British Journal of Sociology of Education

ISSN: 0142-5692 (Print) 1465-3346 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cbse20

Widening the gap: pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience'

Sue Heath

To cite this article: Sue Heath (2007) Widening the gap: pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience', British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28:1, 89-103, DOI: 10.1080/01425690600996717

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600996717

Published online: 07 Dec 2006.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 6955

View related articles

Citing articles: 13 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cbse20

British Journal of Sociology of Education
Vol. 28, No. 1, January 2007, pp. 89–103

Widening the gap: pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience'

Sue Heath*
University of Southampton, UK

Embarking upon a pre-university gap year is an increasingly popular option among British students. Drawing on Brown *et al.*'s work on positional conflict theory and the increased importance of the 'economy of experience', this paper seeks to explore this growing popularity and argues that the gap year's enhanced profile raises important questions concerning the processes by which certain groups of young people are able to gain advantage over others during a period of educational expansion. Indeed, it is arguably no coincidence that the gap year's popularity has taken off in parallel with this expansion, as the gap year emerges as an important means of 'gaining the edge' over other students in the context of increased competition for entry to elite institutions.

Introduction

Taking a year out—or, more precisely, 15 months—between the completion of A-levels or equivalent and the commencement of higher education is an increasingly common practice among standard-age British university entrants. In 1994, 5.4% of all applicants to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service deferred entry until autumn 1995, rising to 7.5% of applicants by 2004. In absolute terms, this represents almost twice as many students deferring university entry than a decade previously, rising from 14,530 in 1994 to 28,435 in 2004 (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2005). In addition, it is estimated that at least 15,000 students apply for a university place in the year after gaining their results, bringing the total number of pre-university gap-year students to a possible figure of around 45,000-plus per annum (gapyear.com, 2001).

The term 'gap year' is now widely used to refer to a diverse range of activities, involving various combinations of paid and unpaid work, leisure and travel. Many students, for example, spend several months in full-time employment in order to finance an overseas trip or volunteer placement in the second half of their gap year,

*School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK. Email: Sue.Heath@soton.ac.uk

ISSN 0142-5692 (print)/ISSN 1465-3346 (online)/07/010089–15
© 2007 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/01425690600996717

while a growing minority of students spend the entire year in paid employment specifically in order to finance attendance at university, sometimes in the form of paid work experience as part of a university sponsorship arrangement or similar.

In response to growing demand, a niche gap-year 'industry' has emerged. Around 30 UK-based organisations offer overseas paid work opportunities (Jones, 2004), while organisations such as the Year in Industry scheme promote structured UK-based paid work placements. Around 800 organisations promote free or subsidised volunteer placements in the United Kingdom and/or overseas, around 85 of which are UK-based organisations whose primary market consists of British gap-year students (Jones, 2004). Additionally, many travel companies offer travel packages for this group. There are also numerous gap-year guidebooks (for example, Flynn, 2002; Griffiths, 2002, 2003; Bindloss & Hindle, 2005), several dedicated 'one-stop-shop' advice websites (such as http//gapyear.com, http//gap-year.com and http//findagap.com) and, held for the first time in June 2005, what is now hoped to be an annual 'Gap Year Show', providing opportunities for marketing a variety of gap-year services to young people (see http://gapyearshow.co.uk).

As the market has expanded, the industry has also become subject to increased regulation. In 1998, several leading organisations formed the Year Out Group, an umbrella organisation that aims 'to promote the concept and benefits of well-structured year out programmes, to promote models of good practice and to help young people and their advisers in selecting suitable and worthwhile projects' (www.yearoutgroup.org, 2003). The group has drawn up guidelines for good practice and currently has 38 member organisations. This organisation has also worked closely with the Foreign Office to promote the 'Know Before You Go' safety campaign, which in 2001 and 2003, respectively, focused on backpackers and youth travellers. In addition, there is at least one parental pressure group working for better regulation of the industry, the Pemba Action Group, which was established following an armed robbery and assault involving gap-year students on Pemba Island, off the coast of Tanzania, in July 2004, while at least four commercial organisations offer gap-year orientation and safety training courses for students (see http//objectivegapyear.com, http//safetrek.co.uk, http//ultimategapyear.co.uk and http//planetwise.net).

This burgeoning gap-year industry has not, however, developed exclusively in response to the demands of pre-university students. A recent review of gap-year provision commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (Jones, 2004) estimates that between 200,000 and 250,000 young people aged 16–25 are on some form of gap year at any one time. The review's working definition of a gap year included 'any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes "out" of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory' (Jones, 2004, p. 8). This definition embraces not just pre-university gap years, then, but a variety of gap-year-type breaks, including post-university gap years, career breaks and study breaks.

Nonetheless, this paper focuses on the pre-university gap year. Certain claims are widely made about the benefits of taking a pre-university gap year, which suggest that students who are able to avail themselves of such an opportunity gain significant

personal advantage over those who are unable to do so. This paper seeks, then, to explore the growing popularity of the pre-university gap year among British students. It begins with a consideration of Brown *et al.*'s 'positional conflict theory' as a tool for understanding processes of social closure within higher education and the graduate labour market. It then provides an overview of the presumed benefits of taking a gap year and argues that a hierarchy of gap-year experiences has emerged within the 'economy of experience' surrounding the gap year, which positions certain 'types' of gap year as more worthwhile than others. The paper then considers evidence for current inequalities in access to gap-year opportunities and the government's response to this. It concludes that the gap year provides students with an important means of gaining distinction over other students in the context of increased competition for entry to elite institutions, and as such deserves further scrutiny by sociologists of education.

Positional conflict theory and the 'economy of experience'

The gap year's growing popularity coincides with the rapid expansion of higher education, in line with the government's target of achieving a participation rate of 50% among under-30 year olds by 2010. Despite the expansion of the sector and the government's rhetoric of widening participation, earlier well-established patterns of middle-class advantage remain firmly entrenched within higher education, and competition for entry to the most prestigious institutions and degree programmes has been strengthened (Forsyth & Furlong, 2000). Moreover, competition for the most highly prized opportunities within the graduate labour market remains fierce (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Recent research on processes of social closure within higher education and the graduate labour market draws attention to the continuing importance of the successful mobilisation of various forms of economic, social and cultural resources in order to gain distinction within these highly competitive markets (for example, Ball *et al.*, 2002; Power *et al.*, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Brooks, 2005; Reay *et al.*, 2005). Bourdieu's work on forms of capital is central to much of this recent literature (Bourdieu, 1986), with a focus not only on the ways in which cultural capital is institutionalised through the acquisition of educational qualifications, but on the ways in which middle-class families are able to translate their economic capital into other forms of social and cultural capital. By such means, social gifts are treated as natural gifts (Bourdieu, 1971), and middle-class educational advantage is thus enhanced and maintained.

However, it is increasingly argued by researchers working in this field of study that middle-class families are no longer able to guarantee their former competitive advantage and that the pressures to maintain their class position are a source of much anxiety. Power *et al.*, (2003), for example, focus on the phenomenon of middle-class educational failure, while Devine (2004) argues that 'it would not be wildly speculative to wonder if mobility into the middle class and stability within the middle class are both now much harder to attain than they were' (p. 11). It has been widely argued, then, that recent trends in education policy, linked to broader changes in the labour

market, have triggered a process of middle-class retrenchment. This has resulted in students having to find new ways of gaining distinction in a world where educational qualifications are no longer sufficient in themselves to guarantee success. This is particularly problematic for those sections of the middle classes who have depended upon credentialism rather than established wealth to acquire and maintain their position within society (Power, 2001).

Brown *et al.*'s work on positional conflict theory and the concept of 'the personality package' as a means of differentiating between equally well qualified groups provides a useful framework for exploring these issues further (Brown, 1995; Brown *et al.*, 2003). Although their primary focus is on graduate employability, their work is nonetheless relevant to a consideration of processes of social closure at earlier points in students' educational careers, including university selection procedures. Brown *et al.* (2003) reject consensus theories of labour market competition that, by ignoring between-group power struggles, situate 'unemployability' within the individual. Instead, they propose a qualified version of conflict theory, an approach that foregrounds the power struggles in which different social groups are engaged at each others' expense. They reject the view that the expansion of higher education reflects an objective process of 'up-skilling' as a consequence of a shift to a knowledge economy. Rather, they argue that employer demand for high-level skills alongside 'soft skills'—such as communication skills, organisational skills, and team working skills—serve as a smokescreen for the ranking of individuals in a climate of increased competition:

> As more and more contestants enter the labour market with graduate qualifications the value of credentials as a screening device declines. Therefore, personal qualities are emphasised in an attempt to legitimate the reproduction of inequalities, rather than improve productivity. (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p. 115)

Brown *et al.* suggest that traditional approaches to conflict theory that conclude that elites are able to *guarantee* their success through such means are too simplistic. They argue that the rigging of the credentials market remains important, but that other ranking mechanisms are equally significant in the process of differentiating between equally well qualified individuals:

> how 'the self' is packaged by labour market entrants, and how prospective employers decode these personal qualities as indicators of productive potential, is central to our analysis. (Brown *et al.*, 2003, p.119)

'Positional competition' is, then, dependent on the packaging and consequent promotion of 'the self', a process that, according to Brown *et al.*, students must now engage in if they are to secure elite opportunities, whether those opportunities be specific degree programmes or graduate career openings. This process, they argue further, needs to be understood not just at the level of the individual, but at the level of institutions and organisations, whose own power struggles in relation to each other have an influence on the life chances of the individuals who pass through them. What Brown *et al.* refer to as the 'economy of experience' is therefore of greater importance to selectors than 'the denomination of academic currency' alone (2003, p. 120).

Students are required, then, to recognise the importance of 'the personality package', consisting of a combination of credentials, skills and charismatic qualities:

> Within the middle classes, the development of the 'charismatic' qualities of their children is becoming as important as arming them with the necessary credentials, contacts and networks. There is nothing new about this focus on the 'rounded' person, but whereas a range of broader interests and hobbies which offered time-out from academic study was seen as a form of cultural *consumption* which was enjoyed for its own sake, it has increasingly become a form of *investment* as part of the construction of a value-added *curriculum vitae*. This involves an increasing 'commodification' of the socio-emotional embodiment of culture, incorporating drive, ambition, social confidence, tastes and interpersonal skills. (Brown, 1995, p. 42; original emphases)

Numerous studies have demonstrated how parents have been able to make these investments at all stages of a child's educational career, from pre-school provision through to university entrance and all stages in between (for example, Ball *et al.*, 2004; Reay, 1996; Power *et al.*, 2003). This paper argues that the ability to mobilise—and hence capitalise upon—the resources necessary for investing in a pre-university gap year also constitutes an important advantage that certain groups of young people are able to gain over others, not only at the point of university entrance, but also at the point of graduate labour market entry. The experiences that students have on their year out and the skills they are thus assumed to develop are a vital component, then, in the construction of an enhanced 'personality package', a theme that is now considered further.

The presumed benefits of taking a gap year

The benefits of taking a year out before commencing higher education are presumed to be considerable. Surveys of student and employer perceptions of the gap year have been conducted by commercial and voluntary organisations (for example, Community Service Volunteers, 2000, 2002; gapyear.com, 2001, 2002), all of which suggest that the experience is hugely advantageous to students. A survey of members of the Association of Graduate Recruiters conducted by Community Service Volunteers, for example, found that 88% of respondents believed that a well-structured gap year could help to furnish graduates with the 'soft skills' that they often lack on leaving university, while 79% felt that students already in possession of these soft skills would progress through an organisation more quickly (Community Service Volunteers, 2002). Similarly, gapyear.com concluded from a stakeholder survey that:

> the concept of a gap year … and the soft skills that can be gained fit in well with the changing world of work, portfolio careers and the desire of the younger generation of workers to attain a healthy balance between career and leisure. (gapyear.com, 2001, p. iii)

These and similar views on the presumed benefits of taking a year out are sustained in most grey literature relating to the gap-year industry, sentiments that are captured fairly typically in the following statement on the Year Out Group's website:

> Remember: if you take a well structured gap year you are more likely to succeed at university and will acquire knowledge and experience that will give you the edge over those that go straight to university when it comes to applying for a job. (www.yearoutgroup.org/tuition-fees.htm, 2005)

Indeed, content analysis of gap-year literature, including the websites of provider organisations, independent gap-year advice websites and published guidebooks, reveals the frequent citation of five related claims:

- the gap year provides an opportunity for self-reflection, enhancing students' sense of perspective and facilitating better-informed decisions about their degree plans and future career options;
- the gap year provides an opportunity for self-development and personal enrichment;
- 'gappers' adapt particularly well to university life as they have greater maturity than non-gappers, are less distracted by the freedoms of university life and are less likely to drop out, rendering them attractive to admissions tutors;
- gappers acquire 'soft skills' that are not necessarily acquired during their formal education, such as communication skills, organisational skills and team working skills; and
- for all these reasons, employers favour gappers.

It is clear from these claims that the gap year has been incorporated into a framework that views it in largely instrumental terms, emphasising the advantages to be gained over other students rather than as an experience worth pursuing for its own sake. These presumed benefits are substantial, appearing to confer important advantages on those who participate, to the detriment of those who do not. In a labour market where employers place high value on the acquisition of soft skills, gap-year students are well placed in terms of gaining competitive advantage, and Brown *et al.*'s notion of the 'economy of experience' emerges as a useful tool for considering the value of different gap-year activities.

Indeed, not all gap-year experiences meet on equal terms, and the gold standard that is constructed within these accounts is of a well-structured and purposeful period of time out. Jones (2004) quotes the director of a gap-year organisation who argued that 'sitting at home for a year and watching daytime TV is not the same as taking a gap year!', a view echoed in injunctions frequently found in gap-year literature to 'get it right'. The company Gap Enterprise, for example, provides a gap-year consultation service consisting of a detailed questionnaire, a three-hour interview and a written report. The company's website proclaims that 'by taking informed advice you avoid false starts, frustration, disappointments and the cost of getting it wrong. The investment ensures the true promise is more fully realised' (http://gapenterprise.co.uk, 2005). In such ways, students are encouraged to bring an appropriate level of seriousness to their gap-year planning in order to maximise the benefits. They are expected to justify the manner in which they spend their year, and must face the consequences of wasting their time. As if to underline this message, the Year Out Group website reminds its users that the gap year is an experience that 'can never be repeated'.

In a similar vein, the government is currently promoting programmes of gap-year accreditation based on experiential learning, including City and Guilds accreditation for the 'life learning' acquired during a year out. The company GapProfile, for example, offers young people the opportunity to obtain a City and Guilds Profile of Achievement through identifying intended learning outcomes and then producing a portfolio of work that provides evidence of having met them. This is marketed as 'a tangible piece of differentiation in an increasingly competitive job market' (http://gapprofile.co.uk, 2005). These developments can be linked to the promotion of accredited outcomes in other areas of government policy relating to informal education, including proposals for such outcomes in Youth Service settings (Department for Education and Skills, 2002, 2005). Within the context of an educational system that is increasingly accused of over-assessing pupils, it is ironic that even the year out has become subject to the gaze of assessment, as many young people may be motivated to take a year out precisely in order to take a break from the assessment regime. Nonetheless, the accreditation of gap-year experiences further encourages a highly instrumental approach to taking a year out.

Alongside this emphasis on the importance of well-structured and purposeful use of the year out, analysis of gap-year literature suggests an emergent hierarchy of gap-year experiences. Within this hierarchy, any gap year is arguably better than none, but certain experiences carry greater worth, and are hence deemed to be more beneficial, than others. UK-based volunteering is increasingly represented as a form of active citizenship and is therefore imbued with intrinsic moral worth, while overseas activities are associated with independence and initiative and are imbued with intrinsic instrumental worth. UK-based work experience, an increasingly common activity, is rated less highly in comparison.

UK-based volunteering

As the gap year grows in popularity, the experience has been subsumed under broader government policies on active citizenship. In general terms, taking a gap year is encouraged by the Department for Education and Skills. Until early 2006, the Department for Education and Skills hosted a Gap Year Informal Consultation Group, while a member of its Ministerial Team had a specific responsibility for gap years (Maria Eagle, former Under Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families). Her predecessor, Ivan Lewis, lent ministerial endorsement of gap years to the Year Out Group's website until just before the 2005 General Election in the following terms:

> Young people who take a year out from their learning or employment can gain so much in terms of personal development and formulating their career choices. But they can benefit too from improved skills—in languages for example—which will make them more employable. And the experience of a year out can shape social values and a sense of community spirit. I want as many young people as possible to take advantage of this experience. (www.yearoutgroup.com, 2005)

The government has been particularly keen to promote UK-based volunteering as part of the gap-year experience. This development can be linked to its broader

promotion of active citizenship as a means of enhancing social capital among young people and hence promoting social cohesion and 'civil renewal' within the communities within which they live and/or volunteer (Gaskin, 2004; Stanley, 2004). These themes were initially trailed by the introduction of citizenship education within the National Curriculum (Landrum, 2002), and further underpinned in recent years by the development of structured opportunities for youth volunteering, including the flagship Millennium Volunteers Scheme for young people (Institute of Volunteering Research, 2002), the Young Volunteer Challenge in England and Wales, and Scotscorp, the Scottish equivalent of the Young Volunteer Challenge.

These earlier initiatives were given a major boost by the publication in March 2005 of the report of the Russell Commission on youth action and engagement (Russell, 2005). The Commission's recommendations place considerable emphasis on the virtues of full-time UK-based volunteering, and outline plans for the creation of an army of young volunteers—including pre-university gap-year students—through the extension of financial incentives. This was reported ahead of the Report's publication in some sections of the UK press as a call to gap-year students to reject backpacking and instead focus on UK-based volunteering (for example, Henke, 2005). The Report's major emphasis is indeed on UK-based opportunities, but it also includes proposals for providing limited funding for overseas placements, albeit for young people who have first demonstrated a commitment to UK-based volunteering. The Youth Services Green Paper, *Youth Matters*, reinforces the message that volunteering is an important component of citizenship, and includes a call for 'all young people to volunteer and contribute to their communities' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 39).

Overseas experiences

Despite New Labour's emphasis on UK-based volunteering as an important form of active citizenship, the promotional materials of many gap-year organisations imply that overseas experiences are particularly impressive to employers and admissions tutors, providing evidence of attributes such as independence and initiative. BUNAC, a leading provider of gap-year overseas work placements, for example, notes on its website that working abroad will, among other advantages, 'add a new line to your CV' and will 'broaden your horizons and be independent' (*sic*) (www.bunac.org). Another provider, Gap Activity Projects, includes the acquisition of confidence and independence among a list of advantages to be gained from participating in one of their overseas volunteering placements (www.gap.org.uk). Providers of structured overseas placements are often keen to point out that travel for its own sake does not automatically impress admissions tutors and employers, even though such opportunities certainly appear to be most highly prized among students contemplating a year out (gapyear.com, 2002). This desire to travel is arguably part of a broader investment among contemporary youth in what Desforges (1998) refers to as the 'standard narrative' of world travel as a source of personal development and identity transformation. Indeed, most existing research on the pre-university gap year

has focused on gap-year students' experiences as international travellers and volunteers rather than as UK-based workers or volunteers. Huxley (2003), for example, argues that global travel during a gap year has become a common feature of contemporary youth culture, characterised by a search for 'authenticity'; while Simpson (2004) has focused on the economic impact of gap-year volunteering projects in the developing world, exploring the impact of 'volunteer tourism' both on students and on the communities in which they volunteer.

British gap-year students constitute an increasingly significant proportion of the international backpacker community, and their presence among this group is widely noted within the general literature on youth travel (for example, Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Richards & Wilson, 2004). This development lends support to Cohen's (2003) argument that the original 'countercultural drifters' of the 1960s and early 1970s have been replaced by 'nomads from affluence': middle-class travellers—often students—who seek the excitement of the original hippy trail but without the risk and insecurity that was traditionally associated with it. To cater for this new group, an alternative infrastructure has gradually emerged that parallels in segregated form some of the characteristics of the 'mass tourist' infrastructure: backpacker hostels, transport and leisure activities targeted specifically at backpackers, and bars, restaurants and clubs that similarly cater specifically for this group. Independent travel has arguably became a commodified and sanitised mass experience for budget travellers, with many contemporary gap-year students following these same, very well trodden, paths.

Organisations offering overseas volunteering opportunities provide a similarly protected experience, with students reliant on provider organisations for most if not all aspects of their trip. Overseas volunteering thus becomes a relatively risk-free, supervised and controlled experience. These developments are somewhat at odds with the assumption that overseas travel provides evidence of attributes such as independence and self-initiative. Nonetheless, the growing popularity of taking time out specifically to travel (including paid and voluntary work along the way), linked to the presumed power of travel to transform an individual's identity, suggests that attempts to divert young people into home-based volunteering will meet with considerable resistance.

UK-based work experience

For many students, financial necessity remains the main motivation for pursuing a gap year. One survey has suggested that around one-quarter of students now defer university entry specifically to raise finances to cover the costs of further study (gapyear.com, 2002), whereas they might not otherwise have been able to do so. This same survey talks optimistically about how 'this path has enabled the very first members of some families to head to university, which not only helps the Government to achieve its target [of 50 per cent participation], but also has a positive impact on society' (gapyear.com, 2002, p. 4). However, unless arranged through schemes such as Year in Industry, such employment is most likely to be poorly paid and unchallenging, and

certainly not as highly rated as the experiences of students who can afford to volunteer or travel during their year out. This is particularly so if students remain in their home towns throughout this time: in the same way that the full benefits of undergraduate student life are widely associated with the ability to live away from the parental home (Heath & Cleaver, 2003), so the full benefits of taking a gap year are widely associated with periods of residential independence.

Bridging the gap?

In principle, gap-year opportunities are open to all students, yet existing evidence suggests that the most highly rated forms of gap-year experience remain the preserve of those from more affluent backgrounds. This tendency was raised in a House of Lords debate on gap-year travel and volunteering in 2000, with Baroness Warwick noting that:

> The majority of students who are likely to consider the possibilities and potential of these opportunities … are likely to come from well-informed, middle-class families. The very notion of the gap year can invoke a rather traditional middle class school leaving applicant. (Hansard, 2000, column 1575)

This view is supported by Jones (2004), who suggests that gap-year students in the 16–25 year old age range (i.e. not just pre-university 'gappers') are predominantly white, middle-class southerners, with young women and former independent school pupils also disproportionately represented. Certain groups are, then, under-represented within the pre-university gap-year student population, including state school students and young people from deprived areas of the United Kingdom (Jones, 2004).

There is some evidence to suggest that independent school pupils are more actively encouraged to take a year out than are state school pupils. One industry survey reported widespread support for gap years among the independent sector, arguing that it has almost become an accepted 'rite of passage', with some schools reporting participation rates of over 60% among their students (gapyear.com, 2001, p. iv). All but two of the 22 gap-year information events scheduled for 2005 and advertised on the Year Out Group's website were 'Gap Year Fairs' hosted by the Independent Schools Careers Organisation (ISCO), with venues including Eton, Repton and Oundle (www.yearoutgroup.org, accessed July 2005). This suggests that pupils in the independent sector are a group who are not only expected by their teachers and families to continue into higher education (cf. Roker, 1993), but are also expected to take time out before doing so, with their needs in this respect specifically catered for by organisations like ISCO. Students attending schools and colleges in the state sector, in contrast, appear to be given far less direct institutional encouragement to pursue a gap year—possibly in recognition of the barriers that may stand in the way of their achieving such a goal.

These barriers include the often prohibitive costs of financing a gap year based on activities other than paid employment. Gap-year placements in the voluntary and

commercial sector invariably require a young person to raise several thousand pounds in sponsorship. A 10-week placement on an environmental project with the 'Frontier' organisation currently costs £2250, for example, while a three-month placement with Raleigh International requires a minimum of £2995 in sponsorship. While in principle no one is excluded from the process of raising sponsorship, opportunities for doing so are in practice inevitably influenced by factors such as the diversity of an individual's social networks and the levels of disposable income possessed by members of those networks. Unsurprisingly, therefore, disadvantaged students tend to be under-represented within schemes that require the raising of sponsorship in this way (Hansard, 2000).

In a specific attempt to widen access to full-time volunteering opportunities, in 2003 the government launched the Young Volunteer Challenge. This £5 million pilot scheme, trialled in nine locations across England and Wales, offered young people from low-income families the opportunity to undertake gap-year voluntary work in community projects in exchange for a weekly allowance of £45, and a lump sum of £750 on completion of a nine-month placement. A similar scheme, Scotcorp, was launched in Scotland. These schemes have provided the model for the proposed programme of 12,000 new full-time UK-based volunteering opportunities recommended by the Russell Commission, which would see young people provided with a weekly allowance of around £60 and a contribution to accommodation costs for all volunteers living away from home to enable them to participate in long-term volunteering commitments (Russell, 2005). The Russell Commission has recommended that these schemes also offer some form of accreditation, given evidence from its consultation with young people that one-half of all respondents would be encouraged to take a volunteering-based gap year by the possibility of such provision.

Concern was also expressed in Parliamentary debates on the 2004 Higher Education Bill regarding the possible effects of the introduction of top-up fees on gap-year students from working-class backgrounds. English students wishing to take a gap year in 2005/06 were not after all penalised by the introduction of the new higher education funding regime when it came into effect in 2006/07. As long as notification of their intention to take a year out was given by 1 August 2005, students who had already accepted a university place will be subject to the pre-existing funding regime for the full duration of their course, and will not be expected to pay the increased top-up fees. This concession was included as an amendment to the Bill following protests from the House of Lords that poorer students might otherwise be deterred from taking a year out and would therefore miss out on the presumed benefits. The House of Commons had earlier argued that this amendment would simultaneously give an unfair advantage to wealthier students, by allowing them to escape the effects of paying full fees, but the weight of argument prevailed in favour of the needs of poorer students.

Conclusion

The gap year has a strong historical association with privilege. Its origins can be traced in part to the 'Grand Tour' undertaken in the Victorian period, largely by well-educated

upper-middle-class young men. The Grand Tour provided a moratorium between the completion of education and the commencement of a professional career, and invariably involved 'improving' experiences such as visits to sites of classical European culture as well as to sites of outstanding natural beauty. Parallels with certain manifestations of the contemporary gap year are apparent, with the 1960s and 1970s hippy trail acting as a more recent historical antecedent. These earlier experiences tended to be the minority pursuits of relatively affluent, often counter-cultural, youth (Cohen, 2003). Once regarded as a fairly 'alternative' activity, pursued by a small minority of relatively privileged young people, taking 'time out' before engaging in more settled activities is now increasingly commonplace, yet nonetheless remains strongly associated with more privileged groups of students in pursuit of horizon-broadening experiences.

The gap-year experience is also underpinned by an assessment of its worth in largely instrumental terms, at the same time that gap-year students are being encouraged to differentiate themselves within an increasingly competitive higher education system and graduate labour market. This growing instrumentality accords with a widespread view that the gap year is hugely beneficial to young people, the presumed benefits including the acquisition of soft skills, greater maturity, enhanced self-awareness and increased independence. These are the sorts of skills and attributes that, according to Brown *et al.* (2003), are increasingly sought by employers and admissions tutors, possession of which—in combination with a baseline level of educational attainment—contributes to the creation of an attractive 'personality package' within the overall economy of experience. The gap year's growing popularity may nonetheless be due in part to the increasingly prohibitive costs of continuing on into higher education and the need for students to take time out in order to save up to cover some of those costs. It has been suggested that UK-based employment is not as highly rated as other gap-year activities, and this is an important issue to be tackled by the government in its current attempts to promote greater access to UK and overseas volunteering opportunities among less advantaged groups of young people.

In the absence of much existing academic research on the gap year, many of the claims of the gap-year industry concerning the presumed benefits of taking a year out are based on perceptions rather than on solid evidence. There is, therefore, a clear need for systematic research into the gap year and its impact on students, and the recent emergence of a small but growing body of gap-year researchers is to be welcomed (www.gapyearresearch.org). However, in one sense this lack of supporting evidence barely matters, as the gap year is shored up by commonsense assumptions that taking time out must self-evidently be 'a good thing'. Many students place huge store on the idea of the year out as a life-changing experience. Heath and Cleaver (2003), for example, note the significance of the gap year as a key moment of independence in the leaving home narratives of many ex-students, while anecdotal evidence suggests that 'gappers' invariably regard themselves as more mature than students who continue directly into university. Certain aspects of this 'identity work' can be mapped directly onto processes of acquiring certain cultural and social resources, and constitute important forms of distinction in and of themselves.

Although this paper has focused specifically on the pre-university gap year, it has been noted that these trends are occurring alongside the growing popularity of the *post*-university year out, and of mid-career breaks among young people in their late twenties and early thirties. Some of the issues explored in this paper are of equal relevance to these phenomena. Indeed, the growing popularity of taking time out throughout one's working life lends support to Brown's argument that 'it is no longer simply a question of *gaining* access to a superior job, but of *maintaining* one's employability' (Brown, 1995, p. 36; emphasis added). There is much, therefore, to be learnt from research into the gap year about processes of inclusion, exclusion and social closure, especially at a time of expansion in the higher education sector. It is no coincidence that the gap year's popularity has taken off in parallel with this expansion, as taking the 'right' sort of year out is emerging as an important means of gaining distinction over peers. In a period of increased competition and heightened emphasis on the 'economy of experience', the gap year serves to widen the gap between different groups of students as part of an ongoing process of positional competition. This process is summed up well in a statement on the Year Out Group's website:

> [A gap year] can make a big statement about you as a person, both to academics and employers and you know how important that CV is going to be! If properly planned, a year out can say as much, if not more, about you as an individual, as any set of exam results ever can! (www.yearoutgroup.org, 2005)

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of this paper, and to Luke Chesters, Robin and Zoe for their insights into pre-university backpacking, Oz-style.

References

Ball, S., Davies, J., David, M. & Reay, D. (2002) 'Classification' and 'judgement': social class and the 'cognitive structures' of choice of higher education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 23(1), 51–72.

Ball, S., Vincent, C., Kemp S. & Pietikainen, S. (2004) Middle class fractions, childcare and the 'relational' and 'normative' aspects of class practices, *Sociological Review,* 52(4), 478–502.

Bindloss, J. & Hindle, C. (2005) *The gap year book* (London, Lonely Planet Publications).

Bourdieu, P. (1971) Systems of education and systems of thought, in: M. Young (Ed.) *Knowledge and control; new directions for the sociology of education* (London, Collier-Macmillan).

Bourdieu, P. (1986) Forms of capital, in: J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of theory of research for the sociology of education* (London, Greenwood Press).

Brooks, R. (2005) *Friendship and educational choice* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

Brown, P. (1995) Cultural capital and social exclusion: some observations on recent trends in education, employment and the labour market, *Work, Employment and Society,* 9(1), 29–51.

Brown, P. & Hesketh, A. (2004) *The mismanagement of talent: employability and jobs in the knowledge economy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Brown, P. Hesketh, A. & Williams, S. (2003) Employability in a knowledge-driven economy, *Journal of Education and Work,* 16(2), 107–126.

Cohen, E. (2003) Backpacking: diversity and change, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change,* 1(2), 95–110.

Community Service Volunteers (2000) Time well spent—how graduate recruiters think a gap year equips new graduates with the skills they are missing, *CSV Reports On* (vol. 3, August) (London, CSV).

Community Service Volunteers (2002) Boosting careers with a gap year, *CSV Reports On* (vol. 11, August) (London, CSV).

Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Transforming youth work: resourcing excellent youth services* (London, DfES).

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Youth matters,* Cm6629 (Norwich, The Stationery Office).

Desforges, L. (1998) Checking out the planet: global representations/local identities and youth travel, in: T. Skelton & G. Valentine (Eds) *Cool places: geographies of youth cultures* (London, Routledge).

Devine, F. (2004) *Class practices: how parents help their children get good jobs* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Flynn, M. (2002) *Making the most of your gap year* (Richmond, Trotman).

Forsyth, A. & Furlong, A. (2000) *Socio-economic disadvantage and access to higher education* (Bristol, Policy Press).

gapyear.com (2001) *The 2001 UK gap year report* (Norwich, The Gap Year Company).

gapyear.com (2002) *2002 UK gap year report* (Norwich, The Gap Year Company).

Gaskin (2004) *Young people, volunteering and civic society: a review of the literature* (London, Institute for Volunteering Research).

Griffiths, T. (2002) *The Virgin travellers' handbook: the definitive guide for students and career gap travellers planning a gapyear* (London, Virgin Books Ltd).

Griffiths, T. (2003) *Before you go: the ultimate guide to planning your gapyear* (London, Bloomsbury).

Hansard (2000) Debate on 'Voluntary service for young people', Hansard 5 July, columns 1572–1594.

Heath, S. & Cleaver, E. (2003) *Young, free and single? Twenty somethings and household change* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

Henke, D. (2005) Brown pledge to pay gap year volunteers, *The Guardian,* 31 January, p. 6.

Institute of Volunteering Research (2002) *UK-wide evaluation of the millennium volunteers programme.* Research Report RR357 (London, Department for Education and Skills).

Huxley, L. (2003) Western backpackers and the global experience: an exploration of young people's interaction with local cultures, *Tourism, Culture and Communication,* 5(1), 37–44.

Jones, A. (2004) *Review of gap year provision* (London, DfES).

Landrum, D. (2002) Citizenship, education and the political discourse of New Labour, *Contemporary Politics,* 8(3), 219–232.

Loker-Murphy L. & Pearce, P. (1995) Young budget travelers: backpackers in Australia, *Annals of Tourism Research,* 22(4), 819–843.

Power, S. (2001) Missing: a sociology of the middle class, in: J. Demaine (Ed.) *Sociology of education today* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

Power, S., Edwards, T., Whitty, G. & Wigfall, V. (2003) *Education and the middle classes* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Reay, D. (1996) Contextualising choice: social power and parental involvement, *British Educational Research Journal,* 22(5), 581–596.

Reay, D., David, M. & Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of choice: social class, race and gender in higher education* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books).

Richards, G. & Wilson, J. (2004) The international student travel market: travelstyle, motivations and activities, *Tourism Review International,* 8(2), 57–67.

Roker, D. (1993) Gaining the edge, in: I. Bates & G. Riseborough (Eds) *Youth and inequality* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Russell, I (2005) *A national framework for youth action and engagement: report of the Russell commission* (Norwich, HMSO).

Simpson, K. (2004) 'Doing development': the gap year, volunteer tourists and a popular practice of development, *Journal of International Development,* 16(5), 681–692.

Stanley, K. (2004) More than a numbers game: a UK perspective on youth volunteering and active citizenship, paper presented at the *Council of Europe and European Commission seminar: 'How Does the Voluntary Engagement of Young People Enhance their Active Citizenship and Solidarity?'*, Budapest, July. Available online at: http://www.ippr.org/research/files/team24/project85/Budapest%20Paper%202004.pdf (accessed 10 February 2005).

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (2005) *Trends in deferred accepted applicants, 1994–2004* (Cheltenham, UCAS).