there can be a downside. Volunteering in overseas orphanages has had a bad press recently, for good reasons: the so-called orphans may have been hired from their parents to play the part. Other well-intentioned community projects may undermine local culture and take jobs from locals. They may have been imposed on communities in return for financial benefits. So look for projects that are well-established partnerships between local communities and reputable outside organisations. And try to contact former participants.

In conclusion, we repeat that we receive no benefit from the organisations we recommend. We are not questioning the value of short gap experiences, nor of the travel experience on its own, but we want to put the case for the longer version of a gap year, with a substantial commitment of time and energy to volunteering or career experience. Our website www.independentgapadvice.org offers guidance for students, schools, colleges and parents on all aspects of taking a gap year or shorter break from formal education.

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