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Mind the Gap Year

by

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Should I do a 'gap year'? Lots of students ask themselves this question.

My view is that the case for a gap year is not proven, as they say in Scottish law. So don't be pushed into it by peer pressure. There is no golden rule: the right answer depends on your aim.

From my perspective as a university teacher, there is no strong academic case for taking a year off. If you are going to do one, I recommend you to be clear about what you will not get out of it, just as much as what you think you might.

First, you will not improve your eventual degree results very significantly. In researching this article, I tried to find out if there was statistical evidence for a link between having a year off and going on to get better university exam results afterwards. None of the education researchers I spoke to knew of such evidence. Then I looked at the data from one department within my own university. It turned out that class of university degree (First, Upper Second, and so on) did not seem to be noticeably affected by whether the student had come straight from high school before reaching Warwick.

However, one small caveat is worth recording. There is some likelihood that being older is, in itself, a good thing. Work by Jeremy Smith and Robin Naylor, published in 2001 in the Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics, shows that in the United Kingdom older students perform better in their exams. In a great piece of social science research, the authors followed the degree outcomes of 100,000 students and discovered that, after factoring out all other influences, the greater their age the more likely students were to end up with at least an Upper Second Class honours degree. Aging

works, it seems.

Unfortunately, the authors could not calculate whether taking one extra year before going to university produces some of that same beneficial effect. My reading of their statistics is that, at a push, it might improve a student's chance of a good class of degree by a tiny amount -- perhaps one percentage point. But this is just my guesstimate.

Second, if your objective is a better job in the long run, then the case for a gap year is a bit stronger. After talking to careers advisers, it seems to me that their professional view is to do one, but to pick carefully.

Here are the words of an experienced university adviser: "My opinion - one that would be backed up by what I hear from employers - is that a gap year (whether it's taken before or immediately following university) can be very useful. But it has to be spent doing something that adds value for employers."

This adviser's opinion is not based on statistical research, but it makes sense. Employers do look for more than just an excellent academic record: they need evidence of the ability to work in a team, potential for leadership, talent at verbal and written communication, and much else.

Third, I'm an economist, and this is 2004. So I should make the point that there is a sound financial reason to do a gap year: you will make some money. Nothing wrong with that. Moreover, this style of argument may cut more ice with a grumpy or skeptical parent.

Fourth, although I cannot tell, in everyday interactions, whether my undergraduates had a gap year or not, I am prepared to believe that a year out makes people a shade more mature. Whether you gain more maturity than you would be just being a student for that year, I am not sure. I suppose I am not convinced.

Fifth, if you are thinking of taking a year out of the normal pattern, then do bear in mind that you can do a gap year after taking a bachelor's degree. In other words, you do not have to do one straight after school.

Sixth, a gap year can be fun. There is something to be said for trusting instinct. "Hell, I just want to" seems to me the only winning argument for a gap year.