

Is a gap year beneficial? Thought-provoking insights to help you decide

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Whether to take a gap year before or after post-school studies is usually a hotly contested topic that raises a considerable amount of polarity. A decade ago it was not even a consideration, but the concept has gained popularity in the last few years.

Opposing opinions range from the spectrum of “get your studies over and done with, then go out and explore the world” to “most matriculants or graduates (from tertiary programmes) have no idea about the real world, or what they want to do career-wise. So taking a gap year provides the perfect opportunity to get one’s bearings, identify personal interests and how they’d like to make a difference in the world.”

If you’re a parent, or close to someone who has just finished school and is grappling with this dilemma, you know that decisions can’t be based on opinions. Here are some facts to help the decision-making process, based on real-life experience provided by the students and the education team at the [Red & Yellow Creative School of Business](#).

Question 1: Would you advocate a gap year before or after tertiary education?

Mandy Carpenter, an Instructional Designer, feels strongly that it should happen after tertiary education, so that it can double up as a training/job shadowing opportunity. On the other hand, Graphic Design lecturer, Connor Cullinan, believes it should happen before studying further.

Question 2: What are the pros and cons of each scenario?

There are two scenarios that need to be considered:

Young adults that know exactly what they want to do career-wise, and how they want to impact the world, should rather complete their tertiary education directly post-Matric. Their clarity - on the role they want to play in future - means they are emotionally and mentally ready to voraciously pursue learning that will equip them with the skills and knowledge to do what they want to do.

So, if and when they take a gap year after studying, they will probably seek opportunities that are aligned with their quest. And more qualified and equipped to gain meaningful practical experience in their areas of interest.

For those that are unsure, a gap year before studying is a good thing. It’s a great way to connect the ‘protected’ world of school with ‘reality’, and help people understand what they’re good at, care about, or want to commit their lives to.

Georgie Wood, one of our outstanding Degree students, took a gap year before studying further and confirms this sentiment. In Matric, she was interested in the creative world and design, as well as geography and marine biology. How to choose? She spent a year overseas as a mitigation against “just doing a programme to get something behind her name”, which as she points out, makes for an unmotivated student. She believes it leads to more committed students that have also developed critical life skills, and has a positive impact on the overall learning journey.

These students are often more motivated and mature, relative to those straight out of school who are quite nervous to fail or make mistakes. The downside is that fellow students will be younger and less worldly-wise. The choice is then to replace ‘frustration’ with ‘an openness to learning’ - trading worldly experience for understanding the next generation of consumers.

To get the most benefit from a gap year, it is key that the student does some form of work or keeps busy, otherwise they will struggle to get back into the zone of focus, studying, deadlines and academic rigour. Another lecturer, Nini van der Walt, concurs that there are definitely benefits but cautions that an academic break can interrupt the mindset of discipline.

Steph corroborates that in her experience, first-year students who spent their gap year travelling or wondering around and not working seem somewhat out of touch with what it takes to achieve. And often not as hard-working, focused or invested in the outcome as they should be.

Question 3: Any noticeable differences in interacting with students who've taken a gap year versus ones who haven't?

Mandy has noticed that students that take a gap year prior are a little more mature and dedicated than those straight from matric. She has also witnessed that the more mature students (i.e. over 21) are more motivated and often support those that lag behind, creating a peer-learning culture based on life-experience.

Steph concurs, based on her years of lecturing as well as her personal experience of working for two years between her Bachelor and Honours degree.

She also notes that there is another 'camp' to consider - the students who don't take a gap year, are committed to studying further, but doing a programme like a BCom or Engineering where their hearts aren't really in it. Midway through their first year, they realise it's just not for them. When they discover that institutions like Red & Yellow offer the perfect blend between the business and creative world, and decide to make the transition, it's as if a light has been turned on. They are often some of our top students, because they've finally found their 'educational home' - where their unconventional approach and creative thinking is recognised, then developed and nurtured through hours of one-on-one attention.

In closing: To 'gap' or 'not to gap'?

The uncontestable conclusion is that there is no right or wrong answer. It depends solely on each individual, and ultimately comes down to three simple scenarios:

- You **know what you want to study**, then in Nike's words: Just do it. You can always take a gap year thereafter, to gain some valuable life experience before plunging into the world of work or studying further.
- You're **not sure**: then a gap year can be hugely beneficial, but only if you do something that helps you gain essential life skills and interests. It doesn't have to be related to your prospective career or programme considerations; it *does* have to expose you to human dynamics and commercial realities. In turn, this'll help identify the personal contribution/value you want to add career-wise.
- You'd **love to, but can't afford** the whole 'travel-thing': there is an alternative solution. It's not as glamorous or Instagram-worthy, but definitely more valuable. Take a year out to gain life experience (through part-time work) and real-life skills (by taking online short courses). It'll give you time to 'figure-out' what works for you, while gaining essential real-life experience and industry-relevant skills and knowledge.

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