

Students' Awareness and Intention to Participate in a Gap Year Programme

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Abstract

This study aims to understand students' awareness and intention to participate in a Gap Year programme at a public university in Malaysia. A survey questionnaire was distributed from a sample of 900 students representing all the nine faculties at the university. The results showed that more than half of the students were not aware of the programme. For those who were aware of the programme, the source of information was from friends, their seniors, university briefing and website. The result for the intention to participate showed that slightly more than half of the students did not have the intention to participate in the programme. The reasons given were the programme could defer their graduation, and some thought that it was unnecessary. The findings of the study are expected to add to the existing literatures regarding the Gap Year and provide empirical evidence about the Gap Year programme in Malaysia context. Besides, the findings are expected to provide useful insights for the university, and the Ministry of Education about the newly launched Gap Year programme. Thus, more effective strategies can be developed, and the ministry's aspiration to produce holistic, balanced and entrepreneurial graduates can be realized.

Keywords: gap year, awareness, intention, public university, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In January 2017, the Minister of Higher Education announced the Gap Year programme, which allows students in tertiary education who are in second year onwards, to take a year or two semesters off their formal education for personal growth (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). The Gap Year programme is part of Shift 1 of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), in producing holistic, balanced and entrepreneurial graduates (Malaysia Education Malaysia, 2015). Although it is a new concept in Malaysia, the idea has been growing and developing in western countries for at least three decades (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015). Existing studies on Gap Year students have attempted to understand this phenomenon, where most of these studies are conducted in the UK (Abidi, 2002; Heath, 2007), Australia (Birch & Miller, 2007), and United States (Grose, 2010; Tucker, 2012). Due to its growing popularity in other countries, studies have been conducted in South Africa (Nieman, 2013) and China (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015). However, as the concept was only introduced in Malaysia in January 2017, to the researcher's knowledge, very limited evidence about the Gap Year can be found in the Malaysian context.

The Gap Year phenomenon has been around in the above mentioned countries for decades, thus most of the studies have focused on the students' experiences, their motivating factors, the benefits and drawbacks of the Gap Year experience, and their experience towards career

decision-making (Haeth, 2007; Nieman, 2013; O'Shea, 2011; Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015). In Malaysia, where the Gap Year is a very new concept and was only started in September 2017, the need to understand students' awareness about the programme, and their interests regarding the programme are the critical issues that need to be addressed. Understanding the Gap Year from the students' perspectives will help universities and the ministry to provide support and guidance to these young people to pursue their educational and career goals. It may also assist the universities and the ministry to develop the appropriate strategies. Therefore, a study to examine these issues is clearly warranted.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Realizing the critical needs as discussed earlier, this study seeks to address the following objectives

1. To investigate students' awareness about the Gap Year programme.
2. To investigate students' intention to participate in the Gap Year programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gap Year is defined in a number of ways. Some defined it as a break in educational career that is usually taken between leaving school and beginning to study at a university (Jones, 2004; King, 2011). Other researchers refer to it as taking time out between high school and college, sometimes during college (Hulstrand, 2010, Torpey, 2009) or after college (Torpey, 2009). Stehlik (2010) uses the definition by UK's Department of Education and Skills, which describes it as a period of 3 to 24 months during which the individual takes time out from a formal work or education trajectory. A similar length of time was also offered earlier by Jones (2004). Heath (2006) refers to the Gap Year as taking time out before engaging in a more settled career. Based on these definitions, although they may differ in time length or when Gap Year is taken, in essence, the Gap Year is where students departing from standard education move from high school to tertiary education or during tertiary education and then making another transition back in. A gap year can be structured or unstructured with a combination of voluntary work locally or overseas (Nieman, 2013). The purpose of the Gap Year is to open students' mind and create opportunities for their journey through tertiary education and their lives after that (Haighler & Nelson, 2005) and it should prepare students to develop particular knowledge, skills, abilities through hands-on experience (Cremin, 2007)

The Gap Year concept which was introduced by The Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia allows students (from the second year onwards) to take a year or two semesters off during university studies (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). It is part of Shift 1 of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), in producing holistic, balanced and entrepreneurial graduates (Malaysia Education Malaysia, 2013). There are three types of Gap Year programmes introduced by the ministry, namely the National Service Volunteer programme, the Volunteer programme and the general Gap Year programme. Under the National Service Volunteer Gap Year programme, students will be attached for one year at a uniformed agency such as armed forces, police, civil defence or maritime enforcement agency. Two universities, i.e. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) will be the pioneer for this project (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). On the other hand, The Gap Year programme (volunteer) is where 8 pioneer universities collaborate with participating agencies, for example, Universiti Utara Malaysia collaborates

with Social Welfare Department, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris collaborates with Ministry of Education and Perak Education Department, and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia collaborates with Islamic Relief Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). Students who choose this programme will do volunteer work with these agencies for a period of 3 months to 1 year. Unlike the first 2 programmes which are very structured, the third programme is general where students can take time out from the university to get involved in sports activities, entrepreneurship, increase their skills, travel etc, for a minimum of one semester and a maximum of one academic calendar (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017).

Taking a gap year has been popular in the UK and Australia. For example, in the UK since 2002, 2.2 % of university applicants had chosen to defer their acceptance to university to take a gap year (Abidi, 2004) and Heath (2007) proposed that approximately 45,000 young people took a Gap Year each year in that country. A similar trend can be seen in Australia where 11% of high school graduates chose to take a Gap Year (Birch and Miller, 2007). Taking a gap year between high school and tertiary education is also popular in the United States (Grose, 2010; Tucker, 2012) and the idea gain momentum when the oldest daughter of the previous President Barack Obama announced her plan to take a gap year before starting at Harvard University (US Fed New Service, 2017). It has also gained popularity in other parts of the world such as in South Africa (Nieman, 2013) and China (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015).

The Gap Year can be rewarding but it also has drawbacks. It is a great way for students to learn about their individual interests and their career pursuits, help students mature and choose the right path (Hulstrand, 2010). Students involved in the Gap Year can acquire a range of benefits from the transformative experience including the acquisition of soft skills, and learning cross-cultural experience in a host country (Jones, 2005), significant gains in personal, civic, moral and intellectual development (O'Shea, 2011), developing confidence, maturity and independence (King, 2011). It also has its drawbacks. Postponing study which takes them off from the traditional path sometimes makes it challenging for the students to get back and they do not graduate on time as their peers do (Hulstrand, 2010)

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through a questionnaire survey. In the awareness section, students were asked to indicate whether they were aware about Gap Year programme. For those who knew about the programme, they were asked to indicate the source of information for their awareness. In the next section, the students were asked to indicate their intention to participate in the programme. An open-ended question was provided for the students to indicate their reasons to participate or not participate. A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed to students from all the nine faculties at the university, where 887 questionnaires were completed and utilised for the analysis. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The responses from open-ended questions were classified into themes.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results of the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Demographic profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	285	32.1
	Female	602	67.9
Ethnicity	Malay	668	75.3
	Chinese	48	5.4
	Indian	37	4.2
	Bumiputra Sabah/Sarawak	134	15.1

Awareness

As illustrated in Table 2, more than half of the students (61.7%) were not aware of the existence of the Gap Year programme in Malaysian universities.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	340	38.3	38.3	38.3
No	547	61.7	61.7	100.0
Total	887	100.0	100.0	

Students who knew about the Gap programme were asked to indicate the sources of information for their awareness. The findings are shown in Figure 1.

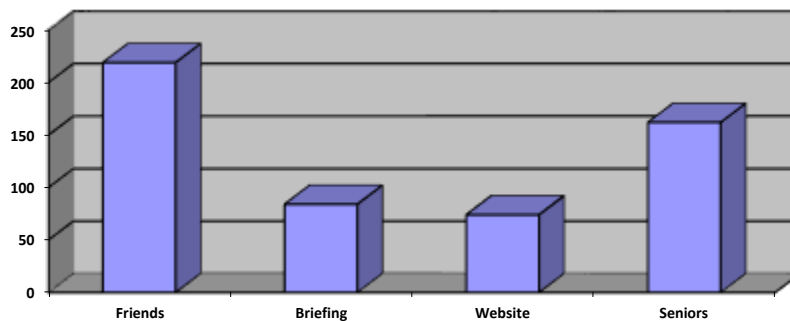


Figure 1: Sources of awareness about Gap Year programme

As illustrated in Figure 1, the highest source of information was from friends (n=219), followed by seniors (n=162), university briefing(n=84) and university website (n=74).

Intention to participate

Table 3: Shows the findings for intention to participate

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	421	47.5	47.5	47.5
No	466	52.5	52.5	100.0
Total	887	100.0	100.0	

As shown in the above table, almost half of the students (47.5%) had the intention to participate in the Gap Year programme, while slightly more than half (52.5%) did not have the intention to participate in the programme. Students were given the opportunity to express their thoughts and indicate the reasons of their intention to participate or not to participate in the Gap Year programme. The comments were classified into themes.

Intention to participate

- Help develop students' skills and potential
- Increase employability
- Fill in the time during semester break
- Networking

Some of the respondents indicated they were interested to participate in the programme because this programme would develop their skills and potential. Such comments include *"I am interested with the programme because I will get experiences and knowledge from various aspects"*, *"Gap year can expand my potential"* and *" This programme can polish my skills"*

The comments also indicated that the students believed that the Gap Year programme could increase their employability. For example *"This programme can improve my marketability and employability"*

Respondents also believed that the Gap Year programme was good for filling in their time during the semester break, *"This programme can fill in my leisure time"* and *"This programme can fill in my time during semester break"*. Other comments suggested that the Gap Year programme was good for their networking, *" It can expand my contacts and networking"*

The comments from students who were not interested to participate in the programme were classified according to the following themes:

- May not graduate on time
- The Gap Year is unnecessary
- Do not understand what the Gap Year is

The student's comments illustrated their worries about not graduating on time if they were involved in the Gap Year programme. For example *"It affects my graduation time"* and *"I'm not interested in participating in the gap year program because I want to graduate right on time"*. Other comments suggested that participation in Gap Year programme might not be the way to become a holistic graduate. Such comments include *"We can still serve the community by participating in the activities organized by students associations. Soft skills can be developed by participating in student organizations/associations at universities. We can do all these even if we do not join Gap Year programme"*, and *"To gain soft skills, while studying we can engage in organizations, associations, national associations and others.... It depends on the student whether they want to join these associations or not... so this can be done and not only by participating in Gap Year programme"* and one student commented that it was a waste of time. The comments from the respondents also showed that they were uninterested because they did not exactly know what Gap Year was, while some respondents indicated that they might consider to participate if they were given more information about the programme.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings for students' awareness show that more than half of the respondents were not aware about the Gap Year programme. The fact that the Gap Year was a newly launched concept in Malaysia which started in September 2017 could be the reason why the programme was not well-known by many students at the university. Unlike in the UK or Australia where the concept is popular (Abidi, 2004 and Birch & Miller, 2007), perhaps more awareness programmes should be conducted in Malaysia. Both the university and the ministry should

identify and use the medium that is popular among students to ensure that the information reaches the target audience.

This study also found that slightly more than half of the students in this study did not have the intention to participate in the Gap Year programme. A more detailed analysis indicated that among the reasons were the students were worried about not graduating on time if they participated in the programme, they could still become holistic graduates without participation in the Gap Year programme and a lack of knowledge about the programme. The findings for not graduating on time are consistent with Hulstrand's study (2010), while the findings for reasons to participate are consistent with Jones (2005). O'Shea (2011) and King (2011).

The findings of this study provide some insight for the university and ministry about the students' awareness and intention to participate in the Gap Year programme. Thus, effective strategies could be developed by both parties. Future studies could be conducted in other public universities to get a more holistic view and the results can be generalized to a larger group.

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