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The Gap Year: An Overview of the Issues

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Abstract

Taking a gap year between high school and post-secondary education appears to be an increasingly popular phenomenon in popular culture, among well-known individuals and for Canadian youth. This report reviews the literature on issues related to gap years, with a focus on the Canadian context and the experiences of youth in several similar countries. Overall, taking a gap year appears to be a beneficial choice for many Canadian youth, although the impacts of a gap year are often dependent on the youth's socioeconomic background and the activities they participate in during their gap year. Based on these findings in the literature, a number of options for public policy are proposed to improve knowledge of gap years, increase the take-up of gap years, and make gap years a more accessible option for disadvantaged segments of the population.

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Executive Summary

Taking a gap year between high school and post-secondary education appears to be an increasingly popular phenomenon in popular culture, among well-known individuals (for example, Malia Obama) and for Canadian youth. Long an established route to post-secondary education for youth in the United Kingdom and Australia, more Canadian high school graduates appear to be interested in not only delaying entry to post-secondary education, but in spending that time volunteering, traveling, and in other activities aimed to foster their personal growth and development. As these youth may well benefit in the short and long run from such an experience, it is worth exploring the desirability and feasibility of more Canadian youth taking a gap year.

This report reviews the literature on issues related to gap years, with a focus on the Canadian context and the experiences of youth in several similar countries. A gap year is defined as a 15-month period between high school graduation and entry into post-secondary education where a ‘gapper’ participates in non-work activities with the prospect for personal growth such as travel, volunteering, or part-time study. A ‘delay’ is more generally defined as any time spent out of school between high school and post-secondary education, irrespective of the student’s motivation for delaying and the activities they participated in during this period. Although there are some limitations with the literature reviewed in this report—for example, an absence of official statistics specifically on Canadian youth taking gap years, a plethora of different gap year definitions, and most data being from 10 to 15 years ago—in most cases, the implications of taking a gap year can be drawn from the experiences of students who more generally delay entry to post-secondary education in general.

This report provides an overview of the incidence of gap years and delays in Canada, the United States, Britain and Australia. Research has found that, in the early 2000s, 24 per cent of Canadian post-secondary education students delayed their enrollment for only one year following high school graduation. The incidence of delaying entry to post-secondary education for longer than four months was found to be 43 per cent across Canada. This figure was highest in Ontario (59 per cent) and lowest in Quebec (21 per cent), likely due to the unique structure of its educational system and its low tuition. While there has not been any research on Canadian students’ motivation for delaying post-secondary education, a survey of British youth reported that the main reasons given for delaying were to work domestically (43 per cent of delayers), to travel (35 per cent of delayers), and to work abroad (14 per cent of delayers).

The literature on the factors that influence a youth’s decision to take a gap year was also reviewed. It was found that youth are more motivated to take a gap year if they desire personal growth and independence, lack academic motivation and are uncertain about their future education plans. Youth were also more likely to take a gap year if they came from a high socioeconomic status family, worked fewer than 20 hours per week in their final year of high school, and if post-secondary institutions allowed deferral of acceptances.

The report also examines the costs and benefits to delaying post-secondary education discussed in the literature. As compared to students who commence their post-secondary education directly after high school, gappers are more academically motivated when they enter post-secondary education, have a better post-secondary academic performance, and enjoy higher employment rates and a wage premium after their post-secondary education. Taking a gap year particularly benefits students who are accepted into a post-secondary institution but are uncertain about their educational and career goals and lack motivation in their studies. However, delaying post-secondary education appears to be less beneficial for youth who do not expect to attain a post-secondary education and spend the delay participating in unstructured activities.

Based on these findings in the literature, a number of options for public policy are proposed to improve knowledge of gap years, increase the take-up of gap years, and make gap years a more accessible option for disadvantaged segments of the population. Actions could be considered to ensure that activities provided by gap year organizations are safe and beneficial for youth, for example setting up an industry-led agency to share best practices and possibly accredit gap year providers. There are several possibilities for the government to increase the take-up of gap years among Canadian youth. The government could incentivize youth (particularly those from lower-income backgrounds) to take a gap year by creating bursaries for youth taking gap years, allowing youth to spend part of their family's Registered Education Savings Plan on structured gap year activities, and supporting structured gap year programs. The government could also increase public awareness and perceptions of gap years through statements from political leaders.

The final section of this report identifies lacunae in our knowledge of gap years and proposes an agenda for further research on gap years. Research on gap years requires better data collection, for example by adding questions on gap years to the National Graduates Survey and the Youth in Transition Survey. A standardized definition of gap year should be agreed upon to allow for better international comparisons of gap year taking. Research should be conducted on whether gap year benefits can be gained from summers or semesters abroad.

Overall, taking a gap year appears to be a beneficial choice for many Canadian youth, although the impacts of a gap year are often dependent on the youth's socioeconomic background and the activities they participate in during their gap year. While further research is necessary to confirm that gap years are a beneficial option for certain Canadian high school graduates, the evidence currently available points in this direction.

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I. Introduction and Background¹

The tradition of taking a period of time, generally one year, between the completion of secondary studies and entry into post-secondary education is known colloquially as a gap year. Already a well-established tradition in the United Kingdom and Australia, taking a gap year appears to be an increasingly popular option for high school graduates in Canada and the United States. As youth may well benefit both in the short and long run from such an experience, it is worth exploring the desirability and feasibility of more Canadian young people taking a gap year.

This report reviews the literature on issues related to gap years, with a focus on the Canadian context. However, there are a number of limitations with the literature on gap years in Canada, in addition to the absence of official statistics specifically on the number of Canadian youth who take a gap year. First, each study typically defines a gap year differently. Therefore while studies utilizing large-sample survey data have examined the experiences of youth who delay entry into post-secondary education—including several in Canada—these studies differ in whether they exclude youth based on their reasons for delaying, the activities they participated in during their time off, and, in some cases, the length of the delay. Second, some students are ex-ante delayers (upon graduating high school they are committed to entering post-secondary education after a delay) and some students are only ex-post delayers (upon graduating high school they do not plan on later entering post-secondary education, but later change their intentions), but in most studies the data are not differentiated between each group. Finally, much of the literature on gap years is based on data from 10 to 15 years ago, and therefore may be less relevant now given changes in the educational system, labour market, and other factors. Despite these limitations, we believe that in most cases the implications of taking a gap year can be drawn from the experience of students who delay entry to post-secondary education in general.

A strict definition for a ‘gap year’ is established in section two of this report. While youth may delay entry into post-secondary education in general for any period of time and for a variety of reasons, in this report the term ‘gap year’ refers specifically to a 15-month period between high school graduation and entry into post-secondary education during which the ‘gapper’ participates for at least part of the period in non-work activities with the prospect for personal growth such as structured or unstructured travel, volunteering, community service, or part-time study. Students who take a gap year according to the definition used in this report are therefore a subset of the larger group of students that delay their post-secondary education. The various activities that youth can participate in during their gap year are also explored in section two, as well as the incidence of participation in each activity where statistics are available.

¹ This report was written by Jacob Greenspon under the supervision of Andrew Sharpe. We would like to thank Claudette Russell, Executive Director of the Youth Secretariat in the Privy Council Office, for the invitation to prepare this report and PCO officials for comments on an earlier version of the report.

In section three the incidence of gap years and delays in general are reported for Canada (nationally and in each province) as well as for several countries, where data are available. Section four examines several of the common reasons cited in the literature for taking a gap year such as students' personal growth and development, their academic performance in high school and motivation, their uncertainty regarding their future education plans, the socioeconomic status of their family, and more. An important factor is post-secondary institutions' policies regarding deferral of acceptances, as well as structured gap year programs offered by some universities.

The fifth section reviews several costs and benefits to taking a gap year (or, where data are not available, delaying post-secondary education in general) discussed in the literature and assesses the evidence for each. The research examined in this report shows that, as compared to students who commence their post-secondary education directly after high school, gappers are more academically motivated when they enter post-secondary education, have a better post-secondary academic performance, and enjoy higher employment rates and a wage premium when they complete their post-secondary education

Based on these findings, policy options are outlined in section six. There are a number of potential public policies for increasing the take-up of gap years among Canadian youth, ranging from financial assistance such as bursaries for youth taking gap years and support for structured gap year programs, to raising public awareness and perceptions of gap years through statements from political leaders. On the other hand, delays between high school and post-secondary education that are unlikely to benefit youth should be discouraged. Section seven identifies several lacunae in our knowledge of gap years and proposes an agenda for further research on the gap year issue. In particular, more specific data on the incidence of gap years in Canada and the outcomes for gappers would build a better understanding of trends in gap year taking among Canadian youth. The final section concludes and assesses the evidence on gap years overall.

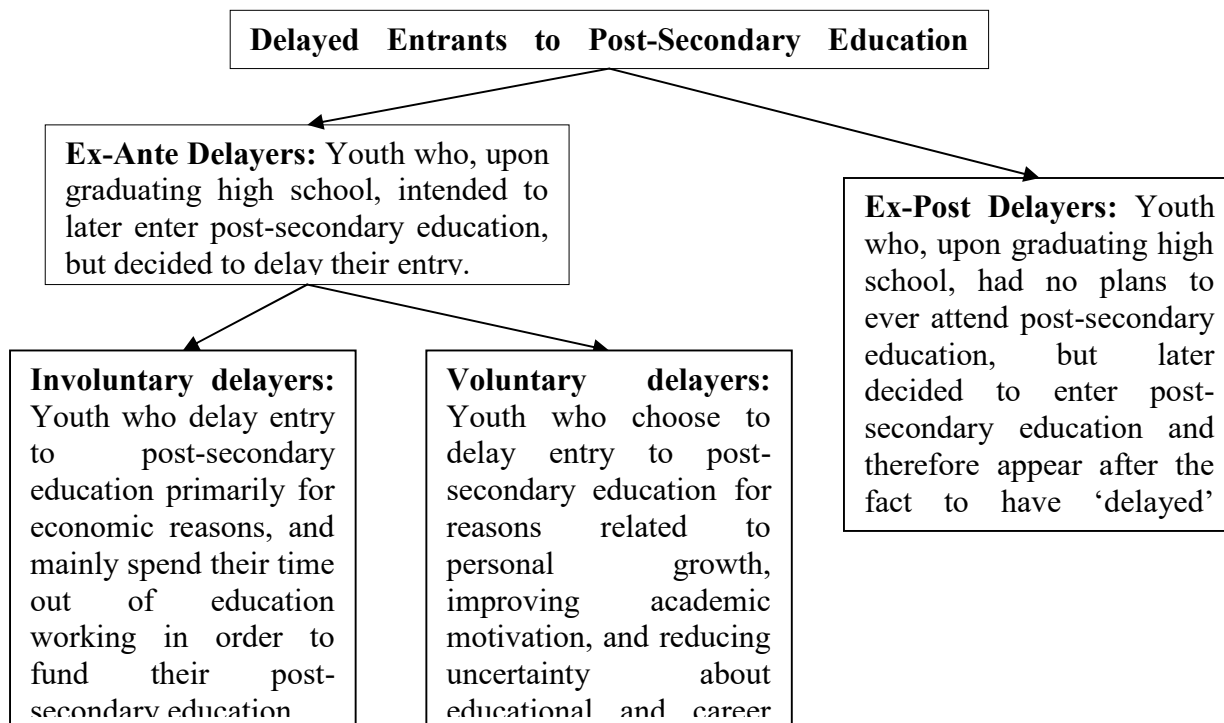
Taking a gap year appears to be a beneficial choice for Canadian youth, although the impact of a delay is often dependent on the youth's socioeconomic background and the activities they participate in during their time away from education. While further research is necessary to robustly confirm the conclusion that gap years are a beneficial option for Canadian high school graduates and should be promoted by the government, the evidence currently available points in this direction.

II. What Is a Gap Year?

A. Defining the Gap Year

Several definitions for the term 'gap year' are used in the literature on youth who delay entry to post-secondary education. Indeed, there is little consistency in the use of the term 'gap year' between studies. For some, any period of time spent away from formal, full-time studies after high school graduation is considered a gap year (Tomkowicz and Bushnik, 2003; Ferrer and Menendez, 2014; Hango, 2008; Lovestrand, 2015). Others limit the period of time that can be considered a gap year to one or two years (Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012; Birch and Miller, 2007). Still others require that for youth's time off to be considered a gap year, it must be "for

Figure 1: Typology of Delayers



the purpose of personal growth and learning” (Hoe, 2014) or “with an expectation of some personal enrichment or development...Otherwise, it is merely a break or vacation” (Lovestrand, 2015:5). In their report on gap years by Australian youth, Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) outline three types of gap years (with significant overlap): academic gap years, used to refine study and career goals through working, informal learning or volunteering; travelling or leisure gap years, for example ‘backpacking’; and economic gap years, where students work to save money for their future education.

Figure 1 presents a typology on delayers, making two crucial distinctions. The first is between ex-ante delayers and ex-post delayers, and the second, under ex-ante delayers between involuntary and voluntary delayers.

This report proposes a definition for future policy research on gap year issues. Youth are considered to have taken a ‘gap year’ only if their time off from full-time education meets the following conditions:

- **Length of delay:** the delay between high school graduation and entry into post-secondary education is 15 months long—the period between graduation from high

school in June and entry into post-secondary education in September of the following year.²

- **Ex-ante view of delay as only a break from education:** upon high school graduation youth are committed to entering post-secondary education (university, community college, vocational school, or an apprenticeship) following their gap year, and have either already been accepted to a post-secondary institution and deferred entry, or are planning to apply for admission in the next application cycle.
- **Activities during delay period:** during their gap year, youth participate for at least part of the period in non-work activities with the prospect for personal growth such as structured or unstructured travel, volunteering, community service, or part-time formal or informal study.

Under this definition, the youth may have planned far in advance to take a gap year, or it may have been a last-minute decision. For example, if the youth was not accepted into their preferred post-secondary education program, they may decide to take a gap year to study part-time in order to improve their marks for re-application.³

The above definition of a gap year is narrower than the definition used in much of the literature. Many studies consider all youth who have delayed entry to post-secondary education to have taken a gap year, regardless of their reasons for delaying, the activities they participated in during their time off, and, in some cases, the length of the delay.⁴ Students who take a gap year according to the definition used in this report are a subset of this larger group of students that delay their post-secondary education, and are estimated by Hoe (2014) to make up only one third of all students that delayed.⁵

Studies that look generally at all youth who delay their entry into post-secondary education from high school provide insights into numerous issues surrounding gap years. However, the wider scope of these studies can lead to conclusions that are inconsistent with the literature on youth who take gap years specifically and, given anecdotal evidence, are unlikely to apply to gappers. For example, the finding by Hango and de Broucker (2007) that 48 per cent of

²Youth may instead take a ‘gap interval’ of more or less than 15 months, for example if they finish high school in June and start their post-secondary education in the following January at the start of the winter semester, or take off two years between graduating from high school and entering post-secondary education.

³Crawford and Cribb (2012) estimated from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) that 28 per cent of students who took a gap year had not planned to take a break before their post-secondary education when asked about it before completing their secondary education.

⁴For example, studies by Hango (2008 and 2011a) and Ferrer and Menendez (2014) on Canadian youth delaying entry to post-secondary education after high school, and by Bozick and De Luca (2005) on U.S. youth.

⁵Hoe (2014) based her estimates on the 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, which allowed delayers to indicate up to six reasons for delaying: work, military, marriage or family responsibilities, health problems, travel, or other reasons. Hoe then defined ‘gap year reasons’ as students within these groups that delayed for one year and for one of the following combinations of reasons: travel only, travel and other, travel and work, travel and work and other, work only, and work and other (2014:26).

Aboriginal youth took a gap year compared to 39 per cent of non-Aboriginal youth is highly unlikely considering the conventional view of a gap year.⁶

Given the extremely limited number of studies on youth who take a gap year according to the definition used in this report, data are cited from studies that use a broader definition of gap year. In order to maintain a distinction between the two types of data, hereafter the terms ‘delay’ and ‘delayers’ are used to describe all students who experience a delay between high school and post-secondary education, regardless of their motivation or the activities they participate in during their time off, while the terms ‘gap year’ and ‘gappers’ are used to refer to delays in education that meet the descriptive conditions outlined above. This often results in research findings being reported using different terms than used by the authors of the research. Although some students are ex-ante delayers (upon graduating from high school they are committed to entering post-secondary education after a delay) and some students are only ex-post delayers (upon graduating high school they do not plan on later entering post-secondary education, but change their intentions), the data do not differentiate between each group.

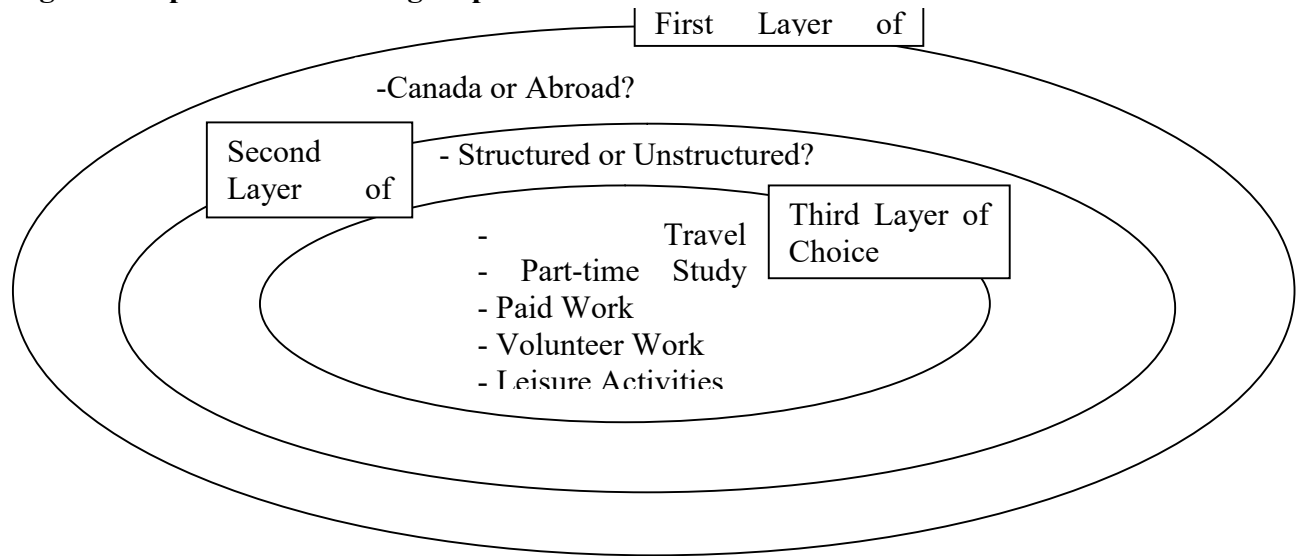
B. Diverse Experiences in Delaying between High School and Post-Secondary Education

A significant literature has emerged on the causes and effects of high school graduates delaying entry to post-secondary education. However, much of this literature does not recognize the variety of reasons youth choose to delay entry to post-secondary education and the activities they participate in during their time out of school. Youth may delay their entry to post-secondary education so they can work to save money for tuition or gain life experience and independence (Lovestrand, 2015). They may also take time off to study part-time during a gap period, either to improve their application profile for post-secondary education or to prepare academically for a program they have already been admitted to (Curtis et al., 2012). This learning may be formal, through classes they enroll in, or informal, through individual self-learning.

Figure 2, adapted from Jones (2004) for the Canadian context, outlines how youth decide on their gap year activities. They first choose whether they will be located in Canada during their gap year or travel abroad (although they may spend part of the year in both locations), and then choose whether they will participate in a structured gap year program (described below) or create their own plan of activities. Finally, the gappers choose which activities they will participate in during the gap year. Although not all youth make those choices in that specific order, Figure 2 provides a conceptual framework of the options available to each gapper when planning their gap year.

⁶Although Hango and de Broucker (2007) use the term ‘gap year’ in their study of Canadian youth, according to the definitions used in this report the more appropriate term would be ‘delay’ since they include all youth who took time off between high school and post-secondary education.

Figure 2: Options in Choosing Gap Year Activities



Source: Adapted for Canadian context from Jones (2004).

During their time off youth may participate in a variety of activities that fit their needs and desires including paid work, volunteer, travel, part-time study, or a combination of several activities. Crawford and Cribb (2012) analyzed the survey responses of British youth who reported what activities they participated in during their time off between high school and post-secondary education. The main activity respondents reported participating in during their delay are listed in Table 1. The most popular reason given by youth for taking a gap year was to work in Britain, which reflects the more inclusive definition of gap year used in Crawford and Cribb (2012) as compared to this report. However, a plurality of youth reported that they intended to go abroad, either mainly to travel (35 per cent) or to work abroad (14 per cent).

The respondents were also asked to list all of the activities they participated in. Most of the youth surveyed worked for at least part of the gap year period: 84 per cent worked in Britain and 16 per cent worked abroad.⁷ 57 per cent of the respondents also reported traveling abroad for at least part of the gap year and 17 per cent volunteered abroad, while 20 per cent of respondents remained in Britain to travel (Crawford and Cribb, 2012).

The role of international travel in gap years has received much attention in the literature.⁸ Moreover, in several countries, including Canada, a ‘gap year industry’ has sprung up that, in exchange for substantial fees, provide youth with structured programming focused around travel and volunteer experiences abroad (Lovestrand, 2015). These programs are designed to “combine the hedonism of tourism with the altruism of development work” (Simpson, 2004:681). The activities are set up, managed and facilitated by a for-profit or non-profit organization and

⁷Survey respondents could select both options because they were asked to list all activities they participated in during their gap year (Crawford and Cribb, 2012:28).

⁸For example, see Lyons et al. (2012) and Simpson (2004).

Table 1: Main Intended Activity of Delayers in Britain (as reported by survey)

Main Intended Activity	Share of Delayers (Per Cent)
Working in Britain	43
Travelling	35
Working Abroad	14
Training/Studying	4
Other	3
Total	100
Source: Crawford and Cribb (2012)	
Note: Sum of activities may not equal 100 due to rounding.	

Box 1: The American Gap Association

The American Gap Association (<http://www.americangap.org>) is a non-profit accreditation and standards-setting organization co-founded by several gap year program providers in 2012 to improve “information-sharing, development of best-practices, and objective evaluation” within the gap year industry. It provides research on the benefits of gap years, serves as an “information and advocacy hub” for university admissions departments and guidance counselors, and works to increase the awareness of gap years within the American educational system. It also provides a listing of all organizations offering structured gap year programs that meets its standards of accreditation and organizes an annual conference on issues relevant to the gap year industry and educators (American Gap Association, 2017).

typically provide some level of training and instruction before the participant is placed in an organized program abroad (Jones, 2004). However, there does not appear to be any body in Canada that accredits or oversees the structured gap year programs available to Canadian youth. In the United States such a quality assurance role is performed by the American Gap Association (see Box 1 for details). The Year Out Group is a similar organization operating in the United Kingdom (Jones, 2004).⁹

III. Incidence of Gap Years and Delays

A. The Delay in Canada and the Provinces

There are no official statistics specifically on the number of Canadian youth who take a gap year, although anecdotal evidence suggests it is an increasingly popular option for high school graduates.¹⁰ Data on the number of students who delay entry to post-secondary education (for unspecified activities that include gap years and others) indicates that many students elect to take this route to post-secondary education, though it is unclear in the data what share of these

⁹<http://www.yearoutgroup.org>.

¹⁰For example, as reported in Counter (2013), Lindzon (2015), and White (2017).

youth knew ex-ante upon graduating high school that they would later enter post-secondary education. The main source of these data is the Statistics Canada Youth in Transitions Survey (YITS), which collected information from a cohort of youth aged 18 in 2000 and followed-up every two years thereafter, ending in 2008. Hango (2011a) reports that according to YITS, 49 per cent of Canadian high school graduates started post-secondary education 3 months after graduation, while 73 per cent had started post-secondary education within 15 months of graduation and 81 per cent had started post-secondary education within 27 months of graduation. This implies that 24 per cent of Canadian youth delayed by 12 months and 8 per cent of youth delayed entry to post-secondary education by 2 years (27 months), while 19 per cent had not entered post-secondary education by 2008.

Ferrer and Menendez (2014) use data from another survey, the Canadian National Survey of Graduates (NSG), conducted in 1997 with a follow-up survey in 2000.¹¹ The NSG data show that of the Canadian post-secondary students graduating in 1995 who had entered their post-secondary institution from high school, 17.3 per cent of university graduates delayed their entry by a year or more while 50.6 per cent of graduates from non-university institutions (trade, vocational, and college students) delayed entry after high school (Ferrer and Menendez, 2014). These delayers were either working full time, unemployed, or out of the labour force before entering post-secondary education. Hango (2008) also found that in terms of delayers' eventual post-secondary education destinations, 4.4 per cent of delayers enrolled in diploma, certificate, and apprenticeship programs, 29.9 per cent in college and CÉGEP programs, and 57.6 per cent in university undergraduate programs.

Hango (2008) analyzed YITS responses to assess differences among the provinces in the incidence of delaying entry to post-secondary education by more than four months following graduation from high school. These results are presented in Table 2. Ontario saw the highest incidence of its youth delay entry into post-secondary education, at 58.9 per cent, while Alberta had the next highest incidence at 50.0 per cent. Quebec had the lowest share of its post-secondary students delay their entry into post-secondary education, with only 20.9 per cent of students delaying. Hango (2008) explains this is due in part to the unique structure of Quebec's educational system: prior to entering university, youth in Quebec are required to attend a CÉGEP following completion of Grade 11 at age 17, and the vast majority go on to CÉGEP directly, without delay. Moreover, the low cost of CÉGEP means that compared to other provinces, Quebec students are less likely to need to take time working before their post-secondary education in order to pay their post-secondary tuition (Tomkowicz and Bushnik, 2003).

¹¹The most recent iteration of the National Survey of Graduates was conducted for the class of 2009/2010 in 2013.

Table 2: Incidence of Delaying Entry to Post-Secondary Education by More than 4 months by Province for Youth Aged 22 to 24 in 2004

Province of Last High School	Incidence of Delaying Entry (by Post-Secondary Education Participants)
Newfoundland and Labrador	41.7
Prince Edward Island	31.0
Nova Scotia	26.5
New Brunswick	33.1
Quebec	20.9
Ontario	58.9
Manitoba	43.2
Saskatchewan	41.1
Alberta	50.0
British Columbia	41.5
Canada	43.2

Source: Calculations from Hango (2008)

B. The Delay: An International Perspective

Generally, the majority of young people continue to take the traditional path of entering post-secondary education directly after graduating from high school. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that taking a gap year (as narrowly defined in this report) is becoming an increasingly popular option for university-bound high school graduates in Canada. While the growing popularity of gap years is clear across the several countries examined in this report, it is more difficult to compare the levels of popularity in each country due to methodological differences in studies of gap year participation across countries. In addition, different definitions and survey methodologies sometimes lead to conflicting statistics on gap year participation within a single country. There has not yet been any research that compares the incidence of gap years or delays across the countries examined in this section using the same methodology for each country. Nonetheless, careful review of the existing literature allows for some inferences to be drawn about the relative popularity of taking a gap year across countries and through time.

According to Lumsden and Stanwick (2012), the concept of the gap year originated with wealthy British families in the 1960s that could afford to have their children put off higher education for a year after the completion of high school. Some trace this back to the late 17th to early 19th century ‘Grand Tour’ traditionally taken by young British noblemen to see the world before starting their career (O’Shea, 2011; Lovstrand, 2015).

Although taking a gap year was still considered relatively rare in the 1980s, its popularity increased in the 1990s and early 2000s, with one sign being a significant growth in the number of commercial organizations that provide opportunities for British youth during their gap year (Jones, 2004). The available data on gap year incidence among British youth suggests there has been an upward trend in recent years. Birch and Miller (2007) report that in 1997, 6.2 per cent of British students deferred entry into university and that this share increased to 7.9 per cent

of students in 2002. Crawford and Cribb (2012) found that of the British youth surveyed that had already applied to university or were likely to apply and were first eligible to enter in 2008, 12.5 per cent intended to take a gap year. Hoe (2014) reports that studies on British gappers show that gap year participants are predominantly white, disability-free, and females from middle-class backgrounds who have attended private schools.

Delaying post-secondary education for gap year reasons appears to be well-established in Australia and an increasingly popular option for high school graduates. In 1974, 4 per cent of Australian students were estimated to have deferred their university education, while by 2004 this rate had increased to 11 per cent (Birch and Miller, 2007). From their analysis of the series of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) found that in the 2009-2010 academic year, 24 per cent of Australian students took a delay between high school and further education (22 per cent took a one year gap), compared to 25 per cent in 2006-2007 (20 per cent took a one year gap), 16 per cent in 2002-2003 (12 per cent took a one year gap), and 10 per cent in 1999-2000 (7 per cent took a one year gap). They note that the increase in the incidence of delayed post-secondary education over that ten-year period could be explained by a growing economy that provided plentiful employment opportunities for high school graduates as well as an increase in the financial costs of studying between 2000 and 2010 (Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012). Some also claim that Australian youth from high-income backgrounds take a gap year mainly to qualify for the Youth Allowance program that they would otherwise not qualify for when considered a dependent of their parents (Curtis et al., 2012), although others have cast doubt on this claim (Polesel and Klatt, 2014).

The similarity between the Canadian and American higher education systems in structure and curricula allows for greater comparability of their gappers and delayers than most other countries. Bull (2006) argues that taking a gap year “was virtually unknown in the United States” in 1980 but that there has been a greater awareness and acceptance of this option in the decades since. According to Horn et al. (2005), one-third of the students entering post-secondary education in 1995 had delayed their entrance by a year or more after graduating high school, although this share includes far more students than only those who took a gap year. Wells and Lynch (2012) reported that 11 per cent of high school seniors surveyed in 2004 planned to delay their post-secondary education for at least a year. Hoe (2014) found from the 2004/2009 Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS) that 8.2 per cent of the students surveyed delayed their entry into post-secondary education by one year while 83.0 per cent entered post-secondary education directly after high school (the remaining 8.8 per cent delayed for a period between two and eight years). Only 5.0 per cent of the sample, or 61.0 per cent of all students that delayed one year, took time off for gap year reasons, although the definition of gap year used in Hoe (2014) includes students who delay their post-secondary education in order to work.¹²

C. Incidence of Delay by Characteristics of Youth

i. Incidence of Delay by Gender

¹²The definition and methodology of ‘gap year’ reasons for delaying used in Hoe (2014) is explained in footnote 5.

Research has found that delayers tend to be male, although the difference is not huge. Hango and de Broucker (2007) reported that of the Canadian students surveyed in 2003, 37.4 per cent of female students had delayed compared to 41.8 per cent of male students. They also found, using a regression estimate of the odds of each group taking a certain 'education pathway' due to certain (independent variable) background factors, that females are about 20 per cent less likely than males to follow a delayer path than a non-delayer path (Hango and de Broucker, 2007). In addition, Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that in the United States males delay their entry to post-secondary education by about two months more on average than females.

The evidence on gender differences among gappers specifically (rather than delayers in general) is less clear. Hoe (2014) found that of the American students surveyed that delayed entry to post-secondary education for gap year reasons (which, according to Hoe (2014), include work), 52 per cent were male and 48 per cent were female. Moreover, while males represented 44 per cent of the sample, among delayers, they represented 56 per cent of delayers who gave travel as one of their reasons for delaying their post-secondary education. However, Jones (2004) reports that in the United Kingdom, women typically outnumber men among gap year takers. Lumsden and Stanwick (2012), who also included youth that took gap years in order to work, found that 25 per cent of female Australian students took a gap year, compared to 22 per cent of male students. It is possible that there are cultural differences between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia that may lead to more gappers being female in the United Kingdom and Australia but more gappers being male in the United States, but further evidence is necessary before such a conclusion is reached.

ii. Incidence of Delay by Urban/Rural Community

There is no available data on the incidence of gap years among students from urban versus rural areas. However, there has been some research on how students' tendency to delay their entry into post-secondary education in general is affected by their community type. There are conflicting findings regarding whether youth from rural areas are more likely to delay their education than youth from urban areas. In Canada, the median length of time between high school graduation and entry into post-secondary education was 8 months for youth from rural communities compared to 3 months for youth from urban population centres (Hango, 2011a). On the other hand, Hango (2008) found that among respondents to the Youths in Transition Survey that identified as having urban residence, 31.1 per cent were delayers while 25.9 per cent of respondents with non-urban residence were delayers. This latter finding could be reconciled with the result in Hango (2011a) if fewer youth from rural areas delay compared to youth from urban areas, but rural delayers tend to delay for a much longer period of time than urban delayers. For youth in the United States, Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that in youth from rural areas typically delay enrolling in post-secondary education by 9.1 months on average, compared to 7.7 months for students from urban areas and 7.8 months for students from suburban areas.

Differences in delays between students from urban and rural communities has received more attention in the Australian literature on delayers. Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) found that in the 2009-2010 academic year, 53 per cent of students from rural areas delayed post-secondary entry by 12 to 24 months, compared to only 20 per cent of students from metropolitan areas. A more limited study of students at the University of Western Australia, showed that students from

rural areas outside the capital city Perth were three times more likely to take a 1-year break between high school and university than those from Perth (Birch and Miller, 2007). Finally, Polesel and Klatt (2014), found that youth in the state of Victoria from “non-metropolitan” (rural) areas were almost twice as likely to defer entry to university than students from metropolitan areas, typically citing financial stresses and travel-related factors.

iii. Incidence of Gap Year Delay by Race

There is only data available by race for delayers in the United States. Hoe (2014) found that of US students who took a gap year (including those who only worked), 67 per cent were white (compared to 64 per cent of the total sample of students), 8 per cent were black/African American (12 per cent of total sample), 18 per cent were Hispanic/Latino (14 per cent of total sample), and 4 per cent were Asian (5 per cent of total sample). Moreover, an analysis of the predictor variables for taking a gap year showed that African American students had lower odds of taking a gap year than white students. On the other hand Bozick and DeLuca (2005) found that, on average, white students enrolled in post-secondary education eight months after completing high school, compared to an average delay of 10 months for Hispanic students and 11 months for black students, although this finding was for delayed enrollment in general rather than gap years specifically.

IV. Factors Influencing Youth’s Decisions to Take a Gap Year

There are a number of factors that play a role in youth’s decision on whether to take a gap year before their post-secondary education. This section reviews several common factors that are cited in the literature and assesses the evidence for how each factor influences youth in their decision on whether to take a gap year. For some factors there are only data available on how they influence decisions to delay entry into post-secondary education in general, rather than on decisions to take a gap year specifically. The factors examined include personal growth motivations, the student’s academic performance in high school, their academic motivation and aspiration, the student’s uncertainty regarding their future education plans, their parents’ attitudes regarding taking a gap year, the socioeconomic status of the student’s family and the financial constraints they face, whether the student was employed in high school, and finally post-secondary institutions’ policies regarding deferred acceptance as well as structured gap year programs offered by some universities.

Crawford and Cribb (2012) report on the main ex-ante motivation of British youth who intended to, and ended up, delaying their entry into post-secondary education. These results are listed in Table 3. The most popular reason given by British youth was to become independent, although it is ambiguous as to whether this refers to financial, emotional, or other types of independence. Nearly a quarter of delayers reported being motivated mainly by a desire to have a

Table 3: Main Reason for Intending to Delay Entry into Post-Secondary Education in Britain (as reported by survey)

Main Reason for Delay	Percentage of Delayers (Per Cent)
Become Independent	40
Break from Study	24
Earn Money	17
Get Work Experience	10
Other	9
Total	100
Source: Crawford and Cribb (2012)	

Table 4: Six Most Common Reasons for Delaying Entry to Post-Secondary Education in the United States (as reported by survey)

Stated Delay Reasons	Percentage of Total Entrants to Post-Secondary Education (Per Cent)	Percentage of Delayers (Per Cent)
Work	5.7	33.6
Work and Travel	2.3	13.2
Work and Health	1.9	11.4
Work and Married/Family	0.9	5.4
Work, Married/Family, and Health	0.8	4.7
Work, Married/Family, and Travel	0.7	4.4
Other	0.5	3.0
Total	13	76
Source: Reproduced from Hoe (2014: 35)		
Note: 'Other' refers to a stated reason that was not among the five reasons for delaying recorded in the survey (work, military, marriage or family responsibilities, health problems, and travel). The 'missing' 24 per cent of responses not included are reasons for delaying that were reported by fewer than 3.0 per cent of survey respondents.		

break from education, while 17 per cent reported their primary desire as to earn money during their delay.

Hoe (2014) reports the results of a survey of American students who delayed their entry into post-secondary education. The students could indicate delaying for any combination of reasons, including work, military, marriage or family responsibilities, health problems, travel, or other reasons. The most common reported reasons for delay are presented in Table 4. Among the entire sample of students, 33.6 per cent of all delayers reported working as the only reason they delayed entry into post-secondary education, though this is enlarged to include 86.1 per cent of all delayers when respondents listed work alongside other reasons. Nearly 30 per cent of respondents indicated that travel was at least part of their motivation for delaying entry. Although few respondents reported travelling as the only reason for their delay—likely because it is expensive and typically unattractive to travel for an entire year—13.2 per cent of students reported delaying for a combination of work and travel.

A. Personal Growth

Youth who take a gap year often explain that they sought a channel for personal growth (O’Shea, 2011), especially if they spend their gap year volunteering (Lyons et al., 2012). The “new perspectives” (Lovestrand, 2015) gained through a gap year may differ depending on the activities youth participate in during their period—for example, an international perspective versus a better understanding of the experiences of more disadvantaged members of their home community. In any case, however, these youths feel that it is not possible to gain these perspectives through the traditional direct entry to post-secondary education. Their personal growth motivations may be altruistic (for example, volunteering in a developing country) or non-altruistic.

Youth may also want to develop greater independence from being on their own, out of a “sheltered life” on an “academic treadmill” (O’Shea, 2011:568). Hulstrand (2010:50) adds that by taking a gap year youth can “gain greater confidence, a clearer direction, and invaluable life experience.” Jones (2004:37) summarizes gappers’ most commonly stated desires as to “gain a broader horizon on life, experience different people, cultures and places, gain personal life skills,[and] to make a contribution to society.” Hango (2011a) explains that young adults will become better citizens from having had experiences outside of the secondary and post-secondary education systems that allowed them to learn about themselves and the world around them. This “self-discovery” will benefit the youth who take gap years as well as society in general (Hango, 2011a:10).

B. Academic Performance in High School

The literature appears conclusive that academic performance in high school is negatively correlated with delaying entry to post-secondary education in general and suggests a similar impact on youth’s likelihood to take a gap year specifically. Hango (2011a) examined the academic performance of Canadian youth who later delayed their entry to post-secondary education after high school (but did not necessarily take a gap year). There was a 3 month median delay between high school and post-secondary education for youth with a high (80-100 per cent) GPA in their final year of high school, an 8 month median delay for youth with medium-high (70-79 per cent) GPA, 19 month median delay for youth with medium (60-69 per cent) GPA, and 59 month median delay for youth with low (50-59 per cent) GPA. The negative effect of marks on the median length of delay before entering post-secondary education remained very robust in the presence of all other variables (Hango, 2011a).

Tomkiewicz and Bushnik (2003) found similar results and pointed out that having low marks would have negatively affected the student’s chance of getting into their desired program or institution, therefore causing a delay in enrolment if they had no other program in mind or wanted to improve their marks and reapply to their preferred program. Finally, both Rowan-Kenyon (2007) and Bozick and DeLuca (2005) had similar findings for delayers in the United States.

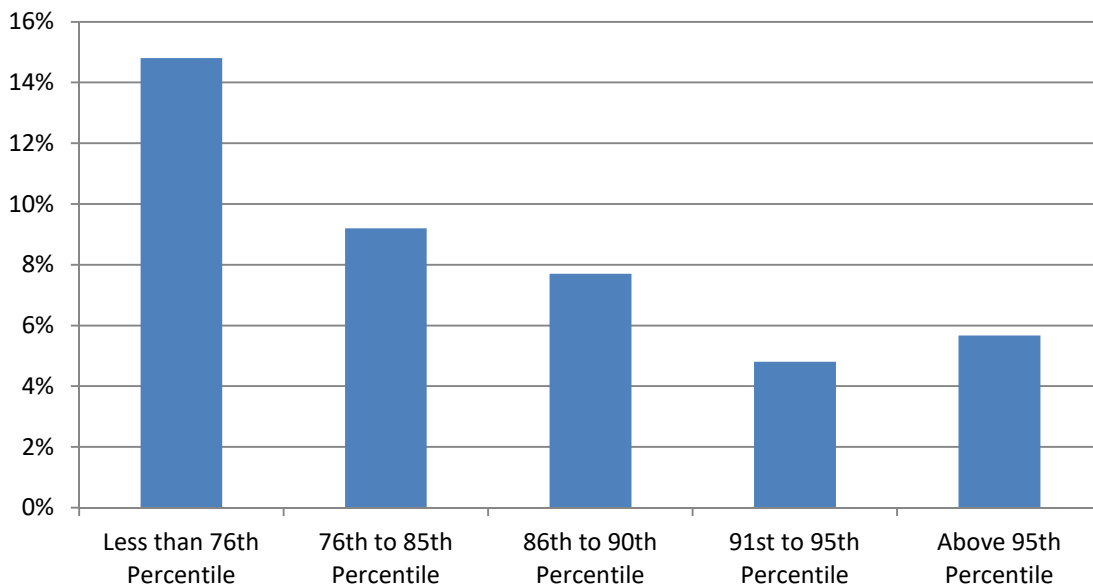
Hoe (2014) found that 43 per cent of American post-secondary students who delayed for gap year reasons (including work) had a high school Grade Point Average (GPA) of less than

3.0, 36 per cent had a GPA between 3.0 and 3.4, and 21 per cent had a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0. Comparatively, among students who did not delay, 28 per cent had a GPA of less than 3.0, a similar share had a GPA between 3.0 and 3.4 and 36 per cent had a GPA between 3.5 and 4.0.

Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) found similar results for Australian delayers. In their study of students at University of Western Australia, Birch and Miller (2007) also found a negative correlation between the students’ propensity to have delayed their entry to post-secondary education by one year and their high school academic performance as measured by their Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER), their relative performance by percentile on high school leaving exams. These results are presented in Figure 3. Of students with a TER below 76, 14.8 per cent delayed, compared to 9.2 per cent of students with a TER between 76 and 85, 7.7 per cent of students with TER between 86 and 90, 4.8 per cent of students with TER between 91 and 95, and only 5.7 per cent of students with a TER above 95.

In contrast to the above results, however, Crawford and Cribb (2012) found that in the United Kingdom students who report they are taking a gap year are more likely to attend better universities, with 44 per cent of self-identified gap year takers attending “high status” universities compared with 37 per cent of those who go straight to university.¹³ One potential

Figure 3: Per Cent of University of Western Australia Students that Delayed Entry by One Year following High School Graduation, by Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) Percentile



Source: Birch and Miller (2007)

explanation could be that these gappers improved their high school grades through part-time study during the gap year and then reapplied to university.

¹³Crawford and Cribb (2012) defined a “high status institution” as any university with a research quality (as measured by the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise Score) at least equal to the lowest scoring member of the 20 Russell Group universities as of 2006.

Aside from academic performance, studies in several countries have also shown that students who are less academically motivated are more likely to delay their entry into post-secondary education, although the relationship between academic motivation and students who take gap years specifically is less clear. In Canada, Australia, and the United States, survey evidence shows that students with more positive attitudes towards school and a higher level of academic aspiration and motivation are less likely to delay entering post-secondary education (Curtis et al., 2012; Hango, 2011a; Martin, 2010; Niu and Tienda, 2013).¹⁴ Lovstrand (2015:9) explains that many students feel ‘burned out’ by their final year of high school, or feel unprepared for the “rigors” of post-secondary education.

In cases where students take a gap year because they lack the motivation to continue on to post-secondary education, there is some evidence from Australia that taking a gap year addresses these “motivational deficits” and improves academic outcomes in the students’ post-secondary education (Martin, 2010: 573). The impact of a gap year on academic motivation and performance is discussed in full in the next section of this report.

C. Uncertainty Regarding Future Education

Some students may take a gap year in order to give themselves time to think out their educational and career plan before taking a costly decision to enroll in a program that may not fit their goals. O’Shea (2011) notes some British students reported delaying entry into post-secondary education in order to clarify their future life plans, for example in terms of their program of study, career goals, and where to live. These motivations are echoed by Australian students surveyed by Lumsden and Stanwick (2012), who found that delaying allowed them time to explore their options in the face of uncertainty. However, for some students this appears not to be the intended course of action. Wells and Lynch (2012) report that some US students needed the delay because they had failed to gain acceptance into their preferred program or educational institution and did not have an alternative plan ready. Crawford and Cribb (2012) report that 28 per cent of British self-identified gappers had not planned to take a break when asked about it before completing their secondary education. Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) found an even higher share, 59.5 per cent, of Australian delayers did not intend on delaying entry to post-secondary education after their final year of high school.¹⁵ Whether taking a gap year was planned in advance or students were forced to rethink their plans later, taking the time to think seems to be an important motivation for many gappers who are unsure what their career goals are or what educational plan best fits them.

¹⁴Martin (2010) measured the academic motivation of Australian students through the Motivation and Engagement Scale for High Schoolers (MES-HS), which assesses motivation with self-rated scores on “three adaptive cognitive dimensions (self-efficacy, valuing, mastery orientation), three adaptive behavioral dimensions (persistence, planning, task management), three impeding or maladaptive cognitive dimensions (anxiety, failure avoidance, uncertain control), and two maladaptive behavioral dimensions (self-handicapping, disengagement)” (Martin, 2010: 565).

¹⁵Of the 17-year-olds first interviewed in 2006 about their post-high school plans, 9.7 per cent said they intended to take a gap year. However, 24 per cent of students took a gap year after Year 12, suggesting considerably more ‘unintentional’ gap year taking (Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012).

D. Parental Attitudes regarding Delays

Hango and de Broucker (2007) found a strong relationship in Canada between parental expectations of their children's education and youth not delaying the start of post-secondary education, especially if their educational pathway culminated in a university degree (Hango and de Broucker, 2007). Canadian youth are less likely to delay their entry into post-secondary education if their parents have high expectation that they will go on to higher education (Hango, 2011a). One measure of expectations is the frequency with which youth and parent talked about future education and career options. Hango (2011a) found that the median length of delay between high school graduation and entry into post-secondary education was 14 and 15 months for youth who never talked about future education options with their parents or only discussed these options less than once per year (respectively), but only 4-3 months delay if youth and parent had those discussions more frequently—a few times a year, few times a month, or few times a week. The median delay was higher, 9 months, for youth who talked daily about future education options with their parents, but this likely reflects situations where parents feel their children needed extra persuasion about the merits of post-secondary education.

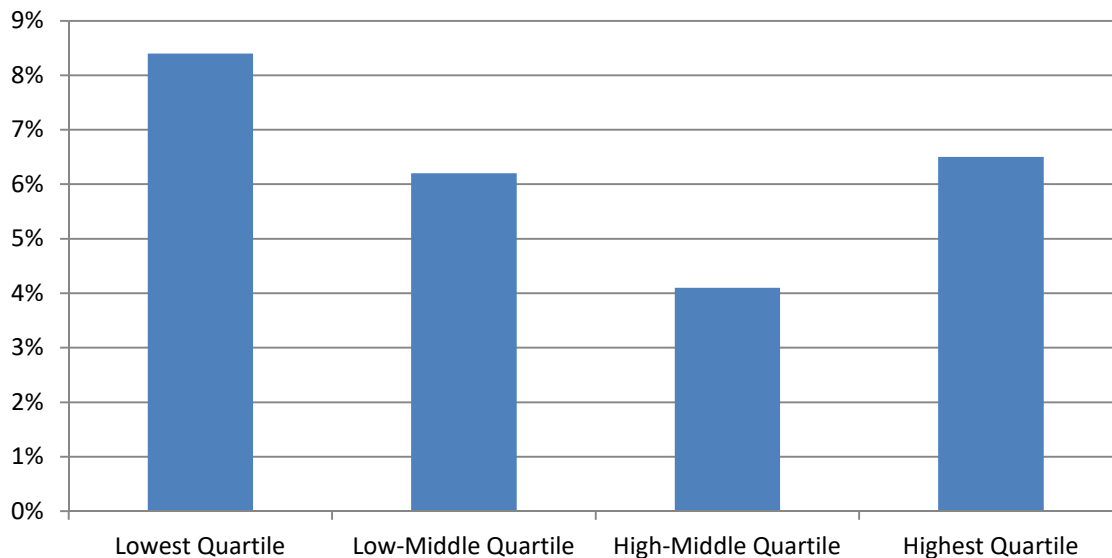
There is no research in Canada on the relationship between parental expectations for their children's education and their tendency to take a gap year. In Australia and the United Kingdom research has found that parents who expect their children to pursue higher education are more supportive of their children taking a gap year, perhaps because it is a more established tradition in these countries (Crawford and Cribb, 2012; Curtis et al., 2012; Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012). This may also reflect that, at least in countries other than Canada, parents who have less faith regarding their children's willingness to go on to future education are less likely to allow their children to take a gap year or provide them with the financial support that makes it possible to take a gap year.

E. Family Socioeconomic Status and Financial Constraints

Anecdotal evidence suggests that gappers tend to be from families with high socioeconomic status. Crawford and Cribb (2012) suggest that in the United Kingdom those who plan on taking a gap year tend to come from “middle- to upperclass families with highly educated parents,” while Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) claim that compared to British gappers, in Australia gappers are more evenly distributed across all levels of socioeconomic status.

Research on delayers (as opposed to gappers specifically) provides considerable evidence that a students' socioeconomic status is negatively related to their tendency to delay post-secondary education. In Canada, young adults who complete university degrees from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to delay the start of post-secondary education compared to youth from families of lower socioeconomic status (Hango and de Broucker, 2007). Similarly, Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011) found that of American high school graduates who come from households in the top quintile of the socioeconomic distribution, only about 5 per cent postpone post-secondary enrolment, compared with 31 per cent of those from families from the lowest quintile, which, according to Wells and Lynch (2012), suggests that students from families with a lower socioeconomic status delay enrolling in post-secondary education more by necessity than by choice.

Figure 4: Per Cent of University of Western Australia Students that Delayed Entry to Post-Secondary Education by One Year, by Socioeconomic Status of Family



Source: Birch and Miller (2007)

Interestingly, Birch and Miller (2007) found a non-linear relationship between students' socioeconomic background and their tendency to delay post-secondary education, depicted in Figure 4.¹⁶ According to their survey of University of Western Australia students, 8.4 per cent of students in the lowest quartile delayed post-secondary education, compared to 6.2 per cent of students in the low-middle (second lowest) quartile, 4.1 per cent of students in the high-middle (second highest) quartile, and 6.5 per cent of students in the highest quartile. The 'U-shape' of this curve could be because lower-income students take time off out of necessity, because they need to work and save money for school, while higher-income students take a gap year primarily to travel, volunteer, or for leisure activities. Two, larger sample size, studies of Australian and American students found that higher-income students were less likely to take time off between high school and post-secondary education than low-income students, although both studies used a definition of gap year that included 'economic gappers' who were taking time off to work (Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012; Hoe, 2014).

F. Employment during High School

Research shows that employment during high school was only meaningfully related to Canadian students delaying their post-secondary education when the students worked more than 20 hours per week in their final year of high school (Hango and de Broucker, 2007; Tomkowicz

¹⁶According to Birch and Miller (2007), "Socioeconomic status is measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 'Index of Economic Resources'. This index contains information on the economic resources of families living in particular regions. A high score on the index suggests that the region has a higher proportion of high-income families, a lower proportion of low-income families, a larger number of households living in homes with four or more bedrooms, and higher rent and mortgage payments."

and Bushnik, 2003). Hango (2011a) found that high school graduates who worked more than 20 hours per week in their final year of high school had a 15 month median delay between high school and their entry into post-secondary education, compared to a median delay of 3 or 4 months for every category of students who had worked fewer hours per week. The relationship between students' employment during high school and delaying their post-secondary education is likely based on these students' socioeconomic status. Given the extensive time commitment working 20 hours per week represents to a full-time high school student, it is likely that the student would only be working that much in high school if it was at least in part out of necessity.

G. Post-Secondary Institutions' Deferred Entry Policies

It is increasingly popular for universities to allow their incoming students to defer acceptance, and the take-up of scholarships, for a year (and sometimes longer). For example, Harvard University in particular encourages its students to consider taking a gap year in order to avoid "burnout" from years of intense schooling (Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). Hango (2011a) reports that most Canadian universities now allow for such arrangements. This option is very attractive to youth planning on taking a gap year as it establishes a firm endpoint for their gap year, which is likely to soothe their parents' fears that taking a gap year will result in their child

Box 2: Sample of Gap Year Programs offered by Universities

- **University of Regina UR Gap Year Program:** this program allows newly-admitted students to take a year off after high school before entering the University of Regina and defers the awarding of any University of Regina funded entrance scholarships they have qualified for. The University provides these students with services to help them prepare for their first year of study and beyond, such as career counseling, academic advising, and more. In addition, it is possible for students in the UR Gap Year Program to earn credit towards the UR Guarantee Program during their gap year.
- **Princeton University Bridge Year Program:** this nine-month program provides newly-accepted students with the opportunity to defer their enrollment at Princeton to volunteer in a community in another country, where they also spend time learning the language, living with a local family, and engage in cultural enrichment activities. In the 2016-2017 academic year, the program placed 35 students at locations in Bolivia, Brazil, China, India, and Senegal.
- **University of Canberra Gap Year Plus:** this program allows newly-accepted students to gain university credit for gap year activities prior to their enrollment at Canberra. The student needs to indicate their intention before the gap year and collect evidence of learning during the year, which can then be used as a portfolio the following year. Students are also required to undertake a course in their first year where they discuss and reflect on their gap experience (Lumsden and Stanwick, 2012).

never returning to school after high school graduation. Hango (2011a:31) also argues that youth with deferred acceptance have their future “more clearly defined and, as a result, they may be able to plan their gap period activities somewhat better than high school graduates who have not yet been accepted into a post-secondary education program.”

Moreover, several universities go even further than allowing (or even encouraging) deferred acceptance and provide gap year programs for students who will attend their institutions following their gap year, and may even provide at-need students with funding to enroll in the gap year program. Some universities that offer international volunteering programs to students who accept offers to attend the university but defer entry include the Princeton University Bridge Year Program, Tufts University ‘1+4 Program’, University of Regina ‘UR Gap Year Program’ and University of Canberra ‘Gap Year Plus’ Program (Lovstrand, 2015: 21). These programs are detailed in Box 2.

H. Summary

Based on the preceding discussion, Table 5 provides a summary of the factors influencing youth’s decision to delay post-secondary education.

Table 5: Summary of Factors Influencing Youth’s Decisions to Delay Post-Secondary Education

Factor	Author	Result (for delayers or gappers specifically)
Personal Growth	O’Shea (2011)	Gappers in Britain seek a channel for personal growth that allows them to develop greater independence than is possible when they are enrolled in post-secondary education.
	Hulstrand (2010)	Gappers in the United States can gain confidence, direction, and life experience from their gap year experience.
	Jones (2004)	Gappers in Britain seek to gain a broader horizon of experiences, attain personal life skills, and contribute to society.
	Hango (2011a)	Delayers in Canada can engage in self-discovery and become better citizens from having experiences outside of the post-secondary education system, which benefits society as well.
Academic Performance in High School	Hango (2011a)	On average, Canadian youth with higher marks in high school delayed entry to post-secondary education for a shorter period of time than youth with lower marks in high school.
	Hoe (2014)	U.S. students with lower marks in high school were more likely to delay entry to post-secondary education than high performers.
	Birch and Miller (2007)	Australian students who performed worse during their high school education were generally more likely to delay entry to post-secondary education.

Table 5 (Continued)

Uncertainty Regarding Future Education	O'Shea (2011)	Some British students delayed post-secondary education to clarify their future life plans, such as their program of study, career goals, and choice of where to live.
	Wells and Lynch (2012)	Some US students needed to delay because they failed to gain acceptance into their preferred program or educational institution and did not have an alternative plan ready.
	Crawford and Cribb (2012)	When asked about it before completing their secondary education, 28 per cent of British self-identified gappers had not planned to take a break before their post-secondary education.
	Lumsden and Stanwick (2012)	59.5 per cent, of Australian delayers did not intend on delaying entry to post-secondary education after their final year of high school.
Parental Attitudes	(Hango, 2011a)	Canadian youth are less likely to delay their entry into post-secondary education if their parents have the expectation that their children will go on to higher education.
	Crawford and Cribb (2012)	In the United Kingdom parents who expect their children to pursue higher education are more supportive of their children taking a gap year.
Family Socioeconomic Status and Financial Constraints	Hango and de Broucker (2007)	In Canada, youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who complete university degrees were less likely to delay the start of their post-secondary education than youth from families of lower socioeconomic status.
	Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011)	Only 5 per cent of American high school graduates from households in the top quintile of the socioeconomic distribution delay their post-secondary enrolment, compared with 31 per cent of those from families from the lowest quintile.
	Birch and Miller (2007)	8.4 per cent of Australian students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile delayed post-secondary education, compared to 6.2 per cent of students in the low-middle quartile, and 4.1 per cent of students in the high-middle quartile. However, the trend reversed in the highest quartile, where 6.5 per cent of students delayed.
Employment during High School	Hango (2011a)	Canadian youth who worked over 20 hours per week in their final year of high school on averaged delayed entry to post-secondary education by 15 months, compared to a delay of 3 or 4 months for every category of students who had worked fewer hours per week.
Post-Secondary Institutions' Deferred Entry Policies	Hango (2011a)	Canadian youth who obtain a deferral of their acceptance into a post-secondary institution have their future better defined and therefore may be better able to plan their delay period activities than delayers who do not did not obtain deferred acceptance.

V. Cost and Benefits of Taking a Gap Year

As shown in the previous sections, there are different reasons why youth may take a gap year (as narrowly defined in this report) as well as many different activities that gappers may participate in during this period. Heath (2007) argues that the impact of taking a gap year

therefore depends greatly on the student's background and their unique gap year experience. Generally, international travel and volunteering experiences lead to greater independence and character-building, while working domestically, an increasingly common choice, is a less valued gap year experience (Heath, 2007). Martin et al. (2013) argue that activities focused around personal development, such as volunteering, travelling, or enrolling in part-time study in classes youth find personally interesting (such as language or art classes) have a positive impact on academic outcomes in later post-secondary education. In contrast, spending the gap year working may distract students from educational goals (Heckhausen et al., 2013).

Hoe (2014:vii) describes how students who delay are less likely to enroll in a university (rather than a college or diploma program) and complete a bachelor's degree, while students who delay specifically for a gap year, in order to travel, volunteer, and participate in other personal growth activities, experience "higher academic performance and increased maturity" in their post-secondary education. Crawford and Cribb (2012:36) note how along these lines there are "two distinct groups of gap year takers" (although according to the definitions used in this report, this statement would refer to gappers versus other delayers).

However not all students have all gap year options available to them; indeed, "the most highly rated forms of gap-year experience remain the preserve of those from more affluent backgrounds" (Heath, 2007:98). If students from lower-income background elect to participate in costly gap year activities such as travel and international volunteering, they may be saddled with significant debt when they return to school (Jones, 2004).

This section will review the costs and benefits of delaying education generally—and taking a gap year specifically—that are explored in the literature. The outcomes of taking a gap year will be explored in four main areas: the students' lifetime earnings; personal growth and development; academic performance in post-secondary education; and employment and earnings following graduation from post-secondary education. Many of these areas correspond with reasons for youth to take a gap year, which allows for an assessment of whether the outcomes from taking a gap year justify students' motivation to do so.

A. Lifetime Earnings

Some researchers have found that students who delay their entry into post-secondary education earn less following graduation than students who entered post-secondary education directly following high school. Controlling for other variables, Crawford and Cribb (2012) found that delayers in Britain earned 8.9 per cent less per hour at age 30 than those who had entered post-secondary education directly.¹⁷ This difference grew slightly, to 9.5 per cent, by age 34, and then decreased to a still-considerable 6.5 per cent at age 38. Similarly, Holmund et al. (2008) studied a sample of Swedish adults, some of whom had delayed their post-secondary education, and found that at age 40 those who had delayed for two years earned 40 to 50 per cent less annually than those who entered post-secondary education directly, mainly due to having less work experience after post-secondary education. There is no research on the lifetime earnings of

¹⁷Crawford and Cribb (2012) controlled for a range of variables, including those related to work experience, various indicators of socioeconomic status, academic ability and performance, "risky behaviours" and others. A full list of control variables is included in Crawford and Cribb (2014:59), Appendix A.

gappers specifically compared to students who enter post-secondary education directly, but differences in earnings outcomes more immediately after completing post-secondary education are discussed below.

B. Personal Growth and Development

Many youth cite the opportunity for personal development as a major motivating factor for taking a gap year. Some studies have found that gap years do indeed serve this purpose. For example, a study of South African gappers who reported gains in confidence, independence, self-awareness, and life skills (Coetzee and Bester, 2009). O'Shea (2011) similarly notes that British gappers reported a smoother transition into life at university, for example because they already had experience living away from home or with a roommate. As well, the British students who took a gap year reported working harder in school and having a higher level of intellectual development (O'Shea, 2011). Martin (2010) also found that in Australia participation in a gap year increased the students' "adaptive behaviour."

However, on a cautionary note, a small number of studies call into question the usefulness of international gap year experiences that supposedly lead to personal development and increased maturity. Lyons et al. (2012) find insufficient empirical evidence to prove that volunteer travel experiences create a sense of global citizenship and contribute personal development, while Simpson (2004:690) argues that the "gap year industry" creates false impressions in gappers' minds of both the reasons behind, for example, global inequality, and the importance of gappers' contributions to solving these issues.

C. Academic Performance in Post-Secondary Education

Even before they enter post-secondary education, delaying can benefit youth by giving them time to make a better decision on their program and institution of post-secondary education. Hango (2008) reports that many Canadian delayers claim the break assisted them in their decision to undertake further study. Ferrer and Menendez (2014:205) explain the impact of taking time off in Canada in terms of facilitating better matching between education and jobs by allowing delayers the opportunity to learn about returns on postsecondary education, what they are good at, or which skills the market demands.

One of the main debates in the literature regarding delayed entry to post-secondary education is whether a delay increases the likelihood of the student dropping out of post-secondary education before graduation. The evidence from the literature is mixed. Hango and de Broucker (2007) find that 5.0 per cent of Canadian students surveyed in YITS had left their post-secondary education before graduation after having delayed entry, compared to 4.9 per cent of all YITS respondents that left post-secondary education before graduation, irrespective of having delayed their entry. This shows that delaying entry did not lead to a significantly greater likelihood of dropping out without a degree. In addition, Hoe (2014) found that, controlling for the effect of other factors, for American youth delaying post-secondary education for travel specifically was associated with a 34 per cent higher chance of attaining a bachelor's degree compared to those who did delayed for non-travel reasons.

On the other hand, Wells and Lynch (2012) found that delayers in the United States were less likely to complete a bachelor's degree, and Roska and Velez (2012) reached a similar conclusion for American students even after controlling for academic performance in high school and students' family responsibilities that may lead them to drop out of post-secondary education. Bozick and DeLuca (2005) also found that in the United States those who delay by a year are 64 per cent less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those who enroll immediately after graduating high school, and that the effect was more detrimental for youth in the lowest socioeconomic quartile and youth with low test scores. Attewell et al. (2012) explain the negative influence of delays on degree completion through a loss of 'academic momentum', arguing, based on trends in the number of courses taken per semester, that the speed with which students in the United States progress through the early phase of their university education significantly affects their likelihood of completing their degree. However, these studies did not specify what activities the students were participating in during their time off.

The evidence is much clearer regarding the impact of delaying entry on grades in post-secondary education. Hoe (2014) found that in the United States all delays in general led to higher GPAs, and that both delaying post-secondary education for work as well as delaying for travel each led to a 0.17-point higher GPA in the student's first year, compared to students who did not delay. Over the students' entire post-secondary education, a travel delay led to a 0.20-point higher GPA than if the student had enrolled in post-secondary education directly from high school. Birch and Miller (2007:341) found the effect in Australia of delaying on grades was stronger for students "on the lower-end of the marks distribution," due to increased academic motivation and more certainty about their choice to be enrolled in post-secondary education. Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) explain Australian gappers' better academic performance may be because they are better organized, more mature, more adaptable, and more motivated to study after their time away from school.

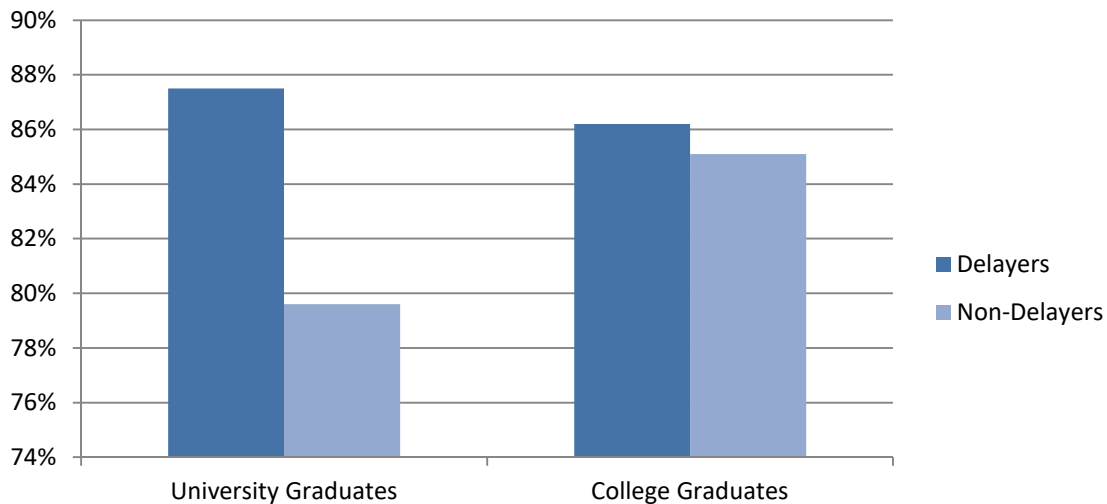
The effect was particularly strong in a study of South African universities where students reported feeling "refreshed and re-energised, ready and even eager to engage in academic activities" (Nieman, 2013:139). In addition, Martin et al. (2013) point to Australian gappers' ability to link the experiences and practical knowledge that they gained on the gap year to their classroom learning, although this effect would be stronger for students in some programs than others (for example, international development compared to engineering).

D. Employment and Earnings following Post-Secondary Education

Another often publicized benefit about gap years is that they provide youth with experience that makes them more attractive candidates on the job market upon graduation from post-secondary education. In some cases, this may be because their gap year experience is directly related to their career after graduating from post-secondary education—for example, if a gapper volunteered in a developing country during their gap year, and then went to work at a development non-governmental organization (NGO) after completing university. Even if their career is unrelated to their gap year activities, a gapper's experience could give them important skills that are valuable in any organization such as team work, communication, and punctuality. In either case, delaying entry to post-secondary education would lead gappers, and potentially all delayers, to have a higher employment rate after graduating from post-secondary education as well as higher average earnings.

There is no evidence regarding the effect of taking a gap year specifically on employment rates after completing post-secondary education. However, it is likely that the positive impact on employment rates of delaying entry to post-secondary education would be similar for those who took a gap year. According to the 2004 Statistics Canada Youth in Transitions Survey of 22-24 year olds in the Canadian labour market, among those who graduated from post-secondary education, delayers experienced higher employment rates than those who proceeded directly to post-secondary education after high school. These results are presented in Figure 5. For university graduates, delayers had an employment rate of 87.5 per cent, compared to 79.6 per cent for graduates that entered university directly from high school (Hango and de Broucker, 2007). The difference for college graduates was similar, though of a lesser magnitude: an 86.2 per cent employment rate for college delayers and 85.1 per cent for non-delayers. Hango and de Broucker (2007) argue this difference in employment rates is mainly due to delayers having more job experience than non-delayers, especially when employment rates are measured only a couple years after graduation, at ages 22 to 24. However, this analysis did not control for time spent out of school and therefore does not account for the potential advantage in previous work experience that delayers have over non-delayers.

Figure 5: Employment Rates of 22-24 Year Olds in the Labour Market in Canada, 2004



Source: Hango and de Broucker (2007)

However, it is important to note that the positive influence of delaying on employment only occurred for those who completed their degree. Delayers who did not finish their postsecondary education had an employment rate lower than non-delayers with the same amount of education, and even lower than those who did not delay and had no postsecondary education

at all (Hango and de Broucker, 2007). This suggests that the lack of commitment signalled by starting, but abandoning a post-secondary education is very poorly received on the labour market.

In comparison to the positive effect of delaying on employment rates, the evidence regarding earnings differences between delayers and non-delayers is mixed. Using data from the National Survey of Graduates (NSG), Ferrer and Menendez (2014) found that in Canada delaying had a positive effect on wages earned in 1997 by youth who had completed their post-secondary education in 1995. In general, university graduates who delayed entry to post-secondary education enjoyed a wage premium of 4.8 per cent compared to non-delayers. The effect was particularly strong for university graduates from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs who delayed, as they enjoyed a 10 per cent wage premium above non-delayers. University graduates who reported that they were working during their delay also benefited in particular, as they enjoyed a wage premium of 6.4 per cent above non-delayer university graduates. Ferrer and Menendez (2014) also tested the relationship between delaying and earnings post-graduation when controlling for the unemployment rate in the year before enrollment in post-secondary education (when the decision to enroll was made), under the assumption that a high unemployment rate represented a lower opportunity cost of enrolling in post-secondary education and thus less of an incentive to delay. In this analysis, Ferrer and Menendez (2014) found a 9.8 per cent wage premium for students who delayed between high school and a BA, and 14.3 per cent for students who delayed between high school and college.

In contrast to the above results, however, Hango (2008) examined more recent data from the 2004 Youth in Transitions Survey of 22-24 year olds in the Canadian labour market and found a negative relationship between delaying entry into post-secondary education and earnings upon graduation. Specifically, he found that the median weekly earnings for non-delayer university graduates was 625 dollars per week, compared to 540 dollars per week for delayers who graduated from university.¹⁸ For college graduates the magnitude was far smaller: the median weekly earnings of non-delayers was 552 dollars per week, compared to 550 dollars for college delayers (Hango, 2008).¹⁹ The different effects of delay on employment rates and on earnings may be explained by delayers having a higher likelihood of finding a job due to their more extensive labour market experience compared to non-delayers, but that delayers have also spent less time in their current job post-completion of post-secondary education and therefore “less time to develop an earnings trajectory.” (Hango, 2008:6)

Delaying entry into post-secondary education generally has a positive effect on Canadian youth’s labour market outcomes, although the evidence is clearer for the effect on employment rates than on earnings. The magnitude of the positive relationship between delaying and employment rates and earnings is also larger for university graduates than community college

¹⁸This study only included respondents who were employed, and reported data on their total weekly earnings from all jobs to account for the fact that 15 per cent of the sample reported earnings from several different jobs. (Hango and de Broucker, 2007)

¹⁹Hango (2008) did not offer any explanation for college graduates (both delayers and non-delayers) earning more than delayers that graduated from university. Given that this analysis did not control for time spent outside education (and therefore work experience) and that college degree programs are typically shorter than university degree programs, it is possible that the college graduates’ earnings exceeded the university graduate delayers’ earnings because, by age 22-24, the former had already spent more time working post-graduation and were therefore ‘further up the earnings chain’ than delayers who had more recently begun working after graduating from university.

graduates. Both Ferrer and Menendez (2014) and Hango (2008) explain the differences in labour market outcomes by pointing to the importance of delayers' previous experience in the labour market, which could make them more attractive candidates as well as better navigators of the labour market job-finding process. Heath (2007) points to the importance of the soft skills delayers attain from their previous experience—which, importantly for gappers, can be developed from non-work experiences such as volunteering abroad and domestic community service. She cites a survey of job recruiters by Community Service Volunteers, a London-based charity, which found that 88 per cent of respondents agreed that graduates who had taken a gap year were more likely than students who entered post-secondary education directly to have the 'soft skills' many employers seek (Heath, 2007).

VI. Public Policies to Incentivize Youth to Take a Gap Year

Earlier sections of this report have shown there are potential benefits to youth who take a gap year (as defined in this report) between high school and post-secondary education. In particular, the research examined in this report shows that, as compared to students who commence their post-secondary education directly after high school, gappers are more academically motivated when they enter post-secondary education, have a better post-secondary academic performance, and enjoy higher employment rates and a wage premium when they complete their post-secondary education.

A group of youth that should be targeted in particular are youth who are able to gain acceptance into post-secondary education but lack academic motivation or direction, and would benefit from the extra-curricular learning experiences afforded by a gap year. However, many of these benefits are only accessible to students who can take a gap year where they travel, volunteer internationally, or engage in other personal growth activities, rather than students who must delay their post-secondary education to work at home. Therefore public policies around gap years should aim to not only incentivize students to take a gap year, but also to make this option more accessible to students who are less able to take a gap year due to their socioeconomic background. On the other hand, delays between high school and post-secondary education that are unlikely to benefit youth, such as those spent in unstructured activities, should be discouraged.

There are several public policies related to youth taking a gap year that the government could consider. Importantly, the government should work in collaboration with stakeholders such as post-secondary institutions, gap year program providers, high schools, and domestic community service organizers in order to maximize engagement with youth and the impact of government policies in this area.

- **Collect better information about delayers:** The government should work to fill the knowledge gap around gap years in Canada, for example by collecting data on this topic through the Statistics Canada National Graduates Survey and by re-instituting the Youth in Transitions Survey. The survey questionnaires could be expanded to ask whether respondents took a gap year, what their reasons for delaying entry into post-secondary education were, and what activities they

participated in during their time between graduating high school and beginning post-secondary education.

- **Better provision of gap year information:** The government should aim to increase youth's access to high quality information about the types of gap year experiences available and the costs and benefits associated with each option. One option is for the government to provide seed funding for an agency, likely non-governmental, to provide information on gap year opportunities to high school students and guidance counsellors, share best practices among gap year program providers, and monitor the quality of services provided by the gap year industry (perhaps even accreditation), similar to the services provided by the (private) American Gap Association in the U.S and the Year Out Group in the U.K.
- **Financial incentives to individuals to take a gap year:** The government could provide youth with means-tested financial incentives to take a gap year and to make the option of taking a structured gap year more accessible to all youth, regardless of their socioeconomic background. These could take the form of loans to youth taking a gap year, high-interest specialized savings accounts that youth could pay into (for example, with their earnings from working during part of their gap year) in order to save money for an unpaid gap year experience, or allowing youth with proof of deferred post-secondary education acceptance to use part of their family's Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) toward a structured gap year experience.
- **Financial incentives to institutions to incentivize gap years:** Rather than the government providing financial incentives directly to individuals to take a gap year and make the option of taking a gap year more accessible to all youth, the government could deliver financial incentives through post-secondary institutions. One option would be to incentivize post-secondary institutions to offer already-admitted students structured gap year programs such as those discussed in Box 3. Alternatively, the Canadian Council on Learning (2008:5) suggested post-secondary institutions could offer incoming students bursaries, to be partially disbursed prior to and during the gap year with the remainder of the bursary disbursed upon enrolment in first-year classes. Offering these bursaries to gap year students would afford lower-income students the opportunity to take a gap year while simultaneously providing an incentive for them to return to post-secondary education after. The government could also encourage post-secondary institutions to offer course credit to students who enroll in accredited gap year programs, and play a role to match post-secondary institutions with members of the gap year industry.²⁰
- **Support for guidance counsellors on gap year issues:** Guidance counsellors located in high schools help students plan their education and career paths after high school. The government could take steps to better educate high school

²⁰For example, in the past Capilano University, Cégep Marie-Victorin, and George Brown College have awarded credits to students who had previously completed the Katimavik program.

teachers and guidance counsellors on the benefits of taking a gap year and the opportunities available to students. One option would be for high schools to have one guidance counsellor specialized in assisting youth who are interested in taking a gap year.

- **Highlighting successful gap year experiences:** The government could popularize the gap year experiences of various Canadian youth through its various advertising channels. By highlighting these youth's gap year experiences and how taking a gap year benefited them later on in life, youth could be incentivized to take a gap year themselves.
- **Moral suasion by political leaders to take a gap year:** The government could have well-known figures affiliated with the government to speak to youth on the benefits of taking a gap year. For example, Hoe (2014:19) reports that the former United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has publicly promoted taking a gap year, arguing that, "taking a gap year is a great opportunity for young people to broaden their horizons, making them more mature and responsible citizens. Our society can only benefit from travel which promotes character, confidence, decision-making skills." Moreover, Lyons et al. (2012) claim that the public perception of gap year activities in the United Kingdom grew more positive after Prince William and Prince Harry both took a gap year to perform volunteer work in developing countries. Malia Obama has also been recognized recently for choosing to take a gap year before enrolling at Harvard University for her undergraduate degree.
- **Financial support for structured gap year programs:** The government could both organize new structured gap year programs for Canadian youth and give financial support on a needs basis to existing programs that meet certain quality and non-profit criteria. For example, the government could create a Canadian version of the popular AmeriCorps program, which pays American youth a modest stipend to volunteer in an American community (Lovestrand, 2015). The government could also consider providing financial support to programs such as Katimavik that relied on funding from the federal government in the past.²¹

VII. Lacuna in Knowledge and Agenda for Further Research

While there has been past research on the incidence, motivating factors, and costs and benefits of youth delaying entry to post-secondary education generally, important gaps remain in our knowledge related to gap years, especially in the Canadian context. These deficiencies in our knowledge base require further research. Issues and questions needing more study are highlighted below.

²¹Katimavik is a program founded in 1977 to "develop youth and foster civic engagement through community service" across Canada. It has experienced several periods of budget difficulties and subsequent service reductions (most recently since 2012), and is currently awaiting funding after a commitment in the Federal government 2016 budget for a youth service initiative (Katimavik, 2017)

- The definition of ‘gap year’ should be standardized in the literature on the topic, in order to ensure consistency and comparability between different research studies.
- What is the distribution of the types of gap year activity among gappers in Canada?
- Where do gappers obtain their information about gap year opportunities?
- What is the impact of taking a gap year on labour market outcomes beyond the horizon of 2 to 3 years after completing post-secondary education?
- How do gap year experiences of students at more prestigious, ‘high status’ post-secondary institutions compare to the gap year experiences of students at other institutions?
- What gap year issues emerge uniquely in Quebec? Do youth in Quebec tend to take a gap year before or after CÉGEP, and what are the implications of each pathway?
- Can the benefits of taking a gap year be replicated by working and going abroad during summers, for exchange semesters, and for international co-op semesters while avoiding potential costs of taking a gap year that come with delaying the start of work following completion of post-secondary education?
- Are the activities that youth participate in during their delay between high school graduation and entering post-secondary education related to the type of post-secondary institution they eventually enroll at?
- Ferrer and Menendez (2014) base their analysis of delayers on an earlier version of the Statistics Canada and Human Resources Development Canada National Graduates Survey (NGS) that studied youth who completed post-secondary education in 1995. A more recent version of the National Graduates Survey was released in 2013 on the graduating class of 2009-2010, so an updated analysis along the lines of Ferrer and Menendez (2014) could be possible using the NGS 2013 microdata.
- The Statistics Canada Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) should be continued, as the last cycle of YITS concluded in 2008-2009.
- What is the relationship between quantitative measures of engagement in school (such as truancy, or involvement in school-organized extracurricular activities) and incidence of taking a gap year?

- What are the personal characteristics of students who take gap years? For example, do gappers have a greater tendency to be leaders, outgoing, or risk takers?

VIII. Conclusion

This report has provided an overview of issues related to youth delaying entry to post-secondary education, and youth taking gap years specifically. The literature on delayers and gappers in Canada was reviewed, as well as for youth in the United States, Britain, Australia, and other countries. It was found that youth are more motivated to take a gap year if they desire personal growth and independence, lack academic motivation and are uncertain about their future education plans. Youth were also more likely to take a gap year if they came from a high socioeconomic status family, worked fewer than 20 hours per week in their final year of high school, and post-secondary institutions were flexible in their policies regarding deferral of acceptances.

The report also examined the costs and benefits to taking a gap year (or, where data were not available, delaying post-secondary education in general) discussed in the literature. As compared to students who commence their post-secondary education directly after high school, gappers are more academically motivated when they enter post-secondary education, have a better post-secondary academic performance, and enjoy higher employment rates. Taking a gap year appears to particularly benefit students who are able to gain acceptance into post-secondary education but are uncertain about their educational and career goals and lack motivation in their studies.

Based on these findings, several policy options surrounding gap years were proposed. First, the government should improve data collection in order to improve our knowledge of trends around gap year taking among Canadian youth. In addition, the government has several options for increasing the take-up of gap years among Canadian youth, which range from financial commitments such as bursaries for youth taking gap years and support for structured gap year programs, to increasing public awareness and perceptions of gap years through statements from political leaders. Many of these policies require close collaboration with stakeholders such as post-secondary institutions, gap year program providers, high schools, and domestic community service organizers. The final section of the report identified several lacunae in our knowledge of gap years and proposed an agenda for further research on gap years.

Overall, taking a gap year appears to be a beneficial choice for Canadian youth, although the impacts of a gap year are often dependent on the youth's socioeconomic background and the activities they participate in during their gap year. While further research is necessary to robustly confirm the conclusion that gap years are a beneficial option for certain Canadian high school graduates and should be promoted by the government, the evidence currently available points in this direction.

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