1. This paper is a Discussion Paper

2. Abstract

GAP Year Plus: Preparing Professionals, Professionally

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" i.e. 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. In Australia 15-20% of students take a gap year (estimated 2008 figures (HighBeam Research 2008)), and as a result gain real improvements in confidence, independence, practical life skills, and subsequent university grades (Haigler and Nelson, 2005).

The "Gap Year Plus" program at the University of Canberra was designed to recognise 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 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. Supported by Knowles' (1970) notions of andragogy, Kolb's

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".

Title: GAP Year Plus: Preparing Professionals, Professionally

Introduction

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. 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.

Employers increasingly demand graduates who have developed a body of professional and disciplinary knowledge and technical skills as well as 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 (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. This concept 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.

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. 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 recognise and then demonstrate their learning. We wanted such a program to be pedagogically sound and not just a 'free ride'.

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 learning, informal and incidental learning and finally the philosophical and practical issues influencing implementation.

GAP Year Phenomena

The period of time between completing high school and commencing university study is described by (King, 2007) as a "zone of transition", an opportunity for young people to negotiate the shift from one life area and the next. This period of time provides a fertile opportunity for students to learn about life, to experience the world of work and to bring the learning that occurs into their university experience.

Formal recognition of the gap year by the higher education sector is rare but not entirely unrecognised 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 (Linke *et al.*, 1985), but by 2004 the number had grown to approximately 11% (Krause *et al.*, 2005) and last year in Australia 15-20% of students took a gap year (estimated 2008 figures (Desira, 2007)).

From this research we know that students' participation in a gap year is moderated by their home location (students outside a capital city are 8% more likely to defer – living costs being a significant consideration), age (decreases at a decreasing rate with age), UAI (University Admissions Index) (lower UAI students are more likely to defer – related to motivation levels) and gender (females less likely to defer).

Students (and their parents) recognise 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 and a focus for their education; a better perspective on themselves and 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 mark advantage 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 (Haigler & Nelson, 2005) within which students reconsider their motivations for embarking upon university study and their goals for learning.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that more students in Australia take a gap year because it makes them eligible for government assistance over the course of their studies. If a student undertakes paid employment up to 18 months out from leaving school, and earns a minimum of $AUS17,667 (or less depending upon the period), that student will 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, for example, 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 indeed 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 deferees to return. It ultimately led to the development and implementation of a new program GAP Year Plus (http://www.canberra.edu.au/gap-year-plus).

GAP Year Plus was designed to recognise 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. 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.

Identifying and Demonstrating Learning from Experience

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 then how can a student demonstrate this learning to a level that satisfies the requirement of an academic program? In answering these questions we looked to the literature on experiential learning and, significantly, its application, particularly the work of Alderman and Milne (2005).

Alderman and Milne 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: 34).

Similarly they drew on Mezirow and associates who indicate the highly individualised 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: 1).

From Mezirow, 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. Secondly we are then influenced by our 'schemes', our expectations of cause-effect and if-then relationships. These perspectives and schemes, according to Mezirow 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 his colleagues (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985a; Boud, Keogh & Walker 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 associations.
- Stage 3 involves the review and evaluation of experience and associating the experience and knowledge gained with what is already known.

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 leaning that has occurred. In GAP Year Plus three strategies for supporting reflective learning are being used: reflective journal, portfolio and self-assessment.

One of the most personalised 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.

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 endeavour, 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, 1991:1).

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 suggests it is necessary to provide some guidance in understanding what self-assessment entails and how it can be done (Clifford, 1999).

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' (Fuller & Unwin, 2004) work environments 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 utilises a unit design underpinned by the following principles:

- The learning outcomes are closely aligned with the UC 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
- Students receive tutorial and technical support in the collection of evidence and in the preparation of reflective responses.

In support of pedagogical rigour 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 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 recognise 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 preferred graduates who can clearly demonstrate that they are ‘work ready’.

Implementation Issues

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 and Little, 2006); and gaining internal and external validity (Brennan & Little, 2006; Langworthy & Turner, 2003) for workplace learning strategies. They conspire to undermine the opportunity inherent in utilising the gap year for credit-bearing work integrated learning.

Although GAP Year Plus at 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 hand side 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.

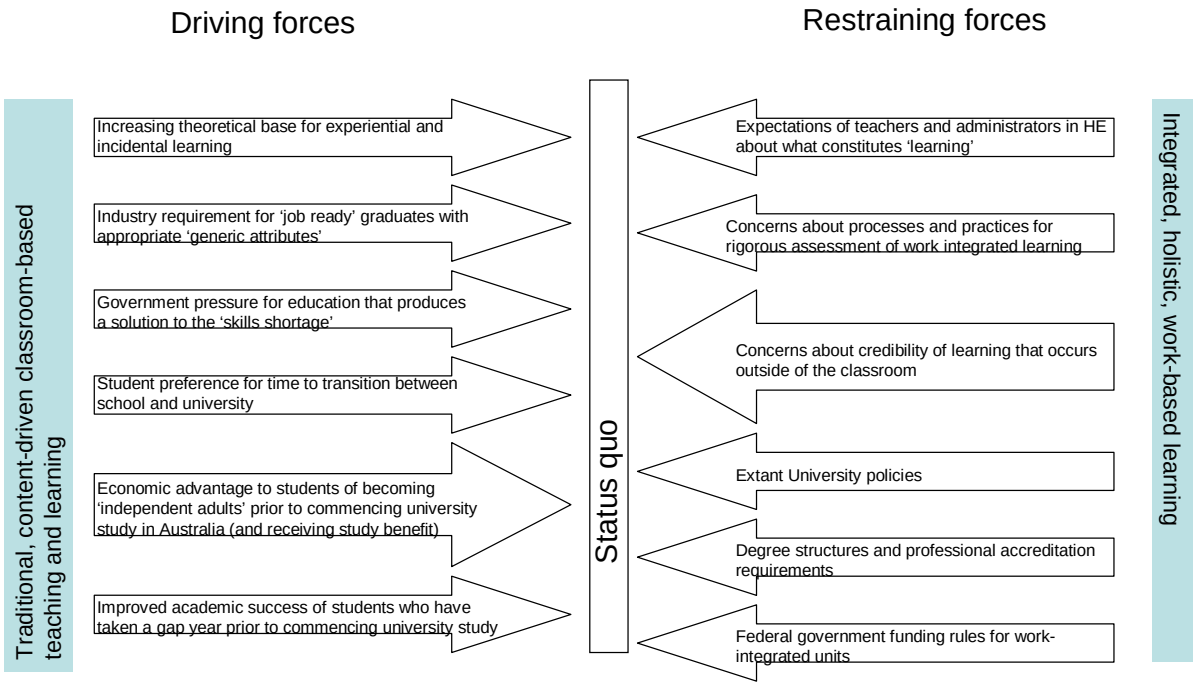

Figure 1: Force-field analysis - Implementation of the GAP Year Plus

In order that innovative approaches to work integrated learning can be developed and institutionalised within the university it is necessary either to reduce the pressure of those forces that act to maintain status quo in traditional practice or to strengthen the weight of those forces that are the drivers of change (or, of course, both). 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 organisational culture. Most importantly, it has been necessary to recognise 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: 96) 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: 230). 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 the context, 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.

Conclusion

The GAP Year Plus program at University of Canberra supports an organisation-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 organisational policy and formalised process. Such a consolidated approach to work integrated learning is critical (Orrell, 2004) if learning for, at, and through work 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 Schon (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.

References

Alderman, B., & Milne, P. (2005). *A model for work-based learning*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press.

Argyris, C., & Schon, D. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice*. Sydney: Addison-Wesley.

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (3rd ed.). Berkshire, England: McGraw Hill.

Birch, E., & Miller, P. (2007). The characteristics of 'gap year' students and their tertiary academic outcomes. *The Economic Record, 83*(262), 329-344.

Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self assessment*. London: Kogan Page.

Boud, D., Keogh, R., and Walker, D. (1985a). Promoting reflection in learning: a model, pp18-40 IN *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. London: Kogan Paul

Boud, D., Keogh, R., and Walker, D. (1985b). What is reflection in learning?, pp7-17 IN *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning.* London: Kogan Paul

Boud, D., and Knights, S. (1994). Designing courses to promote reflective practice, pp229-34 IN *Research and Development in Higher Education.* Volume 16. Ryan, G., Little, P., and Dunn, I., eds. Campbelltown, New South Wales: HERDSA

Brennan, J., & Little, B. (2006). *Towards a strategy for workplace learning: Report to HEFCE by CHERIi and KPMG*: Centre for Higher Education Research and Information.

Bryans, P. R. S. (2000). Beyond training: Reconceptualising learning at work. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 12*(6), 228-235.

Clifford, V. (1999). The development of autonomous learners in a university setting. *Higher Education Research & Development, 18*(1), 115-128.

Desira, J. (2007). A world of opportunity: Gap year options are growing by the year. Retrieved 09 February 2009, 2009

DEST. (2002). *Striving for quality: Learning, teaching and scholarship*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

Fenwick, T. (2001). Tides of change: New themes and questions in workplace learning. In T. Fenwick (Ed.), *Sociocultural perspectives on learning through work* (Vol. 92, pp. 3-18). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fuller, A., & Unwin, L. (2004). Expansive learning environments: Integrating organizational and personal development. In H. Rainbird, A. Fuller & A. Munro (Eds.), *Workplace learning in context*. London: Routledge.

Haggis, T. (2003). Constructing images of ourselves? A critical investigation into 'approaches to learning' research in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 29*(1), 89-104.

Haigler, K., & Nelson, R. (2005). *The gap-year advantage: Helping your child benefit from time off before or during college*. New York: St Martins Griffin.

King, A. (2007). That's what a gap year will teach you. UK: University of Surrey.

Knight, P. (2001). Skills plus: Employability and assessment, *Skills Plus Fourth Colloquium*. Lancaster University.

Knowles, M. S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education*. New York: Associated Press.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnes, C. (2005). *The first year experience in australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

Langworthy, A., & Turner, T. (2003). *Learning for the workplace and beyond: The challenge of university-community engagement.* Paper presented at the HERDSA Learning for an unknown future, Christchurch.

Linke, R., Barton, A., & Cannon, R. (1985). *Deferment of entry into higher education*. Adelaide: Tertiary Education Authority.

Marsick, V., & Watkins, K. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 89*(Spring), 25-34.

Merriam, S. (2001). Something old, something new: Adult learning theory for the twenty-first century. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 89*(Spring), 93-96.

Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress*. San Francisco

Orrell, J. (2004). *Work-integrated learning programmes: Management and educational quality.* Paper presented at the Australian Universities Quality Forum 2004.

Symes, C., McIntyre, J., & Society for Research into Higher Education. (2000). *Working knowledge: The new vocationalism and higher education*. Buckingham, U.K.: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Wasley, P. (2006). Underrepresented students benefit most from 'engagement'. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *53*(13).

Woodward, H. (1998). Reflective journals and portfolios: Learning through assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 23*(4), 415-423.