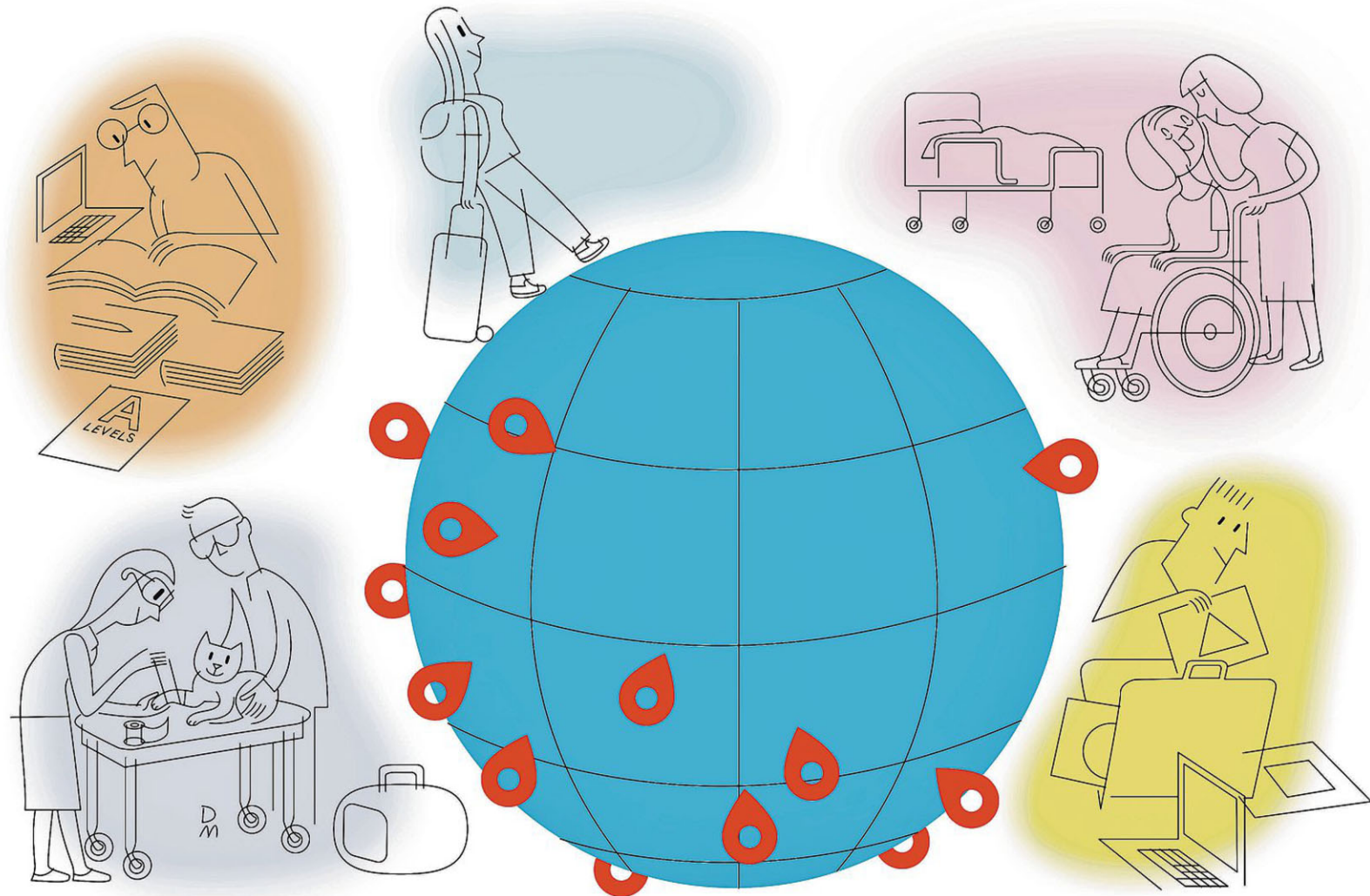


A gap year could be a ticket to life-changing experiences

When a chance to join a medical start-up in Boston presented itself, I pressed pause on my studies, packed my bags and hopped on a plane.



Faye Ng Yu Ci

During my undergraduate studies at the National University of Singapore medical school, I did something unexpected and unconventional – I decided to take a gap year in the middle of my studies.

I was passionate about entrepreneurship and medical innovation, and when a serendipitous chance to join a medical start-up in Boston came along, I took a leap of faith.

I applied for a year-long leave of absence (LOA) from school, packed my bags and left. It was a year of experiential learning, unlike anything I had done before, as I delved into AI in gastroenterology through my internship with the company.

A gap year involves time off during the course of one's education to take stock, pursue interests and gain real-world exposure.

Within my batch of more than 300 medical students, six of us took gap years. All of us came back rejuvenated and enriched by the experience, with interesting stories to tell.

It wasn't all work. The varied paths we traversed included further studies in research and public health, volunteering with an animal conservatory and travelling abroad to learn about different regions and cultures.

A gap year could be about just me-time as well – focusing on working towards intangible, personal goals such as bettering mental health or improving relationships with loved ones.

I had no regrets after taking mine.

A GAP TO EXPLORE

My gap year was nothing short of transformative.

I had never been to Boston, 24 hours by flight from home. But in that unfamiliar city, I was able to experiment and reinvent myself, make mistakes and take on a year that was so pivotal in shaping the person I am today.

Work was busy but fruitful: I sat in on contract negotiations with

partners, prepared briefs and presentations for meetings, and had the opportunity to spearhead a deep dive project on clinical trial recruitment.

Outside of my internship with the company, I picked up coding from MIT OpenCourseWare, attended hackathons and pitching events, and reached out for one-on-one coffee sessions with founders and entrepreneurs. I later started a podcast interviewing various personalities in the medtech scene.

For the first time in my life, there wasn't a scripted guide to follow. There were no curriculum objectives and no standardised tests. There was no bell curve, nothing for me to succeed in or fail.

Apart from the hustling, there was plenty of time to linger and smell the roses. I spent autumn picking apples off trees and biting into the flesh of plump peaches in New Hampshire. I marvelled at the beauty of first snow, the day the branches of the barren trees lining the roads of Cambridge became covered in frosted white.

But there were also moments when I felt deeply alone and isolated, especially during my first few days in Boston where there wasn't a single face I recognised.

Having to uproot myself and lay down an existence again on a blank slate was overwhelming. The initial months consisted of shuttling between work and errands – opening bank accounts, obtaining my social security ID, and house hunting as I lived on the living room couch of a mutual friend who was kind enough to share the space as home.

I learnt that seasonal affective disorder was not just a name but a feeling, sitting by the windows drinking in the full length of daylight in the winter solstice, savouring the sliver of the few hours when the sun was up.

I cycled along the haphazard roads of Boston to get to places (out of exasperation at the local public transport system rather than voluntary choice, given how I picked up cycling only recently), holding onto the handlebars for my dear life. I survived on a staple diet of cabbage and miso

soup on most days to save cost.

The year made me more resilient and I learnt so much about myself – aspects I never knew existed before this wild adventure.

But while my gap year was about self-growth and self-discovery, some use the time to make space for others.

A GAP WITH PURPOSE

One of my close friends took a year off from university after her mother was diagnosed with cancer, during which she journeyed with her through the illness. At the same time, she spearheaded a project destigmatising mental health conditions and creating more avenues of support for struggling young people, drawing from her own experiences as a caregiver for her mum.

The friend of mine realised how passionate she was about promoting mental health as a form of public health through her gap year, having witnessed the gaps in the system. She came back to medical school with a renewed sense of purpose, her heart set on pursuing psychiatry so she could continue advocating for patients.

Taking a gap year can also help to develop key competencies like project management and self-directed learning, along with interpersonal skills such as teamwork and communication.

Research shows a connection between a deliberate choice to take time off from school and better grades upon return to the classroom, and that students who take gap years tend to get better jobs due to their diverse

experiences and expanded perspectives.

Mr Robert Claggett, the former dean of admissions at Middlebury College, conducted a study that demonstrated that students who took gap years tended to outperform their peers academically by 0.1 to 0.4 points on a 4.0 GPA scale, with the positive effects lasting over the four years of college.

Additionally, the American Gap Association reports that students who take a year off are 75 per cent more likely to be "happy" or "extremely" satisfied with their careers post-college, compared with students who head straight to college.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology normally has 1 per cent of its incoming cohort deferring admissions, but by mid-2020, that number had risen to 8 per cent. According to the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the number of "gappers" has doubled in the past 10 years, although exact figures are hard to pin down.

The idea of taking a gap year seems to be gaining traction in Singapore too, with students using the time to figure out what they really want to do.

The website, GapyearSG, which was started by medical student Gabrielle Lee when she took a gap year to reapply for the course, shares resources and personal anecdotes from students with similar experiences.

Among the stories posted on the site, there was a student who retook his A levels thrice to get into his dream course of medicine, a student who took a gap year after the A levels to spruce up her art portfolio before

applying to art school, as well as a student who was already enrolled in university but took a gap year to re-evaluate the suitability of her course while exploring diverse industries.

PUSHBACKS AND DOUBTS

As rewarding as it can be, choosing to take a gap year comes with its own set of challenges and dilemmas.

When I raised the idea of taking a gap year with my parents, I faced considerable pushback. They voiced their concerns over whether a gap year was truly "necessary" and "worth it", expressing that the rosy picture I painted and the objectives I hoped to achieve may not materialise.

They cautioned that my ideals for the gap year may contrast starkly with reality, and to have more tempered expectations.

In Singapore's hypercompetitive environment, delaying graduation may feel counterintuitive.

This inevitably leads some parents and students to remain sceptical and dismissive towards gap years, or harbour misconceptions about what it entails. They might be under the impression that gap years are a "whimsical" detour from school or a "frivolous" bid for vacation, taken by those who are unfocused and unmotivated to "slack away" or "relax".

One of my friends who took a gap year to recover from his anxiety and depression recounted: "When I told my friends and family I was taking a break from school to 'rest', they just looked at me funny, like they didn't understand."

He lamented that the ideas of self-care and self-fulfilment were lost on them in an environment where there is the pressure to excel constantly and succeed every step of the way.

Some others may also view gap years as a privilege of the well-off. That sentiment surfaced in reports critical of former US president Barack Obama's daughter, Malia, when she decided to take a gap year before enrolling at Harvard University. However, the financial cost of

expenses incurred by the gap year, coupled with a year's delay in starting work after graduation, can take a significant toll on some students.

But gap years shouldn't be the exclusive premise of the affluent or elite. Students can opt for gap years to acquire work experience, network and explore diverse career possibilities, all while earning a full-time salary or an internship stipend. Alternatively, some may choose to work part-time to fund their living expenses and travels during their gap year.

This unconventional break may not be for everyone.

Some may regret their decision to take a gap year when they "miss out on the action" and watch their peers advance in their studies or careers without them.

Students must carefully weigh the risks and benefits of a gap year and assess how the choice fits into their educational journey.

A year may seem fleeting in the grand scheme of things, but it is also a momentous time during a period of life where one is at the peak of one's youth, when so many possibilities abound.

Without a doubt, the decision to take a gap year is a complex and personal one.

For me, the gap year was an extraordinary experience that allowed me to find myself and mature as a person. Taking a break from medical school made me more certain and more determined that I want to return to practise clinical medicine – that at the end of the day, I enjoy face-to-face conversations with patients over drafting proposals or sitting in meeting rooms discussing KPIs.

It takes a certain amount of courage to stray away from the conventional path of academic achievement and success. But not all who wander are entirely lost. Perhaps this is what American philosopher Henry David Thoreau meant when he wrote: "I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees."

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