Taking a Pre-university Gap Year is Beneficial to Student's Professional Development

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Abstract. This article focuses on the benefits of a gap year for high school students before they enter university for their future career development, including having enough time to consider job options, being more comfortable in the work environment and having more accessible access to career development. Today, many students choose to take a gap year after high school. Studying this issue is essential for education as it is, in part, closely linked to students' future career development and employment in society. Studying the benefits of gap years can guide vocational education programmes in schools and help students in their career planning and decision-making. The primary debate in the literature related to this topic is that taking a gap year before university may only sometimes benefit students' career development.

Keywords: a pre-university gap year · students' professional development · career choice · work environment · promotion

1   Introduction and Context

The decision by an increasing number of students around the world to take at least one year off between high school studies and higher education is an important trend in modern society. According to Birch and Miller (2007), the proportion of first-year university Australian students who delayed by one year in 1974 climbed to almost 11 per cent in 2004. The same is happening in other countries. The popularity of gap years has increased worldwide, for example, in Oceania (Curtis et al. 2012), then North America (Qian, 2013), then South Africa (Coetzee & Bester, 2009).

Research on the benefits of the pre-university gap year for students' professional development is highly relevant to contemporary careers education (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012). Given the gap year does benefit their professional development, today's schools and teachers can learn how to educate students about career planning, which in the long run is likely to benefit the country's employment market.

There has been debate as to whether students should take a gap year. Some academics disagree with students taking a gap year, arguing that it is neither beneficial nor detrimental to their development. Crawford and Cribb (2012) claim that gapers are more likely to have lower skills and engage in risky behaviours such as cannabis use. According to Nieman (2013), student travel abroad can be risky due to natural or man-made

disasters. According to Parker et al. (2015), students in gap years have a higher chance of dropping out of university courses. However, Inkson and Myers' (2003) study of young people who travelled abroad found that their primary motivation was cultural and social and that their career development was incidental.

This article will further elaborate on three arguments to demonstrate the benefits of taking a gap year after high school for future work. The three arguments are that students who take a gap year have enough time to think about their career and make choices, are more comfortable with the work environment and are more likely to be promoted.

2 Taking a Pre-university Gap year Allows Students to Take Time to Make a Career Choice

Whether a person's career development is successful depends mainly on his or her choice of career; on the contrary, a career pursued just for the sake of making money often only leaves one exhausted, not to mention taking off on the career path. A survey conducted by the China Youth Daily Social Research Centre (Pinchi, 2022) among 2001 professionals revealed that 95.8% of the professionals surveyed believe that entering the right industry is necessary for career development, with 46.6% considering it essential. The survey shows that the right career choice is very beneficial for future career development.

2.1 Evidence from Literature Review

Numerous studies have shown that the gap year between completing high school and formally entering university can help students choose the right career. For example, Niemann (2013) gathered information on the thoughts of several South African students about the value of gap years in preparing for higher education studies and found that all participants were optimistic about the experience. Those who chose to take a gap year because they were uncertain about their study and career options particularly benefited— the gap year allowed them to gain a new perspective. They were more motivated and focused when they had confidence in a subject (Niemann, 2013). A case study conducted by Coetzee (2006), which included semi-structured interviews, lifelines and collages with three study participants, showed that a gap year before the university could help people decide to work as they have the opportunity to travel the world, learn more about themselves and become more professionally mature. Thus, making professional decisions is possible (Coetzee, 2006).

2.2 Counterarguments

Other scholars, on the other hand, need to be more sceptical about whether a gap year before higher education gives young people appropriate career options and further benefits their professional development. Little concrete evidence to support the view that young people take a gap year to university before they can know what they want to major in at university and what they want to do in the future in the real world, making appropriate choices about jobs that will enable them to do better at university or be more successfully employed (Snee, 2010).

The opponents' views are also based on established assumptions and lack a factual basis. Furthermore, in addition to the results mentioned above by Coetzee (2006) and Snee (2010), which prove the accuracy of Claim 1, the authors found an interesting fact. Many universities have developed various programmes to encourage students to become empty years and develop them into literate and skilled individuals. For example, Bridge Year is a gap year programme initiated by Princeton University. The University funds the programme, and 10% of each new class intends to participate (Tomer, 2010).

3 A Pre-university Gap year Helps Students Adapt to the Work Environment

Typically, the main activities that students take part in during their gap year include travelling domestically or overseas, volunteering in the community, learning a specific skill for personal interest, and working a part-time or full-time job to save money on tuition fees and living costs for formal university study and life. As a result, students who take a gap year before university are more likely to be exposed to real-life work situations than those who take a direct higher education without a gap year between graduating from high school and attending university, which results in students gaining a great deal of practical work experience in a short period and gives them a practical working knowledge rather than what is taught in the classroom and rarely used in real life. As a result, gap students are already very familiar with the work environment, including the general procedures for completing tasks, the skills required to perform them, and workplace etiquette, so they can focus entirely on their work tasks without being distracted by trivial matters. Efficient work and a high level of concentration will lead to their successful professional development.

3.1 Evidence from Literature Review

Taking a gap year before attending college affects students' professional development by giving them a year ahead to adapt themselves to the actual work environment, which manifests in several aspects.

Researchers Guang, Eltorai, Durand, and Daniels (2020) did a study examining rates and risk factors for burnout of American medical school students who are gap-year takers. They contend that compared with students who did not, students who took gap years showed noticeably lower levels of burnout.

Furthermore, King (2011) conducted research involving 23 gappers, arguing that people will build excellent identity work, which means they will be more confident, mature, and independent after taking gap years. Identity work is considered a component of soft skills that helps students get more accustomed to the modern workplace and, consequently, more appealing to employers (Stehlik, 2010).

Finally, to gather information, Nieman (2010) did a semi-structured interviews with 25 college students, focusing on the pros and cons of taking a gap year and how it affected their personal development. The research shows that the participants enhanced their interpersonal and communication skills, which involves enlarging friend circles and handling tricky situations and conflicts in working areas.

3.2 Counterarguments

As with the objections of the previous claim, in general, the main point of doubt is the lack of quantitative, experimental data to prove that taking a gap year helps students adapt quickly to the work environment later in life, which can ultimately have a positive impact on their career development.

Nevertheless, given the difficulty of researching this topic, conducting qualitative research is almost impossible, as it requires enormous human, financial and time-consuming resources. In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research gathers first-hand information from students who participate in a gap year, and the perceptual description of the gap year from them is detailed and truthful, reflecting realistic results, rather than laboratory results from qualitative research that may produce errors that do not match the reality.

4 Students Who Take a Gap Year are More Likely to Get Promoted

Students who take a year time-out between finishing upper secondary school and starting their learning in university are more likely to experience promotion in their companies than people who do not have a gap year. Because the more cultures they learn, the more diversified their minds will be. Students who take a year break travel to foreign countries, living in different cultures will make them slowly change themselves to integrate into the local people. Students participating in the gap year will gradually develop an inclusive and diverse worldview and refine their values. At the same time, they will become more empathetic and flexible, which is an integral part of the workplace survival law. Employees with a broad perspective and good emotional intelligence will naturally be promoted.

4.1 Evidence from Literature Review

Students who take a college-preparatory gap year after high school typically have higher EI (emotional intelligence). Shahid and Adams (2020) conducted a survey to assess the Emotional Intelligence level of 486 residents at their medical school who had taken a gap year before matriculating in the school. Residents with a year's break before enrolling in medical school had higher overall EI scores and subscales of interpersonal ability, empathy, decision-making, and impulse control. Similarly, Nieman (2010) points out that those gap year takers develop a broader perspective on the world and a more positive outlook on life. They acquire a more unbiased view of life and better understand other cultures due to exposure to life's reality.

4.2 Counterarguments

The counterargument for claim 3 is that students who take a pre-university gap year do not necessarily get promoted more straightforwardly. Under the guidance of the life span theory of control, Parker et al. (2015) did two studies to compare the factors connected with adaptative outcomes respectively in Finland and Australia. According

to the study conducted in Australia, the researchers observed no difference between gap-year youngsters and direct university entrants in terms of growth in outlooks for the future, professional possibilities, and life satisfaction.

However, the authors think the opposite. This Finnish study did not find that students who chose a gap year were equally likely to have the same career progression as those who went straight to university. This result could be coincidental and does not mean the same could happen in other countries. Overall, combining the two studies by Nieman (2010) and Shahid and Adams (2020), the author suggests that a gap year before university increases the likelihood of promotion and thus benefits their career progression.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In conclusion, taking a pre-university gap year benefits students' professional development. The conclusion is drawn from three claims: sub-aspect of career pathways, making a proper career choice, adapting to the work environment, and getting promoted. The justification for each claim is based on the presentation of previous literature reviews and comparisons.

Overall, there are some limitations. First, most of the studies presented above adopt the qualitative method, and the interview is the most frequently used one, which means that there is a need for more experimental and statistical data that can be taken to draw a relatively persuasive conclusion. On the other hand, the dates of some of the studies the author found are close to 2010. Studies that can be dated back to 2018 or later would be more powerful, for the study results can match the present situation to a large extent. Third, there needs to be a more prior scientific investigation on the pre-university gap year and how it affects students' professional growth.

This paper hopes to shed light on current educational practices and policies. The above analysis shows that participation in a gap year benefits students to enter the workforce later in life. In the big picture, participation in the gap year is closely related to the issue of social employment. Therefore, the government should pay more attention to the gap year and introduce relevant policies to create opportunities for students to participate in the gap year. Schools should adjust their educational curricula for students' careers to foster awareness of active participation in the gap year.

Regarding future research suggestions, more research on the pre-university gap year and its impact on student career advancement are welcomed. Meanwhile, instead of qualitative methods, quantitative methods need to be taken hopefully.

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