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The Gap Year for Geographers: Effects and paradoxes
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The Gap Year for Geographers

Effects and paradoxes

GEORGE ALAN BLACKBURN, GORDON CLARK AND DAVID PILGRIM

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ABSTRACT: This article examines why the growing gap-year phenomenon is important for university geography departments in the context of education and employment. The research examines the scale and types of gap years, and their effects on students. The study uses a multi-actor approach comprising information from national statistical sources, university departments, students who have taken gap years and commercial gap-year providers. The article draws some lessons for geography departments such as the need systematically to record the effects of a gap year. It highlights some paradoxes of any expansion of the gap-year market; for example, that expansion may reduce the benefits of the gap-year experience and may narrow the types of gap year taken. Issues of social exclusion also arise.

Introduction

THE GAP YEAR taken by students between school and university is not a new phenomenon but has attracted much media attention over the last decade which has created the impression of a powerful trend or fashion. There are good educational reasons for critically evaluating the gap year in terms of its effects on students or for university departments and this article reports on some initial research which tackles deficiencies in our understanding of the numerous academic, personal and employment benefits claimed for the gap-year experience. The article examines and compares the views on gap years held by some of the key actors involved, i.e. students, departments and gap-year providers. It draws some lessons for university departments of geography from the development of the gap-year phenomenon and highlights paradoxes in the expansion of the gap-year market which require further research.

Pedagogic and public interest in gap years

The educational interest in gap years springs from three sources. First, the Quality Assurance Agency's *Geography* benchmark statement says that in the UK all geography degrees should help students to develop certain personal attributes and social skills (QAA, 2000). It is arguable *a priori* that a gap year might, depending on its content, improve some of the intellectual skills of the graduate geographer identified in the benchmark statement, notably 'decision making, taking responsibility for one's life, and key skills such as handling interpersonal situations' (QAA, 2000, p. 5). Some of the personal attributes and social skills required are often particularly difficult to include explicitly in a degree programme, yet they could be at the heart of the gap-year experience. These attributes include motivation, autonomy, self-awareness, self-motivation, flexibility and adaptability. If nothing else, the gap year could be part of that training in independence which the benchmark statement sees as the 'hallmark of the geography dissertation' (QAA, 2000, p. 6). A gap year could enhance such personal qualities in students and, as this occurs before university, it could improve students' performance in higher education. Should university geography departments therefore welcome the gap-year phenomenon for its better-prepared students, or are there problems with this argument? This article explores that question.

The second interest in the gap year is in terms of employability skills. The Association of Graduate Recruiters (1995) noted that employers want new recruits to possess, in addition to subject skills and knowledge, proven abilities in time-management, problem-solving and communication skills. The Geography Discipline Network has produced guides to embedding key skills in geography at university, notably in this context the guides on work-based learning (Chalkley, 2000) and problem solving (Gardiner and Hughes, 2000). Jenkins and Healey (1995) have collected together several articles on forging links between degree schemes and the world of work. Clearly both these agendas would be helped by students whose starting points in paid work and problem solving were higher than currently, and a gap year might be a pre-university device to achieve this. A reflective appreciation of the benefits derived from a gap year may improve a student's *curriculum vitae* in ways that

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conventional degree programmes could find difficult in terms of specific achievements – teaching time is necessarily limited. Hence students who have taken a gap year might improve a department's employability record, to both the department's and their students' benefit.

The third educational interest in the gap year stems from the work of Dweck (1999) on self-theories. Her argument is that academic performance will be improved if students have adopted an incrementalist view of their abilities (i.e. that improvement is possible and intelligence is not a fixed entity) and when they have concluded that control over their performance is an internal matter (i.e. one can improve one's performance independently of such external forces as luck or fate). Additionally such self-views may make one more employable. Arguably a successfully planned and executed gap year will enhance a student's sense of achievement, persistence and self-confidence. Of course, Dweck's views are hypotheses and in practice are hard to evaluate, though Yorke and Knight (2002) describe one survey's results. If gap years can edge students further towards what Dweck calls a self-efficacy position, then their general educational effect could be highly beneficial.

Anecdotally, interest in gap years has become much greater than previously, in part due to Prince William's gap year with Operation Raleigh in Chile. Between August 1998 and August 2002 *The Times, Daily Telegraph, Independent* and *Guardian* had a total of 1365 references to gap years. There has been a *Gap Year Magazine* published since 2000 by the Gap Year Company which is distributed to every UK school and university. The researchers found 18 books of a self-help variety in high-street bookshops, and Amazon (the internet bookseller) listed 22 gap-year books for sale in August 2002. There are several 6- and 12-month insurance policies for young travellers now available. There was a 90-minute debate on gap-year students in the House of Commons on 1 July 1998. The Chief Executive of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has warmly supported gap years (UCAS, 2001) as has Margaret Hodge, the Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities (Year Out Group, 2000). The public profile of the gap year is certainly high.

There is also much stereotyping – the gap-year student is pictured as a backpacker in Australia, or something similar. Vandome (2002) reminds us of the wide range of activities that can be pursued during a gap year:

- take a break from studying
- get work experience
- spend a year doing something exciting
- see new cultures
- get away from home for a while before embarking upon a university course
- earn some money to make the university experience more comfortable
- take time to ensure the correct decision on what further study to embark upon
- gain skills in planning time, activities and finance.

This wide range raises the question of what are the effects of a pre-university gap year and how this impinges on how university geography departments plan their curriculum.

In this article we are not considering the effects of a gap year within the scope of a degree scheme in the form of a placement year. There is evidence (Clark *et al.*, 1990) that Coventry's well-known sandwich year has effects on maturity similar to those claimed for the pre-university gap year, as well as acquiring new skills, application of knowledge and career-mindedness which come from its being embedded in a degree programme. Nor does this article consider the relative effects of the gap year taken after graduation.

The scale of the gap year phenomenon

It is surprisingly difficult to say how many young people are taking a gap year (and hence whether the practice is becoming more common, as is alleged) let alone finding out what sorts of people are taking a gap year. The problems are matters of definition. For this research the authors are looking primarily at people who have taken a year out between completion of A-levels (and equivalents) and the beginning of a university geography course.

There is no central public or commercial register of those taking a gap year. UCAS records only those applying for university in one year for entry in the following year (the so-called 'deferred entry'). It does not record what these people are doing during the gap year – students may defer for financial or health reasons which fall outside one's normal definition of a gap year. Nor does UCAS record the gap-year students who delay their university application until during the gap year itself. Nor can it tell which students never take up

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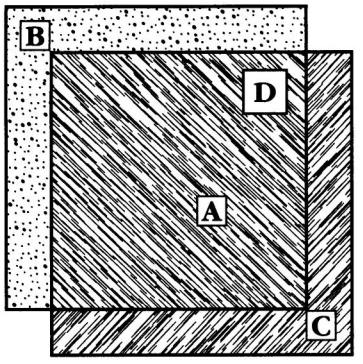

A: those who defer entry and take a gap year;

B: those who defer entry for reasons other than taking a gap year;

C: those who take a gap year but do not defer entry (they apply to university during their gap year);

D: those who defer entry and take a gap year but do not go on to enter university. UCAS records deferrals (i.e. A + B + D). Gap-year students are A + C + D.

Figure 1: Defining a gap year.

their university place after their gap year. Figure 1 shows the relationships among these various categories. UCAS data may not be reliable for those who decide very late in the admissions cycle either to take a gap year or to cancel one they had planned. This makes the task of quantifying the number of gap-year students challenging, and therefore data interpretation needs to bear this in mind.

The UCAS data show that among the applicants in 2000, 12,333 women and 10,944 men deferred entry. The total number of people deferring has been gradually increasing in recent years. Among UCAS applicants in 1994, 14,530 (5.4% of them) deferred entry for a year and both the number and percentage of deferrals has risen steadily each year to 23,277 (6.9% of applicants) in 2000.

These data can be further examined in comparison with figures presented to the House of Commons debate on gap years. It was suggested that in 1998 universities admitted 55,000 19-year-olds (i.e. entry deferred for one year) and 20,000 20-year-olds (entry deferred for two years) (Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 1998). This is a different definition of a gap year and nearly twice as large a figure as the first measure given above. This supports the idea that the group who apply for university entry during their gap year may be quite a large one and that UCAS data on deferrals may underestimate the scale of the phenomenon.

Popular imagination would suggest that geographers might be keener than students of other subjects on exploring new environments and cultures and so might be more likely to take a travel-oriented gap year. Data on the deferral rate by department at Lancaster University for 2001 (the only reliable data on gap years by subject which was available to the authors) show a university deferral rate of 7.6% whereas among applicants to geography degrees it was 10.8%, the fourth highest of the major admitting departments at Lancaster.

The statistical evidence on gap years is not highly informative. However, it does indicate that while only a small minority of students take a gap year, slightly more women do than men, the number taking a gap year is rising, and gap years are (to a limited extent) more prevalent among geography students. Overall the statistical sources do not tell us much about gap years.

Admissions tutors' views

There is a little evidence relating to the views on gap years among the different professions. Some fields, notably engineering, advocate a year in industry before studying the subject at university (Royal Academy of Engineering, n.d.). Conversely, a study in the *British Medical Journal* showed that medical school applicants who requested a gap year were significantly less likely to be offered a place than others (McManus, 1998). The surmise was that wishing to take a gap year was interpreted by admissions tutors as indicating a lack of commitment to a subject with a long training period. To test this, a survey was carried out of admissions tutors at Lancaster University, designed to see if there were any inter-disciplinary differences in how gap years are viewed. A short questionnaire was e-mailed to admissions tutors – 22 of the 50 replied. This enquired about their department's experience of gap-year students, and their views on the effects they saw gap years as having on their new first year students.

No department had surveyed their gap-year students and all the tutors' views were based on anecdote or impression. This itself is an important

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finding; the topic is under-researched and so the tutors' views were impressionistic to a greater or lesser extent. Across all the disciplines they had no data on the numerical trends in gap years but thought there had been a small increase. Nearly every department indicated that their gap-year students were either travelling or working to pay for university, or, in several cases, a mixture of both. Some of the more interesting and revealing comments about student activities are outlined below.

> 'Working (some do organised gap-year work with, e.g. Arthur Andersen), travelling (often with some definite purpose, e.g. Raleigh International), or combinations of the above. They all seem to have a definite plan that appears to have been well worked out – none are just dossing about' (Management).
>
> 'They tend to spend time in the country of the language they intend to study' (Modern Languages).
>
> 'They usually talk in terms of a year abroad dispensing benefits to the disadvantaged and broadening their horizons' (Politics) (the somewhat sceptical tone of this comment was intentional).
>
> The response from geography was a positive one, differing from those in other subjects only by focusing specifically on the maturity and experiential value of the travel abroad element within the gap year.

Only the physics department, perhaps because physics is a particularly linear and cumulative subject, was not in favour of their students taking time out:

> The gap year should be avoided if at all possible since many students have difficulty in recalling material from school as it is, and the gap year just makes matters worse for them, especially as far as maths is concerned. There is also a danger that some students may not enter university at all.

The majority of those replying had a positive opinion of the gap year in the academic sense, giving more weight to the benefits flowing from enhanced personal development than to forgotten factual material or rusty study habits. The management department went as far as to say that 'perhaps [gap years] should be compulsory!'.

Due to a lack of investigation, tutors had some difficulty in pinning down clear effects from a gap year. Many felt that the benefits were more to do with personal development than academic performance, which might produce a more confident and effective job seeker. Several respondents felt that students might be more mature and better able to study effectively as a result, though history and politics departments were sceptical – they questioned whether the people who take gap years are those who already possess the skills that will make them attractive to employers. The mathematics department said they would not recommend a year out to anyone who felt they were ready to take on university, since the benefits might then be outweighed by the disadvantages associated with 'academic amnesia'. The replies from the Management School saw the gap year as something to be encouraged, although they recognised that taking a year out if one had plans and ambitions was more valuable than simply taking time out for its own sake.

Overall the departmental responses were sweeping and bland, lacked insight, and were founded on conjecture and popular image rather than hard evidence from surveys. Only occasionally were they critical or sceptical. For detail on gap-year activities and their effects, a survey of students who had taken a gap year was essential.

Gap-year students' views

An in-depth discussion on their gap-year experiences was held with geography students at Lancaster University. To keep these focus groups to the ideal size for participation, two were held. The four students in the first group were Liz, Tim, Emma and Helen; in the second group were Phil, Glen, Malcolm, Matthew and Emma. Together they represented most of the current students who were known to have taken a gap year. The semi-structured focus-group conversations were recorded on audio-tape and left to flow as much as possible so that the students could open up and talk about their thoughts and feelings regarding their gap-year experience. The topics for discussion included: motives for taking a gap year; activities during the year; expectations of the year and whether fulfilled; and financial issues.

Gap year activities of geographers

Three students spent time working and travelling. One student, Helen, had worked full time as a live-in volunteer at an activities centre. She found this very demanding, had little spare time and was paid very little. Emma had worked for two years after a change of university; she remembered the

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long hours of bar work but also the higher responsibility awarded. Matthew's gap year combined A-level retakes and paid employment. Glen and Phil visited Western Australia. Phil's travel was subsidised because he was with a theatre-group tour. Glen was born in Australia and wanted to return to his roots. Both of them had to work in the UK before setting off and to some extent worked again in Australia and New Zealand. They might be seen as taking a typical travelling-backpacking gap year. Malcolm's gap year was somewhat different from the others in that he felt obliged to take one after he was disappointed with examination results at the end of his second year at university. He decided to take a year out, get paid work, gain maturity and a sense of direction, and then re-take his examinations the following year, rather than go straight to re-sits during the summer. Malcolm took five jobs in the UK and spoke of the experience of working with a great many different people.

The lesson to be learned from these students is that the activities and combinations of activities were very wide; a few were home-based while most were away from home for at least a period of time; paid work predominated but unpaid voluntary work was also found. Thus, it is important to avoid stereotyping the *effects* of a gap year, as well as its origins and the form it takes.

Reasons for taking a year out

The members of the focus groups reported a wide range of motives for taking a gap year out. These included:

- fashion (following the crowd: 'everyone at school was taking one');
- feeling fed up (with school and academic work);
- wanting fun (excitement and experiencing something different);
- being forced to (by academic setback rather than as a voluntary decision; making the best of an enforced year out);
- not feeling mature enough for university (the gap year as a specific remedy rather than an experience with useful side-effects).

Among the group were those who chose to work to save the money they needed for university; those who worked only to fund travel; and those who worked for work's sake (career benefits, in effect).

One must avoid over-generalising geography students' motives for taking a gap year. Each student demonstrated a different combination of these individual reasons.

The benefits of a gap year

The geography students believed that there was a maturity that came from the experience of taking a gap year. Comments such as 'we get on better with second-years' came from several of these first year students who felt they had matured more quickly. They felt they had bridged the transition between school and university more fully than those who had not taken a gap year. The experience of meeting many new people in different environments and situations was felt by several to have helped them mix better at university and develop their social skills, which in turn made it easier to make friends. The second-year students with whom they got on better are the group they would have been with if they had not taken a gap year. Maturity develops during the first year at university as well as during a gap year. We do not know whether there is a quantitative or qualitative difference between the two.

Problem solving and money management were skills that many of the geography students felt they had been able to develop more effectively as a result of taking a gap year. There was a general feeling that skills such as these would be far more useful when it came to finding a graduate job than many of the things they would learn during their degree course. Emma placed more emphasis on her improved time management. Working long hours during her gap year, she had learned to juggle her time in order to maintain a social life around her work. She also felt that the wide cross-section of people she had met through her different jobs had enabled her to become a better team player and to get on more easily with people. We can note that these are all qualities for geography graduates emphasised in the *Geography* benchmark statement (QAA, 2000).

The students struggled to remember the problems they had encountered along the way. Some admitted to being over-optimistic about their ability to save enough to fund travel and for university. Emma and Helen spoke of the repetitive nature of many of their tasks at work, which motivated them to get a degree and a graduate job. Losing contact with friends was a concern for several of them, though having the time to visit friends around the country in other universities was advantageous. Home-sickness was an early issue for the travellers but one that soon faded as challenges appeared. Those who had travelled extensively wished they had saved more. Those who had worked hard wished they had travelled more.

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Advice for future gap-year students

Great enthusiasm was expressed about taking time out, and the over-riding advice for others was 'Just do it'. They all felt that it was a hugely enjoyable and worthwhile experience which they would recommend to anyone. Helen even felt that gap years should perhaps be compulsory. In terms of it being a truly independent experience, there was some ambivalence. Glen and Phil said it is good to avoid travelling on the main tourist routes, particularly in Australia. They described how the number of British travellers and tourists spoiled it a little as they felt they were not seeing new things and meeting new people. There are important benefits (not least in terms of safety and assuaging parental worries) in going with one of the commercial providers, but meeting the challenges of 'doing one's own thing' was recognised as important, and to achieve that the students felt it was imperative to go one's own way. Inevitably, however, they found that the self-confidence needed to do that was often lacking at the start of the gap year, growing stronger towards the end.

Summary

On the evidence of the students' evaluations of their gap years, the main benefits to be identified were independence, maturity and personal responsibility for the gap year, as well as the need to be flexible and socially adept. Thus, in geography benchmark terms, the gap year delivered clear benefits for this particular geography department.

Overall, findings from the focus groups caused the authors to revise their views of gap years. Backpacking, generally considered to be the most common year-out activity, was found to be only one of several types of activity during the year out and was rarely the dominant one. It was more common than expected for students to take part in a combination of different activities during the year, and those experienced away from home (e.g. travel or work) were seen by the students as more effective in developing independence than is possible with a wholly home-based year. Travel and paid work both developed money-management skills in a way that the minor part-time jobs held before the gap year did not.

Gap-year providers' views

During this section of the research, interviews were held with the nine largest firms providing gap years and with the most influential organisations promoting gap years. The format of the interviews was a semi-structured telephone conversation with a senior representative from each organisation. The main themes discussed with each respondent were:

- perceived benefits of taking a year out;
- problems that people face;
- the future of the gap-year market.

There are a number of different roles to be played within the gap-year industry. There are organisations to provide the opportunities to travel, volunteer or work. Some groups organise complete packages – travel, accommodation, activities, work, leisure and advice on all aspects of the gap year for the students and their families. There are companies which provide support in the form of air tickets or backpacking equipment. There are also insurance companies and job agencies. The Gapyear Company and Gap-year.com (see 'References and websites') are similar in that they provide a market in which the other providers can work. They act, as their websites show, as hubs to the industry and, along with the Year Out Group, are emerging as spokespeople for the sector in terms of training, advice and lobbying (Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 1998).

Perceived benefits

On the whole, the providers saw the same main benefits from taking a gap year as the admissions tutors and the students. The primary benefits were the main life skills, developed before embarking on a university course, and simply not capable of being taught in schools – particularly initiative, communication skills and decision making. The Year Out Group spoke of the gap year as an opportunity for 'accelerated personal development'. Gapyear.com predicted that people will increasingly pursue 'portfolio careers'. This means that transferable skills will become more important than the technical skills specific to one job or degree subject. Gapyear.com felt that by taking a gap year people may give themselves the time they need to make the right decisions – getting off the educational conveyor belt for a while. The providers indicated that people develop noticeably through their time out, and that at the end of a year away students come back into the education system better prepared and more highly motivated. This in turn, they argued, is likely to produce 'better' students, who are likely to get better grades and be more interested in what they are studying. In a degree like geography this is especially so, given the

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experiences that people have while travelling (an awareness of others and of the world), which are particularly useful when studying other cultures and environments.

The providers identified a key benefit of a gap year as being the opportunity to gain the skills required to live away from home. While not all gap years will involve living away from home, it was argued that during the course of most years out such skills as money management, time management and self-discipline would form an essential part. Such skills would be likely to help students to settle more quickly into life at university. Building an appealing *curriculum vitae* is of great importance to young people in a competitive job market. With an increasing proportion of young people now obtaining degrees, the importance of non-academic skills is being recognised by employers to a greater extent. Furthermore, the activities undertaken during a gap year can be viewed as an individual statement which fulfils particular personal objectives identified by the student, and the experiences and skills gained add a distinctive flavour to their profile.

Problems that people face

The Gapyear.com annual report showed that, in relation to the gap-year experience, finance was the single biggest worry among young people. The providers' view was that:

1. the costs are exaggerated;
2. fund raising is possible and is a valuable skill in its own right;
3. some gap years need not involve travel or great expense (Gapyear Company, 2001).

Trekforce spoke of their disappointment that the majority of their clients tended to come from an independent schools background. However, there were also indications that recruitment by some organisations was directed at this group of people, i.e. from wealthier families, with peer pressure to take a gap year.

The next most common worry concerned medical attention and the possibility of contracting a disease or infection. Trekforce said that this was very rare and that there are strict regulations to ensure that problems are not common. Most students embarking on a placement are trained in basic first aid, and medical centres tend to be provided on many schemes. One respondent also talked about how medical problems occur everywhere, and that dangers are present at home as well as abroad.

Further problems identified by the providers included the common disparity between students' expectations of the gap year and the actual experience. However the Year Out Group indicated that the rate of failure for gap years, where students prematurely withdraw or are completely dissatisfied with the experience, is very low (less than 5%). The naivety and trusting nature of some students can lead to problems in some circumstances and in many cases people are insufficiently prepared for the range of different cultures they might experience when travelling abroad. Nevertheless, providers recognised that risk was inherent in many gap-year experiences and indeed acted as part of the attraction for many people.

Development of the gap-year market

There was a consensus among the providers that the market is growing and changing every year. Despite the increasing financial problems that students are inevitably facing due to university fees, the number choosing to take a year out is continuing to grow. It is possible that this may be as much to do with the fact that people are seeing the chance to take a year out as more of an opportunity to save money before they leave for university. Project Trust reported that they felt the growing market was due in part to more active recruitment by gap-year providers at careers fairs and in schools. Some schemes have now been running successfully for over 30 years, and so parents are likely to be more trusting of these than newer companies. The providers also felt that the increasing ease with which people can travel abroad has been a major factor in the growth of the industry as it has allowed many more people to travel independently.

The packaging of the gap-year (planned itinerary, company reputation to diminish worries, a single payment, greater certainty of outcome) was the companies' favoured mechanism for appealing to a wider market of students and their parents. Gap-year.com felt that the growth of the internet had also helped the gap-year market to grow. Information is available far more widely than previously and it is easy to compare the different providers. They also felt that the gap year was seen by the travel industry as the next major boom and so efforts are being made to make it more accessible to the public – special travel insurance packages, for example. It was also claimed that students who had simply worked for some or all of their year out were at risk of under-selling themselves in the sense that they took low-skilled jobs such as stacking shelves in supermarkets

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rather than a job that would teach them more important business skills. The Year Out Group (2000) echoed many of these comments but also added that the four basic themes for gap years were unlikely to change, namely skills-based activities (gaining further languages/qualifications), volunteering, work experience and travel. Overall the providers were bullish about the sector's prospects and have clear strategies for expanding the market, but their 'gap-year product' will be different from the ones sold now.

Lessons for geography departments

A number of lessons for current departmental practice can be drawn from this research. Students can benefit from the experience of the gap year, but by how much depends on the nature of the year. When questioned, all the students could identify the benefits pertaining to them. The benefits they identified mapped across clearly to some of the 'softer' or 'harder to instil' qualities of the geography graduate required by the *Geography* benchmark statement (QAA, 2000).

The benefits from a gap year should be recorded on students' progress files as soon as they arrive at university, so departments need to create a structure which reminds their gap-year students to record (and shows them how to record) the effects on them of the gap years they took before coming to university. The university progress file should look to the period before starting university to record the students' baseline for higher education. Similarly, if the gap year follows graduation, students need to be encouraged to maintain this progress file after they have left university.

If a gap year is beneficial (in terms of Dweck's (1999) self-efficacy beliefs, say) then the fact that some of a department's intake will have taken gap years and some will not, leads to a more complex situation for departments. It adds an additional dimension to the already wide range of experiences, skills and backgrounds of first year students. It is valuable for departments also (as distinct from their students) to audit their gap-year students to see what they did and how the experience affected them. Departments may also want to reflect on how this better understanding of their students prior to university might be reflected in their teaching programmes. Given the personal development effects of a gap year, its consequences are most likely to be felt in those forms of teaching that emphasise projects, self-directed learning, fieldwork and problem-solving approaches. A gap year may well have enhanced students' capabilities in these areas, compared with first year students straight from school. Staff need to be aware of this likely range of personal development and practical competencies (in addition to variations in subject knowledge) when planning teaching for first years. The gap year compounds the 'mixed ability' aspect of preparing first year geography modules.

The wide range of gap years implies that students will have matured in different ways and to variable extents – there is no standard gap-year student who is different from those straight from school in a predictable set of ways – and this makes curriculum planning more demanding. The effects of a gap year will be influenced by the balance of paid work and travel, whether living at home or independently, the kind of work and the degree of 'packaging' to the gap year. Departments need to guard against stereotyping gap-year students.

Some paradoxes of expansion

Universities are rarely opposed to gap years and often welcome them. The number of students who want to take a gap year far exceeds the number who do (Gap Year Company, 2001). The gap-year providers are often fairly small-scale operators and there are no insuperable commercial or academic barriers to the expansion of the gap-year market, though higher tuition fees may become an issue after 2006. However, any such expansion, fuelled by rising family incomes, would highlight several paradoxes.

Many of the benefits from a gap year come from the planning phase (financial and route planning, organising work and accommodation, safety issues, fund raising) as much as from actually living through the gap year. If the expansion of the gap-year market, as forecast by the providers (though possibly tempered by higher university fees), is produced by selling increasingly packaged gap years (as the providers predict), then the benefits to individuals from taking a gap year will be diminished as the market expands. They will miss out on some of the research for the year, the detailed planning, and

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the sense of discovery. Also, detailed budgeting will be reduced to the single payment for the package. Options and free time may be built into a package, but it is still a more structured environment. To the extent that 'structured' is equated with 'supportive', the packaged gap year may appeal to concerned parents, but the benefits of having to solve one's own problems are reduced. In these senses packaging may reduce the opportunities for personal development and independence.

The potentially most profitable section of the gap-year market is the one involving long-haul travelling. While fund raising for such gap years can be a valuable experience, this is the least socially inclusive type of gap year, though the one that promises the most fun and adventure. While universities might value gap years for their personal development potential, 18-year-olds may see them in a more hedonistic light, which in turn may limit the expansion of equally valuable but less fun-packed types of gap year (e.g. volunteering). Both commercial providers and the new gap-year students may shun cheaper, more local forms of gap year. Who will promote such gap years, with their lesser profit potential? Geography departments could counsel potential gap-year students on the benefits of all types of gap years and particularly the benefits of years with a mix of travel, independent living, volunteering, paid work and skills enhancement. This advice should ideally be reaching the students in the sixth-form, while they are planning their gap years and the transition to university.

We may hypothesise that an inverse-care law exists in the gap-year market. Those who take gap years tend to have high 'social capital'; that is, they have supportive backgrounds, know others who have taken a gap year and have the initiative and finance to organise one. The students who most need the benefits of a gap year will be the least-well equipped financially and have the least parental and school support. For geography tutors, the fact that gap years expand the range of self-beliefs and abilities with which students enter university is bound to make their job more difficult, as is the fact that gap-year students gain in self-esteem as much as in key skills – our respondents confirmed they had – compared with other students. However, if more people take a wider range of gap years (not just the high-cost, long-haul ones) this polarising effect will diminish. When there are only a few gap-year students, they can perhaps be ignored in terms of curriculum planning, but the more the gap-year experience becomes the norm, the more tempting it is to alter first year plans to match their higher abilities. This would then move the focus to the potentially unmet needs of those who have not taken a gap year. In this respect the gap year reinforces the need for an accessible and inclusive curriculum (Geography Discipline Network, 2004). There is a need for a curriculum which can stretch the more able and experienced as well as developing the less able, at a time when there is a widening range of abilities and experiences among those entering university.

There is a consensus of belief in the benefits of gap years among providers, students and admissions tutors, but for all these parties a degree of self-interest is involved. Also, their views do not constitute evidence that the students now have greater competencies than before their gap year (although *post hoc* the students believed they had), nor that only a gap year can work this transformation. There is a lack of quantitative evidence as to the effects of gap years at university and subsequently. If gap-year students in their first year at university get on better with the more mature second-year students, have they developed further than the cohort from their school who went straight to university and matured in the first-year rather than on a gap year? If that is not the case then the gap year has conferred no additional benefits; one simply enters the labour market a year later than one's contemporaries. On the other hand if the benefits of the gap year are such that students get more out of both their first and later years at university and get better jobs, then the investment in the gap year was worthwhile. The prospect of higher and eventually variable university tuition fees will probably make it more important for all but the wealthiest to assess carefully the benefits obtainable only from the gap year.

More research is clearly needed if we wish to substantiate the consensus of confidence currently expressed by universities, students and providers in the many academic and career benefits for geography students taking a gap year. The field is also open for research into gap years taken at the end of the undergraduate degree. Are later gap years similar to the pre-university ones or different in terms of activities and effects/benefits? For the authors to answer these questions would require a longitudinal study on a scale greater than was possible here. One might speculate that the post-university gap year would do less for developing autonomy (already improved by the degree experience) but might be more directly

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career-useful if focused on relevant work experience which applies subject knowledge at degree level. A comparison of the effects of pre- and post-university gap years would be a useful next step.

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