

# ‘GAP year plus’: preparing professionals, professionally

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## ABSTRACT

The gap year concept emerged after the Second World War and now provides a vehicle for establishing greater global and cultural understandings. The gap year period is described by King (2007) as the “zone” of transition, a transition between different “arenas” in a young person’s life. In Western countries an increasing number of students choose to defer university study for 12 months after completion of their high school study. HighBeam Research (2008) found that in Australia 15-20% of students take a gap year (estimated 2008 figures), and as a result gain real improvements in confidence, independence, practical life skills, and subsequent university grades (Haigler & Nelson, 2005). The ‘GAP Year Plus’ program at the University of Canberra was designed to recognize the learning that occurs as students engage in work over the period of the gap year (UC 2009). The University’s tag line “Preparing Professionals, Professionally” focuses attention on the interaction between higher education and work. ‘GAP Year Plus’ encourages students to reflect critically on their experiences in this period of transition and link their learnings with professionally valuable generic attributes, in particular, lifelong learning. The program’s design is aligned with contemporary perspectives on adult learning and approaches to teaching in higher education. It is supported by Knowles’ (1970) notions of andragogy, Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning, Marsick and Watkins’ (2001) informal and incidental learning and Fenwick’s (2001) perspectives on workplace learning. The program validates the learning that students undertake at work, for work, to work and, most particularly *through* work in the year between school and university. This paper describes the theoretical basis on which academic credit can be gained through students’ experiences in their gap year and pragmatic issues faced in the development of ‘GAP Year Plus’. (*Journal of Cooperative Education & Internships*, 2010, 44(2), 1-7).

KEYWORDS: Reflection, gap year, implementation.

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Learning from experience is not a new educational concept and has long been a significant component of the educational process of some disciplines such as medicine and education (Billett 2009). However, it is now generally agreed by educators, employers and even students that experiential learning opportunities play an essential role in producing more competent entry-level professionals and should form a component of the overall learning experience for students regardless of discipline (Billett, 2009). Employers increasingly demand graduates who have developed a body of professional and disciplinary knowledge, technical skills and a set of appropriate professional attitudes. Educators respond by striving to develop in their students a range of skills and attributes which will equip them to succeed in a wide range of different tasks and jobs and facilitate their contribution to the society in which they live. Students’ preparation for professional life demands the development of professionally appropriate graduate attributes (Department of Education, Science & Training [DEST], 2002). These graduate attributes, otherwise called ‘generic skills’ are those characteristics that employers look for in workers to meet their current and future skills needs.

Learning from experience is also a life-long skill that plays an important part in successful life journeys. The concept of learning from experience opens a wide-ranging discussion on what types of experience provide the basis for student learning and are therefore worthy of consideration for academic credit (Orrell, 2004). All of this is occurring at a time in Western countries when an increasing number of students choose to defer university study for 12 months after completion of high school – commonly called a gap year (Desira, 2007; Haigler & Nelson, 2005, King, 2007). They use this period to travel, work or merely to take a break from the grind of study; or in other words ‘to experience life’. We at the University of Canberra pondered the question whether academic credit could be given to those students who, at the end of their gap year, were able to demonstrate the leaning they gained through their gap experience. The expectation was that there would be enormous personal development in those highly prized generic skills and our challenge was to provide a learning experience that allowed students to recognize and then

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demonstrate their learning. We wanted such a program to be pedagogically sound and not just a 'free ride'. Pitman (2009) recently addressed this very concern with a call to more active development of recognition in higher education contexts of the learning that occurs through work. The Gap Year Program sought to meet this call through investigation of opportunities for rigorous and academically sound processes for recognition of prior learning. This paper discusses the process followed as the idea was explored. It addresses: why the gap year is perceived as being important; the literature on experiential, informal and incidental learning; and the philosophical and practical issues influencing implementation. It concludes with a summary which highlights the importance of an integrated, coordinated and institutionalized approach to learning through work that is supported by organizational policy and formalized process.

## THE GAP YEAR PHENOMENON

Formal recognition of the gap year by the higher education sector is rare but not entirely unrecognized as universities such as Princeton have implemented a 'Bridge Year'. However, it is an increasingly popular option for young people in many countries. Research in Australia in 1974 showed that approximately 4% of students elected to defer their university studies for a 12 month period ahead of returning to study (Link, Barton & Cannon, 1985), but by 2004 the number had grown to approximately 11% (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005) and Desira (2007) found that in Australia 15-20% of students took a gap year (estimated 2008 figures). Desira's (2007) research shows that students' participation in a gap year is moderated by a number of demographic factors. For example, students living outside a capital city are 8% more likely to defer and living costs are suggested to be a significant consideration. Age also plays a role, with participation decreasing with age, and UAI (University Admissions Index); lower UAI students are more likely to defer and this may be related to motivation levels. Women are also less likely to defer their University studies.

Students and their parents recognize the benefits for high school graduates derived from participating in a gap experience in areas such as education, life skills, civic engagement, and employment. Haigler and Nelson (2005) state that students who undertake a period of transition between school and university report greater confidence, independence, and maturity; increased passion for learning; a focus for their education; a better perspective on themselves; a perspective on the world; and increased practical life skills. Not only does the gap year support students' personal development, it can significantly improve the grades achieved of both male and female students. Birch and Miller (2007) illustrate the grade advantage that gap year students have over their counterparts as 2.2% for men and 2.6% for women. This is perhaps related to the motivation impact of the gap year – the period of transition accommodates maturation and changing perspectives within which students reconsider their motivations for embarking upon university study and their goals for learning (Haigler & Nelson, 2005). At the time of implementation of the 'GAP Year Plus' program, students in Australia taking a gap year could become eligible for government assistance over the course of their studies. If a student undertook paid employment up to 18 months out from leaving school, and earned a minimum of \$AUS17,667 (or less depending upon the period), that student would be deemed 'independent', and eligible for Austudy or Youth Allowance payments from the government.

As more and more students defer their university offers for at least a year universities that are funded partially on their student numbers are seeing huge implications for their overall budget. At the University of Canberra over 600 potential students in 2008 decided to defer their offer of placement. While the question is still very much open as to whether they will return in time, the phenomena prompted a closer look at the issue and a consideration of whether a gap year experience provided learning that could translate into academic credit and subsequently whether this would offer an inducement to deferring students to return. It ultimately led to the development and implementation of a new program 'GAP Year Plus' (University of Canberra, 2009).

'GAP Year Plus' was designed to recognize the learning that occurs as students engage in work over the period of the gap year. It encourages students to reflect critically on their experiences in this period of transition and link their learning with professionally valuable generic attributes, in particular, lifelong learning. The program's design is aligned with contemporary perspectives on adult learning and approaches to teaching in higher education validates the learning that students undertake at work, for work, to work and, most particularly *through* work in the year between school and university (Fenwick, 2001; Knowles, 1970; Kolb, 1984; Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

## EXPERIENTIAL, INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL LEARNING

In developing 'GAP Year Plus' two important questions needed to be answered. First, what learning might occur during the gap experience, regardless of the type of experience?, and second, how can a student demonstrate this learning to a level that satisfies the requirement of an academic program? Assessing prior learning in vocational education is well established in practice (see, e.g., Australian guidelines at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/31045.html>), and while it is a relatively nascent topic in higher education (see, e.g., Pitman, 2009), recognition of prior learning will have an important influence on the development of programs like 'GAP Year Plus' into the future. In an attempt to answer questions about the type and quality of learning and rigorous assessment, we looked to the literature on experiential learning and, significantly, its application, particularly the work of Alderman and Milne (2005).

Alderman and Milne (2005) referred to Kolb's definition of learning, that usefully sums up the importance of learning through experience: "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience: (Kolb, 1984, p. 34). Similarly, Alderman and Milne drew on Mezirow and associates, who indicate the highly individualized nature of learning by defining it as "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). From Mezirow (1990), we can conclude that learning is dependent on the way we construct what our experience means. We are invariably influenced first by our personal 'perspectives', our values, theories and fundamental understandings. Second, we are then influenced by our 'schemes', our expectations of cause-effect, and if-then relationships. These perspectives and schemes, according to Mezirow (1990), guide our interpretations of experience, and thus the final outcomes of our learning from experience.

Although we cannot divorce ourselves entirely from these personal perspectives and schemes, we can subject our experience to reflective thinking and critical analysis. Thus, our seemingly intractable view of the world may be altered. As a result, the most significant learning experiences, learning that transforms, involve critical self-reflection. 'Reflection' has also been identified as the key to turning experience into learning by Boud and colleagues (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985a, 1985b; Symes et al., 2000). Boud et al. (1985a) define 'reflection' as 'a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations'. The process involves three stages:

- Stage 1 involves recalling the events, replaying the initial experience and recounting the experience;
  - Stage 2 involves the conscious recall of good experiences and associated pleasurable feelings and those experiences with negative association; and
  - Stage 3 involves the review and evaluation of experience and associating the experience and knowledge gained with what is already known. (Boud et al., 1985a, pp. 26-31)

So if 'reflection' is the key driver for students to learn from experience it must also be the key driver in designing the assessment items that become the means by which students demonstrate the learning that has occurred. In 'GAP Year Plus' three strategies for supporting reflective learning are being used: reflective journal, portfolio and self-assessment.

*Stage 1:*

One of the most personalized and powerful ways students can reflect upon their learning is by keeping a journal, however, it must be more than a recall of events. Students should view it as a record of their personal 'journey' and their reflections upon that journey at different times along the way. Those who have not used journals before might question their value. To ease the sense of the unfamiliar and to provide a framework, Woodward (1998) suggests a double entry format where the left-hand column is used to record the experiences, and the right-hand side is used to record the reflection on the experience. This approach forces students to move the journal from being a mere diary record of events.

*Stage 2:*

While the journal is an ongoing record of learning and reflection on that learning, portfolios are designed to provide tangible, concrete evidence that learning has taken place. Generally, portfolios are used to demonstrate a person's 'best work' in their field of endeavor, but in assisting in the process of learning from experience they mainly assist in

reflection on and assessment of personal goals and achievements. Most importantly, portfolios should demonstrate that students know *what* and *how* learning has occurred. They are tools that reflect the student's learning in the developing or formative stage. Woodward (1998) also suggests that since they are the student's record of what they consider important, they offer others a helpful perspective on the student's learning. Self-assessment can be appropriately used at the conclusion of the experience and requires students to undertake a summative reflection on all that has been learned. This complements the formative role of the portfolio:

[Self-assessment] requires students to think critically about what they are learning, to identify appropriate standards of performance and to apply them to their own work. Self-assessment encourages students to look to themselves and to other sources to determine what criteria should be used in judging their work rather than being dependent solely on their teachers or other authorities. (Boud, 1991, p. 1)

The ability to undertake self-assessment is a valuable life-long learning skill. It can empower the individual and ensure learning experiences are more meaningful, yet despite its value, there is often student resistance. Clifford (1999) suggests it is necessary to provide some guidance in understanding what self-assessment entails and how it can be done. The opportunity for learning that can contribute to a student's development of professional knowledge, skills and attributes and an ability to self-assess and reflect has proven to be a serendipitous outcome of the gap year period. The time of development, coupled with rich experiences gained in 'expansive' work environments (Fuller & Unwin, 2004), and underpinned by careful and critical reflection offers a powerful opportunity for student growth whilst contributing to academic progress. What then were the answers to the two questions posed at the beginning of the exploration? Could we be satisfied that regardless of the type of experience valuable learning could occur and could students demonstrate their own learning in their gap year? With a properly constructed program such as 'GAP Year Plus' we believe the answer to both is 'yes'.

#### 'GAP YEAR PLUS'

'GAP Year Plus' offers students the opportunity to gain academic credit after demonstrating the learning that occurs whilst they are engaged in gap year work. It validates the professional learning that occurs in a student's workplace experience within a rigorous and pedagogically sound structure. In order to achieve the twin objectives of professional relevance and pedagogical appropriateness, the program utilizes a unit design underpinned by the following principles:

- The learning outcomes are closely aligned with the University of Canberra's generic attributes;
- The unit is outcomes based and designed along principles of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007);
- Assessment against the learning outcomes requires the presentation of evidence of professional learning;
- Assessment includes students' critical reflection on their professional learning; and
- Students receive tutorial and technical support in the collection of evidence and in the preparation of reflective responses.

In support of pedagogical rigor the unit provides structured materials and activities for students' development of skills, for critical reflection on experience and includes assessment that is work-related and requires critical thinking. Students are provided support in the form of personal contact with a tutor, group seminars, and guidelines, 'menus' and tools for development of electronic and physical portfolios. Preparation is an important critical success factor (Alderman & Milne, 2005). As has already been noted, students do not necessarily understand or are able to apply reflective learning principles. To participate in 'GAP Year Plus' students must attend a workshop at the University ahead of commencing their gap year where they are given details of the anticipated learning outcomes, the assessment activities, reflective learning activities and how to engage with them. Thus 'GAP Year Plus' provides the required opportunity for students to recognize the generic attributes that they develop, for the University to validate professional learning through formal credit toward a degree, and for the broader community to have access to what the University calls 'preferred graduates', that is, graduates who can clearly demonstrate that they are 'work ready'.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES INFLUENCING IMPLEMENTATION

Whilst there is robust theoretical support and empirical evidence to support the integration of workplace learning in the university curriculum, implementation issues abound. The introduction of 'GAP Year Plus' within the University highlighted the difficulty that faces those implementing innovative approaches to teaching, learning and recognition of workplace experience. These difficulties are well documented in the literature: negotiating formative and summative assessment (Knight, 2001); meeting students' expectations; accessing expansive learning environments (Brennan & Little, 2006; Fuller & Unwin, 2004); developing equal partnerships in which the knowledge and expertise

of both higher education and business are valued (Brennan & Little, 2006); and gaining internal and external validity (Brennan & Little, 2006; Langworthy & Turner, 2003) for workplace learning strategies. They conspire to undermine the opportunities inherent in utilizing the gap year for credit-bearing work integrated learning.

Although 'GAP Year Plus' is well grounded in solid pedagogy and robustly assessed, its implementation has proved difficult. A number of issues conspired to constrain its development and subsequent marketing and uptake by deferring students. In addition to those issues available in the literature and cited above, lecturer, policy-maker, marketing and funding body pressures became points of tension with new and increasingly convincing theories of experiential and incidental learning and their contribution to professional learning, evidence of the value of work integrated learning in professional degrees, industry and government pressure for universities to produce 'job-ready' graduates, a changing marketplace, and increasing student deferral rates. These competing pressures are illustrated below, highlighting the tension surrounding the introduction of this innovative program within the institution. Those pressures on the right would move activity toward the implementation of an integrated, holistic work-based learning approach within the University are counteracted by those pressures toward maintenance of traditional, classroom-based activity.

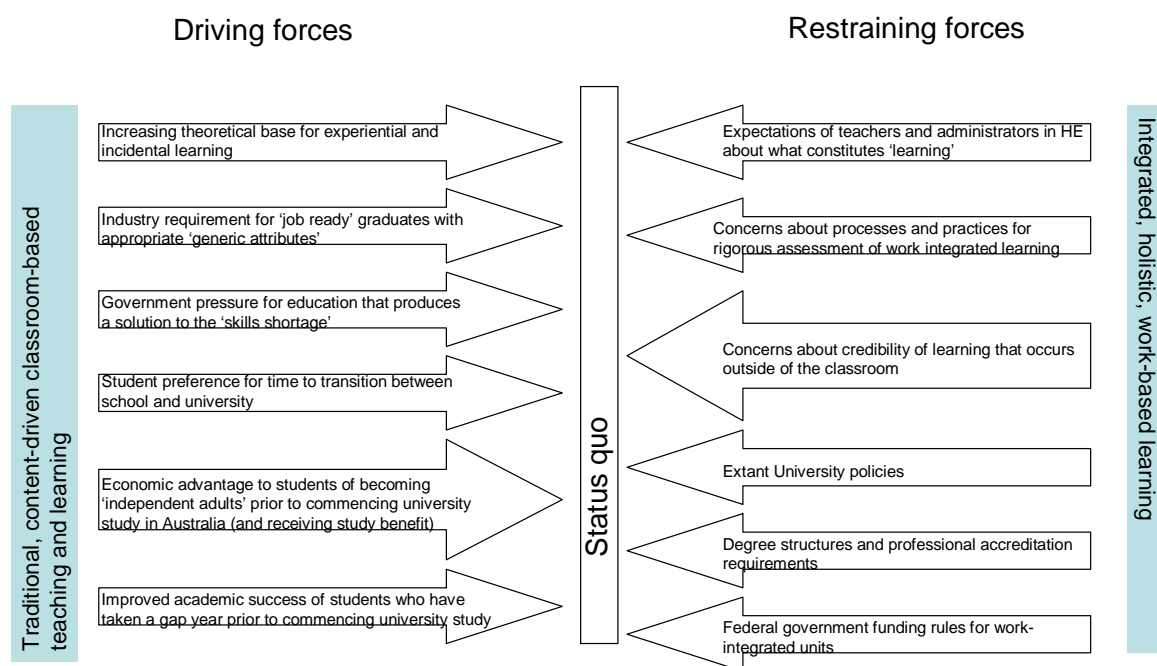


FIGURE 1  
Force-field analysis: Implementation of the 'GAP Year Plus'

In order that innovative approaches to work integrated learning can be developed and institutionalized within the university it is necessary to reduce the pressure of those forces that act to maintain status quo in traditional practice and/or to strengthen the weight of those forces that are the drivers of change. At the University of Canberra, it has been necessary to communicate broadly and strategically industry calls and government demands for 'job ready' graduates, and to support these communications with rigorous theory. In addition, statistics on student preference for deferral were coupled with evidence that illustrates a correlation between student progress and success and deferral in the gap year. It has been necessary to find innovative ways to work within federal government funding

rules, to rewrite institutional policy and attempt to influence change in organizational culture. Most importantly, it has been necessary to recognize as valid the concerns that lecturers have with a robust curriculum, and to engage academic staff in conversations in which their philosophies about what constitutes learning, and where it might take place, are made explicit, and challenged.

Merriam (2001) highlights the pressures of conceptions of knowledge and truth in issues of learning. This singular concern is one that has created great challenges to the development and implementation of the 'GAP Year Plus' program. The assumptions about knowledge and about learning that have been promoted within higher education institutions in the past are those fixed in static information, in which definite outcomes are prescribed, and they foreclose on the types of knowledge that are seen to be most relevant in the new knowledge economy (Bryans, 2000). The new economy, however, informs a generation of students who are sophisticated navigators of their world and who will demand individualized attention to their personal constructions of the learning experience and the contexts within which it may occur. In this environment, the role of the higher education provider is one in flux, and one that is increasingly complex, and one that must be responsive to affordances to meaningful education for a new generation. Universities, in this context, must accommodate a generation of educators who are willing to drive innovative practice that is responsive to a changing world.

## CONCLUSION

The 'GAP Year Plus' program at University of Canberra supports an organization-wide, structured and rigorous foray into work integrated learning. It is one innovation in a raft of approaches designed to provide a coordinated, institution-wide and -deep strategy which is supported by organizational policy and formalized process. Such a consolidated approach to work integrated learning is critical (Orrell, 2004) if learning *for work, at work, and through work* is to be acknowledged not only as valid, but also as crucial to universities producing work ready, credible graduates in contemporary professional environments. Its value is summed up by Argyris and Schön (1996) who noted that in the current knowledge economy, where value resides in continual innovation and adaptation to ubiquitous environmental change, learning must be about not only course content, but about learning to learn.

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