

The pros and cons of taking a gap year

Taking a year off gives students time to pursue other interests while they are away from the academic environment (*SCMP* By Karmel Schreyer 10 November, 2014)

1.Secondary and post-secondary education is becoming more stressful and competitive for students and, for parents, more expensive. This is especially true in Hong Kong. It's no surprise then, that many school leavers are considering a sabbatical or gap year.

2.It can be a welcome breather, and a chance to recover from the rigours of the two-year IB diploma programme or IGCSE exams. But it's also an opportunity to pursue personal interests, earn pocket money, do volunteer work, and explore the world before settling down to a career or advanced studies.

3.Emi Ichikawa Ng, 18, graduated in June 2013 from the YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College, where she took her A-Levels in English, history and art. After taking a year off, she is now studying professional dance at the Northern Ballet School in Manchester, Britain. Her gap year was low-key.

4."I decided to take a gap year because I graduated at 17, and felt too young and unprepared to go straight into vocational training. I thought it was best to take more dance classes, and do dancing jobs to gain experience first," she says.

5.Emi spent the first several months applying to post-secondary dance schools while continuing weekly classes at DMR School of Ballet and Future Stars Dance Academy. Her long-time contemporary dance instructor, Melissa Thornton, put her on the payroll for some commercial event gigs.

6."Taking a gap year was the right decision for me, as I grew more independent over the year. That made the move to Manchester easier," she says.

7."I've heard that taking a gap year is not recommended, as some may lose interest in the idea of higher education. But I could not have been more excited to go to dance school. I was given many opportunities to perform that year, which definitely helped my confidence and performance skills.

8."I would tell readers to do what they think is right for them. They should take into consideration the opinions of their parents, teachers and friends, but ultimately it's their life and no one is entitled to make the choice for them."

9.Sue Gourlay, head of university counselling in the English stream at German Swiss International School, helps students decide what path to take after graduation.

10."As with every decision about higher education, this needs to be approached on an individual basis," she says. "Students who are graduating high school before they turn 18, or who have something they have been itching to do, but were swamped by A-levels or IB diploma work to fit in, can benefit, for instance."

11."Students and their families need to think carefully about the reasons for a gap year and weigh the pros and cons. Simply feeling a bit tired at the end of Year 13 is normal, and not generally a good reason to defer starting university. The summer break is long enough for most young people to fit in all the travel, work and community service opportunities that they want to pursue," Gourlay says.

13. Marie Marchand teaches primary school, and has been a certified parenting coach for 15 years. Her two older children did not take a gap year.

14. "The first one wanted to, but thought that we would not agree. She went to university and she loves it. But she was a bit confused with her choice, and took a break from one faculty and tried a different one for a term. The second child said that if he stopped studying, he would probably never go back. He wanted to get it over with."

15. In May, Marchand's youngest son, Jean-Pierre Nixon, graduated from West Island School. He was keen to take a year off, but it was a family decision. "We had many short meetings, we asked questions and explored ideas," she says.

16. "We talked about filling the year with things that he would learn from, or things that he did not have time to do, but would like to do. He applied for jobs, and signed up for courses. He was offered four jobs, and chose one. After that, he was able to sign up for other things, such as driving lessons, and a football referee course. If he came up with a plan, he was allowed to take a gap year, but doing nothing and wasting the gap year was not allowed."

17. His gap year plan was written down, with articulated goals: take a break from studying; find a job to learn from; make money; and take the time to pursue other interests."

18. Jean-Pierre says: "I chose to take a gap year for several reasons. The IB diploma programme had worn me out. I didn't enjoy school and studying so wanted a break. I did not know what I wanted to study, so during my gap year I wanted to try new things and hopefully gain a better understanding of what I would enjoy.

19. "Also, I wanted to travel and enjoy life after seeing how quickly it could change for the worse after my mum's accident." Last summer, Marchand was seriously injured while hiking in Canada.

20. Jean-Pierre is now working at his old primary school, Discovery Bay International School, as an assistant PE teacher, coaching and refereeing football, tutoring the neighbour's children, and helping at his father's company. He also runs his own birthday party game business. "I am partying a bit too," he adds.

21. His gap year did not get off to a good start. He dislocated his kneecap but is now recovering. "I really enjoy working there and I am gaining experience, making money, and enjoying myself. So I can't ask for much more. I am very busy, but I prefer being busy to finding myself at home doing nothing," he says.

22. "At the moment I believe [the gap year] is a smart choice; continue living off your parents, saving money and gaining experience. I think after travelling, getting back into the routine of studying will be hard, but I believe it will be worth it."

23. Chinese parents tend to feel more secure seeing their children enrolled in university immediately after graduation. With such keen competition in the local system, the idea of a gap year is not popular.

24. "Every year, more than 60,000 graduates compete for university admission. You may be qualified this year, but if you miss the chance this time, you may not be next year," says Joe Tsui Yan-cho, chairman of the Hong Kong Association of Careers Masters and Guidance Masters.