

## What Are Gap Years For?

Headliners reporter Pamwan, who has just completed his A-Levels, considers whether gap years are worthwhile in a piece for The Guardian.

An [article](#) in the Guardian on Tuesday warned of makeshift gap year schemes which offered little benefit to "gappers" or the communities they work with. There are good schemes out there, but they warned that some are "badly planned and supported... ultimately benefiting no one apart from the travel companies that organise them". VSO have created a checklist for those planning a gap year, advising them to consider such things as whether they will be given a defined role, and whether they will get any training.



A quarter of 18 to 25-year-olds now take a gap year. This could be before or during university or even as a 'career-break' from work later on. Gap year can be great life experience for many young people before they enter university; it can also be a way of breaking the stress of exams on students. I have chosen not to go on a gap year as I feel my education to be a priority right now - for me it is simply about getting formal education out of the way before I set out to gain other life experiences.

It seems to me as if many young people planning a gap year don't fully understand what they are getting themselves into before they hand over their cash. Can a privileged British 18-year-old fully understand the extreme poverty faced by children in India? Of course, there are young people who care about what's going on in our world today and truly wish to make a difference but clearly these people need to be fully aware before they leave of the situation of the communities they are going to help and how they will be making a lasting difference.

The companies themselves also have a responsibility to make sure their schemes are really worthwhile for all parties. Project Trust, one of the biggest gap year organisations, responded to VSO's criticisms by publishing the checklist on their website this week, and explaining how they fulfil these requirements.

We also contacted BUNAC, who operate volunteering and teaching opportunities in developing countries. Press officer Hadyn Parks had this to say: "BUNAC values the findings and observations of VSO, and realises the importance of bringing these issues to light. BUNAC interviews all applicants and does all it can to create realistic expectations. Contrary to some comments made in the article, volunteers through BUNAC can fill a void within the community rather than displace the local work force."

Gap years can give students an upper hand over others by equipping them with useful life skills, however caution must be exercised when making choices as some can do more harm than good.

### About this article

This article was Pamwan Osemwenhkae, aged 18, from London. A revised version of this article was published in [The Guardian](#) on Saturday 18 August 2007.

### 1 comment

I think gap years can and are worthwhile

I think it is true that there are a lot of 'bad' gap year companies out there who promote irresponsible aid projects. But I do believe that gap years can be beneficial to all involved. By properly researching your gap year company you can access where and what your money is going on, and if it is in fact needed or desired by the community it is to impact. I went away with Quest and believe that the project that I worked on made a positive impact to all involved, and I would recommend anyone thinking about going on a gap year to do it!

Perth Jones from Brighton, 20 August 2007 11:39

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