

Understanding Graduate Careers: Research, Policy and Practice in Context

Careers and Transitions Section

Graduate Gap Years: Narratives of Postponement in Graduate Employment Transitions in England

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Introduction

For UK higher education students, the 'gap year' or 'year out' is historically conceptualised as an amassing of wider life experience, often overseas, during a twelve-month period between the completion of A-level studies and the first year of a university degree. However, in a recent comparative study, which saw interviews conducted in both 2014 and 2015 with final year undergraduate students (*n*74) from different social backgrounds, across two English universities (one Russell Group university and one Post-1992 university), the term 'gap year' was being re-appropriated to capture something different. The term was being used to describe a period following graduation in which graduands planned to take low-paid work or 'ordinary' jobs, take stock of their financial situation, and attempt to save money and/or repay urgent debt. A high proportion of students in the 2015 stage of the study (16/37) spoke of taking a graduate gap year, compared with 9/37 in 2014. It may be that the increasing costs of debt-based forms of higher education payment coinciding with growing precarious employment has contributed to this situation. By borrowing the term gap year to describe a new and different phenomenon, some of the student interviewees may be legitimising the predicament in which they find themselves. This chapter explores the experiences of students who spoke of taking a graduate gap year. It examines the different roles of a graduate gap year and discusses wider implications for unequal graduate outcomes.

The archetypal gap year and gap year taker

The term 'gap year' is largely conceived as a pre-university experience in the literature (Birch and Miller, 2007; Stehlik, 2010). It is useful to begin by briefly exploring definitions of traditional gap years and gap year takers. The Jones (2003) review of Gap Year Provision, for the Department for Education and Skills, described a gap year as a particular period of time, usually 12 consecutive months, when students take a year out between finishing college and starting university.

Traditional gap year takers have been found to come from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and better performing schools (Birch and Miller, 2007; Crawford and Cribb, 2012). These students have usually deliberately planned to take a gap year and are also more likely to have applied and accepted a place at university before their gap year begins. Indeed, a profitable industry has grown up around the traditional notion of the gap year. It is important to note, however, that Crawford and Cribb's (2012) analysis revealed another type of gap year taker. These are students that did not intend to take a year out. They often have either not applied for or not achieved the grades to be offered a place at university. Their gap year usually comprises low wage employment or returning to fulltime education to retake examinations. These gap year takers are usually from lower socio-economic backgrounds and are less likely to go straight onto university after their year out.

Additionally, Holmlund et al. (2008) identified four types of pre-university gap year, which can be mapped to the two main types of gap year taker in Crawford and Cribb's study:

1. Those where individuals develop specific skills.
2. Those where individuals are waiting for better educational opportunities (such as needing to retake qualifications to achieve passes or get higher grades or avoiding going through the university clearing process)
3. Those where individuals learn about their broader preferences and/or abilities
4. Those where individuals take an extended break or holiday

The findings in the literature suggest that the traditional pre-university gap year is not a homogeneous experience for young people and is likely to be a classed experience (Nieman, 2010; Stehlik, 2010; O'Shea, 2011; Crawford and Cribb, 2012). Before considering how this might relate to the phenomenon of a graduate gap year, the chapter now reflects upon transitions to adulthood and graduate transitions more generally.

Troubling transitions

As Arundel and Ronald (2015: 2-3) point out, transitions to adulthood in general represent:

‘... a key period for individual development but also contribute to processes of social stratification. Growing evidence has pointed to increased complexity, postponement and individualisation in transition dynamics... Transition into adulthood represents a key stage in the life-course where decisions and events can have long-lasting effects for individual development.’

They explain that pathways to adulthood have diversified with increasingly non-linear pathways through education and employment, which is characterised by growing employment instability, often leading to ‘boomerang’ transitions for young adults (Arundel and Lennartz, 2015). Holdsworth (2015: 1) notes that as a response to this context of uncertain futures related to precarious and casualised employment or unemployment:

‘... young people are increasingly encouraged to invest in practices of distinction that enable them to stand out from the crowd in the pursuit of employability. These practices include the acquisition of experiences, such as work experience, internships, volunteering, travel and membership of organisations, which are assumed to give young people an edge over their peers in a crowded and increasingly globalised youth labour market.’

She is concerned that the practice of gaining experience is an attempt by young people to protect themselves against a changeable graduate labour market but that ultimately the ‘distinctions that matter and where new cleavages of domination will be formed... in an era of austerity is between those who can master unpredictability and be creative and those who cannot’ (p4).

Howie and Campbell (2016: 906) suggest that nowadays young people in general are expected to ‘become rational, autonomous, choice making, risk aware, prudential, responsible and enterprising’ in response to neoliberal hardships. However, as Abrahams (2016) reminds us, writing specifically about inequality in graduate employment, there is not an equal chance of securing graduate employment. Graduates from non-traditional higher education backgrounds are less likely to study at the more elite universities and this may impact on these individuals’ future employability. Indeed she points out that mass expansion in the UK higher education sector may have led to an increasingly diversified student body, but going to university alone is not the key to equality.

Bradley and Waller (2018) found that initial transition phases for graduates into adulthood, the labour market and a career, revealed classed and gendered differences in the pace and direction of graduate trajectories. Some of their participants deferred starting graduate employment by travelling. This was seen as a way to recover from the pressures of academic achievement. The authors observed some graduates wanting to spend time as a 'free spirit' before adulthood ties them down. They conclude by commenting that their graduate participants did not seem too daunted as they moved towards adult independence, although it may be significant that their participants started university in 2010 under the lower university fees regime in England and therefore would have graduated with less student debt. This chapter seeks to extend their findings by presenting the views of students graduating in 2014 *and* 2015, with the latter leaving university with higher levels of student debt and with a noticeably more apprehensive and less hopeful outlook.

Research methods

There is currently little in the literature that explores the emergence of the concept of a graduate gap year in England and the role that the phenomenon plays in constructing graduate transitions, particularly in a climate of higher university fees and higher levels of student debt. This chapter starts to address this under-researched area by drawing on a qualitative study (Vigurs et al., 2016) that comprised interviews about graduate transitions with final year undergraduate students (*n*74) in two universities in central England (46 studied at a Russell Group university and 28 studied at a Post-1992 university). Half of the students graduated in 2014 (lower fees, approx. £3000 per year) and the other half graduated in 2015 (higher fees, approx. £9000 per year). The students interviewed in 2014 (*n*37) were selected by socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. The 2014 sample was matched in 2015 to ensure that another 37 final year students were selected from the same university, socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. In order to ensure anonymity pseudonyms have been allocated.

Table 1 shows that the sample of students was additionally classified using widening participation categories (WP status/Non-WP status). It is important to note that students did not necessarily self-identify as having WP status (this was not directly asked), but rather they met certain indicators - such as low parental income, being first in their family to attend HE, coming from a low HE participation area, etc. – which meant that they had access to university bursaries and larger maintenance grants. This information is significant as

access to different levels of capital (financial, cultural, social) is likely to influence graduate decision-making (Vigurs et al., 2018).

Table 1: Number of students in the sample (n74) planning a graduate gap year		
Students planning a graduate gap year by institution & widening participation (WP) status?	Students graduating in 2014	Students graduating in 2015
Post-1992 University, WP status	1 / 4	5 / 5
Post-1992 University, Non-WP	3 / 10	4 / 9
Russell Group University, WP status	3 / 14	5 / 14
Russell Group University, Non-WP status	2 / 9	2 / 9
Total	9 / 37 (24%)	16 / 37 (43%)

A significant themes that emerged was the phenomenon of taking a graduate 'year out' or 'gap year' (see Table 1). In 2014, 9 out of a sample of 37 (24%) reported an intention to take a graduate gap year, whereas in 2015, 16 (43%) out of a matched sample were planning to take a graduate gap year. The chapter will now explore reasons identified for taking a graduate gap year and how these differed between the graduates of 2014 (lower fees) and the graduates of 2015 (higher fees).

Typology of graduate gap years

Four types of graduate gap year emerged from the data analysis of the 25 interview transcripts where students communicated their intention to take a year out immediately after graduating:

1. A year out to build up work experience
2. A year out to work out next steps
3. A year out to take a break
4. A year out to get 'ordinary work' to earn money

Interestingly, only one of these categories was experienced by graduates of both 2014 and 2015 (taking a year out to build up work experience). Taking a graduate gap year to work out next steps was only experienced by those graduating in 2014, and the final two categories were only experienced by those graduating in 2015 (to take a break, and to get an ordinary job to save money). Table 2 below demonstrates the types of graduate gap year taken by different students.

Table 2: Type of graduate gap year by participant					
Type of graduate gap year	Year of graduation	Type of HEI	Socio-economic background	Graduate gap year takers	
A year out to build up experiences	2014	Russell Group	Non-WP	Peter	
		Post-1992	Non-WP	David Olly	
	2015	Russell Group	Non-WP	Annabel	
			WP	Francesca Vazir	
		Post-1992	WP	Annie	
	A year out to work out next steps	2014	Russell Group	Non-WP	Nia
WP				Munnas Abdul Lydia	
Post-1992			Non-WP	Gemma	
			WP	Ellie	
2015		Russell Group	Non-WP	Olivia	
A year out to take a break	2015	Russell Group	Non-WP	Shaila	
			WP		
	2015	Russell Group	WP	Max Helen	
				Post-1992	WP
		Non-WP	Jamie Adelle Mark Dan		

A year out to build up work experience

In 2014, three male students without WP status (RG: Peter; Post-1992: David, Olly) described the purpose of their ‘year out’ to be about taking up opportunities that would build valuable professional work experience in the same discipline as their degree. They felt this would make them more attractive to the graduate labour market in their field:

“I’ve actually got an [advertising] internship in London so I’m going straight down to do that ... I’m lucky because my parents are able to support me.” (David, Post-1992, Non-WP, BA)

All three acknowledged that familial financial support would need to be drawn upon to cover the costs of a year out to build professional experience often in a voluntary capacity.

In 2015, only one student without WP status (RG: Annabel) felt she needed a year out to build employability experience in relation to a chosen career, “I feel there’s got to be ... more stages before I can get to any job that I’d actually want to do” (Annabel, RG, Non-WP, BMus). However, three students from WP backgrounds (Post-1992: Annie; RG: Francesca, Vazir) also reported an intention to take a graduate gap year to build up experience. Annie and Francesca both planned to combine travel with building up work experience in a broader sense through temporary jobs:

‘I haven’t had a year out yet so I’m thinking of doing work experience this summer to try to build the CV up and then I want to travel a bit as well but not extreme like some people; just around Europe just to see a few countries before I get too old and get stuck in a job.’ (Annie, Post-1992, WP, BA)

Vazir was clear about what career he wanted to enter, but felt he was currently lacking experience in that particular field, which was preventing him from getting the job he wants when he graduates:

“I want to start working within the [Finance] sector. I’ve applied to many graduate schemes but I’m now settling on [temping] agencies after I graduate, just to get experience, because I was faltering [on the graduate scheme applications] through experience mainly, rather than grades, so a year of experience could help me.” (Vazir, RG, WP, BA)

A key distinction in this category is between those who take a graduate gap year because they do not feel they have developed the skills for graduate employment and those who take a year out to complete an internship. One is reactive and one is proactive. Perhaps surprisingly, those taking up an internship all referred to it as a year out, although less surprisingly they were all from more advantaged backgrounds.

A year out to work out next steps

Only those in the sample who graduated in 2014 experienced this category of graduate gap year. Two male and four female students reported the reason for taking a year out was to create thinking space to help them work out their next steps in relation to work, adulthood and independence. These students were

unsure what they should do with their future. Two were planning to gain this thinking space by travelling. Lydia (RG, WP, BA) had saved money whilst being at university and felt she did not need to 'rush into a job' and Gemma (Post-1992, Non-WP, BA) said she would 'probably travel because I've got nothing else to do', which would be funded by her mother. The other four students were planning to create thinking space by either turning their current part-time job into full-time hours or taking on low paid work. Munnas (RG, WP, BA), Abdul (RG, WP, BSc) and Nia (RG, Non-WP, BSc) described already having part-time 'good', 'proper' jobs in retail, which they would be taking on in a full-time capacity after university, whilst they work out what to do next. It transpired that Munnas and Abdul had been focusing solely on their studies to try to achieve as good a degree classification as possible rather than planning their future. Though both were aware that graduate transitions were unlikely to be smooth. Munnas said "I think it is going to be hard because when you're applying for a job there's probably thousands of others so it's trying to stand out." Nia claimed she was indecisive. Ellie (Post-1992, WP, BA) was unsure about how to get a job in her field of choice (disability sport), she suspected it might involve needing to study a postgraduate course and therefore needed 'time out' to look into this.

A year out to take a break

Only two female students in the sample experienced this category. Both graduated in 2015 and studied at the Russell Group University. Olivia was from a non-WP background and was educated at an independent school. She was planning to take a postgraduate course but first wanted a 'year off' to be able to unwind from the strains of studying:

"I'm thinking about doing a masters but I want to take a year off to decide... I'm just going to... relax basically and pursue hobbies and things like that, just take some time to do things that I haven't had time to do for the last few years... [I don't want] to take a job that I don't enjoy or just to pay the bills. I don't want to get sucked into something that I don't like." (Olivia, RG, Non-WP, BA)

Shaila was from a widening participation background and also desired to discontinue academic study. However, she was clear that this would not be a temporary break. She did not enjoy studying at university and was not sure what her future would now hold. For Shaila, her planned year out in America sounded more like a means of distraction and escape:

"I don't know exactly what I want to do after I graduate... I don't want to carry on studying. I'm done with uni now, I'm definitely finished. I don't like studying, I don't want to do research or anything... hopefully I'm moving to America [for a year], that's the plan." (Shaila, RG, WP, BA)

A year out to get 'ordinary work' to earn money

This category of gap year was only reported by those who graduated in 2015. Taking a graduate gap year in a low paid job aligned with one of three specific goals. The first goal was taking 'ordinary work' in order to save money to fund postgraduate study in the future. All three of these students were from WP backgrounds (Post-1992: Claudia, Joanne; RG: Max).

Max had already been offered a place on a master's programme at the RG University, but he was waiting to see if he had won a bursary to fund the costs of postgraduate study. If this did not happen, his next option was to defer the place for one year and to find paid work to build up savings. For Max, building up financial reserves was crucial, but doing this via 'ordinary work' would be a last resort as a result of the financial support potentially provided by his University:

"If it turns out that I don't get funding [for postgraduate study] this year, I will take a gap year, and look for work and possibly with the [University] Internship Programme... I think finance is the number one thing in deciding what I'm going to do, it's just whether I can afford it or I can't. It absolutely decides what I'm doing next year." (Max, RG, WP, BA)

Building up savings was also essential for Claudia and Joanne if they were to take up postgraduate study (it is worth noting that the students interviewed were not aware of the imminent introduction of postgraduate loans). However, Claudia was not sure what postgraduate course to apply for:

"The priority is to get a few years just with ordinary work while I decide what postgraduate degree to take. I'm going to have to take one to follow a career path... but only after I manage to build up my savings... I'm already in my overdraft for this semester as a result for having to pay out for a new laptop and it's had a knock-on effect... I'm from a family that doesn't have much to support me financially so I've got to try to find a job as soon as possible and build up finance as soon as possible." (Claudia, Post-1992, WP, BA)

Joanne could have gone to university a year earlier, but had to do an extra year at college to re-take some of her examinations, so she ended up starting university the year that higher fees were introduced. This means that she ended up having two (unintended) years out:

"I need to do a counselling diploma when I graduate... if I take a year out to save, I can afford it. I'll get a temporary job for 12 months, hopefully one that is psychology related... but I'm not sure how likely this is... I feel confident about getting a temporary job, because I've worked since I was 15... so I've

had quite a lot of experience in those sorts of jobs.” (Joanne, Post-1992, WP, BSc)

Joanne had a clearer idea of the postgraduate course she wanted to study. She knew she needed to save up money to fund this, but she also knew that getting employment in the field related to her future course would support her application. However, Joanne demonstrated that she felt more confident about getting an ‘ordinary’ low paid job during her year out.

The second goal identified in this category of graduate gap year was to save money for travelling purposes, although only one student in the sample fitted this type and she was from a WP background and graduated in 2015 from the Post-1992 University:

“I’m not thinking of starting my career for another two years. I just want to take a few years out and travel. I’ve been looking at internships in America, like doing receptionist jobs, hotel work, things like that. I’m not sure I’m confident enough to start my career yet so I’m hoping that travelling might spark something off in my brain... I’ve got to work in a retail or low paid job for a few months, maybe a year so I’ve got money saved up.” (Sophie, Post-1992, WP, BA)

Sophie had the aspiration to travel to North America to try to gain confidence and career inspiration whilst working temporary contracts in the service industry over there, but she also needed to take another year out prior to travelling in order to build up financial savings.

The third goal identified in this category of graduate gap year was students wanting to increase the level of their bank balance. One of these students was graduating from the RG University and was from a WP background (Helen), the other five were graduating from the Post-1992 University. One was from a WP background (Veronika) and the others were from non-WP backgrounds (Jamie, Adelle, Mark, Dan).

Helen was keen to get full-time employment in the short-term as a stopgap in order to earn a regular wage and was not discerning about what sort of job this might be. She explained that she was more confident applying for low paid retail jobs as this was where her current work experience lay:

“I’ve no idea what I want to do when I graduate... I’ve worked for a supermarket for four years now so I think that provides quite a good work experience ... I mean I could stay in my current job [for a year] if I didn’t find anything after uni.” (Helen, RG, WP, BSc)

Veronika's priority was to take a year out to earn money in a low paid job, whilst gaining events management experience in her spare time. She was unable to gain this sector specific experience during her degree due to needing to earn money in her spare time to cover her university costs:

"I've got a part-time job at the minute [working in a restaurant] and I've just got to go full-time for a year when I graduate and look for opportunities to do events management roles as like my side job." (Veronika, Post-1992, WP, BA)

Jamie wanted a year out because he spent his final year focused on completing his coursework for his degree so he had not started to apply for jobs related to his degree and was under immediate financial pressure to find paid employment:

"I haven't actually applied for jobs because I've been focussing on finishing my [university] work... I feel confident about my skills and stuff... I've had jobs but it's not been like what I want to do for the rest of my life... I need to get earning money as soon as possible because I come from quite a poor family so, without the student loan, I'm going to be needing something immediately." (Jamie, Post-1992, Non-WP, BSc)

Mark had also not yet applied for graduate jobs in his field of study. He was planning to become an hourly paid care worker to ensure that he was earning money as soon as he graduates. He also expressed concern that his degree would not give him an advantage in the labour market and he communicated financial anxiety about the future in relation to living costs, housing and postgraduate study.

"I'm not [applying for graduate jobs] at the moment... I'm really just looking for, you know, care jobs maybe, just to get something coming in... I just fancy a year off from education... I don't feel like I've got as much of an advantage on those who don't go to university, as much as say ten years ago... I just don't think there's an availability of jobs. When I start looking at the costs of living away somewhere or paying for a house or paying for a Masters, then I start panicking." (Mark, Post-1992, Non-WP, BA)

Dan and Adelle were both focused on finding a way to save money in order to build up deposits to buy houses as soon as they graduated. In their interviews it felt like the initial graduate gap year was likely to extend into the future, particularly if a regular non-graduate wage provided the means to get onto the housing ladder. Dan craved security and planned to move back to the family home and get 'the first normal job' he could:

“Being realistic I see myself working in the first normal job that I can get my hands on... I haven’t had a fixed job for the three years that I’ve been studying... now I’d like a fixed reliable wage... I need to keep my bank level up... The plan is to move back home to live with parents and find my first full-time job to save up for the deposit on a house... I just need to be secure at the moment rather than being a freelance creative kid.” (Dan, Post-1992, Non-WP, BSc)

Adelle lived at home whilst studying so she wanted her graduate gap year to give her more independence from her family. She also communicated scepticism about the graduate job market. It is clear that her goal was to get into a financial position where she could buy a house:

“I’d like to work for a charity for a year... I need to start looking... I just want to start working now and live away from home and have a change... I feel like graduate jobs aren’t all they’re made out to be or they’re not as common as they make out. So I’m like, where do I go from here, will it get me anywhere towards the deposit for a house?” (Adelle, Post-1992, Non-WP, BSc)

Reflection on graduate gap years

It turns out that Holmlund et al.’s (2008) typology of pre-university gap years is a useful starting point when thinking about the nature and purpose of the phenomenon of graduate gap years. Indeed, three of their categories map neatly to those of graduate gap year takers (see Table 3 below).

Pre-university gap year type (Holmlund et al.’ 2008)	Graduate gap year type
Those where individuals develop specific skills.	Those where individuals build up work experience.
Those where individuals learn about their broader preferences and/or abilities	Those where individuals work out their next steps.
Those where individuals take an extended break or holiday	Those where individuals take a break.
	Those where individuals get ‘ordinary work’ to earn money.

However, the fourth graduate gap year category, as presented in this chapter, is quite different in nature and purpose to those described by Holmlund et al. and also Bradley and Waller (2018). It was only experienced by the graduates

of 2015 (higher fees) and involved taking a graduate gap year in order to generate financial capital urgently, which prompts them to make compromises about the type of work they will pursue after graduation. This may suggest that graduate transitions in a climate of higher university fees and student debt are being marked by both austerity and precarity. It was notable that students from non-WP backgrounds at the RG institution did not experience this final category. Thus the feeling of financial stress was only an issue for students from WP backgrounds and for some of those at the Post-1992 institution from non-WP backgrounds, perhaps speaking to the anxieties they felt concerning the lower institutional status of their university.

As with pre-university gap years, this chapter demonstrates that the graduate gap year is not a homogeneous experience for young people and that it is also likely to be a classed experience. The issues raised by many of the graduate gap year takers in our 2015 sample appear compounded and more financially motivated than for those graduating in 2014. It is plausible that this may be an impact of higher education finance reform in England.

As noted earlier, Bradley and Waller (2018) have conducted complementary work in this area by investigating graduate transitions to work in a climate of lower university fees and student debt. They found that some of their graduate research participants were deferring their career straight after graduation (taking a break from education and competitive employment) and some were 'drifting' having left university (working out what to do with their lives). In particular, they highlight how those found to be 'drifting' – because of a lack of insider knowledge of the professional world and its cultural and social parameters - were more likely to be working class women. In contrast our study with students across two HE finance systems found that both male and female graduates from widening participation (RG & Post-1992) *and* non-widening participation backgrounds (Post-1992 only) were sharing narratives of postponement in relation to transitions to the graduate labour market.

However, the fine-grained qualitative data analysis further suggested that the emergent concept of the graduate gap year might extend, rather than lessen, social advantage for some. For example, Peter, David and Olly all look to be benefitting from having pro-actively secured graduate gap years that will involve them undertaking graduate work experience in the same field as their degree. But this opportunity is only possible because they can draw on the financial support of their families. For others like Annie, Vazir and Veronika their narratives of postponement come across as riskier, harder and less certain to lead to a graduate job in the medium term. There is a concern that such decisions and events might have long-lasting, disadvantaging effects for the individual development and progress of some graduates. Furthermore, data from our sample suggested that some students were preparing themselves to

have not just one year out after graduation, with some expecting 2-3 years of postponement and uncertainty (e.g. Mark, Shaila, Claudia and Joanne). Elias *et al.* (1999) found that the graduates of earlier HE systems in England took about three years to settle into a chosen graduate direction. However, a concern raised by our study is that some groups of students are extending this time to 'settle' by taking a graduate gap year/s. Further longitudinal research is now needed to investigate whether some graduates end up being disadvantaged taking different types of graduate gap year.

Atkins and Tummons (2017) argue that policymakers are resistant to the idea that transitions are not ladder-like and unproblematic, but the findings presented in this chapter about different types of graduate gap years add further weight to the argument that not all graduates are experiencing smooth transitions out of university. The likelihood is that some of these transitions characterised by uncertainty and postponement immediately after graduation will lead to longer-term inequality, which threatens to increase social stratification. Universities and policy-makers must be vigilant when it comes to the phenomenon of graduate gap years and consider interventions that could decrease precarity in graduate transition pathways.

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