

How the “Gap Year” Influences the PARTICIPANTS’ Self-Development

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Abstract: The gap year emerged in Europe in the 1960s. Gap year help students improve their academic achievement, enrich their life experience, promote their personal growth, promote their future career development, cultivate world citizen awareness and stimulate cross cultural communication. As an innovative way of higher education in western countries, more and more young person favors gap year. This paper summarizes the impact of gap year on students.

1. Introduction

The “gap year” has become a recognised, institutionalised and specialised cultural phenomenon, which attracts the attention of many young people in society.^[1]

2. Background

The gap year originated from “The grand tour” in Europe during the 1760s.^[2] In the decade preceding the Second World War, governments began to promote travel and cultural exchanges by youths in order to create peace between cultures, and avoid another world war. Furthermore, the British domestic economy was booming, and the British government financially supported students to participate in gap years. This guided young people to greater serve the society, and created global awareness and mutual understanding among societies of all countries. In the 21st century and Internet era, gap year activities are developing rapidly around the world, and are welcomed by the youth of many countries.

2.1 Definition of a ‘Gap Year’

The definition of a gap year varies according to different studies. For instance, Krause define gap year students as those who enter university one year after high school.^[3] The most widely recognised definition is any period between 3 to 24 months that an individual takes out of education, training, or the workplace.^[2]

3. Research Methodology

In this thesis, the existing literature in relation to gap years will be explained. Previous studies mostly use a qualitative analysis, especially discourse analysis or narrative analysis.^[4] These

studies use qualitative interviews to collect samples of the literature related to studies on “gap year” from blog search platforms. Then, the sampled blogs are transferred into text and coded using a qualitative analysis package.

Although the extended literature review is applied to this study instead of interview, the questions originally proposed can be used to narrow the study’s focus. For example, the question, “What did you do during a gap year?”, “What was the biggest impact of your gap year?” narrow the main points of the gap year activities. Therefore the bibliographic retrieval is centered around the terms ‘gap year’ and synonym ‘transition year’.

All of the literature collected in this paper derives from the online library from the University of Glasgow database, Google Scholar, and Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure. The literature will be analysed through a thematic analysis to classify the literature according to different themes.

4. The Influence of the Gap Year

Previous studies have demonstrated that gap years have a far greater impact on young people's personal development, employment achievement, identity formation, and higher education.^[5]

4.1 Stimulate Learning Motivation and Learning Achievement

Previous studies have demonstrated that gap years have a positive impact on participants' learning motivations and learning achievements.^[6] In a 2013 article produced by Harvard University, it was stressed that the positive role of the gap year may relieve the pressure of studying for high school students.^[6] Clerkin demonstrates that students in Ireland who participate in the transition year have a significantly greater positive attitude towards learning, and have a stronger sense of emotional belonging at school.^[7] They also may have a greater harmonious relationship with teachers, have higher cognitive participation in learning, and are generally more satisfied with school, and global life.

Additionally, it is generally believed that taking a gap year before university has a positive impact on academic performance. According to Clerkin, students who undertook a gap year scored 2.3% higher in reading and mathematics than those who did not take a gap year.^[8] These results also confirm that gap years can contribute to better academic performance for students at university.

4.2 Gain Maturity and Self-Reliance

One of the fundamental advantages of the gap year is to promote the maturity of students, and cultivate their self-reliance and cognitive abilities. According to Clerkin, students who participate in the transition year obtain improved social behaviour and intellectual maturity, which will contribute to them feeling grown up during university.^[7] Participants believe that this is conducive to enhancing their ability to manage their time effectively when preparing for higher education.^[7]

Gap years can permit students to consider what they want to pursue in the future. This may be simply to strengthen their personal consciousness so that they can enter the field of higher education independently.^[6]

4.3 Gain Soft Skills and Be Competitive in Workplace

Gap years are also an opportunity to develop soft skills, such as communication, organisational, and teamwork skills. These new skills can make participants more competitive in the workplace as they may not acquire these soft skills during the formal education.^[9] 79% believed that students who had mastered these soft skills would make greater progress at university.^[5] Furthermore,

employers will consider it to be an advantage for job seekers to have overseas experience. This means that those applying are flexible, independent, and good at adapting to new environments. These experiences, which contribute to their resume can mold their character, and enhance their competitiveness in the highly competitive job market or enter university.

4.4 Social Identity Maintenance

Gap years support the establishment of global citizenship, and increases the difference between middle class participants and other student groups. This maintains social advantages of the middle class, gaining advantages in university and the job market.^[10] The Guardian's advice for future gap year participants states that gap years are a period when young people actively build their identity and status, and subsequently take responsibility for their lives.^[9] For instance, Heath proposes that gap years are undertaken by the middle classes to expand higher education participation, in order to create new forms of differentiation.^[5] Furthermore, the difference between different groups of students who engaged in this activity is contributing to widening the gap between them.^[5] They also can acquire the skills to become global citizens with cosmopolitan identities.^[10] This will create new privileges within employment markets and universities, and make students stand out in the recruitment process.^[5]

However, some have argued that gap years are solely for the construction of cultural capital, which is used as a form of social class positioning.^[5] This implies that young people from middle-class backgrounds use their gap year experience to distinguish themselves from others in similar class status. Although not all participants do so, the majority of them, regardless of their social class background, attempt to create this distinction, and participants usually consider themselves more mature than students who entered university directly.^[5]

4.5 Promote Cross-Cultural Communication

American cultural scholar Edward Hall proposed cross-cultural communication in 1950s, which refers to a situation and state formed by individuals or ethnic groups belonging to different ethnic groups and in different cultural backgrounds, and the process of cultural collision and cultural blending.^[11] Regarding cross-cultural communication, long-distance travel is an important channel when conveying local culture, and interpreting different cultures. As Ao writes, travel is usually inextricably linked with culture.^[11] It could be argued that travel can promote cultural communication, which renders travel more valuable and meaningful. For example, the travel of Chinese gap year participants includes both individual travel, participation in official cultural communication organisations, such as the Confucius Institute and international Chinese school.^[11] Through gap year travel, two-way communication between different national cultures can be realised, forming positive interactions, mutual exchanges, and enhancing mutual understanding and friendships.

5. Conclusion

In the Internet age of the 21st century, gap year activities are developing rapidly. Gap years have been widely promoted and popularised in recent years and have been favored by increasing numbers of college students around the world. As a new form of international higher education, gap years are becoming increasingly important. They are of great significance, not only to students' academic and mental development, but also to the development of society.

To conclude, gap years reflect a form of freedom and independence, which is valuable in modern materialist societies. As a special informal education approach, the gap year has a far-reaching

impact, involving many aspects of society, culture, economy and policy. Therefore, whether it is a longitudinal study of the process of youth participation in the gap year or a horizontal comparison of the phenomenon of gap year in different countries, it has important reference significance for the development of the gap year in various countries.

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