

# THE VALUE OF THE GAP YEAR IN THE FACILITATION OF CAREER ADAPTABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the gap year experience of 11 first year Stellenbosch University students and its influence on the development of their adaptive career resources and preparedness. Phenomenological analysis was applied to data obtained through semi-structured interviews to identify overarching themes and subthemes within the data. This study found that engaging in a gap year facilitated formative personal growth and the acquisition of a variety of skills. These themes depicted increased career maturity and, in combination with an improved knowledge of the world of work, enabled the participants to construct a more confident identity and make informed career decisions. The findings indicate that a gap year appears to be useful for individuals to foster curiosity regarding future personal and career development and exercise career adaptability. This study signifies that a gap year can be utilised as a valuable life design opportunity for individuals to address career uncertainty and acquire a variety of skills to prepare them for subsequent formal study and career decision-making.

**Keywords:** career decision-making, career development, gap year, career adaptability, employability, career resilience

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, South African high school graduates are taking time out from formal education and entry into the work sector to embark on what is popularly known as ‘a gap year’ (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 608; Greffrath and Roux 2012, 461; Nieman 2010, 121; 2013, 133). While traditionally a pre-university phenomenon, the modern gap year has undergone a major transformation from being a radical activity to a process that shapes new citizens for a global age (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 609). In recent years, there has been a significant global increase in the number of young people engaging in a gap year. According to Jones (2004, 11),

approximately 250 000 of the United Kingdom's national youth population (between the ages of 16 and 25) participate in a gap year. Moreover, 8 per cent of all university applicants defer entry to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to engage in a gap year (Jones 2004, 48). The majority of South African gap year participants regard tertiary education as a prerequisite for a successful career – furthering their formal education is frequently a high priority. However, the experience of career indecision often stymies their confidence to continue to tertiary education (Nieman 2013, 138). Furthermore, this uncertainty is compounded by the anxiety associated with the diversity of occupational environments and choices in the post-modern era (Savickas 2012, 13). A gap year appears to assist individuals in resolving this experience of initial career uncertainty (Nieman 2013, 138).

The digital revolution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in a major transformation in the world of work (Maree and Morgan 2012, 312; Savickas 2012, 13). Rapid advances in information technology have produced an economic globalisation, reshaping the social arrangement of work (Savickas 2010, 33), wherein part-time and freelance positions have replaced permanent appointments (Maree 2010, 362; Savickas 2012, 13) and the requirements for entry into the work place is becoming more obscure. In order to successfully enter the formal economy in this digital age, individuals require greater confidence and knowledge of self (Savickas 2012, 13). To address the demands of the new world of work, more emphasis on personal meaning is required in the career counselling process to improve 'employability rather than employment' (Savickas 2012, 3). On completing high school education, more individuals are opting to use a transitional space to bridge this developmental gap between self-confidence, knowledge of self and employability. The gap year phenomenon is thus becoming an important career development resource for individuals tentative about entering the world of work, or choosing their initial study direction.

Despite the growing popularity of the gap year among the South African youth, local research on this phenomenon is relatively scant, with only a few research articles published locally (Coetzee and Bester 2009; Greffrath and Roux 2012; Nieman, 2010, 2013). Much of the available literature on this phenomenon focuses on the gap year experiences of British and North American students. According to Nieman (2010, 121), international gap year literature is not relevant for research on young South Africans' gap year experience because of disparate contexts. For example, South African students' motivation to engage in a gap year is usually related to the experience of career indecision (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 618; Nieman 2010, 121), whereas students in the United Kingdom engage in a gap year to travel and experience different cultures and people (Jones 2004, 66). This suggests that South African students

participating in a gap year may have different motives and experiences that may influence the development of their adaptive career resources and preparedness.

## **DEFINING THE GAP YEAR**

Traditionally, a gap year has been defined as taking a year off between school and university to explore the world and career opportunities (Pidcock 2004, 1). This definition has been refined by Jones (2004, 24) as a period of time between three and 24 months in which an individual takes time out from formal education, training or the workplace, resulting in a longer career trajectory. For the purpose of this study, a gap year refers to a period of between six and 24 months directly after completing secondary school in which individuals engage in a range of informal work, study and travelling activities while contemplating decisions regarding their future.

## **MOTIVATING FACTORS INFLUENCING GAP YEAR PARTICIPATION**

Students' motivation for engaging in a gap year is influenced by a variety of factors. Studies from the United Kingdom have found that students are motivated either by the prospect of cultural exploration or as a result of the experience of career indecision (Heath 2007, 89; Jones 2004, 39). Similarly, career uncertainty is a significant motivating factor in South Africa. However, additional considerations, such as gaining life experience, earning and saving money to pay for tertiary education and inadequate career counselling at school are also influential factors in South African students' decision to engage in a gap year (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 618; Nieman 2010, 121). Consequently, students often consider a gap year to be a period where they can take a break from their routines and resolve the uncertainty they are experiencing regarding their future (Nieman 2013, 138). Students' decision to delay tertiary education and embark on a gap year is also influenced by financial status (Birch and Miller 2007, 330). Findings by Heath (2007, 100) and Nieman (2010, 123; 2013, 137), for example, indicate that a gap year is common among the white, middle-class and well educated population. However, with respect to its global popularity, taking a gap year is increasingly prevalent among students from diverse backgrounds and cultures who are able to work abroad (Heath 2007, 98). Casual work experience in the Commonwealth and various jobs on ocean liners have increased opportunities for employment abroad.

## **BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF THE GAP YEAR EXPERIENCE**

The increasing popularity and motivation to engage in a gap year can be attributed to the various perceived individual advantages associated with participating in a gap year. A gap year offers an opportunity for self-development: trying on different roles, meeting new people and engaging in a variety of social spaces, where students can 'find' themselves and use this period to guide future decisions (Nieman 2010, 124). A gap year offers a developmental context for personal growth: learning new skills; exposure to a variety of social situations that may be job related and engaging in self-reflection. Participating in a gap year tends to contribute positively to the transition between high school and university, since these students are usually more mature, independent and focused on their academic goals (Martin 2010, 566), exhibit increased punctuality, improved time management and ability to make important decisions independently (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 620). The improved academic ability of gap year students has been well documented in the literature, both internationally (Heath 2007; Jones 2004, 2005; King, 2011) and locally (Coetzee and Bester 2009; Greffrath and Roux 2012; Nieman 2010, 2013). For example, Birch and Miller (2007, 340) found that taking a gap year between secondary school and university had a positive impact on students' academic performance. In particular, a gap year appears to have the biggest positive impact on the academic performance of low-achieving students (Birch and Miller 2007, 340).

Various benefits associated with a gap year are also interrelated. For example, a gap year enhances the acquisition of 'soft skills' which, in turn, may improve an individual's employability. 'Soft skills' primarily refers to interpersonal, leadership, communication, managerial and organisational skills (Jones 2004, 66). It is the exposure to, and development of, these soft skills (often vicariously in the gap year) that is most likely to be important for future education and employment success (Jones 2004, 66). Moreover, the acquisition of these skills enhances career maturity and self-efficacy (Miles 2015, 166) and facilitates the process of career decision-making (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 621).

The beneficial qualities of a gap year, however, largely depend on how structured and organised the gap year is (Greffrath and Roux 2012, 462; Heath 2007, 90). What differentiates a gap year from a vacation is the engagement with a meaningful activity, such as paid or unpaid work, leisure or travelling (Heath 2007, 89). It is essential for a gap year to have a planned purpose, facilitate personal growth and for the individual to engage in active processing of these experiences (Savickas 2005, 52); lacking these elements, it is regarded as a holiday (Nieman 2013, 134).

A gap year also has its disadvantages. Universally, many students identify their separation from friends and family as being a gap year's main pitfall, contributing to their sense of solitude

(Nieman 2010, 129). A poorly planned gap year and a lack of structure increase the possibility of inconsistent employment, where individuals find it difficult to remain motivated after a break in their routine (Nieman 2010, 129). This may result in some gap year participants being unable to progress to tertiary education and drifting from their initial plan (Nieman 2013, 143). Furthermore, the financial costs associated with embarking on a gap year may leave the individual with large amounts of debt (Coetzee 2006, 24; Piddock 2004, 4).

## **A GAP YEAR'S INFLUENCE ON CAREER DECISION-MAKING**

The process of career decision-making is complex, with multiple interacting factors influencing an individual's career choice (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 621). The benefits associated with a gap year, specifically increased personal growth and maturity, largely contribute to students' confidence to engage with their personal and career development. The diverse social and living conditions associated with a gap year contribute to an increased sense of maturity and sense of self (Jones 2005, 2–3). Super (1990, 225–226) theorises that an individual's career maturity is particularly characterised by the ability to manage related developmental tasks during late adolescence. Super and Hall (1978, 340) delineate that career maturity is associated with developing competencies in six areas, namely, knowledge of careers, knowledge of work environments, knowledge of preferred occupational group, planfulness, decision-making and accessing resources available for exploration; all these are germane to the gap year experience. Similarly, Savickas (2005, 51) posits that attitudes of exploration and planfulness facilitate an awareness of career progression, where individuals become future-orientated regarding occupational tasks and transitions. Ultimately, the ability to make informed career decisions is regarded as an important expression of career maturity (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 619). Therefore, students struggling with career indecision gain from taking time out to gain a better sense of themselves and their connection to the world of work. Nieman's (2013, 141) findings suggest that gap year students appear to be more confident about their decision of choice of study and career goals. Thus, one of the implicit major outcomes of a gap year is the degree of career maturity gained by students.

The term 'career uncertainty' has various negative connotations and is often regarded as burdensome. Savickas (1995, 3) challenges these negative connotations and argues that career indecision is essential during the process of career decision-making. Career indecision does not inhibit progression, but rather offers individuals the opportunity to engage with exploration, undergo transformation and develop a new, germane identity (Savickas 1995, 3).

Within this context, the current study examined experiences of first year Stellenbosch

University students who had taken a gap year prior to embarking upon their studies and describes how this experience influenced their personal growth and subsequent career decision-making. To achieve this, an in-depth qualitative analysis focused on the students' motivation for taking a gap year, the benefits and drawbacks associated with this experience, the skills acquired during their gap year and how their experiences influenced their choice of study at university and, ultimately, their career decisions. In the next section, the study's research design will be outlined. This will be followed by a presentation of the study's findings and conclude with a discussion of the findings.

## METHOD

### Participants and sampling

First year university students who had a gap year experience immediately after the completion of their secondary education were recruited as participants. Participants were invited via notice board invitations and formal letters of invitation distributed during tutorial classes in the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University. Of the 11 participants, eight were recruited through the use of purposive sampling, while three were recruited by means of snowball sampling, having been identified by participants who had been interviewed (Bryman 2008, 418). The current study did not have a predetermined sample size and sampling occurred until the point of saturation was reached. The sample consisted of 9 female participants; 8 of the participants were White, 2 Coloured and 1 Black (existing racial classifications are used to illustrate the sample diversity and does not imply endorsement of these categories). The majority of participants had also taken a 12 month (year) gap period. A summary of the demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant	Sex	Race	Age	Home language	Family SES	Residential area	Siblings at university	Duration of gap year
1	Female	Black	19	isiXhosa	Lower-income	Suburban	No	12 months
2	Female	White	20	Afrikaans	Lower-income	Urban	No	12 months
3	Male	Coloured	21	English	Low-income	Suburban	No	16 months
4	Female	White	20	English	Middle-income	Suburban	Yes	12 months
5	Female	White	19	English	High-income	Suburban	Yes	11 months
6	Female	White	21	Afrikaans	High-income	Suburban	Yes	12 months
7	Female	White	19	English	Middle-income	Suburban	Yes	12 months

Participant	Sex	Race	Age	Home language	Family SES	Residential area	Siblings at university	Duration of gap year
8	Female	White	20	English	Unknown	Urban	Yes	10 months
9	Female	Coloured	20	English	Lower-income	Suburban	No	12 months
10	Female	White	20	English	Middle-income	Rural	Yes	12 months
11	Male	White	20	English	High-income	Suburban	No	12 months

## Research procedure

The data for the study were collected by means of a short biographical questionnaire and individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in either English or Afrikaans, depending on the participant's language preference: 10 of the interviews were conducted in English and one interview was conducted in Afrikaans. The interview schedule consisted of eleven open-ended questions related to the participants' gap year experience. Questions included: 'Was your gap year experience what you expected it to be?' and 'How would you describe the influence your gap year has had on your life?' The purpose of the open-ended questions was to guide, rather than dictate, the interview process (Smith and Osborn 2008, 182).

The participants were encouraged to answer the questions in as much detail as possible and certain probes and follow-up questions were used to elicit the participants' experiences, views and opinions. The interviews were conducted in a neutral environment in the university library to limit distractions. The interviews were recorded digitally. Extensive observation notes were made throughout the interview process. The digital recordings of the interviews served as the primary data for the current study. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions were analysed.

## Data analysis

The data were coded and captured using *Atlas.ti* (Silverman 2010, 261), a qualitative data analysis computer programme, and the data were analysed by means of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA employs a thematic style of analysis where patterns or themes in the data are identified, analysed and reported (Smith and Osborn 2008, 180). Although the analytic procedure is not prescriptive, the general analysis of a transcript follows four steps: familiarising the data; identifying occurring themes; clustering themes; and constructing a summary table (King and Horrocks 2011, 209). As the current study analysed more than one transcription, a fifth step was also employed, namely integrating the occurring themes across multiple cases. IPA offers a scope for reflexive considerations and clear

procedures that the researcher can employ in order to understand an individual's experiences (King and Horrocks 2001, 211).

The process of coding focused on recognising commonalities as well as peculiarities within the data which were related to the participants' gap year experience and its influence on their career decision-making. The coded data were used to generate and identify occurring themes, which were analysed and reported.

King and Horrocks (2011, 209) assert that themes represent recurrent and unique features of the participants' accounts, characterising specific experiences or perceptions, which are relevant to the research question. Thus, the themes of the current study were extracted to represent the participants' gap year experience and its influence on career decision-making.

### **Ethical considerations**

Approval for the study was obtained from Stellenbosch University's Ethics Committee. Prior to the process of data collection, the participants were required to complete an informed consent form. Participants were informed, both in writing and orally, about the aims of the study and the process of data collection. All participants were informed, inter alia, that they had the right to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from participation during any period of the interview. The participants were assured that all personal information would be protected and that the confidentiality of information and anonymity would be maintained unless explicitly waived by the participants.

Prior to data collection, the first researcher conducted a pilot interview with three participants. This process helped to improve the phrasing, relevance and sequence of the questions used in the interview schedule. This data was not included in the study.

### **FINDINGS**

From the analyses of the interview data, seven main themes and two subthemes were identified. A summary of the identified themes and subthemes is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary table of identified themes

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Short Description</b>
1 Career uncertainty		The experience of career indecision
2 Acquisition of skills		The influence of the gap year on the participants' acquisition of soft and practical skills
	2.1 Soft skills	Includes interpersonal, communication, managerial and organisation skills
	2.2 Practical skills	Skills the participants acquired during their gap year and which they employ in their daily life
3 Personal growth		Refers to increased maturity and independence

Themes	Subthemes	Short Description
4 Broadening horizons		Includes the expansion of knowledge and world views
5 Identity formation		The construction and establishment of a coherent sense of self
6 Disconnection and isolation		Refers to feelings of detachment from their peer group and isolation from close friends and family
7 Practical career (dis)continuity		Confirmation or disconfirmation of a preferred career choice

### Career uncertainty

The most common motivating factor for engaging in a gap year was the participants' experience of career uncertainty. Nine of the participants attributed their decision to engage in a gap year to career indecision. While seven of the participants were indecisive about their future career choice, the remaining four participants were conflicted between two or more contending career choices they were contemplating. Participant 4 shared:

In the middle of matric I still did not know what it was I wanted to do. It came to mock exams and I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do the next year. I just didn't have a clue so I just needed to get away.

In conjunction with the experience of career uncertainty, two of the participants ascribed the experience of familial pressure regarding their future as a motivating factor to embark on a gap year. Participant 1 explained: 'Your family keep asking, 'So what are you doing, what are you studying?', which increased the pressure to make a career choice. Consequently, Participant 1 also suffered exhaustion upon completion of secondary school and felt she was unprepared to continue her tertiary education the following year.

As a result, it seems that a gap year offered participants an opportunity to take a break from their routines, stresses and pressures to make a decision, as well as enabled them to postpone deciding on their future.

### Acquisition of skills

The skills acquired by the participants during their gap year can be partitioned into two subthemes, namely 'soft skills' and 'practical skills'. Jones (2004, 66) defines 'soft skills' as the attainment of interpersonal, communication, managerial and organisational skills, whereas 'practical skills' refers to the participants' ability to utilise the knowledge they have gained during their gap year in their daily activities.

*Soft skills.* The participants described being exposed to a variety and diversity of people during their gap year. These social interactions had a major influence on their interpersonal skills. Through the activities they engaged in and the people they worked with, the participants

extended their social skills, became adaptable, tolerant, and found themselves needing to take others into consideration. Participant 6, who identified her home town as ‘... a small, racist community,’ described her experience: ‘I had to share a room with two black girls which was also a big challenge for me, but you get to know people on a different level than they are from the outside’. This experience helped her to challenge her own stereotypes and improve her cross-cultural communication skills.

Furthermore, the data revealed the influence of a gap year on the participants’ acquisition of conflict management and problem-solving skills. The participants were challenged to become assertive, make compromises and consider possible solutions during stressful work- and social situations. Consequently, the participants’ independence cultivated improved managerial and organisational skills which in turn gave rise to the acquisition of certain practical skills.

*Practical skills.* The most salient practical skill acquired during their gap year was the participants’ ability to be planful to manage their finances. During her travels through Thailand, Participant 5 learned how to budget and proudly asserted to have ‘... lived off like R20 a day or sometimes like R60 a week’. Living on a limited budget, the participants had to research the least expensive travel options, buy food selectively and, for the female participants, discard certain luxuries, such as ‘nice soaps and moisturisers’ that they often took for granted while living at home.

Other practical skills included the participants learning how to cook, learning different languages and receiving occupational training. Participant 6, who engaged in a performing arts gap year and worked as a stage technician, shared that her experience with faulty stage equipment provided her with the practical skills to repair and maintain such equipment. This experience was invaluable in terms of her future career, as illustrated in the following statement:

I know about all the things that could go wrong, and how to fix it and now, coming into my studies where I have all of this equipment to my usage and it’s better quality, so if anything would go wrong, I would know what to do and if anything breaks, I would be able to work with less than they are giving me, I’m over-skilled, I think I’m prepared for any situation.

The participants indicated that the variety of soft and practical skills they had acquired during their gap year had assisted them subsequently in adjusting to life at university. The participants’ improved ability to live independently and manage their time, finances and increased responsibility aided the adjustment process. This is illustrated by Participant 9 who shared, ‘I matured, so if I went straight from school, I wouldn’t have been able to handle all the freedom and workload’. These skills appeared to be vicarious in the participants’ everyday functioning

and played an integral role in their ability to function independently.

### **Personal growth**

The main benefit gained from participating in a gap year was the increased personal growth experienced by the participants. Engaging in a gap year offered the participants an opportunity to self-explore, which facilitated the process of personal growth. Participant 4 described this as follows: 'It all comes down to growing up, that was a benefit for me, being independent and doing things on my own'. This sense of maturing was confirmed by the majority of the participants, who reported feeling confident in their abilities and determination regarding their university career. Another component of personal growth identified within the data was the participants' high levels of independence or self-sufficiency. Participant 7 ascribed her independence to '... living without a family, like my mom wasn't there to drive me around and that makes you way more independent'.

All the participants in the sample claimed that their gap year experience had improved their sense of self-confidence, when compared to their level of self-confidence in their final year of secondary school. The participants averred that their gap year had made them more mature, independent and experienced, and they were more comfortable with their own individuality. They were also able to engage with the uncertainty regarding their future.

### **Broadening horizons**

Engaging in a gap year expanded the participants' knowledge and perspective on life. The broadening of horizons was a common theme identified among both the participants who engaged in a gap year abroad, as well as those who were situated in South Africa. While working on a kibbutz in Israel, exposure to different cultures and nationalities assisted Participant 3 to realise that 'The bubble that is I, needs to pop'; and that, during his gap year, he had gained awareness of a wider social context. Through interacting with people of different cultures and nationalities, the participants identified differences between themselves and other people, and vicariously gained self-knowledge which extended their perspective of their own interests, individual characteristics and personal preferences. Through their exposure to various occupational settings and with time to do thorough research on different careers during their gap year, participants' knowledge and awareness of different careers increased. Participant 6 indicated that she had '... learned a lot about the organisation of entertainment and how you get from the idea to the process to the show to after the show'. Subsequently, this experience inspired her to pursue a career in drama.

Experiencing personal growth, having free time to contemplate important decisions and being exposed to new environments and circumstances, enabled the participants to explore and construct their identity, clarify preferences and, ultimately, approach their career decisions with more confidence.

### **Identify formation**

In all of the interviews, the influence of the gap year on the formation of a more confident identity was evident. The participants indicated increased confidence in their individual competencies and characteristics. Participant 11 shared that, through engaging in a variety of activities, ‘... you learn so much about yourself, I learnt that I’m laid back and relaxed and, ja, you change big time, no one will change the same’. Consequently, Participant 11 accepted his self-perception as being tranquil and assumed it as part of his identity. These sentiments were shared by Participant 2, who, through her gap year experience, had constructed her identity as a patient, autonomous and independent individual.

Consequently, a gap year had served as a period of self-reflection, empowering the participants to form a more discerned identity. This provided the participants with clarity on their interests and preferences, which ultimately enabled them to decide on a career path.

### **Disconnection and isolation**

Engaging in a gap year, however, was not exclusively experienced in positive terms and the participants shared a variety of challenging experiences related to their gap year. Even though these experiences were, to a certain extent, subjective and unique, certain commonalities were identified within the data. A recurrent trend was that the participants felt disconnected from their peers and isolated from close family members and friends. This was mainly influenced by differences in time zones or no cell phone connectivity. Also, missing home and the South African context were reported as further common negative experiences. Throughout her gap year, Participant 2 experienced intense isolation and separation from her peer group. Her peers were ‘... *ver weg en besig met ’n nuwe ervaring, met opwindende dinge wat gebeur en, um, ek staan net elke dag op en, um, doen wiskunde*’ (... far away and busy with a novel experience, with exciting stuff that happen and um, I just get up every day and, um, do maths). However, it must be noted that this experience can be attributed to the disorganised structure and lack of planning prior to her gap year.

The participants further ascribed challenging experiences which were subjectively related to their gap year. For example, while diving together off the coast of Mozambique, Participant

5's friend passed away in a diving accident and she was forced to manage the situation and her grieving on her own. However, she commented: 'Every experience, even it was a negative; it came out to be as a positive'.

Irrespective of the positive or negative experiences, the influence of the entire gap year on the participants' lives was invaluable. None of the participants regretted having taken a gap year and claimed that their gap year experiences had 'toughened them up'; and, by experiencing difficult times, they had emerged stronger, more resilient. Despite three participants still experiencing career indecision upon completion of their gap year, the majority of participants purported to have resolved the career uncertainty experienced prior to engaging in a gap year.

### **Practical career (dis)confirmation**

For many of the participants, their gap year afforded them exposure to a range of occupational activities which helped with their career exploration. The data revealed that, by disconfirming certain careers, the participants were refining their career options. Participant 10, who worked as a chef and contemplated pursuing this career path, realised, 'I didn't want to work in someone else's kitchen. That is why I stopped by the end of the year.' For these participants, the occupations they were exposed to influenced their career decision-making process, as it helped them to decide which career path not to follow.

Two of the participants indicated that engaging in a gap year did not have any influence on their career decision-making, since they were still indecisive regarding which career path to follow.

However, for other participants, their gap year served as a period where they confirmed their interest in a specific career. Participant 11, who engaged in a Rotary exchange in France, shared his experience: 'I only realised how much sport meant to me during my gap year, because, whenever I was in school, I wished I was on the athletics track, training, getting the hours in'. Competing in athletics abroad inspired him to work towards his long-term goal of competing at the Olympics and he decided to follow a career in sport. Participant 3, who chose to pursue a career in international relations, related that 'Being on the kibbutz was kind of confirmation of that, confirmation that I had to study, I just didn't know what it was I was going to study, but being there kind of gave me perspective'. For these two participants, the gap year provided a broader experience to confirm career options they had been considering and ultimately the career path which they preferred to follow.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings revealed that the pervading motivation for taking the gap year related to the participants' sense of indecision regarding which study and career path to follow after matriculating. This is in line with several South African studies that found that the gap year offered participants time to self-reflect in order to resolve their career uncertainty (Coetzee and Bester 2009, 619; Greffrath and Roux 2012, 463; Nieman 2013, 138). These findings are in contrast with those of Jones (2005, 3), who found that participants in the UK engaged in a gap year to travel and experience different cultures and people, a 'time out' before taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. Thus, future research could investigate disparities between South African students and students from the UK in terms of their motivation for taking the gap year.

Several themes in the findings indicate that the gap year offered individuals a range of opportunities for personal growth to explore their interests, try out new skills and develop their sense of identity. These are essential aspects of what Marcia (1966, 552) considered developing an inner sense of identity. This involves the interaction between two developmental tasks: exploration of one's self and the external environment, and commitment to a career path. With ample time for self-reflection and exposure to a variety of circumstances and careers, it appears that a gap year offers individuals the opportunity to engage with these developmental tasks and concomitantly consolidate an identity. These findings support King's (2011, 353) characterisation of the gap year as an opportunity for undertaking 'identity work' during the transition to adulthood. The participants' increased personal growth, one of the main identified benefits of engaging in a gap year, fosters the development of their sense of self and identity. The participants encountered diverse social and cultural contexts which broadened their perspective on life and helped to give them a better sense of self in relation to others. Subsequently, it appears that experiencing personal growth promotes the establishment of a coherent sense of self, which facilitates the career decision-making process.

In line with Savickas's (2005, 53) theory of career construction that postulates vocational personality, career adaptability and life themes to be core to the career development process, gappers begin to develop their own life themes or unique experiences that facilitate the construction of a subjective career path. This construction is a psychosocial process where the components of the self and societal experiences become linked (McIlveen and Patton 2007, 227). The self-knowledge gained during a gap year and the variety of activities the participants engage in foster this integration. Consequently, a gap year and its associated benefits offer individuals the opportunity to begin to construct life themes and ultimately decide on a career path.

Furthermore, it appears that participation in a gap year fosters one of Savickas's (2005,

55) four dimensions of career adaptability, namely career curiosity. Career curiosity refers to an exploration of the accord between the self and the world of work (Savickas 2005, 55). Successful facilitation of career curiosity produces a cache of knowledge on which to base future decisions. Savickas (2005, 55) asserts that individuals who explore beyond their own environments acquire more knowledge regarding their personal abilities, values and interests, coupled with knowledge about the prerequisites and benefits of various occupations. Accordingly, through engaging with different social and cultural environments, the gap year experience serves as a foundation on which to make future personal and career decisions.

Engaging in a gap year had a major influence on the participants' acquisition of soft and practical skills. Through attaining interpersonal, leadership, communication, managerial and organisational skills, albeit vicariously, the participants strengthened their career control (Savickas 2005, 54), which improved confidence in their responsibility to construct their own occupational future. Coetzee and Bester (2009, 621) similarly found that these skills improve an individual's career maturity, which facilitates the process of career decision-making. The participants claimed that the acquisition of these skills also assisted in their transition to university, since they were already able to live independently, socialise and communicate with others and manage their time and finances. Accordingly, the current study's findings indicate that, for students who enrol for tertiary education, a gap year might play a formative role in preparing them to better manage their university experience. These findings concur with those of Nieman (2013, 142), who reports that gap year participation facilitates students' adjusting to university, since they are often more mature and better able to handle the responsibility, as well as the freedom, associated with university life. Interestingly, four participants from this study attributed their decision to engage in a gap year to the fatigue they experienced during the final years of secondary school.

Despite subjective challenges related to the participants' gap year, most of the participants ascribed being away from their families and losing connection with their peer group as the most common challenging aspect of their gap year. Two participants mentioned that the negative experiences of their gap year were related to poor planning and the unstructured nature of that year. This concurs with previous studies that emphasise that, for a gap year to be meaningful, it must be planned and structured (Greffrath and Roux 2012, 462; Heath 2007, 90; Nieman 2013, 134). Regardless, none of the participants regretted their decision to engage in a gap year: the gap year was a positive experience for the majority of the participants, despite certain challenges.

Furthermore, the gap year provided the participants with a rich exposure to the world of

work, both directly and indirectly. There were recurring discussions about future studies and plans in their social circles; participants had exposure to diverse jobs, training and volunteer experiences, and opportunities to observe people performing their work roles. This exposure helped participants confirm or disconfirm their interest in a specific career and engage more actively with career exploration. Coetzee and Bester (2009, 621) allude to this indirect impact of the gap year on career decision-making, with individuals gaining confidence, clarity and maturity, enabling them to make important decisions about their future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study yielded insights about the potential value of the gap year experience of individuals prior to becoming university students and the influence on their career engagement. The findings revealed that engaging in a structured gap year with predetermined objectives provided a conducive context for the participants' personal growth and the acquisition of a variety of skills. These factors contributed to increased self-confidence and efficacy and, in combination with an expanded knowledge of the world of work, enabled the participants to consolidate their sense of identity and feel more confident about their career and study decisions.

A gap year can offer a valuable period of self-reflection and integration, where individuals gain life experience and a variety of skills, experiment with autonomy, experience personal growth, consolidate their sense of identity and provide exposure to numerous occupational and social contexts. The combination of these factors ultimately exerts an influence on their sense of self and career identity. Despite presenting adjustment challenges, the gap year offers formative experiences that have a major consolidating impact on the individual's social identity, burgeoning life themes and her/his subsequent career development.

Even though the gap year might not be equally beneficial in terms of individuals' career engagement, it does add certain value as a career development intervention. The gap year affords individuals with the opportunity to mature, acquire skills and gain self- and occupational knowledge all of which, ultimately, prepares them to manage the transition into tertiary education and the world of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The potent advantages associated with the gap year could be used by career counsellors and guidance practitioners to develop individuals' career preparedness and expose them to the variety of career options available in the modern global work sector.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of the current study only reflect the gap year experiences of students who enrolled

at a tertiary institution upon completion of their gap year. As a result, these experiences exclude individuals who entered the world of work directly after their gap year, individuals who did not enrol at a tertiary institution directly after their gap year, individuals who are unemployed after their gap year, or individuals who are still discovering their respective career path. Considering that the majority of the sample was white, middle-class, and English-speaking, this study is further limited by the sample's lack of diversity. Further, the purposive, non-random sampling used in this study does not allow for generalisation of the findings. The reported experiences of the participants do, however, provide useful insights about how the gap year can contribute to career maturity for the undecided student. The findings can be helpful to guide further research on the impact of the gap year on the subsequent career development of South African students.

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