

Why a gap year is the thing many school leavers need

ABC Everyday / By Rebecca Huntley

Travel

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"If in fact my kids want to study further after school, I will be quietly encouraging them to take a gap year," Rebecca writes. (Unsplash: KaLisa Veer/ABC Everyday: Juliette Steen)

The song that most reflects my attitude to life? Edith Piaf's stirring rendition for the defiant, *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*.

"No! I don't feel sorry about anything,

"It's paid for, removed, forgotten, I'm happy with the past."

Although if I am entirely honest, there is one thing I regret, a sadness that passing time has actually increased rather than diminished.

I wish I'd taken a gap year between finishing school and starting university.

At the time it never occurred to me to take a break, even though other friends from school were doing so.

I was eager to start my degree.

Perhaps because I came from a family of academics and the university environment was familiar to me. I had no anxieties about whether I would do well or fit in.

Or perhaps the idea of schlepping around the continent with a backpack held little appeal.

For whatever reason, I started on campus as soon as I could and studied, almost without pause, for over a decade to obtain three degrees.

Pull beers, meet people, read novels

If I had a chance to say anything to my 18-year-old self, I would tell her "take your time".

"Pull beers in a pub, meet different people, read novels you don't have to write essays about, and rethink whether you really want to do that law degree as an undergraduate, surrounded by the irritating boys you used to ignore at debating competitions."

(But remembering how I was at the time, I'd probably ignore my middle-aged self.)

Sometimes I fantasise about taking that forsaken gap year right now.

Why parents' gap year fears are unfounded

The conventional concern from parents who want their children to go on to higher education is that if their kids take a gap year, they might never actually

start their degree.

But this assumption is being challenged by research. In 2012 the [National Centre for Vocational Education Research published a study called Who Takes a Gap Year and Why?](#)

It found the incidence of gap-taking increasing over recent years. It also found no difference in course change or attrition between gappers and non-gappers.

In other words, whether you take a gap year or not seems irrelevant to your progress towards and through university.

A gap year can help you grow

And the benefits of taking a gap year are becoming more apparent in a study published in 2013 by researchers at the University of Sydney.

[That research found](#) that when used constructively, gap years helped students gain skills, better grades and did not slow down their academic momentum.

"For many students, a gap year is about crystallising their decision-making; developing self-directed and self-regulation skills, broadening their competencies and self-organisation and perhaps their confidence," said lead researcher on the study, Professor Andrew Martin.

In my own research, talking to young Australians and their parents, it seems increasingly socio-economic factors are driving the thinking behind taking a gap year or not.

In regional and rural Australia, where young people are often travelling to the city to study, a gap year jammed pack with paid work is necessary to

accumulate the savings in order to afford to study while living away from home.

For these young people, a gap year is less about finding yourself in India and Italy and more about relieving the pressures on mum and dad as you further your studies.

It reminds me there is a large group of young Australians who don't look on further education as a given, with a gap year as a character-building break in their successful academic lives.

Young people's changing views on higher education

The other factor driving the gap year trend could be changing attitudes among young Australians to the value of higher education.

In my early work on Generation Y, published well over a decade ago, young Australians were telling me that while they mostly aspired to higher education, they were finding it increasingly expensive and less and less valued in the workplace.

In other words, it was expected that you had a degree but having a degree (even a very good one) wasn't enough to land you a well-paying and secure job.

The average university student who is studying full time may also be working between 20 and 30 hours a week of paid work. Plus more students are reporting doing many unpaid internships in order to get a foot in the door in their profession.

Student life today is a far cry from the stories of carousing around campus in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Perhaps a gap year, however difficult, is a welcome pause before the stress of full-time study.

If in fact my kids want to study further after school, I will be quietly encouraging them to take a gap year. I'll even chip in a few dollars to make that backpacking tour around Europe a reality.

Perhaps I'll pull on the hiking boots and go with them. Even mature aged 'students' deserve a gap year don't they?

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