

Exploring the challenges and opportunities of gap year institutions in selected provinces in South Africa

M Hattingh



orcid.org/0000-0002-4397-2876

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Supervisor: Prof SP van der Merwe

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Student number: 22908773

ABSTRACT

Very little research has been conducted on the value, opportunities, and challenges of gap year institutions within the South African realm. Not very much has been done to understand the various aspects of a gap year and the impact participation in a gap year has on South African students' personal development and academic performance.

This study's first primary objective was to give an exploratory and descriptive view of the value of gap year institutions in South Africa and the impact on personal development and academic performance. The study furthermore sought to uncover the experiences and perceptions of the students regarding participating in a structured gap year.

The second primary objective of this study was to conclude the gap year industry's challenges and determine the opportunities. The literature review of Chapter 2 provides insight into the gap year industry required for the study.

Firstly, this study used phenomenological analysis on twelve students who participated in structured gap year before their tertiary studies. This was done to conclude the student's perception of participating in a gap year and determine the value of a gap year. Secondly, data was also collected from seven managers of gap year institutions to accomplish the second primary objective, establishing the challenges and opportunities within the gap year industry. The value of a gap year was also discussed from their perspective. The empirical research was the second phase of the study. This study was conducted using a qualitative research method along with semi-structured interviews.

Thematic analysis was used as the data analysis technique. The quantitative interview procedure identified four main themes from the data collected from students who participated in a gap year and four main themes from the managers of gap year institutions. The participants in this study also described several sub-themes and categories.

The study concluded recommendations of how gap year institutions can overcome challenges and exploit opportunities. The consequent advice was that taking a gap year is beneficial and holds great value to the students who participated in one. Suggestions for further studies were also made in this regard.

Keywords: gap year, structured gap year program, gap year institution, personal development, drop out, course changing, higher education, tertiary studies, academic performance, matriculates, challenges, opportunities and values.

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CHAPTER 1: NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

“The opportunity to step away from everything and take a break is something that shouldn’t be squandered.”

Harper Reed

1.1 Introduction

Increasingly, South African Matriculates are taking time out from their educational careers to embark on what is known as a ‘gap year’ (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Nieman, 2010; Nieman, 2013). A gap year is referred to as taking time off after completing secondary education, involving structured activities such as “volunteer tourism” and unstructured activities such as leisure (Martin, 2010).

Very little research has been done in South Africa on gap years as the explanation for a delay in starting a student’s post-secondary education and the value of participating in one. The conditions that allow students to take a gap year before attending university has, however, been investigated by some studies. Several of these studies delve into the economic advantage and cultural or social capital as salient factors. In other countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, others have examined the gap year trends among young adults due to the gap year being a popular option for many years. Heath (2007) has concluded that one common feature of the gap year decision is that it is economically determined and limited to those who can afford it. It is generally an experience available mainly to those from socially advantaged backgrounds.

Studies have also been conducted to ascertain how Covid-19 has impacted the traditional factors for students’ decision to take a gap year: mental health, finance, education standard, and travel, which were vital influences derived from previous studies (Farrington, 2019).

When looking into the value of a gap year, another researcher suggests positive effects of gap year participation such as personal growth, college and career attainment, and language development (Hoe, 2014).

This study investigated the current value of gap year programs by conducting research on students’ experiences who participated in a structured gap year program before pursuing their tertiary studies. Secondly, the value, challenges, and opportunities of gap years have also been investigated from the perspective of the managers of gap year institutions.

As Morley (2019) stated, there lies the value in knowing the background of a gap year as a structured element of a young person’s education since it is a relatively new phenomenon in America where less than two per cent of students take a gap year. Many university

administrators and professors reported that gap year students were more mature and capable of managing their own affairs, which elevated their academic performance. Another essential factor that Morley reported on was the period within which students completed their college degrees, and it was found, in terms of a survey conducted in the USA, students who pursued a gap year before university usually completed their qualifications in under four years. This may indicate how this relatively new phenomenon is probably a societal response to the high school graduates who have not reached a level of maturity that enables them to successfully deal with the demands of adulthood and the pressures of higher education.

Little research has been performed to understand the various aspects of a gap year and specifically the effect of participating in a structured gap year program on South African students' personal development and academic performance.

To facilitate the growth of the gap year market in South Africa, this study aimed to highlight the challenges of the gap year industry and how to overcome them. It also revealed opportunities that can be exploited within the market. The main challenges that the gap year industry faces are acknowledgement in the South African educational system, the evidential supply of highly ready students to the universities, and funding and growth of the industry. However, opportunities lie within this realm, such as the possible expansion of the gap year industry, the number of students who participate in this industry and the future increased tertiary performance of students who take a gap year.

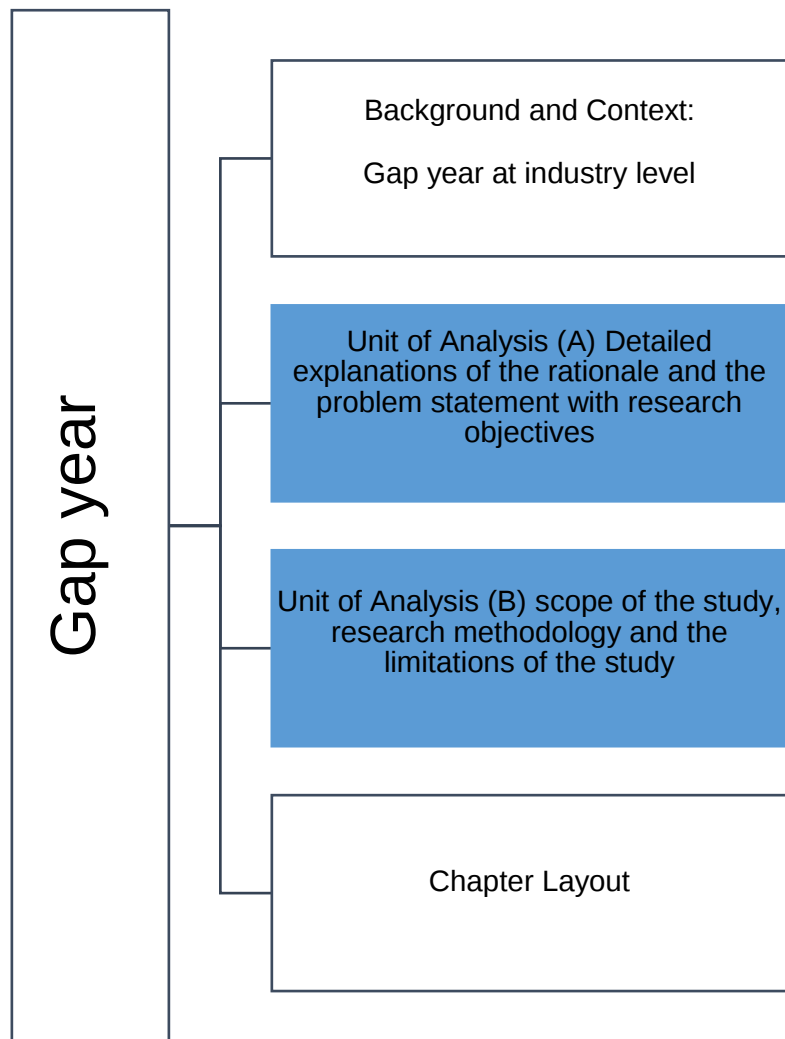


Figure 1-1: Layout of Chapter 1

This introductory chapter provides the background and definition of key terms applicable to the study. Detailed explanations of the rationale and the problem statement for the study were also presented. From there, the research objectives and questions that guide this study were defined. The chapter further highlights the scope of the study, research methodology and the limitations of the study. The chapter concluded with the chapter layout for this mini dissertation.

1.2 Definitions

This section defines some of the essential concepts used in the study.

1.2.1 Gap year concepts

There are several definitions for gap year concepts, and such definitions differ globally.

1.2.1.1 Academic performance

Academic performance is the outcome of education. In this study, academic performance refers to the extent to which a student has achieved educational goals (Kapur, 2018). Factors such as dropout rates and course changes were considered to measure academic performance.

1.2.1.2 Gap year

A gap year has been defined as taking a year off between school and university to explore the world and career opportunities (Piddock, 2004). For this study, a gap year refers to a period of between three and twenty-four months directly after completing secondary education. Individuals engage in a range of volunteer work, informal work, study and travelling activities whilst contemplating decisions regarding their future (Jones, 2004). According to Holmlund *et al.* (2012:684), gap years fell under one of five categories: “(a) an investment in skills, (b) gaps as leisure, (c) gaps as waiting for better educational opportunities, (d) gaps as learning about ones’ preferences and / or ability, and (e) gaps as military service.”

1.2.1.3 Gap year institution

A gap year institution is an organisation that offers gap year activities of three or more months (Jones, 2004). In this study, the institutions can be domestic or foreign and for-profit or non-profit.

1.2.1.4 Gap year program

A gap year program refers to structured activities offered by institutions that enrol students during a gap year. These activities can include volunteering, working, travelling, studying, and more (Guidi, 2018).

1.2.1.5 Matriculates

The term ‘Matriculates’ were used in this study to refer to individuals who completed their secondary education in South Africa who have not yet started their tertiary education (Kapur, 2018).

1.2.1.6 Dropout

A dropout was classified as a student who registered for tertiary studies but failed to complete the program (Chen, 2008).

1.2.2 Personal development and perceptions

1.2.2.1 Personal development

Although the development of an individual may encompass multiple areas of ones' life, this study specifically emphasised an individual's perception of their personal development. For this study, personal development refers to individual identity, preparedness for adulthood, a sense of maturity, and the accrual of life or career skills (Kosine & Lewis, 2008; Stebbins, 2016).

1.2.2.2 Perceptions

This study was based on the personal meanings or perceptions emanating from managers' involvement in the gap year institutions and students' experiences. Thoughts and feelings were used to understand students' structured gap year experience. Perceptions in this study refer to how the gap year experience appeared to students and how their experiences affected their academic performance and personal development. Secondly, perception also refers to how the managers of gap years view the industry challenges and opportunities and their thoughts on the role of a gap year by considering the results they have seen from their institution. Student opinions were utilised to determine whether structured gap year programs are worth further interest and investment (Guidi, 2018).

1.3 Problem statement

In South Africa, career uncertainty significantly motivates students to participate in a gap year. The decision to engage in a gap year is also influenced by other factors, such as the desire to gain valuable life experience, earn and save money to pay for higher education, as well as lack of career counselling on school level (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Nieman, 2010). In early adulthood, career preparation and decision-making are some of the most stressful elements (Bloxom *et al.*, 2008; Gray *et al.*, 1990; Stringer *et al.*, 2012).

The shaping of better global citizens before such citizens embark on their chosen career paths can consequently be seen as one of the factors which motivated the development of the gap year industry. Furthermore, the diversity of occupational environments and career choices in the post-modern era is associated with a sense of uncertainty amongst high school leavers (Savickas 2012).

Career uncertainty and unpreparedness are directly associated with dropout rates. In South African higher education institutes have a great need to address student dropout rates and the cost implications (Jeynes, 2016). Not only are students dropping out at an alarming rate, but they are also changing courses and taking much longer to complete their degree or diploma than the

prescribed duration. The South African Council of Higher Education reports that about 50% of students who enrol in university do not complete their degree. Of the 50% that drop out, most do so in their first year of tertiary education (Moodley & Singh, 2015). Subsequently, this leaves the country with a mere 15% graduation rate within the specified duration of the degree (Jeynes, 2016). Moreover, in 2005 the South African Department of Education estimated that this high drop-out rate costs the National Treasury about R4.5 billion in grants and subsidies to higher education institutions (Department of Higher Education, 2015). Therefore, tertiary dropout rates are both a societal and financial crisis that must be remediated.

One factor influencing the drop-out rate and course changes is a lack of preparedness' before enrolling for higher education studies (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). However, participation in a structured gap year has been identified in western countries as one of the ways to reduce the chances of students dropping out or changing their course (Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; King, 2011). Engagement in an informative and practical gap year activity and not a passive holiday is crucial in attaining this advantage. One way of ensuring this is by participating in gap year programs offered by gap year institutions. These drop-outs have reduced the labour force and raised the problem of foreigners taking South Africans' job opportunities.

Gap year programs can mitigate the dropout problem South Africa faces by addressing factors such as personal growth, career guidance, decision-making skills and educational readiness. Although some research has been done concerning the value of participating in a gap year, no proper academic research has been conducted on the secondary objectives of this study. These objectives aimed to explore challenges faced by gap year institutions and provided opportunities for the gap year institutions to gain market share in South Africa.

1.4 Research objectives

This study had two primary objectives and four secondary objectives that will assist in achieving the primary objective.

1.4.1 Primary objective

The first primary objective of this study was to give an exploratory and descriptive view of the value of gap year institutions in South Africa.

The second primary objective of this study was to determine the challenges that the gap year industry is faced with and to determine the opportunities within the gap year industry of South Africa.

1.4.2 Secondary objectives

In order to achieve the primary objectives, the following secondary objectives were addressed:

- Review the literature on the gap year phenomenon and the institutions offering structured gap year programs;
- Explore the value that gap year programs provide to their students;
- Explore and describe the challenges faced by gap year institutions in South Africa that hinder new entrepreneurship towards gap year systems;
- Explore the opportunities available to gap year institutions in South Africa;
- Explore recommendations on dealing with the challenges that gap year institutions in South Africa face.

1.5 The scope of the study

The scope of the study was divided between the field of study, educational sector and geographical demarcation.

1.5.1 Field of the study

This study primarily focused on two subject areas, namely business management and entrepreneurship. Gap year institutions need to manage the complications within the educational sector. The gap year industry is relatively new and still expanding quite substantially. As a result of a limited scope of gap year institutions, there are many entrepreneurial opportunities within this sphere. The educational sector was the secondary focus.

1.5.2 Industry

Few gap year institutions cater to a growing number of students in need of gap year programs within the South African realm. In South Africa, the educational sector is highly funded by the government's financial budget, but gap years are privately owned and do not receive any subsidies. Besides government funding, students in South Africa tend to secure payment for their studies through loans, family support, working part-time, which can boost incomes to entrepreneurs aiming to venture in providing gap year programs.

1.5.3 Geographical demarcation

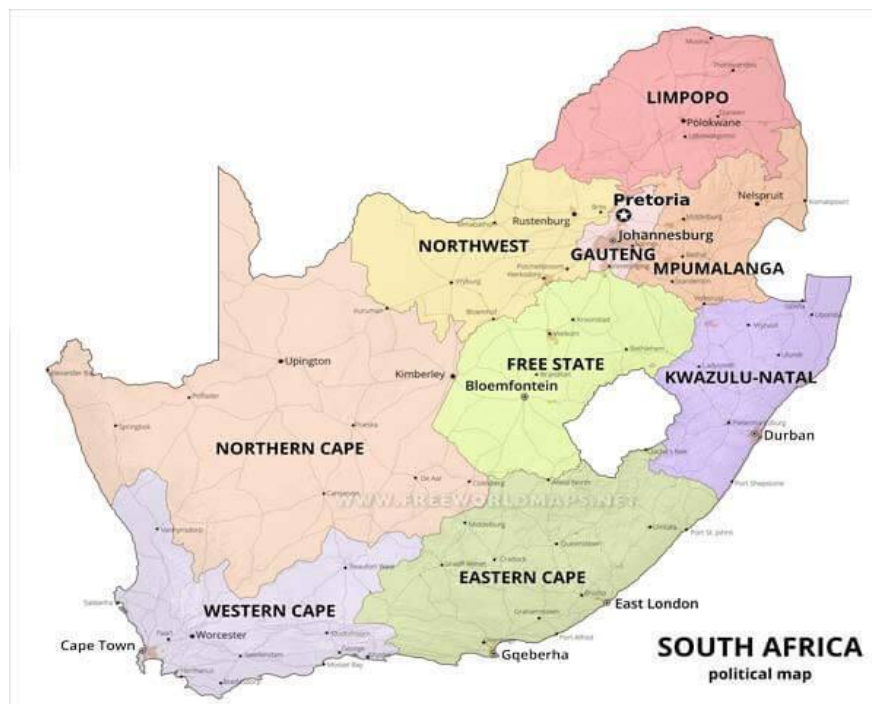


Figure 1-2: South Africa

Source: Free world maps

As the first study on this area in South Africa, the study was conducted on seven institutions due to time constraints and limited data availability. The majority of gap years are located in Gauteng and the Western Cape; therefore, the main focus was placed on them, although it includes gap year institutions from Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape.

1.6 Research methodology

Research methodology discusses the model used to perform research. This refers to the methods and procedures used to acquire and analyse data in the form of questionnaires, observations, interviews, and both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:4).

This research study applied a qualitative research approach by adopting two phases. The study first examined the literature review to build the background, introduce the gap year system, and discuss the role and value of gap year institutions. Secondly, the study conducted an empirical analysis to assess the unique challenges of the gap year industry in South Africa and ways to mitigate these obstacles, many of which led to opportunities for the industry.

1.6.1 Literature review

The literature review was the first phase of the research methodology to understand the gap year institutions and the market. The literature review provides a synopsis of the origination and establishment of the gap year as a concept and the services provided by institutions active in this sector. The literature review also defines the gap year program in South Africa and its role and value to participants. The literature review also discusses challenges gap year institutions face and the opportunities to exploit.

Information used in the literature review was found on Google Scholar and NWULIB. This information comprises of:

- Journals and written publications;
- Dissertations, mini-dissertations, and other papers on the subject;
- Books; and
- News articles, internet articles as well as internet websites.

1.6.2 Empirical study

The empirical study was the second phase of the research. This study was conducted using a qualitative research method along with semi-structured interviews. Questions for the interviews were deduced from the literature review. As an additional data gathering tool, probing was implemented during interviews by asking further questions to get more in-depth knowledge on specific questions depending on how the interviewee responded. Themes were created and linked to codes that allowed the study to proceed under a thematic analysis, exploring the transcribed interviews.

1.6.2.1 Research paradigm

Research was regarded as the primary systematic, rigorous collection and analysis of data, guided by an indistinct aim used to increase knowledge on a particular area of investigation (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, the nature and development of knowledge was determined by the philosophical assumptions that underpin a research study (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

This study was interpretivist oriented. A research paradigm is an entire belief system and theoretical outline with assumptions about ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). "The paradigm emphasises that humans are different from physical phenomena due to created meanings. No two people share the same opinion, as reality is only

comprehensible through socially constructed denotations” (Ryan, 2018:49). According to Rehman and Alharthi (2016), interpretive research attempts to establish individuals’ interpretation of a social phenomenon they interact with and not discover the universal context and value-free knowledge and truth.

1.6.2.2 Research approach

A qualitative method was appropriate to conduct a holistic and deep investigation of gap year systems and institutions. A qualitative approach is data collection and analysis focusing on understanding and emphasising meaning. According to Saunders *et al.* (2016), qualitative research involves collecting, analysing, and interpreting data by observing what individuals do and say.

Semi-structured interviews with room for probing and discussion was necessary to gather the information. Codes were formulated from transcribing the interviews. Themes, sub-themes, and categories were developed from codes to further the analysis. The first set of interviews with managers examined the role of gap years, challenges faced by gap year institutions, gap year opportunities within the industry and prospects of the gap year market. The second set of interviews investigated the value of a gap year with students that participated in a gap year.

1.6.2.3 Study population and sample

According to Quinlan (2011), the participants chosen for the study must have knowledge or experience in the researcher’s field of interest to give appropriate and relevant data to the study. This study employed purposive sampling, which aligns with the qualitative research approach typical of research that aims to describe, interpret, and attach meaning to the participants’ experience (Ryan *et al.*, 2007). As this study is focused on South Africa, purposeful sampling was also used to capture the heterogeneity in the population to allow conclusions to be made about the entire population range (Palinkas *et al.*, 2016). Purposive or judgmental sampling ensures that units are selected for a particular purpose or from a unique situation or in instances where the population is not easily reachable (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). This strategy involves identifying specific settings, persons, and events that can provide the sought-after information that cannot be found in any other selection (Bickman *et al.*, 2014).

The recruitment of participants was conducted through formal requests for participation that were sent to the targeted participants electronically. The requests were in the form of informed consent letters, and these are attached to interview schedules for face to face qualitative part of the study.

The target population of this study were gap year managers or owner-managers, from now on referred to as managers, and students who participated in a gap year. Gap year institutions’

managers and students who formerly participated in a gap year program formulate the unit of analysis for this study. Managers were included to assist in fundamental input regarding the gap year industry, and students provided knowledge on the value of the gap year market and prospects.

The gap year institution that qualified in the screening process is had to comply with the following criteria:

- The institution was required to be in operation for more than two years and have a structured gap year program;
- The institution required to have more than ten members;
- The institution required to be a registered business and comply with all relevant regulations and laws; and
- The study area was limited to South Africa.

A total of at least ten until saturation was reached was used as purposeful sampling. According to the notion of saturation, as commented by Charmaz (2006), the researcher should stop collecting data when the categories (or themes) are saturated: when gathering new data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties. This is when the researcher has an adequate sample (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018).

1.6.2.4 Research instrument

The instrument for this study was open-ended semi-structured interviews (Appendix A & B). The content of the interview was prepared in advance, and in that sense, it is semi-structured (Bougie & Sekaran, 2020).

1.6.2.5 Collection of data

Data were collected for two purposes: first, to build the literature through analysing previous studies and secondly, to gather information on what is currently happening within the gap year sector. The former was gathered from international knowledge and historical knowledge emanating from gap year systems, structures, programs, markets, and the industry. The international data provides a platform to compare western gap year structures against the South African concept of gap year institutions. The latter looked at information provided by participants who responded to questions in interviews. Interviews were conducted online, through ZOOM or Microsoft Teams. The interview comprised of at minimum the following; an introduction of the

interviewer, the purpose of the interview, assurance of confidentiality, request of permission to record the interview, and a set of questions in a logical order (Bougie & Sekaran, 2016).

For analytical purposes, codes and themes were developed under saved, recorded, and transcribed responses by participants on the interview questions. To capture unique sentiments among participants, closed and open-ended questions were used.

The required data was obtained by first calling and setting up appointments with the managers at the gap year institutes to discuss the aims and objectives of the study. Afterwards, a formal request for a list of contacts of their gap year participants was requested. Both managers and students were given time to consider their participation in the study and were allowed to ask any questions or raise any concerns regarding the study. Those who agreed to participate in the study signed individual consent forms presented in Appendix C. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

1.6.2.6 Analysing the data

Since this study used a qualitative research method, a thematic analysis was applied. Themes represent patterns observed across data sets that are useful when describing a phenomenon associated with a specific research question (Yin, 2018). The gathered data was viewed, analysed, and then placed into core themes and sub-themes representing the entire setting and range of questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data was interpreted using an exploratory framework. Atlas.ti software was used to support data obtained from the thematic analysis, one of the most frequently used data analysis strategies alongside analysis induction and grounded theory (Bryman & Bell, 2014). The interview transcripts were compared and contrasted with extracting core themes and subthemes across participants. Thereafter, these research findings were analysed and discussed by examining current literature and determining whether it corresponded to it. New and unanticipated findings were also explored when interpreting the data.

The process of data analysis in qualitative research involves “making sense of text data, preparing data for analysis, and moving deeper and deeper into the understanding of the data by interpreting it” (Creswell, 2009:180). According to Bryman *et al.* (2014:350), thematic analysis is a “flexible method not tied to a specific philosophical orientation”. As seen in Table 1-1, Creswell's stages of thematic analysis were used to analyse the data.

Table 1-1: Creswell's stages

Stages	Description of the process
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Organising and preparing study data	• Transcribing interviews. • Optically scanning material. • Typing field notes. • Arranging the data into different types.
Reading through the study data	Obtain an overall sense of the study information and reflect on its complete meaning by reviewing the following: • What common ideas are from participants? • What the character of the ideas is. • The general view of the data.
The coding of the data	The process of organising data into parts of text before bringing meaning to information. This entails taking text data and segmenting the sentences into categories and labelling these categories with a term.
Description of themes for analysis	Description involves a comprehensive version of information about people, places, or events in a setting.
Presentation of the themes	This is a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis.
Interpretation of data	Researcher's interpretation of the meaning of the study data.

Source: Creswell (2009:185)

1.7 Limitations of the study

A limitation of the study was the lack of literature on gap years, gap year institutions, and gap year programs. The fact that the available literature tends to be situated in a Western context means that it may not be representative of and accurate within the South African realm. The lack of data available to research the gap year market limits the depth of this research study.

Another limitation is that the gap year industry of South Africa has not yet matured, especially in terms of standardisation and formalised compliance structures, as the industry is void of the same.

1.8 The layout of the study

The study is organised in chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the concept of a gap year, including its programs and institutions. This chapter comprises the study background, problem statement, objectives and scope of the study, research methodology and limitations.

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature survey examining key concepts and provides a background on the nature of the study.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology utilised in this study. The study employs a qualitative approach and thus presents the determinants of the qualitative approach, including the research design, sampling techniques, data collection, and analysis methods. The reliability and validity of the study are included in this chapter. Additionally, the ethical considerations utilised within the study is justified.

Chapter 4 illustrate the research findings from the study. These findings are linked back to the relevant literature. Research findings and analysis of the findings are also presented in this chapter. The chapter first presents the participants' demographic details and their importance, and secondly, it analyses the themes that emerged from thematic analysis.

Chapter 5 This chapter summarises the research findings from the study and any further recommendations. The achievement of objectives is presented in this chapter. These findings are linked back to the relevant literature. Conclusions and several recommendations on empirical research and the literature review are discussed and highlighted in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“It is a good thing for everyone who can possibly do so to get away at least once a year for a change of scene. I do not want to get into the position of not being able to see the forest because of the thickness of the trees.”

Franklin Roosevelt

2.1 Introduction

Literature presenting the value of a gap year, the challenges that the industry is faces and the opportunities available were reviewed in this chapter. The literature review section aims to give background information on the essential concepts to address the primary and secondary objectives. In addition, the concept of a structured gap year and the gap year program are discussed. The literature review is essential as it highlights the context of the research question by illustrating how previous literature defined and assessed the gap year phenomena. Moreover, the literature review facilitates an understanding of the significance of the research problem.

2.2 Theoretical framework or the theory used to underpin the study

- The Institutional Theory

Institutional theory introduces a unique approach regarding the study of social, economic, and political dynamics (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional theory not only explains why organisational structures and practices become entrenched, but also how and why change occurs. Institutional theory focuses on the roles of social, political and economic systems in which companies operate and gain their legitimacy. As explained by Scott (2001), institutions provide for the rules of the game and define the available ways to operate by discouraging, constraining or encouraging given behavioural patterns. They have an impact on the decision-making process in giving indications of what would be acceptable or not, and in determining the individual socialization of norms and behaviours in a given society. Scott describes the three pillars on which societies are built: the regulative, the normative and the cognitive.

A key feature of the cross-cultural and volunteering experiences associated with gap years is their potential to transform the individuals involved, affecting their outlooks, their values, the questions they ask, and the ways in which they interpret their own worlds. This theory underpins the perception of the students that participated in a gap year as well as how the institutions operate.

- Krumboltz's Learning Theory of Career Choice and Counselling

Krumboltz's theory assumes that people's characteristics can be explained on the basis of their unique individual learning experiences, while acknowledging the role played by innate and developmental processes (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1996). Krumboltz (Krumboltz & Worthington 1999:322) views activities engaged in by young people during the school-to-work transition – which include the apprenticeships and community based volunteering that often occur during gap years – as offering valuable learning opportunities which allow young people to expand their abilities. These include occupation-related skills but also more generic life-skills such as communication skills, which Krumboltz feels may influence young people's employability when they enter their chosen career. This theory underpins the value of a gap year through gaining new skills and experiences.

2.3 Background of the study

2.3.1 The meaning of a gap year

Globally gap years are becoming an increasing trend (Stehlik, 2010). Participating in a gap year after graduating high school and starting with tertiary education is well-regarded in many countries, especially Europe and Australia. Partaking in a gap year is common and encouraged. This is evident from the fact that more than 25% of students defer admission to post-secondary education for purposes of gap year participation (Curtis, 2014).

Over the past few decades, 'gap years' have become a common concept in the tourism industry. Although gap years are much more prevalent today, they can be traced back to a much earlier travel era, specifically the 'Grand Tour'. During the eighteenth century, young men from the well-educated, upper-middle-class, this tour was embarked on by young men. Back then, there was a well-developed view that extended travel could benefit the maturation and sophistication of youth (Hibbert, 1969).

In the UK in particular, there is more of a historical perspective to a gap year that originated with relatively privileged young people who took 'time out' before embarking on more settled careers (Heath, 2007). During a gap year, you may volunteer or work for remuneration locally or overseas, and it can be structured or unstructured. More often than not, volunteer work is associated with nature conservation, health care, or community development upliftment in underprivileged areas (Nieman, 2013).

As per Jones (2004), participants can choose between three and twenty-four months for a gap year program, depending on what they wish to accomplish in the program. International scholarship contests the definition of a gap year, according to Harmer and Rodgerson (2017).

According to Cremin (2007), gap years refer to periods that usually takes place in unfamiliar locations, between high school and university, or between employments. According to King (2011), a gap year is a period between leaving school and entering university during which students take a break. The gap year is furthermore and frequently associated with those who have just completed secondary and tertiary education, according to Griffin (2013). Research has not always focused on a comprehensive view or definition of a gap year as it is a term that can refer to several activities young adults may perform.

In Stehlik's view, the term "gap" insinuates something missing, misleading since constructive gaps are typically filled with valuable life experiences and contribute to essential skills development (Stehlik, 2010:365). Jones (2004) agreed that the term "gap year" or "year out" may be problematic because neither describes a clearly defined phenomenon.

What is shared amongst the definitions, despite being loosely defined, is that a gap year is considered to be an intentional period during which a participant partakes in activities other than formal education or employment for purposes of gaining specific life experiences and skills.

2.3.2 The meaning of a gap year program

Gap year programs can be defined by location, structure and activity choice (Jones, 2004). The programs often offer either domestic or foreign activities. For abroad activities, language and cultural immersion experiences are often alluring and considered to broaden the mind in this global era. The structure of the gap year program may be in the form of commercial packages that offer guided and supervised activities. This can include a wide range of activities such as volunteer or paid work, travel or leisure trips, educational experiences, internships, sports programs, and cultural immersion experiences (Jones, 2004; White, 2009). The wide range of gap year activities can appeal to many individuals making it easier to promote (O'Shea, 2015).

A gap year is meant to be intentional time off from the traditional education and career track, allowing students time and opportunity for such identity development indicators as seen in the AGA survey responses exploration (American Gap Association, 2016b; O'Shea, 2014; White, 2009). Gap year programs offer intentional opportunities for students to develop university and vocational readiness through experiences that typically involve community engagement and support, understanding and exploration of vocational interests, and opportunities to learn from and serve different people groups across the country and the world (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2011; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2014; White, 2009).

2.3.3 The gap year phenomenon

When gathering data about the gap year, a challenge is the lack of existing literature about the topic (Jones, 2004). Many of the information takes the form of anecdotal evidence from gap year takers on websites of gap year service providers, and a large majority of these providers are based in the UK or the USA. Most of the gap-related information used in this chapter is based on the research conducted by Dr Andrew Jones and reported on in his Review of gap year Provision (2004). It offers a comprehensive overview of the gap year phenomenon in the UK, and parallels can be drawn to the South African context.

As previously stated, there is nothing new about the concept of a gap year. Since the late 19th century, the wealthy and elite have been participating in what was once called the Grand Tour, which was a worldwide road trip focused on experiencing culture, tackling hands-on activities, and learning about the world's affairs. Taking a gap year floundered during the late 20th century, as diving straight into one's studies became more important than having real-life experiences, but gap years are seeing a resurgence now (Frisch, 2021).

Gap years today are no longer a radical activity for pre-university students but are rather the process of developing new citizens for the global age (Coetzee & Bester 2009).

Curtis (2014) and Martin (2010) states that recent years have seen an increase in students taking time off from further study after graduation from high school. Commercial gap year companies which offer planned gap year programs can be defined and identified by their location, structure and chosen activities.

Three elements are fundamental to a gap year as established by Martin (2010): intentionality, motivation, and achievement in circumstances where gap year students necessarily engage in structured activities to further their career pursuits. Examples of such activities include but are not limited to work for remuneration, volunteering and other forms of self-improvement, travel or leisure trips, educational experiences, internships, sports programs, and cultural immersion experiences (Jones, 2004; White, 2009). It is prevalent that such activities are often presented as commercial packages that offer guided and supervised activities. The programs usually last between three months to a year, and the wide range of gap year activities appeal to many individuals making it easier to promote (Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2014). However, there is very little literature on structured gap year programs and their potential impact on South Africa participants (Jones, 2004; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016).

Heath (2007), the British researcher, looked at recent trends among British university students and concluded that gap-year students "gain the edge" over traditional students at universities and universities in the U.K. According to Heath, the number of students in England who chose to "take

a year out” before attending university nearly doubled from 1994 to 2004, mainly due to the presumed benefits of doing so. Relying on studies and articles prepared primarily by gap-year organisations, Heath described the characteristics of gap-year students and explored the relative popularity of specifically chosen gap-year experiences. She was careful to point out that in the absence of much existing academic research on the gap year, many of the claims of the gap-year industry concerning the presumed benefits of taking a year out are based on perceptions rather than on solid evidence (Heath, 2007). Although she compellingly suggests that taking a gap year further stratifies privileged students from those less privileged, this article does not provide any studies of sample populations of gap-year students.

Although this question has not been studied, our collective experience with the current secondary and higher education landscape offers some possible insights. Another important consideration is the conditions that appear to support the growth of this phenomenon. With the rising costs associated with university attendance, students want to be sure that they are ready for higher education. When one adds the mounting pressure of the university search and application process, including an increased emphasis on standardised test scores and evidence of extracurricular involvement during high school to this, it is not surprising that young people may find themselves exhausted and needing a break before pursuing a university degree (O’Shea, 2014).

Furthermore, high schools emphasise community service and heighten students’ awareness of societal issues they might address during a gap year of volunteering or interning. In addition, several universities have begun to mandate a gap year or gap semester for some students (Middlebury University and Harvard, among others) so that more students find themselves exploring their options. Our increased global connectivity, made possible through electronic media ranging from basic live television to cutting-edge social media tools, has become a platform for exchanging information across the country and the world. Blogs and websites are used to transmit stories about students’ gap-year experiences and increase the intrigue of a gap year (O’Shea, 2014).

Technology also has produced an impetus for greater understanding and awareness across geographic and cultural divides, not the least of which is the globalisation of higher education, supporting the notion of incorporating international travel into a gap year plan. These conditions have begun to make gap years less unusual and more accessible. Hence, gap year programs have a broad foundation to expand and flourish (White, 2009).

2.4 The value of participating in a gap year

2.4.1 Introduction

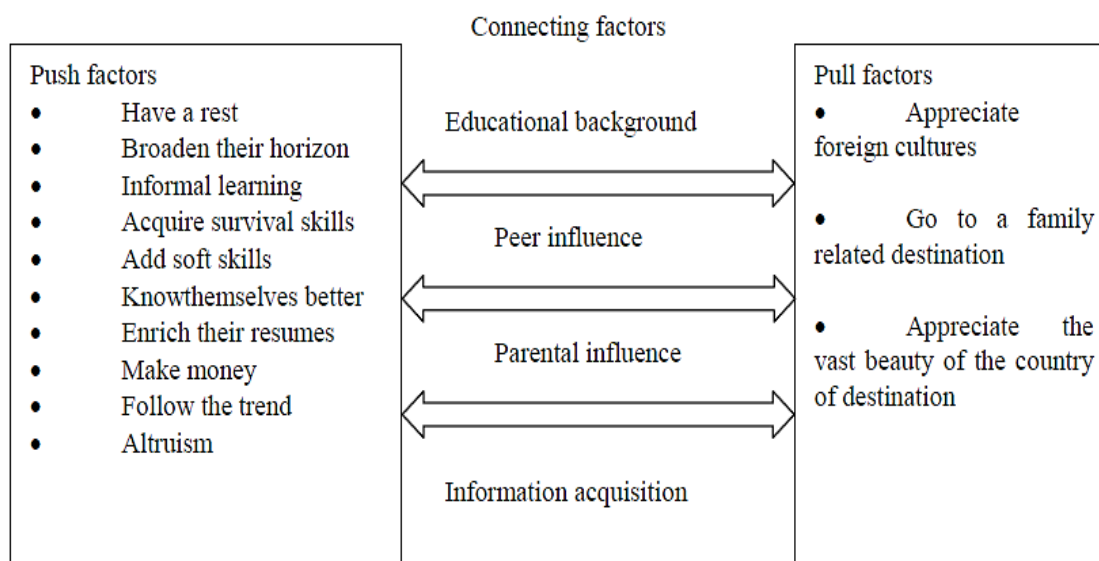
A considerable body of literature has explored the factors associated with delaying the start of post-secondary education; however, gap year students are typically absent from these studies. Instead, the research on delayed entry into university focuses primarily on students' common characteristics to not go directly from high school to university (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011; Roksa & Velez, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). In particular, most studies have explored familial and socioeconomic conditions that cause students to delay entrance into university for one year or more. In addition to family backgrounds and socioeconomic status, these studies also examine the social roles and adulthood transitional behaviours that such students may play after high school and during university and how they impact university enrolment patterns.

Some key global motivators for taking a gap year include:

- explore career options
- gain work experience
- take a break from formal education
- gain new experiences
- gain life skills
- enhance soft skills
- earn money

Although motivators such as travel opportunities, gaining life experience and earning money are influential factors in South African students' decision to engage in a gap year, career indecision is the most significant motivator (Coetzee & Bester 2009; Nieman, 2010). Accordingly, students often consider a gap year as a period to resolve the uncertainty they are experiencing regarding their future (Nieman, 2013).

Figure 2-1: The push-pull model of factors that motivate gap year participation



Source: Guomei and Wei (2017:168)

Internationally, most gap year participants, according to Martin (2010) and Hoe (2014), are motivated by the desire to: grow personally; discover and travel; take a break from academics and ascertain what study choices they have to their availability.

2.4.2 Motivation for participating in a gap year

2.4.2.1 Educational readiness

Very little of the research looking specifically at the gap year as the explanation for a delay in starting a student's post-secondary education has been conducted in South Africa. Several existing studies consider the conditions that allow students to take a gap year before university. Several touches on economic advantage and cultural or social capital as salient factors. In the United Kingdom and Australia, where the gap year has been a popular option for many years, Stehlick (2010) and others have examined the gap year trends among young adults. Stehlick has concluded that one common feature of the gap year decision is "that it is economically determined and limited to those who can afford it, and generally an experience available mainly to those from socially advantaged backgrounds" (Stehlick, 2010:367).

The number of post-secondary students unprepared for the pressures and demands of higher education is on the rise.

Academic credentials are no longer a guarantee of success. University students must seek other ways to gain advantages, including developing appropriate "personalised travel" to gain communication skills and personality traits favoured by employers (King, 2011:507). Travelling to

the third world is also a cultural capital that allows practitioners to present to their peers and employers (Simpson, 2005). Practitioners are trying to make better use of gap year practice to get a better job. Everyone thinks this experience is worthwhile, and nobody thinks it is a waste of time or regrets taking a gap year. They all believe that this memorable experience makes them different from others (King, 2011).

Palmer *et al.* (2009) looked at student transitions into university life through the lens of the concept of “in-between-ness,” or liminality, which describes the transition an individual experiences when moving between one place (or set of experiences) and another. He suggests that new students are at the “threshold” between their former and new environments and may feel they lack a sense of place or belonging. Their research looked at the turning points that students encountered and how these were associated with feelings of both inclusion and exclusion as new university students. While most students feel a sense of disequilibrium in the process of making this transition, gap-year students may be considered as having a prolonged experience of standing at the threshold. The turning points in their lives are multiple and complex and therefore worthy of exploration.

It might be said that gap-year students have begun the gradual process of approaching adulthood if one or more of these criteria describe their experience during the year. When they start university, they may relinquish some of the independence they had enjoyed. When they arrive at university as first-year students, gap-year students are likely to be one year older than -- and in many cases seem qualitatively different from -- traditional first-year students in their class. They may, indeed, appear to be better equipped to handle the adjustment to the university experience during their first year. In contrast to other students whose circumstances prevent their immediate access to university, gap-year students seem to be a somewhat more privileged group, whose goals for an interim year between high school and university are linked to their broader educational and personal objectives.

It is becoming increasingly popular to take a purposeful gap year instead of entering tertiary institutions directly after high school graduation, in circumstances where a purposeful gap year increases students' academic motivation and performance (Dyrda *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, those students who elect to pursue a gap year showcase improved academic motivation, maturity and self-directness, all of which have exhibited higher educational performance (Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010).

Previous studies in Britain, Australia and America, have revealed the academic benefits of students who took a gap year, which is inclusive of lower dropout rates, more miniature course changing and better performance in studies (Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; King, 2011). Since the rate of students dropping out of higher education institutes in South Africa

is alarmingly high, the implementation of proper gap year systems may be used to circumvent factors associated with the same (Moodley & Singh, 2015). A natural inference can be drawn that higher drop-out rates can be associated with higher unemployment rates, which should not be taken lightly.

High tertiary dropout rates remain a concern for higher education institutes and the South African government (Moodley & Singh, 2015). Not only are South African students dropping out at an alarming rate, but they are also changing courses and taking much longer to complete their degree or diploma than the recommended duration. A study by Pillay and Ngcobo (2010) found that one in eight students believed they had not made the right choice of study, which may have contributed to the high dropout rate. The lack of career information at the time of decision making was stated as the most contributing factor. Other stress factors associated with tertiary dropouts include financial constraints, lack of accommodation and, more importantly for this study, an inability to cope with academic demands (Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). In response, student retention strategies are being adopted at universities to reduce dropout rates. A gap year to gain practical skills, professional experience, or personal awareness has emerged as a possible pre-emptive retention strategy.

Lemmens (2010:15) suggests that readiness for university is part of a broader and more comprehensive field of student success and retention. Unfortunately, universities rely mainly on academic achievement to admit new students when life skills and student maturity are crucial for higher education success. Students' "university readiness" is rarely considered, nor is their emotional and social preparedness for further studies.

In a study titled 'Students, motivation to learn, academic achievement, and academic counselling', Henning (2007:1-3) emphasises that motivated and emotional preparation for higher education cannot be overlooked. It acknowledges the significance of the interaction between cognition affects in studying.

Unger (2011) claims that students often spend their first year at university asserting their independence and finding themselves, which accounts for the low success rate of many.

Students enrolled in a university, college, or post-secondary institution within Canada drop out of their studies before completing at least 40% of the time (Council of Alberta University Students, 2011; *Shaienks et al.*, 2008). Similarly, 50% of students enrolled in a four-year degree program in America fail to graduate (Jansen & Van der Meer, 2012). Taking a gap year seems to assist individuals in resolving initial career uncertainty, which may lead to changing courses or dropping out during higher education (Nieman, 2013). Thus, it is expected that by the introduction of a

structured gap year, school leavers were better prepared before they enrol at university, thereby increasing graduation rates.

Transition to adulthood, especially with the immense pressure to choose a promising career, is plagued by a lack of confidence or knowledge (Nieman, 2013; Pillay & Ngcobo, 2010). Therefore, awareness of oneself is fundamental. Moreover, understanding one's strengths and weaknesses matched to a career path is of prime importance in this modern era (O'Shea, 2014; White, 2009).

Few peer-reviewed studies attempt to understand or define how a gap year impacts students once they begin their first year in university. Most of the existing research has been sponsored mainly by consultants or organisations promoting gap year programs, attempting to capture self-reported outcomes of students' experiences. One study shows that the improved academic ability of gap year students has been revealed both internationally and locally. The improvement of academic performance by students who participated in a gap year, especially low-achieving students, is emphasised. As previously stated, these students appeared more motivated and were also less likely to drop out or change courses during their studies (Birch & Miller, 2007; Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004; King, 2011). Gap years are sold as a valuable part of career development (Stehlik, 2010). Nieman (2013) suggests that tertiary students who took a gap year also appeared more confident in their decision about the choice of study and career goals. This gain in maturity and confidence in career choice aids an individual's academic capabilities during higher education, reducing the likelihood of dropping out.

According to Rabie and Naidoo (2016), a gap year empowers individuals with the skills, maturity, self-knowledge, occupational knowledge and self-confidence they need to transition into university and the workforce of the 21st century. A gap year offers value as a career development intercession, even though a gap year might not be correspondingly advantageous for career engagement. Should a gap year lack a planned purpose, the 'time off' turns more into a holiday which may dull an individual's skill or motivation (Nieman, 2010:129), and it is thus crucial to engage in meaningful activities. Consequently, despite a gap year having great potential, the benefit thereof is heavily dependent on how such a gap year is organised and structured. (Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Heath, 2007). On the other hand, a poorly structured gap year program may lead to feelings of isolation or reduction in the motivation to pursue higher education.

Many returned participants in the UK feel that attending university is a decision rather than a natural progression (O'Shea, 2011). The gap year experience, as noted by O'Shea (2011), has given participants a renewed commitment to academics and thus leads to them being more hard-working and disciplined while in college. This is due mainly to the fact that the gap year programme is believed to have shaped their work ethic. Haigler and Nelson (2013) surveyed 280 former gap year students and found that 90% of them started or returned to college within only

one year of completing their gap year. In addition, the researchers reported that 60% of the respondents claimed that the gap year was instrumental in ascertaining their academic direction and career and cultivating increased motivational levels compared to their peers. Interestingly the results reflect that student satisfaction in university may be associated with variables such as family support, peer approval, early influences, and family expectations. Moreover, the findings that emanated from the study also suggest that psychosocial factors may be more significant predictors of university choice during the final stages of decision-making as opposed to other major preparatory factors, like academic performance before university, academic interests, and standardised test scores.

A study by Martin (2010) looked at the gap year in Australia through a psychosocial lens. The author specifically looked at motivation and high school performance as predictors of taking a gap year. There is prior research, he explains, that suggests that “school leavers” lack motivation and perform poorly in high school. He cites previous articles focusing on the gap year, considering who chooses these situations. Another study conducted by Leese (2010) implies that one component of the post-high school gap year phenomenon is the feeling of exhaustion that middle and upper-class students feel after a childhood filled with the cultivation of their skills and talents, as suggested by Leese’s research. Suppose such students do not feel ready to continue their schooling immediately after high school. In that case, it may be less. After all, they are uninterested in learning or furthering their education and instead because they are motivated to experience and learn from a more unscripted life. Motivation may be a significant factor in a student’s desire to pursue further education or take time off. Martin concludes that taking a gap year may “resolve motivational deficits” (Martin, 2010:570), and in many cases, helps to improve academic performance at the university level. The deficits that Martin (2010:570) considers seem inextricably linked to the pre-university conditions that impact the choices available to students.

Over 80% of gap year participants stated they would recommend taking a year off to others, and the results showed that delaying college was associated with better grades Gallagher (2015).

Formal education is highly regarded amongst South African gap year participants, and it is frequently considered the foundation of a successful career. Consequently, furthering formal education is generally of grave importance and prioritised. According to a study done by Rabie and Naidoo (2016), the majority of participants who took a gap year cited being indecisive about what to study and what career path to pursue after matriculation as the driving motivation for taking the year off. However, their indecision about their careers thwarts their ambition to pursue post-secondary education (Nieman, 2013). Consequently, uncertainty is exacerbated by anxiety associated with the diverse occupational environments and choices that have emerged in the postmodern era (Savickas 2012). Gap years may help individuals deal with this sense of initial career uncertainty (Nieman, 2013). Several South African studies have found that the gap year

allows participants to self-reflect and solve their career uncertainty (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Greffrath & Roux, 2012; Nieman, 2013).

The gap year affords individuals with the opportunity to mature, acquire skills and gain self- and occupational knowledge, all of which, ultimately, prepares them to manage the transition into tertiary education and the world of work in the 21st century (Rabie & Naidoo, 2016).

2.4.2.2 Personal growth

The popularity of the gap year can be attributed to the benefits that participating individuals have claimed. Notably, a gap year offers an opportunity for self-development, allowing individuals to gain new experiences, learn new skills, expose themselves to various social situations that may be job-related, and explore their abilities or passions (Nieman, 2010). Moreover, students who took a gap year are often perceived as more independent and mature, with improved soft skills such as leadership, time management, communication and punctuality (Coetzee & Bester 2009; Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010).

Key global motivators for taking a gap year include the desire to explore one's career options, to gain work experience, to take a break from formal education, to gain new experiences, to gain life skills, to enhance one's soft skills and to earn money amongst others (Rabbie & Naidoo, 2016). The factors also include formal education or work related to a need to have a break from education or work. The purported effects of gap year participation tend to be positive by nature.

Lyons (2012) also pointed out that many people find their career path through gap year practice. Most gap year participants believed that it is a process of looking for freedom and self-discovery, which broadens their horizons and helps them realise what they want and find the occupation that fits their interest (Cremin, 2007).

The gap year provides a valuable opportunity for personal growth: students can learn from their experiences, meet new people, and emerge themselves in a variety of social spaces, where they can 'find' themselves for purposes of using this period to guide future decisions (Nieman, 2010:124). As a developmental context for personal growth, a gap year presents various opportunities for new skills, exposure to many social settings that could be job-related, and the opportunity to self-reflect. (Martin, 2010).

In one independent study, O'Shea (2011) examined the educational value of taking a gap year focused on volunteering, specifically to programs designed by a prominent gap year organisation in the United Kingdom. Students are placed into international settings through this particular program, where they perform volunteer duties in rural communities for twelve months before entering a British university. Notably, O'Shea found that a year of volunteering overseas before

attending university resulted in tremendous psychosocial development and that “the gap-year experience accelerated this development by presenting challenges in unique environments to the learner” (O’Shea, 2011:575). Students reported feeling better at making decisions, more open to different cultures and perspectives, and having a greater appreciation for family and community due to their gap years.

The gap year break in traditional higher education is generally used for cultural immersion, volunteer work, personal growth, and skill development as a means for students to understand themselves better, others, and the world (O’Shea, 2014; White, 2009). A gap year connects students with the world around them and provides them with opportunities to help those in need. It also gives them a chance to take a break from educational achievement to grow personally and appreciate learning for inherent rather than instrumental reasons (Fitzsimmons *et al.*, 2011; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O’Shea, 2014; White, 2009).

Some higher education professionals support gap year ideals because of the potential pitfall of students stepping into career preparation before they have a solid understanding of who they are or what they want to do in life (Fitzsimmons, McGrath, and Ducey, 2011). Gap year research also supports the assertion that gap year experiences can promote personal, age-appropriate developmental growth and thus be transformative and holistic educational experiences (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; King, 2011; O’Shea, 2014).

Participants experienced a significant increase in personal growth by participating in a gap year. In taking part in a gap year, the participants could explore themselves, which aided their growth as individuals. Participants in the study reported higher self-confidence after their gap year than their self-confidence level after high school. According to the participants, their gap year transformed them into more mature, independent, and experienced individuals at ease with their identity and individuality. Additionally, they became more adept at coping with uncertainty in their future. As a result, gap years enabled participants to form a more distinct identity through self-reflection. Participants were able to define their career interests and preferences through this process. During a gap year, individuals can gain life experience, develop new skills, experiment with independence, build their own identity, get exposure to various vocational and social contexts, and consolidate their sense of self through self-reflection. Together with one another, these factors affect a person’s sense of identity in themselves and their careers (Rabie & Naidoo, 2016).

According to Heath’s (2007) content analysis of gap year literature, in return for their investment, participants benefit from time to self-reflect, allowing them to make better decisions about their future careers. Interest continues on a global scale as nations such as Australia, New Zealand,

Germany, Japan, and South Africa show increases in promotion and participation (Chan, 2015; Clermont, 2012; Curtis, 2014; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; O'Shea, 2014; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016).

"The career decision-making process is complex, with multiple interacting factors influencing an individual's career choice" (Coetzee & Bester, 2009:621). The benefits associated with a gap year, specifically increased personal growth and maturity, largely contribute to students' confidence to engage with their personal and career development. Nieman's (2013) findings suggest that gap year students appear to be more confident about their choice of study and career goals. Thus, one of the significant implicit outcomes of a gap year is students' degree of career maturity.

The findings of a study performed by Flowers (2015) detailed the pivotal events and elements of structured gap year programs, evidence on the effects of personal growth, and barriers to accessing a structured gap year program. Participants in structured gap year programs reported they had built resilience, developed self-direction, developed relationships, found independence, and defined their passion during their gap year.

2.4.2.3 Skills development

The acquisition of soft skills is crucial to employment in the modern workplace. By participating in a gap year, individuals can develop soft skills that they did not necessarily acquire during their high school education (Heath, 2007). This includes self-development and self-enrichment, building social values and community spirit, and enabling students to better adapt to university life and decrease their chances of dropping out (Qian, 2013). As Jones (2004) points out, employers are often interested in recruiting former gap year participants because their soft skills and life skills are highly demanded.

It has been confirmed that gap years can help participants become more mature and independent. It can also allow participants to acquire these soft skills and the cultural capital needed in the modern work environment (Coetzee & Bester, 2009). Furthermore, it assists participants in better adapting to the work world, improving their personal status (King, 2011), and ultimately enhancing their employability at work (Heath, 2007).

Employers tend to employ job seekers who participated in gap year practice. It has been confirmed that employers value specific soft skills and survival skills. A survey by site gapyear.com in 2011 indicates that 63% of the human resources managers in the UK believe that participating in gap year travel, volunteer work or learning job skills help individuals perform better. On the other hand, students who participated in gap year are more mature, independent, attentive and creative than other graduates (Guomei & Wei, 2017).

2.5 Challenges in the gap year industry

2.5.1 Introduction

It is reiterated that although previous studies have revealed the perceptions and benefits of taking a gap year in South Africa, very little research has been performed on structured gap year programs and the challenges thereof, and consequently, literature is limited. However, this does not negate the importance of researching challenges within the gap year industry but should rather motivate.

Young people who complete high school successfully may encounter a range of options and opportunities. It is evident that this range may be bounded by the levels of capital – economic, cultural, and social – to which a student has had access. In their study of high school students' expectations about completing a four-year university degree, Johnson and Reynolds (2013:825) found that educational expectations were shaped significantly by socioeconomic status and that “those who lived in a two-parent family where at least one parent had a graduate/professional degree were the most likely to hold high expectations to earn a bachelor's degree”. While somewhat difficult to define, family background, habitus or social location, and social or community support are among the factors that determine what choices are available to a high school graduate. This is related, of course, to the research on delay of university entrance and leads us to consider the connection between these factors and the growing popularity of the gap year.

2.5.2 The cost associated with participating in a gap year

Funding gap years is another critical concern since gap years are a costly undertaking. Costs can include living expenses and health insurance premiums because coverage is usually unavailable through parents' plans for adult dependents who are no longer students (Frisch, 2012).

Participating in a gap year can be very expensive as cost add up quickly when taking into account the sizable amounts of program fees, housing, flights and food (Rosa, 2019).

There is a thriving marketplace of gap-year experiences, offering a wide array of working, volunteering, teaching, travelling, studying, language immersion, outdoor adventures, and personal exploration. This marketplace appears to be targeted towards, and available to, a very narrow group of young people and high school communities and do not appear to be intended for families who are likely to lack cultural capital or occupy lower socioeconomic strata (White, 2009).

Regardless of the fact that some secure sponsorship and paid work during gap years, financial constraints remain the most prominent potential drawback of taking a gap year. For example,

due to program prices and funding sources, American gap year programs tend to be exclusive. Gap year programming has materialised into a prosperous industry, but the industry relies on both students and their families to believe in the educational and developmental benefits. Gap year fairs, such as those held at Philips in Andover, Massachusetts, demonstrate this reality every winter when such fairs are routinely scheduled (USA Gap Year Fairs, 2014). The reality is that the financial ability of these families determine whether these gap year opportunities are accessible, and even though grants and benefactors fund structured gap year programs, many of them have tuitions that rival the fees of tertiary institutions and consequently lead to exclusion. Despite gap years varying in price and funding prospects (Birch & Miller, 2007; King, 2011; Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011; Stehlik, 2010), an unavoidable cost should be anticipated, and this is an increasingly important consideration within the South African gap year realm.

In addition to contributions from parents, savings, loans, sponsorships, paid work and subsistence expenses can also be cited as familiar sources of funding for a gap year (Vandome, 2002). UK gap year participants from affluent, middle-class families are often stereotyped as being entirely funded by their parents. However, in an interview with service providers, Jones (2004) found that even young people from affluent backgrounds are likely to contribute to the gap year's cost for purposes of supporting their own needs. More often than not, different types of funding sources are utilised by gap year participants in conjunction with one another.

Another published report, *The Condition of Education 2010*, looked at the rates of immediate enrolment in university by young people who had completed high school. The results show there are persistent differences in students' post-high school choices, determined by such factors as household income, level of parents' education, and race and ethnicity. According to the report, students in lower-income groups have exhibited only slight improvements in the rate of immediate enrolment in university from 1972 to 2008, despite gains overall in the percentage of students who enrolled in university immediately after completing high school. In 2008 completion rates among specifically high school graduates from low-income families lagged behind those from high-income families by 25% (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In turn, this may also be true for gap years.

Similar to their British counterparts, South African gap year participants are likely to be white and generally come from upper-middle-class families. The participants are usually inclined to travel abroad (Coetzee & Bester, 2009).

Indeed, in families where cultural, social or economic capital is lacking, these gap year programs are likely to seem less attractive because they require an additional investment of time, money, and effort, which only delays the acquisition of a degree. Children in such families, who have succeeded and are supported in their desire to go to university, particularly if the parents did not,

can be even more eager to go directly to the university and begin to prove themselves intellectually. A university degree, of course, would eventually lead to an increase in capital for that student and family. Appealing to the sensibilities and concerns of students and parents may be a goal of the gap-year programs (O'Shea, 2014).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the South African government and tertiary institutions in South Africa currently do not promote gap year programs (Nieman, 2013).

Evidentially, funding constraints are a grave frustration to both gap year participants and the growth of the gap year industry.

2.5.3 Perception of a gap year

There are many perceived disadvantages of participating in a gap year, including parents who fear that tertiary studies will not be completed, gap year participants not being granted the freedom to make their own choices, increased difficulty in adapting to tertiary education, and not finding direction in what they want to study. "Many parents feel that participants might not like to attend a tertiary education institution after a gap year" (Tenser, 2015:13). Participants who start with the first year of college after a gap year may feel out of step with their peers because of their time after they defer their entry. If they return to tertiary education at all (Tenser, 2015).

Although parents and teachers are not always supportive when it comes to taking a gap year due to the fear of students not returning to studies, the American Gap Year Association reported that 90% of students who delayed college for a year returned to their studies at the end of it (Dickler, 2017).

2.6 Opportunities in the gap year industry

2.6.1 Introduction

As with the challenges within the gap year industry, very little research has been performed on structured gap year programs and the opportunities within the gap year industry, and consequently, literature is limited. However, this does not negate the importance of researching opportunities within the gap year industry but should motivate.

A gap year has the potential to prepare young adults effectively for higher education, so South African school leavers must be made aware of the benefits of a gap year. This is where schools and universities can play a pivotal role (Nieman, 2013).

2.6.2 COVID-19 pandemic

There is undoubtedly something unorthodox about taking a gap year. When you "fall behind", it becomes a scarlet letter, with the gap year being a risk you may have to postpone college indefinitely. However, a global pandemic in 2020 re-shaped the idea of what constitutes an acceptable path to adulthood. Jane Sarouhan, the co-founder of J2Guides, a gap year counselling company, stated that "The isolation and lack of social engagement are driving people to consider a gap year". Nina Hoe Gallagher, director of research and evaluation of ImpactED at the University of Pennsylvania, confirmed that "the (university) has seen a 300% increase in gap year students for incoming freshmen," she further added that "these are all pre-professional, Ivy League kids, but with the pandemic, there's this big increase, and it is becoming more acceptable, even in more rigorous academic environments." Foundry10, a research firm, surveyed students for 2020-21 and found that 16% of them took gap years, as opposed to 3% in 2018 (Patel, 2020).

2.6.3 Diversification of gap years

Heath (2007) advocated for diversifying studies and examined the increasing popularity of post-university year programs and career breaks among young people between 20 and early 30 years old.

Based on Heath's findings, the research team considers the potential of studying other forms of a gap year to enhance our understanding of the ever-changing and growing concept.

2.6.4 Attracting international markets

Gap years can take place domestically and abroad. Participating in a gap year abroad is promoted to broaden one's mind and become a global citizen as it allows participants to interact with other cultures (Snee, 2013; Soderman & Snead, 2008).

In recent years, international 'gap year' travel programs and policies have been growing due to the valorisation of cross-cultural understanding and the pursuit of global citizenship. Gap year travel is uncritically marketed by governments, and the industry alike, as a path to developing inclusive, global citizenship-related ideologies (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2011).

According to Lyons and Wearing (2008), the ability to travel to developing countries is cited as one of the primary motivations for taking a gap year. Some of the most accessible developing countries are South Africa and Australia. The attraction of international participants is consequently and undoubtedly a significant opportunity within the South-African realm.

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the relevant literature for this study, which included defining the gap year and the gap year program and the value thereof. In addition, the motivating factors for participating in a gap year, challenges faced by the industry and opportunities available were discussed. The methodology used in this study is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

“When you are at that intersection in the road and you’ve got two paths to go down, because of the impact of certain people in your life, you’re able to choose the right path.”

Jason Witten

3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the research methodology and presents the study's findings. A qualitative study design was used to explore the value of gap years and the challenges and opportunities associated with students and managers within this sphere. Qualitative methodology is an excellent technique for exploratory research that emphasises the depth of understanding and the deeper meaning of human experience and aims to generate theoretically richer, albeit more tentative, observations (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

This study used the phenomenological approach, which allowed for a deeper understanding of whether gap year programs are beneficial as an alternative to enrolling directly in higher education after high school. This chapter presents the research approach, research design, target population, sampling, data collection methods, and data analysis methods utilised within the study. This chapter furthermore presents the fundamental ethical considerations of the study.

Several decisions impacted the research regarding the limited amount of research available on gap year institutions in South Africa.

This chapter also provides details of the themes and sub-themes elicited from the data analysis performed by the researcher.

3.2 Research approach

According to Salkind (2018), there are three approaches to research: qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research. “Qualitative research yields non-numeric data and focuses on words, images, text rather than numbers in data collection. As a research strategy, it is inductive and subjective, constructivist and/or interpretivist” (Quinlan *et al.*, 2019:402). Thus, it emphasises words rather than quantification in data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Creswell and Guetterman (2020:681), “quantitative research is an inquiry approach for describing trends and explaining the relationship among variables found in the literature”. The research yields information that is numerical in nature (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Mixed method research combines

qualitative and quantitative research and integrates the findings (Creswell, 2015; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Quinlan *et al.*, 2019).

The qualitative research approach was used for the study. The study first investigates the gap year industry's role, challenges, and opportunities. Secondly, the study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of the students regarding participating in a structured gap year. This was done to uncover the value of participating in a gap year. Thus, a qualitative study was deemed appropriate since it allowed the researcher to have in-depth interviews with gap year managers and students who completed a structured gap year program.

3.3 Gathering of data

3.3.1 Research design

This study utilised the qualitative approach as this approach seeks to understand participants' perceptions within their natural setting. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), a qualitative research approach is a methodology that aims to build on theory and tries to establish the implications of a phenomenon. Qualitative research is used to understand a research phenomenon from its natural setting (Babbie, 2017). This is achieved through questions ascertaining why events occur or why things are that way; therefore, interviews were conducted in this study. A qualitative study of an area where little is known allows for unexpected or new responses, making it ideal for this exploratory study.

Moreover, this methodology allows the researcher to identify themes and patterns across the data set. Since the results of qualitative research are descriptive and allow for analytical generalisations, this method is useful in this research as the study aims to describe the value of taking a structured gap year, such as preparing students for higher education and also to explore the opportunities and challenges experienced by the managers of gap year institutions.

The research design presents a blueprint of how the study was conducted. This study used an exploratory research design (Akhtar, 2016). This research design is undertaken when little is known about a phenomenon, and the study seeks to help create an understanding of the final research design (Shajahan, 2014). Therefore, the explanatory research design is a research design that seeks to generate knowledge on a subject that is not known and aspires to serve as a base for further studies to be conducted upon (Berg, 2001). This is the research premise as the study investigates the value of taking a structured gap year to essentially prepare students for higher education or develop educational readiness and improve decision-making skills, which walks hand in hand with maturity and personal development. As the gap year industry offers positive results, the study also touches on the challenges and opportunities to grow. Thus, the exploratory research design answers the research questions of the value, opportunities and

challenges of gap year institutes and the experience of gap year takers and their impact on their academic performance and personal development.

Since every study is conducted to gather new knowledge, research is an important part of the research philosophy. According to Neuman (2014), a philosophy is ideal for gathering knowledge about a particular phenomenon. A phenomenological approach was employed to learn about gap-year students' experiences in a gap year program and the impact on their tertiary studies and also the experiences of the managers and coaches in terms of the values, opportunities and challenges of gap year institutes. Phenomenology allows for research of maximum depth into a largely unstudied area of the student experience and managers' perception; therefore, the method was chosen because it allows an investigation into the experiences of a small group of gap year students and managers of such institutions (Akhtar, 2016). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), phenomenological studies focused on participants' lived experience, that is, the participants' recollections and interpretations of those experiences, mainly concerned with generating meanings and gaining insights into those phenomena. To achieve such understanding, Patton (2002) explains that in-depth interviews should be conducted with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest rather than people with second hand experience. Kumar (2014) believes that phenomenological philosophy is based on the idea that to generate comprehensive knowledge on a certain idea, the best way is to understand meanings from the research participants themselves. Accordingly, Flick (2016), a phenomenological assumption, seeks to set aside preconceived notions and biases about human experiences, feelings and responses to a particular situation. In this regard, the study utilised a phenomenological study to understand the impact of a structured gap year program on tertiary students.

3.3.2 Setting and population

Flick (2016) defines a target population as “a set of elements that serves as units on analysis in accordance with the subject under inquiry.” This is in line with Creswell (2014), who defines the target population as including a group of individuals from which the researcher seeks to draw inferences and conclusions. The target population within this study are managers from gap year institutions established for more than two years in South Africa and students between the ages of 18 and 26 who completed a gap year program of 6 to 12 months. The research sample was limited to South African students that utilised gap year institutions and managers of gap year institutions.

For this study, the participants were limited to seven gap year institutions; Equilibria School of Life, My Best Gap Year, Warriors Academy, AEL, Target Life, Iala and Victory Gap Year.

The seven gap year Institutions are explained below:

- Equilibria School of Life is a Christian based gap year institution located in Northcliff, Johannesburg, South Africa. It offers career guidance, fitness, Christian faith-based fundamentals and life skills programs for 10 months.
- My Best Gap Year is a personal development focused institution located in Waterkloof Glen, Pretoria East, South Africa. It offers various learning modules and job shadowing experiences for nine months.
- Warriors Academy is located in Magoebaskloof, Limpopo, South Africa. It offers a variety of programs, including corporate programs, instructor training and adventure activities. It generally provides programs that are either seven weeks, one year, or two years in duration.
- Target Life is also a personal development institution that focuses on personal mentorship located in Silverton, Pretoria East, South Africa. It offers a variety of learning modules and personalized career and life guidance.
- International Academy for Leadership through Adventure (Iala) is an adventure-based leadership gap year. They are located in Stil Bay, Western Cape, South Africa. They offer a range of adventures and travelling aspects.
- Victory Gap Year is a Christian faith-based gap year located in Jeffrey's Bay, Eastern Cape, South Africa. This gap year institution focused on equipping and empowering students to advance the kingdom of God.
- AEL is an academic gap year focused on the conservation of ecology. It also has an adventure aspect to the program. They are located in Upington, Northern Cape, South Africa.

Although there are some overlap in the offerings by these institutions, none of them has the same program. This allows for depth and variety to the study population that can more accurately describe the phenomenon of a structured gap year program in South Africa.

3.3.3 Sampling

The study only included the findings of students that utilised gap year institutions. However, it is impossible to study the whole population and therefore, the study focused on a sample proportionate enough to generalise the target population. There are two types of sampling within research methods: probability sampling and non-probability sampling, and non-probability sampling methods were used in this study.

3.3.3.1 Non- Probability Sampling

Since this study also intends to do a qualitative study on the benefits and challenges of taking a structured gap year in South Africa and the impact on personal development and academic performance, non-probability sampling was utilised. According to Neuman (2014), non-probability sampling entails that the sampling process is determined by the availability of the participants in a unit of analysis they seek to study. Non-probability samples are helpful for quick and affordable studies, case studies, qualitative research, pilot studies, and developing hypotheses for future research (Babbie, 2017). This research, therefore, utilises purposive sampling in which the researcher chooses the participants in the study based on their knowledge and the relevance thereof to the research problem. Purposive sampling was also employed to select gap year institutes in different locations and with various programs for the study.

3.3.3.2 Research questions

This research study intends to ascertain the experiences of the structured gap year participants before and after the gap year.

- Firstly, the study attempted to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the participant before, during and after taking a gap year to establish the value of participating in the same. In particular, what the motivating factors or influences were that prompted the decision of the students to participate in a structured gap year program.
- Secondly, the study sought to ascertain whether the experiences and skills gained during the gap year were perceived to impact the academic performance and development of the students and what the role of a gap year is.
- Lastly, the study attempted to establish what the challenges in the gap year industry are, and in addition hereto, what opportunities are available to the market.

3.3.4 The researcher

As the researcher may influence or impart bias during a qualitative research study, it is essential to present the background and beliefs of the researcher. The researcher worked in business development for five years and held a Bachelor of Commerce in Forensic Accountancy. The experiences of the researcher may have influenced the research topic choice. However, research questions and the criteria used to select participants were developed independently through an extensive literature review to identify the knowledge gap. The researcher had no direct relationship with any participants that may present a conflict of interest or imparted bias on the research study.

3.3.5 Participants

This study was limited to only 19 participants. From the 19, 7 were managers of gap year institutes while 12 participants were students. Choosing a smaller sample size allowed the researcher to analyse fewer participants more in-depth to answer the research questions more comprehensively (Patton, 2002). Participants were invited according to the following criteria:

- Identifying three gap year institutions in different geographical areas;
- Identifying gap year institutions with varying types of gap year programs to ensure representation of a wide range of gap-year experiences among participants; and
- Identifying at least one to two students from each of the seven different institutions who went on to pursue tertiary education.

After identifying gap year institutions that fit the essential criteria, calls were made to connect with these institutions and explain the study's nature. Twelve companies responded favourably to the conversation. At this point, location, the type of gap year programs on offer, and the number of past participants in contact with the institution were used to determine the final seven gap year institutions. Afterwards, permission to work with these institutions managers and contact students from their database who attended a gap year program between 2014 and 2018 was requested.

After obtaining verbal permission, an email was sent to each manager and student explaining the objectives and purpose of the study and obtaining written permission (Appendix C) by the managers from the gap year institutions and the students. This allowed the gap year institutions to maintain the confidentiality of their students by not disclosing names or contact information directly to the researcher. Interested students then responded to the researcher with their contact information. Calls were made to establish a connection with the participant and ask the screening questions to confirm that they participated in a structured gap year program and pursued tertiary studies after their gap year. All nineteen participants extended letters of gratitude (twelve students and seven managers). An individual consent form explaining that the study was voluntary, confidential, and had no monetary compensation was sent via email for the selected participants to sign (Appendix C). Thereafter, details regarding the nature of the interview (face-face or telephonically), the location, and the time of the interview were discussed and agreed upon by the researcher and each participant.

3.3.6 Data collection strategy

Primary data was collected in this study. Since this is a qualitative study, semi-structured interviews, where the researcher has a predetermined list of questions but can probe further to follow up on an issue that the researcher seeks clarity on, were used.

3.3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

Creswell (2014) stated that semi-structured interviews are relevant as a data collection tool when the subject matter is still unknown and when the research seeks to offer detailed perceptions from the participant's perspective on a particular phenomenon. It is within this perspective that this study utilised semi-structured interviews in a bid to understand the impact of structured gap year programs.

In a semi-structured interview (also known as the interview guide approach), “an interview guide allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds” (Magaldi & Berler, 2020:161). The interviewer is free to probe and follow the participant's lead, allowing for a natural conversation. The researcher can anticipate the main questions but is not limited to asking these in a specific order or format. According to Quinlan *et al.* (2019:402), “a semi-structured interview is used when the researcher knows, broadly speaking, what aspects or elements of the research should or could be observed”. Adams (2015:498) identify the following as being important aspects of a semi-structured interview:

- After customary pleasantries, start with a few extra easy or even throwaway questions to start a comfortable chat.
- Rapport is established.
- The order of questions is not essential. In this case, turn to more directly relevant but non-threatening questions next.
- When introducing critique questions, consider putting positive inquiries first.
- Turn to drawbacks, disadvantages, disappointments, or areas that need improvements while taking a neutral stance.
- The most potentially embarrassing, controversial, or awkward questions should come at the end. The interviewer may probe interesting areas that arise because the interviewer at this stage is no longer a stranger.
- The interview can now ask demographic questions if any.

- To end on a substantive note, consider concluding by returning to a short, easy, program-related question, perhaps about the future.

In this study, open-ended questions were prepared, and face-to-face interviews were conducted. The use of an interview environment is the most appropriate format for this age group, as social interaction tends to compel this age group into more meaningful contributions than isolated or distanced communication (Arnett, 2000).

The semi-structured interviews used in this study as the research instrument is presented in Appendices A. It was organised as follows:

Section A: Demographic Details

This section detailed the important demographic details such as age, gap year institution attended, and participants' home language.

Section B: Interview guide

This second section detailed the experiences of gap year takers. This section was divided into five sections that explored the participants' experiences before the gap year, during the gap year, at the end of the gap year, and the effect it had on the participants during higher education. Lastly, the interview sought to understand the participants' perceptions of the gap year.

3.3.7 Data collection/fieldwork

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the interview guide in Appendices. Interviews were conducted at a suitable time that ensured participants' comfort and privacy. Permission to record the interviews with a tape recorder was requested beforehand.

3.3.7.1 Individual interviews

Interviewing is an established primary method of gathering data in phenomenological studies. Researchers recognize that interviews “vary in the degree to which they are structured” (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007:104). Because I was interested in comparing data across the twelve student participants and seven manager participants, the same semi-structured interview protocol was used with each participant. As stated by Creswell (2014), a semi-structured interview is used when the researcher wants to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's beliefs or experiences of a specific phenomenon when the subject matter is still unknown.

The semi-structured interviews, presented in Appendix A and B, used in this study, allow the researcher freedom to probe and follow the participant's lead. Unstructured interviews would also

not be effective for this study because they could lead to the collection of unwanted information since neither the interviewer nor the interviewees would be guided in their questions and responses (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). The individual interviews took place between September and November 2019. As such, ten face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Each interview lasted between 35 and 45 mins. When the interviews were conducted, audio recordings were used to capture the participants' responses. An audio recording was used, as video recording would not add meaningful, additional data as in the case of a sensitive or emotional reflection. The audio recordings were then transcribed to review and analyse the students' perspectives.

3.3.7.2 Data management

All hard copy data of this study were stored in locked data storage cupboards. Digital data, including digital audio tapes of the interviews, were held on password-protected computers. Access to this data was granted to the research team. Hard copy and digital data will be stored for five years at NWU. Thereafter the data would be destroyed responsibly according to NWU policy.

3.3.8 Data analysis

After data has been collected, it has to be analysed. This process includes data analysis, measurement, and interpretation (Anderson, 2017). Firstly, descriptive statistics (e.g. medians) were used to compare the proportions of individuals in each group with particular characteristics (Afifi *et al.*, 2004). There are different types of data analysis utilised in research. Amongst these are discourse analysis and content analysis. Discourse analysis is the technique used to interpret vocal or written data, sign language, or any significant semiotic event (Babbie, 2017). Content analysis is a data analysis technique used to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding data presented in the form of textual material (Leedy & Omrod, 2019).

Since this study has used qualitative research methods, thematic analysis was utilised. Thematic analysis is a malleable data analysis approach governed by a specific philosophical orientation (Bryman & Bell, 2014). This coding process focused on recognising patterns such as commonalities and anomalies within the dataset. The identified occurring themes were analysed and reported. Although the analytic procedure is not rigid, "the general analysis of a transcript follows four steps: getting familiar with the data, identifying themes emerging from the data, clustering the occurring themes, and constructing a summary table of the themes" (King & Horrocks, 2011:209).

After transcribing the audio recordings, each participant's transcript was reread to familiarise the researcher with the interview again. From this, words or phrases that captured the participants'

perceptions were extracted as codes. Statements that were off-topic and not relatable to the research questions were not removed. Similar codes about the participants' experiences were organised into categories. These categories were further grouped into major themes and subthemes (Agresti, 2007). This process was repeated to align the codes and categories to themes. After this procedure, some statements had to be reallocated to another theme. The themes are patterns across the data sets that describe the gap year phenomenon. The themes that emerged after several rounds of analysis are presented in Table 3.1. Saturation was reached when no new codes could be extracted from the data. Further details about the themes are presented in Chapter 4.

Table 3-1: Major themes and subthemes of the study from managers and coaches

Themes	Sub-themes
Value	Bridging the gap between Matric and University
	Recreational Activities
	Skills Development
	Personal Development of the Youth
	Career Guidance
	Educational Advancement
Opportunities	Collaboration with institutions outside of the gap year industry
	Financial support by the government to both gap years and students
	Adaptability of gap year program
	Increase awareness/marketing of gap year
	Personal development opportunities
	Collaboration within the industry
	Establishment of a regulatory body
	Infiltrating international market to attract more students
	Positive impact of COVID 19 on the gap year industry
	Establishment of networking platform in the gap year industry
	Leadership development opportunities
	Conversion to non-profit organization
	Diversification of gap year program

Themes	Sub-themes
	Diversification of students
	Need for government support
	Opportunities in gap year market
Challenges	Financial resources/component/restraint
	Parents' perception of a gap year
	The value of gap years are not clear to students
	Awareness of gap years
	The COVID-19 pandemic
	Marketing of a gap year
	The intimacy of the gap year program and the fears surrounding the impact that expansion will have hereon
	No Regulatory Body with rules that gap year institutions should adhere to
	Problematic nature of the terminology used to describe the industry "Gap Year".
Advice to other gap years	Collaboration with other gap year institutions
	Focus on own a niche and align the curriculum with mission and vision
	Establish intellectual property
	Ensure all-round development of students
	Flexibility of program
	Forge relationships with parents and students
	Good personal relationship with students
	Skill development for staff members

Table 3-2: Major themes and subthemes of the study from students' interviews

Themes	Sub-themes
Gap year Motivators	Influencers
	Career uncertainty
Skills acquisition	Life skills
	Practical Skills
Career choice	Exploring career opportunities
	Practical experience
Adjustment to higher education	The transition from High school to tertiary studies

	Self-management
Gap year program outlook	Expectation
	Recommendations

3.3.9 Reliability and validity

3.3.9.1 Reliability

The term “reliability” embodies the replicability or repeatability of the research study results or observations. Reliability is the extent to which results accurately represent the observed realities of the researcher for the population under study. It is considered reliable if the study results can be reproduced under similar research conditions (Babbie, 2017; Salkind, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). However, different data can be generated by researchers studying the same phenomena and still be considered reliable accounts of the researcher’s observed realities.

In this study, the research instrument of choice was a semi-structured interview. In addition, only one individual, the researcher, collected all the data. Results derived from semi-structured interviews on a once-off population in time are not intended to be replicable when applied to other contexts since they reflected reality when they were collected in a situation that may be subject to change (Marshall & Rossmann, 2006). However, Smit (2001) suggests that, when trying to ensure the reliability of a qualitative study, different researchers might not produce the same data and results but would agree that the findings make sense based on the data gathered. To ensure reliability, it is essential that the assumptions of this study, discussed in chapter 1 and how they affect the study, are acknowledged. The use of a semi-structured questionnaire in this study provides a consistent manner to collect data and generate results.

3.3.9.2 Validity

Validity in a qualitative study is the extent to which a research instrument truly measures what it claims to measure. In order to address the validity of the study, the selection of the participants, the reduction of bias, the depth of the data, and the objectivity of the researcher are taken into consideration (Cohen *et al.*, 2004). The validity of a qualitative study can be considered at five levels: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalisability, and evaluative validity (Maxwell, 1992).

Descriptive validity

Descriptive validity ensures the accuracy of their reporting of their observations. It can be defined as the extent to which the participant's perceptions are accurately accounted for by the researcher

(Maxwell, 1992). In this study, the researcher avoided making inferences during the collection and analysis of data. Moreover, participants were encouraged to check data collected from their interviews to ensure no misconducted meanings.

Interpretive validity

Interpretive validity refers to maintaining the meaning or beliefs of the participant (Maxwell, 1992). In this study, semi-structured interviews that allowed the researcher to probe further into the participant's experience regarding their gap year were utilised as the tool to collect data. Thus the understanding of the phenomena was approached not from the researchers' perspective but the participants' perspective.

Theoretical validity

Theoretical validity looks at the theory's legitimacy applied to the study (Maxwell, 1992). Therefore, the researcher did an extensive literature review before formulating the study to apply a theoretical understanding that is truly applicable to the students' experiences.

Generalisations

Generalisations refer to how developed theories can be extended to scenarios other than the one under study (Maxwell, 1992). However, Schurink (1998) states that the nature of qualitative research is inductive and does not seek to generalise but rather to understand a specific phenomenon as experienced by the participants. Therefore the suggestion that this research is generalisable to other students or groups of students should be carefully considered, and the degree of applicability should be noted.

Evaluative validity

Evaluative validity refers to the ability of the researcher to appraise their own study (Maxwell, 1992). In this study, the researcher maintained objectivity. In addition, the findings of this study were examined about the other results and existing literature on the experiences of gap year takers.

3.4 Ethical consideration

To be reliable and valid, a study has to meet the research objectives. Still, more importantly, ethical considerations such as informed consent, no harm to participants, confidentiality, anonymity and permission have to be ensured.

Informed consent

All the participants were informed about their rights and privileges, and they understood that participation is voluntary with no compensation. Before receiving data, the researcher obtained signed consent forms from the individuals and gap year institutions (APPENDIX C). The gap year institutions were informed about the aims of this study and research process before being asked whether they would like to participate in it.

Confidentiality and privacy

The participants' privacy was ensured by only allowing the researcher to use information obtained for the purpose intended and communicated to the participant. When the participating gap year institutions were initially approached, they were assured that confidentiality would be maintained and all identifying information would be removed from the data.

Deception

At no stage in the research process were the participants deceived about the purpose of this research, and the aims of this research were discussed with each participant before the research process commenced. The results of this research were made available to the participants for their perusal before being published.

Harm to participants

The participants were informed that they would not be harmed by participating in this study. The researcher also minimised the possibility of emotional harm and stress could arise. No information was directly linked to any individual.

The researcher applied for ethical clearance from the North-West University (NWU) in this study. Each participant also completed a voluntary informed consent form (APPENDIX C).

Main goals achieved in ethical research:

- Ensuring that people participate voluntarily in the study;
- Making peoples' comments confidential;
- Protection of people from any harm; and
- Ensuring mutual trust between researchers and people studied (Silverman, 2010).

In addition to Silverman's ethical goals, the study also aimed to comply with the ethical research policy of the NWU.

Beneficence and non-maleficence. Signifying maximizing benefit and minimizing harm requires that the research's risks must be reasonable considering anticipated benefits.

Distributive justice (equality). A fair balance of risks and benefits amongst all role-players involved in the research should reflect the principle of equality by no segment of the population being unduly burdened by harms of research or denied the benefits of knowledge derived from it.

Respect (dignity and autonomy) for research participants, signifying the opportunity for self-determination about their choices. It recognises the importance of dignity, well-being and safety interests of participants, as well as autonomy.

3.4.1 Trustworthiness

This study applied the criteria of trustworthiness suggested explicitly for qualitative research. This entails that the study is credible. According to Holloway and Wheeler (2002) and Macnee and McCab (2008), the term can be defined as the confidence placed in the truth of the research findings. Credibility requires that the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and enforces that a correct interpretation of the participants' original views has been made (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative researcher establishes rigour of the inquiry by adopting the following credibility strategies: prolonged and varied field experience, time sampling, reflexivity (field journal), triangulation, member checking, peer examination, interview technique, establishing the authority of the researcher and structural coherence (Anney, 2014). Each strategy is discussed in detail in the sub-sections below:

- i. **Prolonged engagement in field or research site:** Qualitative research data collection requires the researcher to place themselves in the participants' world (Bitsch, 2005). This enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the context of the study, which negates misrepresentations of information that might arise due to the researcher's presence in the field. The longer the researcher's time in the field, the greater understanding of participants' culture and context (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).
- ii. **Use of peer debriefing:** According to Guba (1981), peer debriefing provides inquirers with the opportunity to test their growing insights and to expose themselves to searching questions (Guba, 1981:85). For this study, academic staff will give professional guidance, and feedback from peers will also be encouraged to improve the quality of the findings.

- iii. **Triangulation:** “To gain corroborating evidence, this strategy uses multiple and different methods, investigators, sources and theories” (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007:239). Triangulation implies integrating data from various methods and sources of information (Carter *et al.*, 2014). This assists the researcher to reduce bias, and it cross-examines the integrity of participants’ responses. The three triangulation techniques that will be used in this study are:
- **Investigator triangulation** supports the integrity of the results by using multiple researchers to investigate the same problem, which brings about different perceptions.
 - **Triangulation/informants triangulation** uses different sources of data or research instruments, such as interviews, focus group discussion or participant observation, or utilising different informants to enhance the quality of the data from another source.
 - **Methodological triangulation** uses different research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).
- iv. **Member checks:** This strategy also strengthens the quality of qualitative findings. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This is the second most important method that will be used to ensure credibility. Member checks mean that the data and interpretations are continuously tested as they are derived from members of various audiences and groups from which data is solicited (Guba, 1981). Researchers must include respondents' voices in the analysis and interpretation of the data. The purpose of doing member checks is to eliminate researcher bias when analysing and interpreting the results. This aspect allows interviewees to verify the correctness of data captured and provide additional information where necessary. Documentation of the research process will be made available to the study recipients. This will be the records of the entire research process, following the recommendations to enhance rigour (Ryan *et al.*, 2007).
- v. **Negative Case Analysis:** Negative case analysis is when data emerging from the inquiry contradicts the researcher’s expectations (Bitsch, 2005). If this happens during the investigation, the researcher is required to conduct a negative case analysis of the cases emerging from the study. Reporting negative cases improves the study's

credibility because the researcher accounts for the contradiction that emerged from the data, which could provide a plausible alternative explanation.

- vi. **Persistent Observation:** “Persistent observation poses the question as to whether the researcher or the research team have done an in-depth study to gain detail” (Bitsch, 2005:83). Persistent observation helps discover participants’ qualities and unusual characteristics.

3.4.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents – it is the interpretive equivalent of generalisability (Bitsch, 2005; Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Bitsch (2005:85), “the researcher facilitates the transferability judgment by a potential user through the thick description and purposeful sampling”. This means that when the researcher provides a detailed description of the enquiry and participants are selected purposively, it facilitates the transferability of the inquiry.

- **Provide thick description:** According to Li (2004), thick description enables judgments about how well the research context fits other contexts, thick descriptive data, i.e. a rich and extensive set of details concerning methodology and context, should be included in the research report.
- **Do theoretical/Purposive sampling:** Purposive sampling is the technique mainly used in naturalistic inquiry studies and is defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, or institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study’s questions (Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

3.4.3 Dependability

According to Bitsch (2005:86), dependability refers to the “stability of findings over time”. Dependability involves participants evaluating the findings and the interpretation and recommendations of the study to make sure that they are all supported by the data received from the informants of the study (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Dependability is established using an audit trail, a code-recode strategy, stepwise replication, triangulation and peer examination or iterator comparisons (Ary *et al.*, 2010; Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Krefting, 1991; Schwandt *et al.*, 2007).

- **An audit trail:** An audit trail involves examining the inquiry process and product to validate the data, whereby a researcher accounts for all the research decisions and activities to show

how the data were collected, recorded and analysed (Bowen, 2009; Li, 2004). For an auditor to conduct a thorough audit trail, the following documents should be kept for cross-checking the inquiry process: raw data, interview and observation notes, documents and records collected from the field, test scores and others (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

- **Stepwise replication:** Stepwise replication is a qualitative research data evaluation procedure where two or more researchers analyse the same data separately and compare the results (Chilisa & Preece, 2005).
- **Code-recode strategy:** The code-recode strategy involves the researcher coding the same data twice, giving one or two weeks gestation period between each coding. The results from the two codings are compared to see if the results are the same or different (Chilisa & Preece, 2005).
- **Peer examination:** Peer examination, in principle, is no different from the member checks strategy employed to enhance the credibility of the inquiry (Bitsch, 2005; Krefting, 1991).

3.4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how the results of an inquiry could be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). "Confirmability is concerned with establishing that data and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer's imagination but are clearly derived from the data" (Tobin & Begley, 2004:392). Studies suggest that confirmability of qualitative inquiry is achieved through an audit trail, reflexive journal and triangulation (Bowen, 2009; Koch, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Bowen (2009), an audit trail offers visible evidence from process and product that the researcher did not simply find what they set out to find.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"Sometimes, it's important to work for that pot of gold. But other times it's essential to take time off and to make sure that your most important decision in the day simply consists of choosing which color to slide down on the rainbow."

Douglas Pagels

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented the methodology used to obtain the data. This chapter aims to deliver the in-depth interviews conducted with the managers and students. The chapter presents the managers' results and demographic information, their views on exploring the value, opportunities, and challenges of gap year institutions in South Africa. The students' findings will then be presented, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the results.

4.2 Central themes

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the thematic approach was used in data analysis and the themes are shown diagrammatically in Figure 4.1.

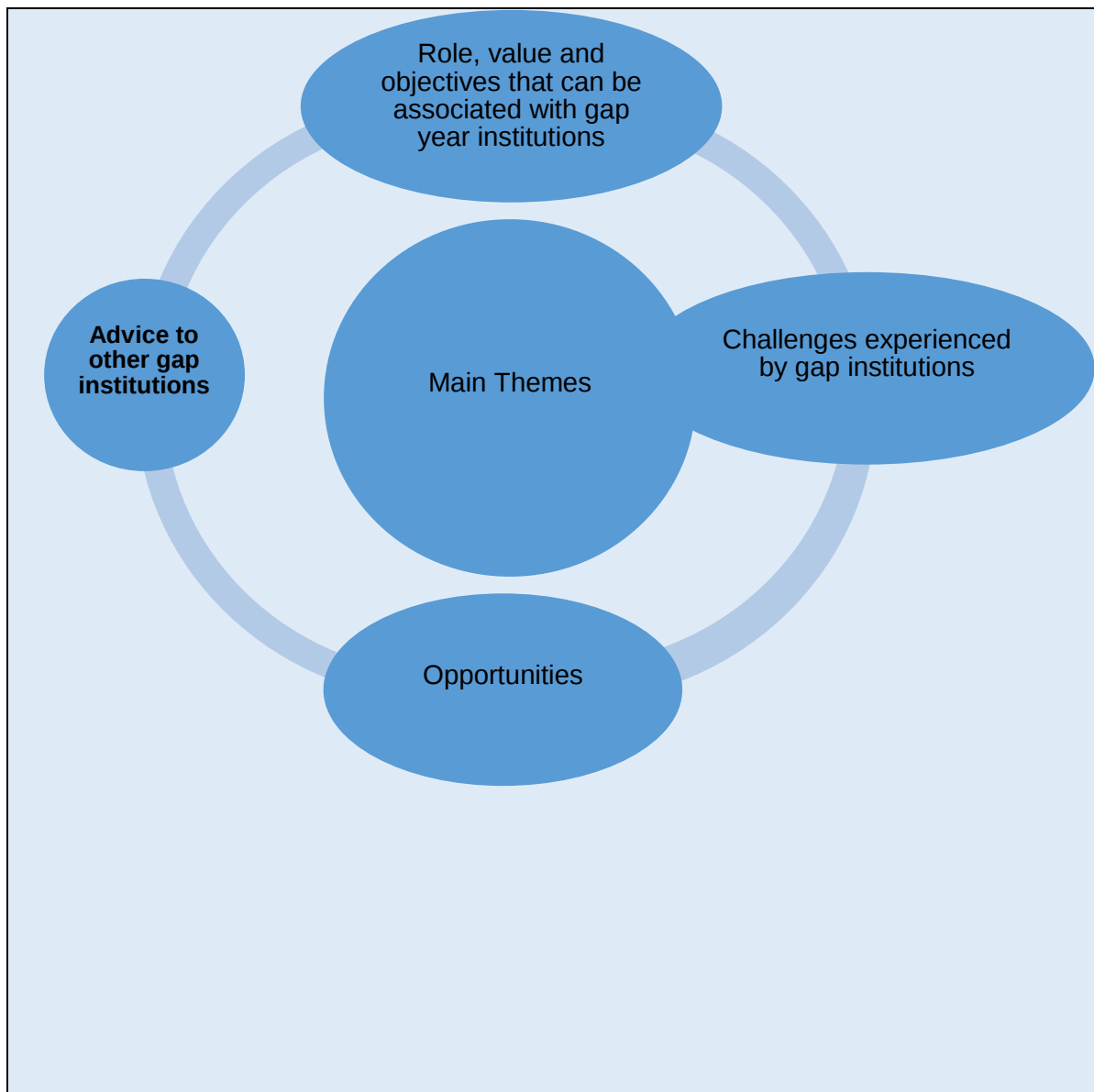


Figure 4-1: Main themes for the study

There were three main themes: role, values, and objectives associated with gap year institutes, challenges experienced by gap year institutes, and opportunities. The researcher rounded off the session by indicating any interviewers' advice to other gap year institutes. The findings from the managers and the students will be discovered in the following sections.

4.3 Findings from the managers

This section aims to ascertain what managers of gap year institutions consider their role, challenges and opportunities within the industry, and advice they might give to other gap year institutions.

4.3.1 Demographic information of the managers

Seven managers participated in the study, and their profiles are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4-1: Demographic information of the managers

ID	Gender	Institution	Year institution started
P1	Male	AEL	2016
P2	Female	Equilibria School of Life	2010
P3	Male	Iala	2009
P4	Male	Target Life	2006
P5	Male	Warriors Academy	2004
P6	Female	My Best Gap Year	2014
P7	Male	Victory Gap Year	2000

Both males and females participated in the study. The institutions that participated were the Academy for Environmental Leadership SA (AEL), Equilibria School of Life, International Academy for Leadership through Adventure (Iala), Target Life, Warriors Academy, My Best Gap Year, and Victory Gap Year. All of the institutions have been in existence for five years or more. AEL is the youngest of these institutions, with five years of accommodation for gap year students. My Best Gap Year has been in existence for seven years. Equilibria School of Life for eleven years, Iala and has been operating for twelve years, Target Life for fifteen years, Warriors Academy for seventeen years-, and Victory Gap Year, the oldest, for twenty-one years. Therefore, the institutions were credible and reputable sources to explore the values, opportunities, and challenges experienced by gap year institutions.

4.3.2 Inception of the institution

The participants were asked to indicate how their institution started. Several matters were covered in this question, such as who the institution's founder was, the involvement of the managers within the institution, the programme offerings of gap year and other gap year institutions in existence.

4.3.2.1 Founder of the institution

One of the participants stated that she was motivated to enrol in the gap year institution after her daughter's passing. She realised that her child had achieved all her goals by the age of 21 with the tools and guidance she gave her, and four years later, she started My Best Gap Year. Another participant decided that whilst still studying, he wanted to work with young people, and after finishing his engineering degree, he started teaching. He also went to the army for five years,

which he describes as a period that aided his spiritual development. All of this consequent the birth of Target Life. He was quoted saying:

“When I came back, I was a teacher at a high school for seven years, but during those seven years, I started a discipleship group at our home, and we had sixty kids every Friday evening in our home.” – P4

Participant three stated that the man who started lala was the Head of Student Affairs at the University of Stellenbosch at the time of inception. Two of the other founders were university academics. About three years after opening lala, he asked the participant if he wanted to be part of it, which led him to buy the business.

According to participant two, Equilibria School of Life was started 11 years ago by a lecturer at the University of Potchefstroom. Participant seven said Victory Gap Year started in Jeffrey's Bay. The latter stated that their gap year is faith-based and that their senior pastor and his wife started the gap year as they believed it was their calling. Hereafter, the gap year was created with Victory Life Church in Jeffrey's Bay, built in 1990.

Most of the participants started the gap year as they felt they had a calling to work with young people and to equip them for their future.

4.3.2.2 Participants' involvement in the institution

Most of the participants stated that they are the institution's founders, whilst one of them said his involvement occurred because he completed his gap year with such institution at an earlier stage (in 2008) and then started working at the institution full time. Most of the participants are either owners or managers of the institution.

4.3.2.3 Programs offerings of gap years

Through the interviews conducted, the participants gave the streams available. Participant one said that conservation ecology is their main flagship and unique in the country, while participant four said they wanted the students to get rid of all their baggage. They also do career guidance and leadership training to plot the student's future with them. Participant two said they equip the students with life skills and focus on providing them with a whole comprehensive career guidance component to assist them in making the best decisions for their future.

Participants two and five talked about life component skills. Participant seven says they do CV writing, job interview preparation, teach them to change tires and work with electronics, and fundamental good life skills. He said that they have a couple of courses in personal leadership

that work with technology and its effects, including subjects such as self-discipline and the challenges that people are having due to being exposed to numerous solicited /unsolicited media sources and platforms. He also said that they have different streams focusing on musical skill development, theology within worship, videography and media, which the students can choose from. Participant seven further said that everybody goes through the core stream of faith-based teachings to learn about God and themselves and their identity.

Four participants mentioned a variety of gap years. Participant one said that in South Africa, there is no standard to comply with, there is no qualification that one needs to call themselves a gap year. Participant two said the options are endless. None of them, according to him, has got such a great comprehensive program than this one he said, *“The proof is in the pudding. It works.”* Participant three noted that the students must start to think and adapt to the environment, which is what the brain needs; the brain needs to rethink the conditions in the environment and consider the best way forward. He further said that communication skills are being developed throughout the year. His goal is to create an environment as normal as possible where the students can interact. According to Participant five, Warriors Academy has a variety of programs which include Abseiling, Camp Craft, Cliff Diving, Cycle Safari, Ebenezer Mile Swim, Hiking - Seralo And Kruger Park Hike, Mountain Biking, Cycle Workshop, Triathlon Race, The Art Of Gym, Self-Defense Course, Conservation Education at the Endangered Species and Cheetah Project, Kinyonga Reptile Centre Visit, Moholoholo Animal Rehabilitation Centre Visit, Nyani Culture Village Experience and, Fire-walking.

In this study, the gap year offerings are split into mostly adventure-based, religious-based and career guidance. All of the gap years have some form of personal growth offering as an integrated focus.

4.3.2.4 Names of other institutions

The participants were asked to give names of other gap year institutions they knew. The institutions were divided into four categories, as shown in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4-2: Names of gap year institutions

Key concept	Occurrence
• Adventure gap years	5
• Developmental gap years	3
• Faith-based gap years	3
• Academic gap years	2
Totals	13

Participant two was aware of the gap institutes Metamorpho, the Warrior Academy, AEL and the Equilibria School of Life programme.

“Equilibria program was the only one in Potchefstroom, but now that it has moved to Johannesburg, I think there will be a lot more competition going on between the institutions” –

P2

Metamorpho is a faith-based gap year; Warriors Academy is an adventure-based gap year; Environmental leadership program (AEL) is an academic-based gap year, while Equilibria is a developmental gap year. Participant four was from Target life, a developmental gap year, and knew faith-based gap years, Metamorpho, Warriors Academy and Victory Gap Year.

“I saw many gap years got like either a leadership training or media training or adventure training. And that's not what's on our heart; we want to do personal development” – P4

Participant five from Warrior Academy, an adventure gap year, was aware of Quest Africa, an adventure gap year institute and AEL, an academic gap year. Participant six from My Best Gap Year mentioned Target life, Equilibria and Warriors Academy. Participant seven from Victory Life mentioned Christian gap years, Beyond Adventures, Warriors Academy, Hillsong, and Global Leadership Summit. Christian gap years are faith-based gap years, Beyond Adventures is an adventure-based gap year, Hillsong is faith-based, and Global Leadership Summit is a developmental gap year.

“I know of a couple, to be honest. I also know about Beyond Adventures and Warriors Academy, which is more adventure focused, and then you have the Christian gap year in Pretoria. A couple of gap years are connected to churches such as Hillsong in Cape Town, more like an internship program. One that started last year does a performing arts gap year, which is really, really cool. They do plays at schools that focus on topics such as race, gender and xenophobia. The Global Leadership Summit happens every year has been happening since

the early 2000s, and it's also faith-based. It's based out of a church called Willow Creek in the US. They have host sites across South Africa and the world. It's in October every year. They usually showcase different awesome leadership initiatives within our country.” - P7

4.3.3 Role, value and objectives that can be associated with gap year institutions

The participants were asked to determine the gap year's role, value, and objectives. They came up with six key concepts, as shown in Figure 4.2 below:

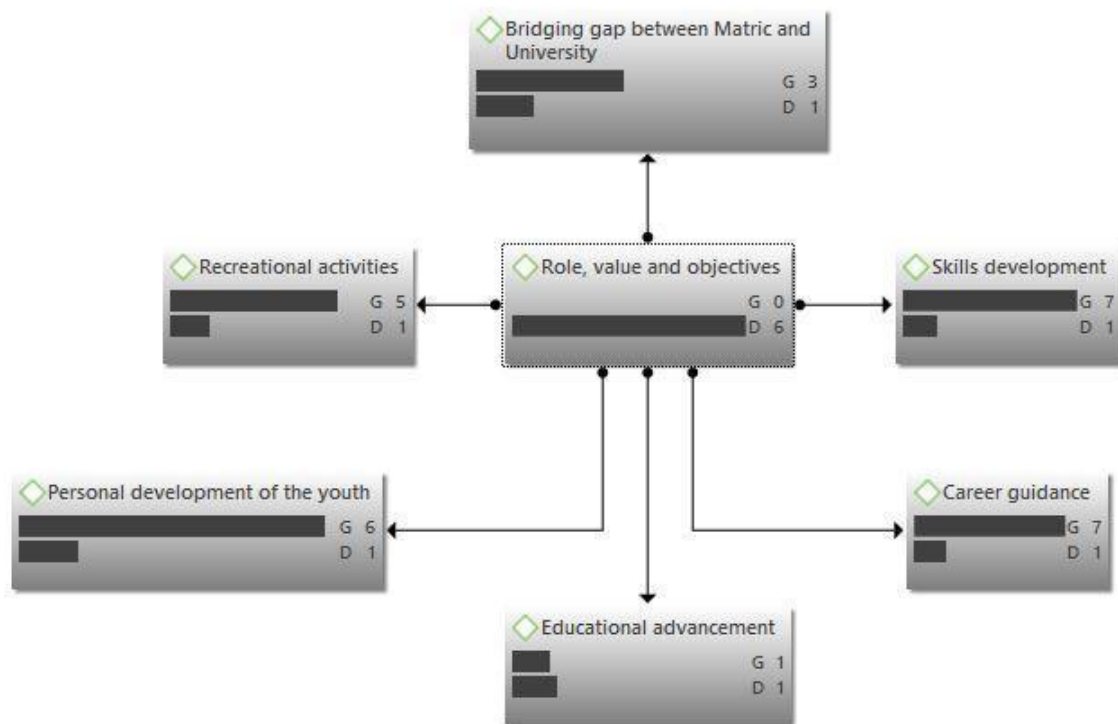


Figure 4-2: Role, value and objectives

Key: G – Grounded, which shows how many times a code has been applied and D – Density which indicates the number of links between entities

The main issues that came up were skills development, bridging the gap between Matric and University, recreational activities, personal development of the youth, career guidance and educational advancement.

Skills development

All participants mentioned “skills development” as one of the key concepts in the gap year institutions' role, value, and objectives. Participant one said that their students don't necessarily need to improve their matric marks to get into the course they want to study. Still, the institution's purpose is to prepare them for the more significant load and responsibility for their own decisions

when going to university. Participant six said that they help them to set intentions and goals and teach the students to manage their time. They created awareness because many people are not aware of what they are doing with their time and need time management to be a student. Participants two, four, five and seven indicated that the development of skills is one of the objectives of their institution.

“We want to give the students all the tools so that they can take it into the future. We want the students to find their identity and their purpose. While a lot of other gap years have a specific focus, like leadership, or maybe adventure, Target Life is equipping them for life.” - P4

“Warriors was started because Rudi and Rene realised a lack of skills taught by schools to young adults. The focus of schools is mainly on subjects’ education, but schools fall short on teaching young people skills related to overcoming challenges, dealing with emotions, self-discipline and other personal hurdles. In our opinion, this is one of the biggest reasons why so many students drop out of university” – P5

“I think we’ve seen the results right off the bat, and that’s why we haven’t strayed from the original intent, we’ve maybe had to adapt with the times, in the context of how we do things and how we approach them and align our program accordingly but the heart is still the same. We want to equip people holistically. So it’s not just spiritually, but practically, mentally, financially, emotionally, the whole spectrum. We see that many children do not really know what they want to do with their lives after finishing school. They also struggle with factors like having a sense of purpose, identity and a lack of skills.” – P7

These statements indicate that gap year institutes are meant to develop youth skills. Participant seven further shows skills development in developing the student practically and financially. Participant two said that it doesn’t matter what charity project the students choose to be involved in, but they have to raise the money themselves. This is one of the skills that they teach their students.

Participant three said that there’s no success without structure and self-discipline. This skill is taught throughout their program by incorporating it into the daily routine activities. Participant five indicated that a structured gap year program provides students with a way to explore who they are and develop essential skills needed for their personal and professional lives. Participant five mentioned that they offer soft skills like self-mastery courses focusing on emotional intelligence and fitness, community service, first-aid, public speaking workshops, trauma/tension release therapy (TRE), and career guidance workshops.

Researchers such as Guomei and Wei (2017) and Rabie and Naidoo (2016) also found that gaining life skills and developing soft skills are global motivators of taking a gap year.

Developing skills that are important for embarking on university and essential for life. Learning these skills straight out of high school is a major benefit to young adults as one can never have too many skills.

Career guidance

All participants also indicated “career guidance” in roles, values and objectives of gap year institutions. Matters that were mentioned under career guidance were personality profiling tests, direct career guidance, vocational interests, work environment orientation, students identification of interests/goals, interaction with guest speakers of different career industries, career orientation, job shadowing, youth feedback development, feedback with personality profiling and apprentice challenges.

The majority of the participants make use of aptitude tests/profiling. Participants two and seven indicated that they aim to guide the students' career.

“My generation and older people, my father, your dad, we were involved in national service. In other words, we were part of the Defense Force that gave us time to decide what we wanted to do with our career and gave us the experience of being part of the workforce. Today, young adults don't have that time to decide nor the workforce- or life- experience to make those decisions.” – P3

“In fact, if you start something, finish it before you do the next thing. A ship can change its direction as long as it's going forward. So if you don't know what to do, do the best next thing that you can do, because otherwise, you will never find direction. We spend quite a bit of time on the career guidance up until about April every year, and then the students have the rest of the year to think about it and do job shadowing and all kinds of things” – P4

“I think if people have that, then it gives them a sense of certainty, and then also teach them how to take control of the emotions, and I show them how behaviour drives emotion. So I aim to help them get direction, business acumen, confidence, public speaking, and express themselves. When they go into conversations with a parent or with other adults or businessmen is that they have the confidence to ask questions to express their thoughts and thinking, and are getting very comfortable in the, in the generational gaps that exist” – P6

Interaction with people in business was also seen to enhance youth development. Students are given a chance to talk to professionals in different industries and industries that they might consider a career choice. This gives them great insight that they might not have gotten otherwise.

“We have guests speakers from those fields that come to talk to the students” – P6

“We also do this apprentice challenge where the students give business pitches for actual businesses in Jeffrey’s Bay such as Billabong, and it was just so amazing to see them kind of like venture out and try and do something, stepping out of their comfort zone, and we create a safe place for them to fail, and I think that’s kind of cool as well and they can come, and they can try something and fail at it and be like wow you know I sucked at that and but that’s okay, I learned something about myself and that’s maybe not where I want to be or what I want to do, and then, in the end, a lot of coaching and feedback is given to make a better more informed decision about what they want to do in the following year” – P7

The statements show that the students are guided to the career by interacting with mentors, fostering responsibilities, career guidance, and apprentice challenge.

Participant seven said that students are also making career choices based on how much money they will get and not looking at the bigger picture and that they might have to follow that career for the rest of their lives. He indicated that they focus on different personality profiling tests with the students and then conduct consultations for career direction. He noted that it’s not just personality profiling but also vocational interests, identifying values, and skills and abilities to create an extensive 30-page report for the students. He then subsequently works through the information with each student.

“We equip the students with life skills, a whole comprehensive career guidance component to assist students in making those decisions” – P2

“The gap year program delivers amazing results. We help the students achieve a greater success rate with the course they choose at the end of the day. Since then, it became an absolutely amazing gap year program to be reckoned with, with which many wonderful testimonies followed. Students have been able to find the correct career and make the right decisions” – P2

Participant two also indicated that they allow the students to identify their interests, supported by participant four, who said they had developed a process that is very much connected to the founders’ personal life history. He further said that it is about identifying with other people because they resonate with people that are the same as themselves, and then they can identify the personality type. He further explained that they do the MBTI, the strength finder where they identify ten strengths, and he is also an MBTI coach and a strength coach, and they utilize about 15 different questionnaires. The students receive a whole questionnaire about passions to determine what stirs that person. Afterwards, they developed software to bring all that information onto one page and colour code it. They will look for the golden thread running through and assist the students in writing three or four themes for the lives, and then from the themes, they must

write a mission statement to say this is the general direction, these are the things that they have to do to be a fulfilled person.

The statements show that the students are being equipped with the necessary tools to make a more informed decision regarding their career choices.

Although motivators such as travel opportunities, gaining life experience and earning money are influential factors in South African students' decision to engage in a gap year, career indecision is the most significant motivator (Coetzee & Bester, 2009:618; Nieman, 2010:121).

Personal development of youth

Six participants indicated that the “personal development of the youth” is a key objective of the institution. Matters that were mentioned were: problems with youth, the world needs custodians, personal growth, development of young people, building emotional awareness, empower and equip the young generation, basic disciple, equipping them spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically, emotional intelligence, development of character, self-discipline, developing student identity, strength identification, creating support systems, character reports and development of a sense of purpose.

One of the participants stated that, firstly, the world needs more custodians to look after the environment. Another participant stated that:

“We are internationally accredited by the Gap Year Association and have won the best gap year provider for three years. Over the last 17 years, we have had students from across the globe join our program, which is focused on the personal growth and development of young people and building emotional fitness” – P5

From the above statement, it can be concluded that the institution's purpose was for the personal growth of the youth, the development of young people and building emotional fitness.

“You know we grew pretty quickly, but realize there was a real issue, in and around young people, of not having a clear purpose or a plan for their lives” – P7

Participant seven further said they mainly focus on personal growth and maturity, with a faith-based foundation. For them, it's also massively important to help them establish an identity because many young people are trying to prove something to someone instead of focusing on what would fulfil them personally. He said they spend a week with them where they talk about knowing their “why”, they focus a lot on with subject because a lot of students are trying to please their parents or they're trying to please their friends, they are trying to look cool or trying to do what is popular, they don't have a sense of identity and who they are so the gap year allow them

to discover themselves throughout the year and to become secure in who they are. He indicated that their institution also places a lot of emphasis on developing emotional intelligence. Participant five indicated that they grow emotional intelligence through adventure and experiential learning.

“18-Year-old kids that are coming out of school, they think they know everything, but they know very little about life, and they might have the knowledge but not experiential knowledge yet” –

P7

Participant six said that they also teach them to take responsibility for their mental health, spiritual health, physical health, and then they show them how to build support systems.

Participant four said that in high school, the students study all the time, they do sports and whatever everyone tells them what to do, but for once, they can sit down and figure out what they want out of life and if a gap year gives them a chance to think about the lives he feels that it is helpful. Participant six said that he shows them how to communicate confidently, receive feedback and criticism with grace, and then learn from that.

Participants one and seven mentioned personal development. Participant one indicated that they teach the students to develop themselves and understand themselves. The main reason is that the gap between school and young adulthood is too big. He said that alcohol use amongst the youth is a problem. That's the other thing they also need to manage. They need to educate the young students on the big problem worldwide. The dropout rates correlate to the use of alcohol, and the institution tries to foster accountability in the students to enjoy the freedom they have and take responsibility for their actions. After this process, they start with career guidance and plot the road ahead. He said that some students study one degree for four or five years and then end up something totally different to what they have studied for. Some might even create their own jobs, so their focus is to get the students to understand who they are and see the long-term picture.

“So it's the first time most of these students go out of the mom's house, and so just being out of your mom's house is already a learning curve. We foster a semi-secured environment to help the students stand on their own feet. I say semi-secured, we used to have quite strict rules that were relaxed over time, but it helps them transition from freedom versus the rules from your parent's house. We want to teach them is personal development” – P1

He further indicated that there is philanthropic growth. Participant seven supported this, who said that their students are practically involved in learning to give back to the community and serve as a well of life and not a drain, thus leaving the woodpile higher than they found it. He further said that when they are put in a position to serve, it can be a bit difficult at the start, challenging their character and then developing their character through serving.

Three participants mentioned fostering responsibilities. Participant three indicated that the students are put into an environment where they can run their own program to an extent to foster discipline and responsibility. They have to clean their rooms, work in the kitchen, and learn time management and discipline. He stated that there is no success without structure and discipline because nobody gets food on the table if there is not somebody working for it.

Participant four thought that a gap year should be a pass-through, not the end destination, and often in the industry's marketing pitch, a gap year is the ultimate. While they have never done that, they promote a gap year as an accelerator. Participant five said that a structured gap year program gives students who don't know their next moves or what to study time to explore their passions and find more direction. He said it also helps foster responsibility and accountability to make students more independent and make the right choices. They have to have the maturity to do these things independently and succeed. She further said a gap year could either be beneficial for students or not because they are in a phase of learning. They just got out of school, they just out of their parent's house. They can start making their own decisions, they are very vulnerable and open to input, and if they don't give properly balanced input, they can damage them, so a gap year can form the foundation of adulthood for them.

Participant seven also talked of the development of a sense of purpose.

"We empower and equip this generation to advance the kingdom of God, with the emphasis on equipping and empowering this generation now that's coming out of high school. It's been just amazing to see how they have established a sense of purpose and identity and their lives when they've grown up with a lot of fundamental relational aspects missing and seeing who they develop in context with our program has been wonderful" – P7

It is evident from the analysis that personal development through fostering responsibility, gaining a sense of purpose and better understanding oneself is a clear objective of gap year institutions and that a lot of time goes into developing the youth.

According to a study conducted by Rabie and Naidoo (2016), the participants experienced a significant increase in personal growth by participating in a gap year.

Recreational activities

Five participants mentioned recreational activities as one of the objectives of the institute. Four participants indicated that there were adventure-oriented. One participant believed that many students want to take a break after high school and have an adventure, so they combine the co-curricular activities with adventure-based activities, the last being the capstone module. As it is an academic-based gap year that focuses on ecology conservation, they go on tours and show

the students where the industry meets the theory. They visit solar farms, aqua farms, and national parks to show how volatile the temperatures are. He further said that they do 4x4 training, shooting of targets, rowing on the Orange River, and thus it's a fun adventure. Participant three indicated that he had been involved in adventure for the past ten years, ever since he studied in Potchefstroom years ago when he was a student in '93.

According to participant four, he had a friend, an industrial psychologist. While he was still a teacher, they would sit and brainstorm. He helped him develop this course that evolves around basic discipleship and industrial psychology together with some adventure camps. Participant five said teachings are done through adventure and experiential learning. He further said that their program focuses on all aspects of the person by incorporating teachings into adventure activities that are fun to teach them soft skills that are essential in everyday life.

Participant three said that the easy part is to let the students take part in adventure because they do a lot of adventure stuff.

Participant two said they have the students involved in community service projects. They have to raise the money by themselves and then give back to the community by supporting the schools or helping at nursing homes.

Incorporating recreational activities into a gap year program is essential to attract students. It is also a fun way of obtaining many skills and realizing what the student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests are.

Bridging the gap between matric and university

Three participants indicated that the purpose of starting the gap year institution was to bridge the gap between matric and university.

“She (the founder) noticed that there’s a huge gap between Matric and University which lead to a high dropout rate of university students.” – P2

“I also realized there’s a huge gap in the market to develop young people, not just school leavers, but also university dropout students, to equip them with the necessary skills because they have no idea of what lies ahead of them. They are very insecure, uncertain about their life decisions and career path.” – P6

Participant five said that matriculates are just not equipped to handle the giant leap from school to the responsibility and accountability needed for studying at university. Participant one talked of academic readiness and indicated that they teach students to work hard and “go the extra mile”. This approach is followed so that the students don't get spoon-fed and better prepare them for

university. The gap year aims to uphold the same standard as universities. The workload is relatively high, which is part of the development or the journey they need to go through.

What can be deduced from these statements is that there is a clear gap in skills development post-secondary education. The aim of the gap year is consequently to bridge the gap between matric and university. Similarly, two people mentioned the development of young people.

Students who elect to pursue a gap year showcase improved academic motivation, maturity and self-directness, all of which have exhibited higher educational performance (Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010).

Educational advancement

Participant one said that it started as a fun gap year, which now evolved into an academic gap year because of the students' NQF qualification after completing the gap year. They saw a gap in the market for an academic focussed gap year.

4.3.4 Challenges experienced by gap year institutions

The participants were asked to indicate the challenges experienced by gap institutes, and they came up with nine challenges, as shown in Figure 4.3 below:



Figure 4-3: Challenges experienced by gap year institutes

Key: G – Grounded, which shows how many times a code has been applied and D – Density which indicates the number of links between entities

The main issues that came up were: financial resources/component/restraint; parents' perception of a gap year; the value of gap years are not clear to students; awareness of gap years; the COVID-19 pandemic; marketing of a gap year; the intimacy of the gap year program and the fears surrounding the impact that expansion will have hereon; no regulatory body with rules that gap year institutions should adhere to and problematic nature of the terminology used to describe the industry "Gap Year".

4.3.4.1 Financial resources/component/restraint

All the participants mentioned financial resources as a challenge. These institutions are privately owned, and some rely on sponsorships to cover their cost. After conducting interviews with most of the owners of the gap year institutions, it is apparent that financial gain was not the objective

of starting their gap years but rather to assist the growth of the youth in some way or another. The participants were quoted as saying:

“The second challenge is funding. Parents compare our fees to a university first year, but few people know that the government subsidizes universities and it's a big subsidy, I think almost 50%. So it's a very, very difficult financial model. Universities have a lot of students to survive financially, and the upfront cost of capital for building better facilities is very expensive. So I think that's the two main problems” – P1

These statements indicate that financial resources are a challenge. Gap year fees are not subsidised, and parents tend to compare costs for gap year institutions with university fees, and they would rather put the money towards college or universities.

“Then another challenge, I think now especially now is finance” – P6

“Financial component; if you take finances out of this component, most students will choose a gap year opportunity. Not everyone can afford a gap year.” – P2

If gap years were not expensive, more students would see participating in gap years as a viable option. This can be facilitated by establishing study bursary funds or subsidies to assist students during a gap year.

“Secondly, our clients are students whose parents can afford the gap year. I don't know how to make the gap years more accessible to more students because it costs money to participate in a gap year. Whether it should be subsidies or study bursaries should be given, I think that's another question. I can't see how the government will allow everybody to participate in a gap year.” – P3

“I think there are a few things, there's still a perception amongst parents that they're going to waste their time, which I don't think is really true, and then the other thing is funding. Everybody puts money into everything but the youth, and if you want to do a gap year or travel a bit and do some things, it becomes costly. Especially with COVID and the economy, I think those are factors to consider. It is also quite difficult to advertise a gap year. It takes a while for a gap year to get word of mouth out there. With the years it gets easier, but you still have to do effective advertising because it's a difficult concept to explain to somebody and it can be costly to advertise” – P4

The industry needs money to advertise gap years, which is expensive.

“The expense of a gap year – many parents would rather put this money towards college or university fees/studies (This is specifically the case with black South African parents” – P5

"We are based at the beach, so convincing young people to come here is not too hard, but the parents, obviously they have to pay for it, financially along with the stigma parents have of gap years, but I actually think we're in a beautiful setup now for gap years, because a lot of universities are aiming to do things online and it's not what it used to be in the context of campus life. A lot more people are looking at taking gap years during the COVID-19 pandemic before starting with University. We thought we would struggle with numbers, but we've actually done really well. And next year is also looking really good." - P7

Although people are considering a gap year more since the COVID-19 pandemic started, it remains a financial challenge and despite gap years varying in price and funding prospects (Birch & Miller, 2007; King, 2011; Knight, 2014; Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011; Stehlik, 2010), an unavoidable cost should be anticipated, and this is an increasingly important consideration within the South African gap year realm.

4.3.4.2 Parents perception of gap year

Five participants talked of how parents view gap year and their perception of it. According to participant five, gap years are becoming more and more popular globally, but there are still some misconceptions around their benefit. Many parents don't want to send their children on a gap year because they think it's a party year, and that's not the case, especially when choosing a structured and accredited program. Participant three indicated that the biggest challenge is parents that send their children to universities directly after finishing high school, and the participant believed that it was a mistake. The high drop-out rates are because parents are still in a traditional belief that they must go and study first. Still, many drop out in the first semester because their maturity level is not on a standard yet, or the students are unsure about what to study. According to participant four, parents still perceive that they're going to waste their time, which the participant does not think is really true.

Participant six believed that the challenge is that some parents do not understand a gap year. They try to change that conception or the interpretation of what the gap year must mean, and another challenge that they have picked up is anxiety. It's not just young people and also with a parent, the parents fear and concern about their kids future. Participant seven thinks there's a stigma. Typical South African parent thinks by taking a gap year, their children will get drunk in Europe or just sit around doing nothing. That's why we always emphasize a "structured" gap year whilst marketing, as many people have a negative connotation to a gap year.

Many parents feel that participants might not like to attend a tertiary education institution after a gap year (Tenser, 2015).

4.3.4.3 Value of gap year is not clear to students

Three participants mentioned that the values of participating in a gap year are not clear to students. Participant two said that students think that a gap year is a waste of money because they/their parents pay for a course that doesn't directly go towards their studies, but they don't realize that this course can set you up for success. Participant three was quoted saying

"Something I have also realized is that prospective students, very often, don't tell their classmates that they are going to participate in a gap year because I think they assume their friends might think they do not have a plan with their lives or they do not know what to study or even get admitted to a university, and word of mouth should be our biggest marketing tool. 95% of the students don't know what they're going to do, so you're not going backwards in your career. If you do a gap year, you are actually moving forward. In my experience, all of the students that completed the gap year got accepted for whatever course they've applied for." –

P3

Participant three said that gap years are education-based and involve a lot of self-discovery, self-awareness and that certain parts within gap year are like therapy. It's almost a rehab. It's rehab from life. It's rehab from your family; it's rehab from school.

Participant four said there's a little bit of a drawback when the gap year doesn't have a balanced program. It should not be a little bubble where the students are isolated from the outside world. They must still keep in contact with the normal world and get them motivated when they leave. He further said a gap year should be a pass-through, not the end destination and often in our industry, the marketing pitch is that a Gap Year is the ultimate. The participants also felt that the students do not want their classmates and friends to know that they are doing a gap year.

4.3.4.4 Marketing of gap year

Two people mentioned the marketing of gap years as a challenge. Participant one said that people don't know what they don't know, and thus they don't know they need a gap year. Participant four noted that the longer you are in the industry, the easier it gets because of word of mouth. However, they still have to do effective advertising because it's a difficult concept to explain to somebody. It mostly takes place on a personal, face to face level. It can also be costly to advertise.

4.3.4.5 COVID-19 pandemic

Participant two indicated the current COVID component, especially for people from all over South Africa, because they have a problem with the President closing the borders. Participant six said that one of the ways to overcome the COVID pandemic is to use zoom and encourage students

to get together because they see people are very isolated. They can see some of the behaviours that concern them from this isolation. Participant seven also said that COVID is a challenge because they focus on community engagement and involvement. Simultaneously, they should limit exposure to students to potential people with COVID in the townships.

“Obviously now in the context of COVID. You know, it's an extra cost in parents' eyes.” – P7

From these statements, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a challenge where students cannot interact with other students, and it has caused an extra cost to parents.

Awareness of gap years

Participant five and participant seven talked of the lack of awareness of the existence of gap year institutions as a challenge. He also said that connecting with schools is a problem. There is a lot of red tape when it comes to visiting schools, and they have been more successful in connecting with schools overseas than here in South Africa. Participant seven said that schools need to do a better job; there's a great space in the gap year industry for people to take that strategic pause. They even had people coming in after going to the university that needed some space to break out of the constant studying. He thinks that it's one's passion to study something, do it, but some people wait to get the certificate to start finally, and when they come to a gap year, their learning is a lot more practical. It's not just theoretical, and one really starts to develop soft skills.

The intimacy of the gap year program and the fears surrounding the impact that expansion will have hereon

Participant seven said it becomes a challenge once one is bigger. Although there is room to grow, he indicated that they could not go over 100 people. He also added that breaking the idea that people have that it's a must go to university to be successful is a challenge, and there is a need of breaking that notion in people's minds.

No regulatory body with rules that gap year institutions should adhere to

Participant one said there is a definite problem in South Africa because there is no standard and no guidelines to adhere to; there is no qualification to call yourself a gap year. He further said getting a standard across the board will minimize bad experiences by clients and keep gap years to the promises they make on advertisements. He emphasised a need for quality control issues in South Africa.

Problematic nature of the terminology used to describe the industry "Gap Year"

Participant one said that one of the challenges is that the word gap years in some people's vocabulary is bad or comes with risks and fears. Another participant said that he is aware of quite a lot of people who took an unstructured gap year, of which some went to the UK, where he said: "They fall around and come back as either junkies or they've lost a year of their life".

As a gap year can refer to and structured or unstructured gap year, it holds a major challenge for the industry as a gap can be viewed as a waste of time.

In Stehlik's view (2010:365), the term "gap" insinuates something missing, which is misleading since constructive gaps are typically filled with valuable life experiences and contribute to essential skills development.

4.3.5 Opportunities

The participants were asked to indicate the opportunities for the gap year industry. Sixteen opportunities were tabulated as:

• Collaboration with institutions outside of the gap year industry
• Financial support by the government to both gap years and students
• Adaptability of gap year program
• Increase awareness/marketing of gap year
• Personal development opportunities
• Collaboration within the industry
• Establishment of a regulatory body
• Infiltrating international market to attract more students
• Positive impact of COVID 19 on the gap year industry
• Establishment of networking platform in the gap year industry
• Leadership development opportunities
• Conversion to non-profit organization
• Diversification of gap year program
• Diversification of students
• Need for government support

The opportunity themes are shown in Figure 4.4 below.

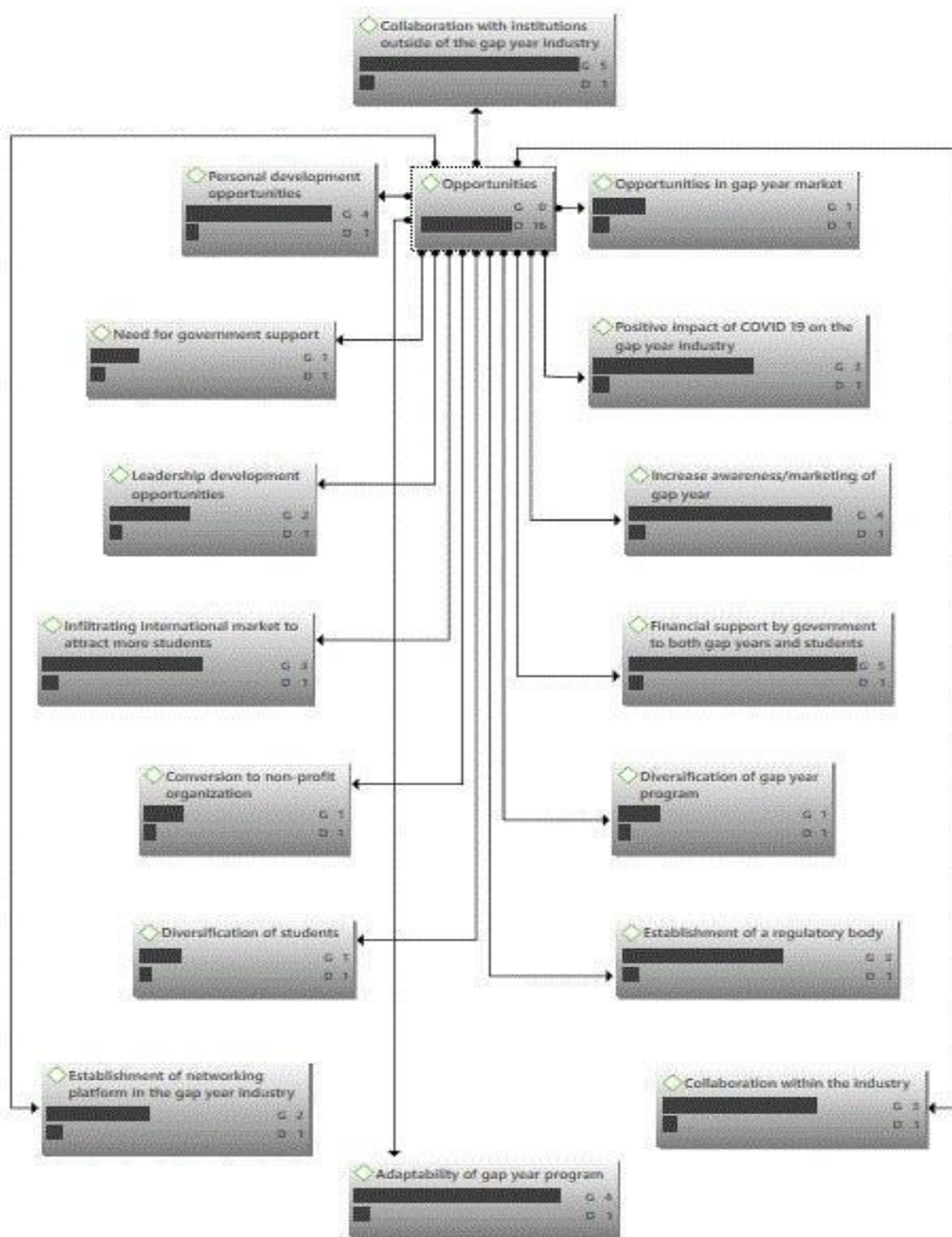


Figure 4-4: Opportunities available

Key: G – Grounded, which shows how many times a code has been applied and D – Density which indicates the number of links between entities

4.3.5.1 Collaboration with institutions outside of the gap year industry

Five participants indicated an opportunity for collaboration between the gap year sector and other institutions. Participant one said that collaborating with other businesses to create internships opportunities after participating in a gap year would be a significant venture. Participant seven said they also saw a chance to employ former students of the gap year or give them an internship within the companies, schools, and establishments they are actively involved in. The students can study online whilst working, whether it's in their education-, counselling-, psychology-, theology-, or in the media sector. Participant four said that all the sponsorships that they receive, they give to students that cannot afford it by themselves. He said that they make R 400,000 bursaries available that they don't have at the beginning of each year and keep faith that the sponsorships will come in, and somehow it has always worked out for them.

As the financial restraint is heavy on the industry, the need to access capital is high. If gap years plan to expand and improve their programs or give sponsorships to students who cannot participate in a gap year, they will need investors and sponsorships. Therefore, working with other businesses within their vicinity is an opportunity worth pursuing. In turn, the students can work at the companies over holidays and internships can be considered.

4.3.5.2 Financial support by the government to both gap years and students

Five participants indicated the need for financial support from the government. Participant one talked of the need to link a financial model to a business model. Participant two said they should set up a fund (donors' fund for companies who want to donate) for students who wish to join them, who show genuine interest. She also talked of helping students who cannot afford the course but are academically gifted, who have not decided what they want to do in the future. Participant two also talked of methods of pursuing opportunities such as affordability, attractiveness, safety and keeping student and their parents happy. Participant four said that being a Christian gap year makes it difficult because some people do not want to give money to a specific religious group, so they will have to attract a company or somebody that sees the investment opportunity. He emphasised that the biggest next challenge is to get financial support from the government. Participant seven supported this, who said that if the government can get involved in gap years, it would stimulate the industry. He said the local municipality supported their mission. They do a lot of work with them and see their value. He also noted the need for government to subsidise the gap year institutions.

Participant five said they have just started the Warriors Foundation, where they raise money for disadvantaged students to join the gap year program. Participant six said they want to start hiring young people from a financial perspective and get sponsorships from organizations to sponsor

students with high potential to put them through a gap year and prepare them for their studies and the workplace.

4.3.5.3 Adaptability of gap year program

Participants one, four, six and seven talked about the adaptability of gap year programs as opportunities. Participant one said they could change some online courses and believe that there is a space for context sessions, preferably shorter courses between holidays. Participant seven indicated that they have an excellent opportunity to create a space for people to rethink how they are running their program. He said that most kids are learning online full time now, they are not going to schools anymore, and it is breaking the unknown and the fear of doing something like moving to some online courses. He believes that people are becoming more and more open to exploring different options after completing matric.

Participant three said that COVID is also an opportunity as most universities adapted a distance learning module. Participant six noted that one of the things they believe in is to be flexible, think on their feet, and change because they live in a time of change; nothing will ever be the same again. She emphasised that they need to think on their feet and deal with change. She further said that one of the ways to overcome the COVID pandemic is to use zoom and encourage students to get together because she sees people are very isolated.

4.3.5.4 Increased awareness/marketing of gap year

Four participants mentioned increased awareness/marketing of the gap year. Participant three said that marketing and website marketing increase awareness of gap year. Participant five said connecting with schools remains a priority for them specifically to gain access to students and parents and educate them about our gap year program and its benefits.

Participant seven indicated the need for awareness. He said that they spend a lot of time going to different schools and putting a lot of time into career days. He believes that sitting alongside companies and educating people on what gap is and what gap isn't will promote the outcome of a gap year.

Participant seven said that to promote the outcomes of a gap year, they need to create awareness by visiting schools, speaking to young people and becoming more and more of a hot topic in South Africa that it can, in turn, create a strong platform for gap years to get subsidized as well possibly.

4.3.5.5 Personal development opportunities

Participants one, three, four and five talked about personal development opportunities. Participant one said that more opportunities for academic gap years focus on personal development, leadership development, or skills development.

4.3.5.6 Collaboration within the industry

Three people mentioned collaboration within the industry as an opportunity. Participant one said that every man is for himself in this industry, and there is little to no collaboration. That being said, competition is not highly strong as offerings are so widely diverse, even where the gap years are situated are not too close to each other. He further said that they need adventure camps, where they can send their students to another gap year facility for a few months, and in turn, the other institute can send their students to their facility, where they teach them a little bit of career guidance. If allowed, participant five said that cross-pollination would be beneficial for every gap year program. Participant seven said that they think if gap years can start working hand in hand with schools, they can be a better kind of synergy between schools, and gap years, even starting to get into schools in grade 11, grade 12, and so to speak.

Participant six said they would love to collaborate with others. They can work out a program together, like a year program or even a three-year program where they work with the students and then the students can partake in other programs from other gap years, and this will give the students tremendous exposure and can create fantastic opportunities because some students do not like what they are offering although they have a unique program. She further said that she has just been exposed to people that think out of the box. She said she could add a lot of value, and she would love to collaborate with others. They can work out a program together, a year program or even a three-year program and then the students can partake in other programs from other gap years. She believes that it will give the students tremendous exposure and create fantastic opportunities.

“In terms of overcoming these challenges within the industry, I think it's a tough challenge because competitors don't talk to each other in terms of collaboration. I'm not sure if different gap your programs can and will start to form a body where we can talk to each other. I think that will be the ideal situation; we must start to talk and collaborate.” – P3

Participant four said they had a very open policy to take his old curriculum and just put it into somebody's hands. Participants one and two also said that there's an opportunity to collaborate and work together. He said, *“There is power if you stand together”*.

4.3.5.7 Establishment of a regulatory body

Three participants mentioned the establishment of a regulatory board. Participant One believed that they should form some type of forum or something because they would be aware of what the other Gap Years are doing.

“I think there needs to be a governing body. I think it's good. And the problem is gap years don't have to comply with any of these existing governing bodies because they don't offer a certified program. I think it's a governmental thing of school education and why schools do not help students better prepare for university or make the right decision when it comes to choosing a career path. I also think that kids are uninformed, and that makes the dropout rates skyrocket” –

P1

He believed that a governing board will eliminate gap years that are not on a standard to offer certified programs.

Participant two was talking of international standardisation of gap year guidelines, and he is also talking of a board that will assist in regulating issues among competitors. He further said that new gap year programs open up all the time, copying and pasting existing gap year programs' websites and programs and since there are no guidelines or criteria that one should comply with to open a gap year. It makes it difficult to compete with these emerging gap years.

4.3.5.8 Infiltrating international market to attract more students

Participants three, five and six talked about infiltrating international markets to attract more students. Participant three said they must get the students from overseas, which can be easy money and the biggest opportunity. Ideally, they want students from overseas to support the program's cash flow to have South African students at a discount. Participant six said the international market is also an ample opportunity that's been their dream for quite a few years now. He thinks that will be an excellent opportunity for these young people to build networks and tap into that market. He believes that if he can take hands with other gap years and can put something together. Participant five said they have also focused a lot of time and effort on attracting international gap year students to grow and travel through South Africa.

4.3.5.9 Positive impact of COVID-19 on the gap year industry

Participant three said that due to COVID-19 pandemic, students are in more isolated conditions than before, emotionally and socially, which can leave them in a depressed state because there is no stimulation. He further said they know about first-year university students who have not been to campus since the pandemic. Participant one indicated that the students could socialise even if

the specific gap year does not consist of a perfect program. He reckons that is one of the most important benefits of participating in a gap year; students can socialize, communicate, learn more about building relationships, deal with conflict, and grow emotionally. He said that the pandemic is also an opportunity as most universities adapted a distance learning module.

Participants five and six also mentioned the positive impact of COVID-19 on the gap year industry. Participant five said that there is a lot of growth in this sector, and he believes that COVID-19 has positively impacted this. Many parents are now looking for an opportunity to give students this kind of experience, especially after the stress and anxiety caused by lockdown, no socialisation, cancellation of sport etc. Participant six also thinks that there's an excellent opportunity to adjust to the times that's changed and address all that's new. She said she never quit problems, they are new challenges, and she believes that the institutions can recognize that and be very flexible in their approach. She said with the pandemic, it is a big opportunity for gap years now because all these universities are closed, but gap years can still keep their students socially interacting. They can still see each other, whereas universities do not offer that with the current pandemic.

“Since COVID, it has become an international platform. There are opportunities for students from abroad to do a gap year in South Africa. The only thing that can hinder us is that the career guidance is a little different here” – P2

According to participant three, due to COVID-19, all structure has been taken away, students are studying online and not experiencing any university life. Also, the philosophy around being between 18 and 22, all the normal things that one could have experienced and all the things that one could have done, adventurous things, is now taken away. Participant four said that there's a lot of opportunities. They have a group going in Mamelodi, they've got an outreach, and they are running their curriculum because they say the kids come out of school, they are going nowhere, doing nothing and are just hanging around. Although COVID-19 had devastating effects, participant five believes that COVID-19 positively impacts the gap year sector. He said there is a lot of growth in this sector, and he believes that COVID-19 has positively impacted this. Many parents are now looking for an opportunity to give students this kind of experience, especially after the stress and anxiety caused by lockdown, no socialisation, and cancellation of sports.

4.3.5.10 Establishment of networking platform in the gap year industry

Participant two said they have also set up an advisory council that includes people in different roles to answer their panels.

They must start to collaborate if they want to build the industry. He indicated that they have to begin to network. That's the one thing from their generation, they didn't tap into their network, but

they are starting to network now. The intellectual property doesn't sit with themselves. They must network and think bigger than their own small town village approach.

By networking with other gap years, changes in the market can be faced as a group. New ideas can be discussed before testing them in the market, and as most of these gap years are not in competition with each other, they can help increase the accumulative standard of the industry.

4.3.5.11 Leadership development opportunities

Participant one said that they think there are more opportunities for academic gap years that focus on personal development, leadership development or skills development.

4.3.5.12 Conversion to a non-profit organization

Participant four said that one of the strategies to overcome these challenges is to become a non-profit company. However, they are still in a phase to discover how to do fundraising because that's quite specialized.

4.3.5.13 Diversification of gap year program and students

Participant four indicated that they should formulate a gap year that is not entirely Christian-based, excluding many South African students.

Participant two talked of the diversification of students. She said that they wanted a diverse group (different cultures and languages), and that's why they have an Institution in Johannesburg.

Participant four said that they are a Christian gap year makes that very difficult because people don't want to give money to a specific religious group, so they will have to have a company or somebody that sees the investment opportunity. He said the biggest next challenge is maybe to get people in government to support the gap year institutions.

4.3.6 Advice to other gap institutions

The participants were asked to indicate their advice to other gap year institutions. The information is shown in Figure 4.5.

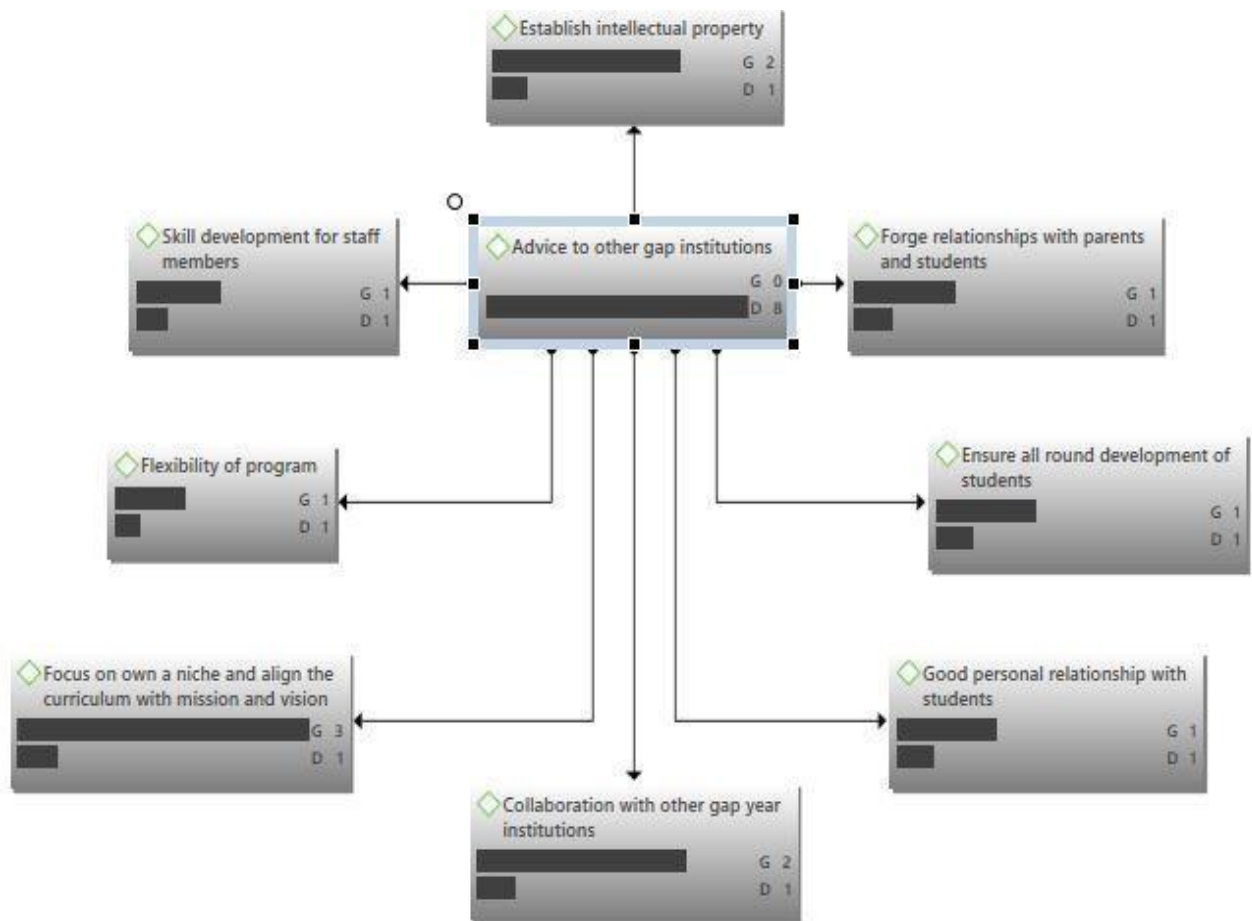


Figure 4-5: Advice to other gap institutions

Key: G – Grounded, which shows how many times a code has been applied and D – Density which indicates the number of links between entities

Focus on own a niche and align the curriculum with mission and vision

Participant two said that they should focus on their niche. She said everybody is offering something completely different, and they will attract the student that needs their unique offering. Participant seven said that they should be a clearly defined mission. It guides them whilst marketing by knowing their “why”, and making sure there is a demand for their “why”, and filtering that through their curriculum and collaborating with different gap years to promote the industry as a whole.

Collaboration with other gap year institutions

Participants three and seven talked of collaboration with other gap years. Participant three said that they must really get over themselves and work together as an industry and research. South Africa doesn't have a long history of research of what's happening to the industry and the value of a gap year. Participant seven said there should be collaborating with different gap years to promote the industry as a whole.

Establish intellectual property

Participant three said that in US and Canada, there are gap year schools that have been established for many years, and it's a long history of intellectual property. Participant seven said that they had done some work with a few other gap years, and it worked well, and if there was some forum or board, they could connect with other gap years in South Africa.

Ensure all-round development of students

Participant five said they need to leave these young people with more knowledge and better skills, insight, and self-confidence than when they started your program.

Flexibility of program

Participant six said that their program is ideal for any young adult as an induction program into the workplace and having kids between 18 and 29, but they don't want to be put in one group. He further said the need is to teach young people to be flexible in their thinking, and all stakeholders must also be very flexible in their thinking.

Forge relationships with parents and students

Participant six said that the relationship between the students and the parents are very important. To work together to create the best future for the student. It doesn't work if the parents are not involved.

Good personal relationship with students

Participant four said that the one thing that makes Target Life very unique is they have very close personal relationships with our students. He further said that there are unique because, in terms of the information they give to people, there's nothing they can get, every lecture they give, they can get a better one on the internet, and everybody kind of does the same thing. But it seems like in this personal mentorship, or coaching, that is where the real change comes in.

Skill development for staff members

Participant five said they should ensure their team is well trained and have considered all elements of their program structure.

4.3.7 General comment

The participants were asked to give general comments, and the information is shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4-3: General comments

Key concept	Occurrence
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• Change parents' perspective	1
• Marketing of gap year	1
• Need for collaboration	1
Totals	3

Participant three was the only one who gave general comments. He thought that this research of theirs is very important to work together and make an entity that one can sell and grow bigger opportunities for students. At this stage, everybody is going on their own. He said that if they collaborate and make a body of interest, they can regulate it and support it. Still, they need to make it attractive to go to a gap year they need to consider how to attract more students and change the idea that most parents see it as a holiday for their children that they are paying for and for that to happen, they need to, as a body, approach young people and their parents differently.

4.4 Findings from the students

4.4.1 Introduction

The selected participants comprised of nine female participants and three male participants. However, gender disparities do not affect the study's research findings, and therefore the researcher accepted and proceeded with these participants. The participants all fit within the pre-stipulated age range of the study, being between 18-26 years, and this covers the majority of students pursuing their undergraduate degrees. Six of the participants were between 17 and 20 years old. Three of the participants were between 21 and 24 years, and the remaining three were aged 25 years or above. Most female participants were willing to participate in this study, resulting in a 1:3 male to female ratio. The demographics of the participants are summarised in Table 4.4.

Table 4-4: Summary of the demographics of the participant

Participant	Gender	Age range (years)
1	Female	18-20
2	Male	20-24
3	Female	18-20

4	Female	18-20
5	Female	18-20
6	Male	25 or above
7	Female	18-20
8	Female	20-24
9	Female	18-20
10	Female	25 or above
11	Male	20-24
12	Female	25 or above

4.4.2 Duration of gap year

Analysis of the data showed that all the participants took a gap year that was six months to twelve months long, three of the participants took a gap year shorter than a year but longer than six months, and the other nine participants took a gap year that was one year long. The most common duration of a gap year amongst the participants was one year, as shown in Figure 4.6

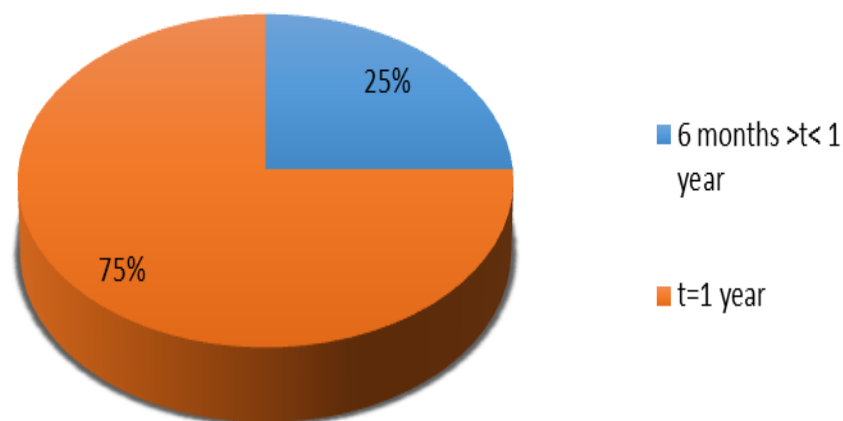


Figure 4-1: *Duration of gap year amongst participants*

4.4.3 Gap year activities

As previously mentioned, the three gap year institutions were selected due to the variety of activities offered. Some of the gap year programs had “terms” or were divided into courses that ensured various activities. Therefore, some of the participants participated in more than one activity throughout the year, as shown in Table 4.7. The majority of the participants had an internship, job shadowing or a vocational job that they attended to during their gap year. Other popular activities were community service or volunteerism and travel or cultural immersion activities. Adventure activities such as hiking, cycling, sailing and so on were also common

amongst the participants, whilst some participants chose to attend personal branding and university preparation jobs such as budgeting, toastmasters and career study.

Table 4-5: The gap year activities of the participants

Activity	Number of Participants
Travel/Cultural Immersion	4
Social Justice/Service/Volunteerism	5
Art/Music/Aesthetics	3
Environmentalism/Sustainability	3
Sports/Athletics	3
Outdoors/Conservation	3
Academic/University Preparation	2
Vocational/Internship/Apprenticeship	9
Faith/Religion/Spirituality	2

4.4.4 Choice of gap year program

With the variety of options available for matriculating students who want to take a gap year before continuing their studies, it is important to note the factors that motivate their choice of program. The most commonly cited reason for choosing a gap program amongst the participants was an alignment between their values and the values of the gap year institution.

“I looked at multiple websites of different gap year programs... The main thing that attracted me was that the company’ morals and values.” – P1

“It is a gap year that my church presents. I, therefore, believed that it would be rooted in the same values that I hold dear and live by.” – P3

Participants 1 and 3 also refer to the ‘moral’ inclinations of either the company or themselves.

Another participant who cited a need to perform community service because they decided to take a gap year further mentions that they chose their gap year program based on community engagement.

“... despite not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, I was very sure that the year following my final year of school, I wanted to be engaged with the community in a hands-on manner. The specific program that I selected offered me exactly this.” – P6

The proximity of the gap year institute was cited as another motivating factor for the choice of program by some participants. Notably, participants 10 and 11 showed that a degree of familiarity

was linked to proximity when they considered their choice of a gap year. The first refers to “my home town”, and the second refers to “my siblings” in relation to the proximity of the gap year.

“The fact that Equilibria was in my home town was the main driving factor.” – P10

“I chose the one that my siblings went to since it was close by.” – P11

Unsurprisingly, the type of gap year activities offered affected participants' choice of gap year program. Some participants simply stated that they wanted gap year programs with some working aspects.

“I wanted to get practical experience and therefore split my gap year into four terms to shadow different people in the career paths that I was considering” – P6

In addition to looking at the activities, one participant explicitly mentions that they were looking for activities outside of their “comfort zone” to experience safely.

“I look at the adventure activities, the learning opportunities, and mostly something to get me out of my comfort zone that was safe.” – P1

4.4.5 Emergent themes

The questions in the semi-structured interview guide were intended to elicit information from the participants about their experiences, development, and access to the program through questions about their explorations, preferences, relationships, and independence. Interview informants spoke freely and openly, offering audio-recorded data that was later transcribed for analysis. Analysis of the transcripts uncovered the following overarching themes: gap year motivators, skills acquisition, career choice, adjustment to higher education and the outlook on a gap year. Further detailed analyses of quotes from the transcripts revealed more categories under these major themes, sorted into subthemes.

4.4.5.1 Gap year motivators

This study first focused on the factors that motivated the participants to take a gap year. The decision to embark on a gap year was mostly driven by career uncertainty or a lack of knowledge of what to do, and family relations also influenced it.

Most participants identified career indecisiveness as one of the factors that motivated their decision to take a gap year. One participant stated that it was the only course of action available to them.

“It was the only option as I did not know what I wanted to study after school.” – P1

Another participant mentioned that they experienced this career uncertainty due to the limited information about the career options that they had.

I did not know what to study in my Matric year, and from a young age, only certain occupations are introduced to you.” – P2

Some participants chose a gap year program with an obvious expectation that it would help them choose their career path.

“I also believed that it would help me get to know myself better, and therefore allow me to make a better choice of the degree to study once I enrolled in university.” – P3

One participant intentionally took a gap year after starting tertiary education. The said participant was unsatisfied with the chosen career path and intentionally dropped out of a university program to take a gap year.

*“I did not plan on taking a gap year. I started studying <degree> I quickly realised that it was not for me. So, I decided to take a gap year instead and figure out what I really want to do.”
– P4*

On the other hand, other participants did not feel they were ready to make a career choice after high school and therefore, they decided instead to pursue a gap year.

“I have always been pedantic when it comes to life choices and did not consider myself ready to make a life decision that would impact my entire life forward when.” – P7

Another participant attributed age to career uncertainty.

“...and I believe that you are not competent enough as an 18-year-old to make a decision that will have an impact on your whole life. My father made a good point by stating that as an 18-year-old you must make the most difficult decision of your life – and so I believe that I was not competent enough to make that decision yet because I did not know exactly what it is that I wanted to do.” – P2

Taking a break from academics was another motivating factor for taking a gap year. One participant expressed a sentiment to gain life experiences before continuing, while another participant wanted to take a gap year to give back to the economy.

“Mostly just wanting to experience life and the world before committing myself to study.” – P3

“I finished school. I was also very drawn to the idea of spending an entire year or at least a substantial part thereof giving back to the community.” – P8

However, not all students took a voluntary break from their schooling. One participant mentions that taking a break from their studies was not voluntary as she had to give her parents time to raise funds needed for her tertiary studies.

“Going to university was expensive, so my parents needed to raise funds.” – P12

For some of the participants in the study, taking a gap year was heavily influenced by their friends or relatives. Some participants mentioned their parents as why they took a gap year.

“I was unsure of what I wanted to do after matric, and my parents and I agreed that it was wiser to take a gap year before starting a degree which I may not have been happy with.” – P10

“My parents were all about taking a gap year, so my siblings and I took a gap year.” – P11

Another participant attributes her decision to take a gap year to her advice.

“I wasn’t sure what career would best suit me, so after matric, I met with a lady called <name> who did an aptitude test to give me certain guidelines on potential career paths. She recommended that I take a year to do my own research.” – P5

4.4.5.2 Skills acquisition

During the course of the gap year, students reported that they gained skills that they utilised to transition into higher education. These include a variety of life skills and practical skills.

Life skills

All participants agree that gaining life skills was an intended outcome of their gap year. In this study, life skills refer to any abilities or qualities gained by an individual which they can use towards life experiences and independence. The most common life skill that the students gained after participating in a gap year was the ability to handle social interactions. Participants 2 and 3 further elaborated by stating that the specific people skills they acquired were patience and knowing how to handle conflict.

“...how to deal with people so acquired people skills.” – P1

“Yes, I learnt a lot of new skills that I can use in the future. Not only child-based skills but people skills. I’ve learnt things like patience; especially while working with children.” – P2

“Yes, I learned social skills and how to work with different kinds of people. I learned how to handle conflict.” – P3

In addition to people skills, some participants reported improved communication skills after the gap year.

“Another skill that I have acquired is communication. You have to be able to talk to people in a way that makes them understand the concept you are trying to teach or the message that you are trying to get across.” – P2

“Yes, I learned a lot of communication skills by dealing with different kinds of people in different situations.” – P4

Others reported that they acquired life skills related to taking care of themselves and navigating responsibilities.

“I also learned how to make hasty decisions and think on my feet. I also learned how to take care of myself, like make food, do washing, pay bills etc. By doing this, I had to learn how to plan, time-manage and take responsibility for my actions. I also learned a lot about leadership and self-awareness.” - P1

*“I had to plan out classes weekly, keep to my schedule and also plan my personal life around it.”
– P9*

Apart from acquiring life skills, some participants reported an increased personal growth or maturity after the gap year.

“I also grew a lot in myself, became a stronger, more confident person. I learned to trust myself and have patience. I also had to manage my time, get in the routine of waking up in time and being in class on time, so I think it taught me discipline as well.” – P3

“I developed an entirely new skill set during the gap year program, and my mind was opened to so many things.” – P6

“I would like to think that it also made me more mature and made my personality stronger. I also came across a diverse set of people, and I learned how to deal with them.” – P7

Practical skills

It is imperative to differentiate between life skills and practical skills in this study, as most of the participants chose a gap year program with working/job-related activities. The participants reported acquiring different practical skills since they applied for different “jobs”. However, most of the students had learnt a common skill of computer literacy.

“Yes, I learnt a lot of new skills. The company that I was employed at really made an effort to equip me with various skills from computer skills; like working on Excel, Word, PowerPoint, Payroll and Pastel to people skills; such as communicating ideas, overcoming social anxiety, positively influencing others and solving problems.” – P6

“I learnt a lot. Like work etiquette, being responsible and accountable. Oh, my computer skills definitely got way better and faster.” – P10

“I took a course in basic computer skills.” – P11

In addition, the workplace environment taught participants other skills such as communicating ideas, problem-solving, work etiquette and personal accountability.

Depending on the student's temporary job or volunteer work, some had specific experiences related to their activity. For some, these experiences were useful for their career choice.

“I did a photography course and an events management course during the free time I had, as the gap year doesn't take up much of the day. As I mentioned before, I took those courses because I had no career direction, so it was just a process of elimination. Today I do photography part-time. I didn't really enjoy the event planning as much as I thought.” – P9

“The gap year was centred on the goal of running a fully-fledged community service project of your choice. Participants were required to deal with various aspects of starting and completing the project which included but was not limited to: approaching the institution/community, raising awareness/marketing, fundraising and compliance with regularities, and logistics and implementation.” – P8

Some of the participants who took a gap year with a work component did not work in the sphere they were involved in during the gap year. Nevertheless, the experiences proved useful as a process of elimination. Another participant expressed disillusionment about the workplace.

“It was as hectic as what I thought working would be like. I guess I expected to be treated leniently, but we had an 8-5 job like everyone else. It was still nice though because I made so many friends...” – P10

4.4.5.3 Career choice

Since career indecision is a common motivating factor to take a gap year in South Africa, the students were asked to what extent taking a gap year influenced their choice of career. Exploring career experiences and gaining practical experience emerged as two factors that affected their career choice.

Exploring career opportunities

Participants made statements that indicated that exploring career opportunities was a critical component in their gap year experience. The majority of the students felt that the gap year cured career indecision, whether directly or indirectly. Students who were enrolled in gap years that included a variety of activities felt that this assisted them in making informed career choices:

“It opened my eyes up to the other possibilities out there, showed me other jobs I would love and be good at, and it helped me find my passion for helping people. So yes, there was a big influence on my career choice.” – P1

“Taking a gap year had a big influence on my career choice. I had the chance to learn and enjoy the environment before getting to study in that field. I worked with clients and accompanied qualified personal trainers and semiologists to learn from their skills.” – P5

“Yes, my gap year most importantly gave me practical experience in problem-solving and interacting with a vast array of individuals.” – P9

The gap year programs proved very informative for students who felt they could not decide on their career at their age without some practical experience.

“I believe that taking a gap year had a great impact on my life. At a young age of 18 years old without experience, you cannot make a decision as big as this by not knowing the practical side or what the career requires. If I did not take the practical route – I would not have known that it is not exactly what you expect it to be.” – P2

“I always knew that I wanted to go to a tertiary institution. The only concern was what field of study I should take, and at the end of my gap year, I felt more equipped and ready.” – P2

“I had concerns about tertiary education after taking a year off, but by the end of my gap year, I was excited to go back into a more academic environment.” – P4

Practical experience

Due to the structured nature of the gap year programs that the participants attended, some participants reported that they gained practical experience, which was extremely useful.

“I gained experience that is not taught during the course, like assisting the teacher in practical ways such as assessments with children, conducting intervention plans, marked assessment and structuring a program that involves physical activities. I got the opportunity to plan and present my own lesson plans. I believe that this is rich knowledge that is not thought in theory.”

– P2

Some participants believed that their experiences in a gap year program made them more confident and that such confidence emanated from practical experiences.

“Not a lot, it only made me feel confident that I would be able to succeed in everything I do.” –

P3

“It just confirmed that I should not doubt my own choices. I am currently studying teaching, so the au pair work did give me some practical experience in working with children and assisting them with homework.” – P4

However, some students already knew their career choice but decided to take a gap year to gain practical experience in their field of choice or to confirm their decision.

“My mind was also made up, I wanted to be a teacher, and therefore I didn’t have the extra stress of uncertainty that many of my peers had.” – P7

“Becoming an advocate was always an option, but my gap year turned the option into a certainty. I had the opportunity of interacting with the community, and I had a platform to serve others. I have always considered myself an activist, and I’ve always had a passion for writing, public speaking and the community. The gap year solidified all of this, and I was provided with certainty that being an advocate would bring everything I am passionate about together.” – P8

“It did not cause me to change my mind about the career path I had ideas about, but it helped me to learn more about the career, as well as other options so that I was sure it was what I wanted to do. Yes, through job shadowing.” – P10

“I went to the more creative side of career paths. The photography really showed me that. I attended MBGY in 2017, in 2018, I attended a year’s course in RCM for digital marketing and this year, I have found my true passion and am working towards becoming a yoga instructor. I still use my digital marketing for my photography and yoga, but I do not offer it as a service. I have had my photography business now for almost three years. I learnt a lot about being an entrepreneur.” – P9

In some instances, practical experience during the gap year influenced career choice by highlighting what careers they did not want to choose.

“Becoming an interior decorator was the only option after completing my gap year. I did not want an office job and was happier when I was more creative. The gap year made me realise that the other careers do not suit my personality. Yes, my gap year was 100% practical.” – P7

"It made me realise what I did not want to do. Like a business or a desk job was not for me at all, even though I enjoyed it at the time. It just seemed boring to me. So I guess it cemented what general field I wanted, which was science." – P11

Another participant mentioned that taking a gap year gave them the courage to choose a more challenging career choice after gaining practical experience.

"Yes, if I had not taken a gap year, I was just going to do something that was not challenging. I was already into numbers and business, so I wanted to do business finance, but it was not offered at my university, so I had to do accounting." – P12

4.4.5.4 Adjustment to higher education & transition from high school to tertiary studies

The study also sought to determine whether taking a structured gap year program affected how the participant adjusted to higher education. To understand the effect that participating in a structured gap year program has on the adjustment of the students to higher education, if any, the researcher asked about each student's academic performance. None of the twelve participants changed courses after taking a gap year. However, one of the students had first dropped out of their course, and then they decided to take a gap year before returning to their tertiary studies.

For some students, there were clear differences between high school and university. They noted that time away from studies affected their enthusiasm for their tertiary studies.

"I guess the pace of work and volume was intense. I felt I was always a step behind throughout the first year. I continuously told myself I wanted to be here. The gap year was nice, but I was not willing to fail and go to a desk job. So I guess the gap year gave me energy." – P9

"I was not used to doing practical and theoretical exams together. I knew what I wanted to become after my gap year, so I faced and conquered any challenge that appeared. I felt determined to do anything needed to be successful." – P11

Some of the participants highlighted certain differences, such as a change in workload and a change of the educational structure. One participant experienced language difficulties since the education language between high school and the university was different.

"I am <race> and the English were quite a challenge for me. Studying in English and completing assignments was a challenge that I quickly conquered." – P4

“Tertiary education is completely different to high school. I found high school quite easy and received good marks without putting in much effort. University demanded much more of an effort from my side, and this was a very important realisation.” – P6

For some participants, the gap year program was challenging, and their tertiary studies were then viewed as equally challenging or less challenging in comparison.

“The gap from high school to university is big and the gap from the first year to the second year even greater. University requires a lot more discipline, hard work and dedication than I expected. I could cope a bit better than my peers because of the skills I gained during my gap year. I also knew how to connect the theory to the practical application.” – P3

*“I was thrown with more curveballs during my gap year than within my entire four years at university. My gap year matured me and taught me that there are people that face massive obstacles daily. Problems and challenges that would normally seem like the end of the world to someone who comes from a confined and protected environment became manageable to me.”
– P8*

Some participants felt their practical experiences during the gap year also gave them an advantage when they started university.

“I believed, by gaining practical knowledge before theoretical knowledge you are far more ahead of the program because I had first-hand experience of the theory side.” – P6

*“I did not experience any academic challenges because I knew what I wanted to do, and I gained a lot of knowledge during my gap year. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, so I just went for my goal to finish my studies and became a full-time teacher so that I could fulfil my purpose.”
– P4*

To conquer the challenges posed by adjusting to higher education, some participants channelled the life skills that they had learnt during the gap year. These included self-discipline, stress management and enthusiasm, amongst others.

“My gap year showed me that hard work really pays off as well as not to get easily discouraged. As I handled bigger problems during my gap year, my study concerns seemed small, and I was able to handle the pressure.” – P8

The gap year also played a role in the attitude that some of the participants had when faced with the challenges associated with tertiary education. The participants noted that they felt more prepared in general because of experiences during the gap year.

“It mostly prepared me for life and work environments, as I had to deal with different kinds of people, cultures, religions, personalities. It also helped me cope in stressful situations, overcome hardship, and focus on what is important. These factors may have given me an advantage over my peers.” – P1

“I would not necessarily say that I was more prepared than everyone, but I felt more prepared than those who were facing the same difficulties that I was when I left school.” – P8

As previously mentioned, some participants felt they experienced personal growth or maturity. This maturity was also perceived to be useful when faced with challenges.

“Yes, I was ahead with knowledge because of my practical experience. I also felt a little bit more grown-up and mature, not that they were immature, but I felt that I had a better idea of what to expect. I knew how the theory is applied in practice, and this made it easier for me to pass my subjects and excel.” – P7

“Yes, I think I was more mature, and I realised the importance of getting an education. Whereas some of my peers were still in the partying phase.” – P10

“I was not as immature as I was in high school, and by the time I went to university, I really wanted to go. So I worked hard because I missed school. I was also surprised that I remembered high school stuff like a year later. So yeah, it was good.” – P12

Another running theme amongst the participants was that they were better at managing their stress or anxiety after the gap year. The major inducers of stress were exams and time management when studying.

“Yes, I think I had a few more skills and a better idea of what I wanted to do career-wise, and I also think my stress levels were lower because I knew how to prioritise and plan.” – P6

“It was like being in varsity before actually going to varsity. So all that stress everyone had, I was already used to.” – P5

“Some stress before exams, sticking to my timetable and keeping the discipline of going to every class. It has influenced me in the sense of being confident in my choices as well as keeping me level headed in times of stress instead of running and hiding or breaking down emotionally.” – P4

“I think it helped me deal with anxiety, stress and uncertainty. I knew myself much better and knew what I had to do to avoid these states. I approached exams and assignments with

positivity and with my goal in mind. I also knew I had the ability to perform well, so it was just a matter of putting in the work that needs to be done.” – P7

In addition to maturity, one participant also felt that they were more confident and calmer after the gap year, which aided the transition to higher education.

“Due to the fact that I worked full-time throughout my tertiary education, time management was an issue I had to face and control daily. My gap year provided me with the confidence and more self-management skills to better handle my academics, as well as manage my stress.” – P8

“Taking a year to just take a little step back and assess your life makes all the difference. By doing this, I became a calmer, more confident human being that discovered my purpose in life and knew my passion. I most definitely feel that it gave me preparedness compared to my peers.” – P9

4.4.5.5 Outlook on a gap year

Another emergent theme in this study was the gap year program about the expectations of the students before and during the gap year program. Some students felt that the gap year program had exceeded any expectations they had before.

“It most definitely exceeded my expectations.” – P2

“The practical side is far more different than a short description on a brochure... It exceeded my expectations.” – P4

“It definitely exceeded my expectations. I learnt a lot about myself, and I can honestly say that I grew up in that year. I got to realise what the real world is about and to take responsibility for my own expenses.” – P6

“I learnt a lot during the gap year period. It exceeded my expectations by giving me a lot more perspective and opportunities than I thought it would.” – P8

“The activities I expected to do was to serve the community and to be involved in charity-related work. I was doing this and so much more. The program assisted me in understanding the holistic approach to community-based projects. Dealing with the various aspects of setting up such a program and implementing it gave me exposure to a vast array of activities, all whilst helping others. The program completely exceeded my expectations.” – P9

In particular, one participant mentioned that the working environment was not as they had expected. They also expressed the sentiment that they did not think the working aspects of the program would have mimicked that of other employees at their workplace.

"It was as hectic as what I thought working would be like. I guess I expected to be treated leniently, but we had an eight to five job like everyone else. It was still nice, though, because I made so many friends I wasn't expecting. I did not really think too much about what was happening, but it was more than I expected because it was a real job, and I actually learnt something." – P11

4.4.6 Review & recommendations

To ascertain the usefulness of participating in a gap year program, the students were asked to review their gap year experiences. The majority of the participants felt the gap year program was a positive experience for them.

"I experienced and learned more during this year than I could ever hope for." – P3

"I will be forever grateful for what they taught me." – P4

"It's still the best decision of my life. I wouldn't be alive now if not doing a gap year. I would not change anything at all." – P10

Other participants felt that a gap year program would be useful for other students who were not prepared for higher education even if the matriculant did not have any career indecision.

"I would recommend a working gap year for everyone that is not yet ready for the large environment at university." – P1

"I would definitely recommend it. It is a breather after twelve years of school, it opens your mind to the million possibilities there are, and it makes you experience so much with regards to your personal development as well as your career decision." – P9

"I would even recommend a gap year when you think that you are certain of what career path you want to follow." – P12

One participant felt that their attitude towards the gap year was not favourable from the onset and they would have preferred work experience in line with their chosen career path.

"I think I would change it in the sense of going into the program more open-minded and less afraid to experience life from the very beginning. Practical exposure to my career path would have also been useful." – P9

The most commonly expressed recommendations for the gap year institutes were to include courses on the current job market.

“Yes, I would have liked to learn more during the years, such as what careers have a job shortage in the market and what careers are already flooded.” – P4

“What I expected was to get insight into the different occupations, and through the exposure, I hoped to have a clear idea of what career path to take. Although the practical side helped me a lot, I would have still liked more information and guidance.” – P6

“I would incorporate a few things, learn more about the job market, salary scales, investigate more career options, learn an extra language, start being part of a charity, learn how to do personal income tax, learn how to plan better, and some career guidance by a career councillor would have been preferred.” – P10

Another participant felt that there was too much time left during the day after they finished the courses offered by the gap year program, which could have been better utilised.

“If I could repeat my gap year, I would make sure to participate more in a social sense, as well as to get a part-time job so as not to waste so much time after classes. I also would have liked to maybe learn an extra language or learn an extra skill such as how to do your own personal tax.” – P5

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“The opportunity to step away from everything and take a break is something that shouldn’t be squandered”

Harper Reed

5.1 Introduction

As the number of young people taking time out from studying after completing high school increases globally, studying this phenomenon in the South African context is important. These students would spend upward of one year engaged in non-academic learning that helped them to develop into fully-fledged, contributing members of society ready for university and careers. Unlike the programming that high schools offer, and unlike the environment of the typical university, Gap year programs get students out of their comfort zones and offer them a chance to develop organically through contact with authentic activities. Private studies conducted within the gap industry show that gap year takers do return to and perform well at university. These findings suggest that the practice is highly worthy of attention.

The importance of such a study relates directly to the problems seen in higher education institutions. The current South African statistics for student dropouts and students’ persistence in obtaining degrees indicate that there is a crisis regarding student outcomes in universities. A gap year allows students to step out of academics for exploration, and discovery may aid their adjustment in university. While some may say that a gap year is time wasted away from university, others see this as a solid investment to mitigate the potential financial and psychological impact of ineffectual personal choices before university. Therefore, there is a need for research attention directed at motivating factors and the academic profile of students in further education and training who have participated in a structured Gap Year after completing high school.

This chapter aims to conclude on the findings from the qualitative study in conjunction with the literature review. The conclusions summarise what has been ascertained as the value of gap year institutions in South Africa, the challenges that the gap year industry is faced and the opportunities of the gap year industry of South Africa.

Additionally, the chapter reviews the primary and secondary objectives, critically assessing their accomplishment. In conclusion, the chapter offers research recommendations for the future.

5.2 Summary of the key findings

Following the previous chapter, value, challenges and opportunities are divided into three categories, despite overlapping in some instances.

5.2.1 Value

The first primary objective of this study was to give an exploratory and descriptive view of the value of gap year institutions in South Africa.

5.2.1.1 Bridging the gap between matric and university

The gap between high school and university presents many challenges for first-year students who take up higher education (university) studies. Consequently, the transition has often been a difficult one for many.

Structured gap-year programs have proven to be a successful tool to bridge the gap between secondary education and the maturity required from students to successfully navigate the demands of tertiary education. Essentially the scripting of an unscripted year provides those who partake in outcome centered activities with an opportunity to fill the “gap”.

According to (Dyrda *et al.*, 2017) it is becoming increasingly popular to take a purposeful gap year instead of entering tertiary institutions directly after high school graduation, in circumstances where a purposeful gap year increases students’ academic motivation and performance. Consequently, those students who elect to pursue a gap year showcase improved academic motivation, maturity and self-directness, all of which have exhibited higher educational performance (Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010).

What is apparent from the study is that students who participated in a structured gap year harboured a feeling of an increased readiness for higher education that was lacking before the completion of a gap year. Furthermore, the findings from the students also illustrate the potential within gap year programs to ease the transition into higher education. None of the twelve student participants changed courses after taking a gap year. However, one of the students had first dropped out of their course, and then they decided to take a gap year before returning to their tertiary studies.

5.2.1.2 Personal development of the youth

Most of the managers of the gap year institutions said that working with youth is their calling and that their objective is to let the students develop as a whole. Spiritually, mentally and physically. Students described how their maturity grew during the time they participated in a gap year. It gave

them time to become more self-aware, discover their identity and find their purpose. Fostering responsibility within the students enables them to make better decisions.

The interviews with students also revealed that the participants expressed an increased personal growth or maturity that they perceived to have prepared them for better future decision-making.

These findings are supported by Coetzee and Bester (2009) where the benefits associated with a gap year, specifically increased personal growth and maturity, largely contribute to students' confidence to engage with their personal and career development.

5.2.1.3 Skills development

The development of skills is an added benefit of taking a gap year. Participants described soft skills, financial management, practical skills, self-discipline, and time management skills. These skills are essential for every young adult. Gaining some of these skills right out of high school can assist with future endeavours like enrolling in tertiary education. This supports research by Guomei and Wei (2017) and Rabie and Naidoo (2016) that found gaining life skills and developing soft skills as global motivators of taking a gap year.

Furthermore, students also reported that they gained skills by participating in a gap year. These include a variety of life skills such as communication skills, the ability to handle social interactions and conflict and practical skills.

5.2.1.4 Recreational activities

As South Africa offers such exceptional nature landscapes it makes it easy for adventure-based gap years to design their programs. These activities create space to teach the students skills, let them develop personally, and expose them to establish interest and strengths. It also is the backbone of marketing for many of the gap years.

5.2.1.5 Career guidance

"Career indecision is the most significant motivator for participating in a gap year" (Coetzee & Bester, 2009:618; Nieman, 2010:121). This study also supports researches findings. Allowing the students to take time off to explore their options and plot their next steps after conducting career guidance gives them more clarity and lowers dropout rates and course changes. Some means of guiding the students with their careers are personality profiling tests, direct career guidance, vocational interests, work environment orientation, students identification of interests/goals, interaction with guest speakers of different career industries, career orientation, job shadowing, youth feedback development, feedback with personality profiling and apprentice challenges.

The finding from the students also revealed that exploring career experiences and gaining practical experience through career guidance emerged as two factors that affected their career choice.

5.2.1.6 Educational advancement

Some gap years offer academic courses. This adds value to their academic achievements and is also perceived in a better light by the parents as the students have something on paper to show after their gap year.

5.2.2 Challenges

The second primary objective of this study was to determine the challenges that the gap year industry is faced with in South Africa.

5.2.2.1 Problematic nature of the terminology used to describe the industry: “Gap Year”

This is supported by Stehlik's (2010:365) that said the term "gap" insinuates something missing, which is misleading since constructive gaps are typically filled with valuable life experiences and contribute to essential skills development.

Parents and students see a gap year as taking time off, having fun, going on adventures and not necessarily as an added value to the student and to his/her future.

5.2.2.2 No regulatory body with rules that gap year institutions should adhere to

The fact that no regulatory body controls the gap year industry is a challenge as it can take one bad gap year institution to influence the perception of the gap year industry as a whole. Any person can open a gap year without complying with any regulations.

5.2.2.3 Financial resources/component/restraint

Gap years are privately owned institutions, and the financial restraint keeps them from expanding the business. Expansion includes acquiring bigger and better facilities, developing the gap year programs, increasing staff numbers and attracting more students through extensive marketing. Participating in a gap year is also not cheap and many parents and students feel that the money can be of better use contributed to university fees. In South Africa, no subsidies are extended to gap year institutions and sponsorships are also challenging to obtain.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the South African government and tertiary institutions in South Africa currently do not promote gap year programs (Nieman, 2013). This creates an even more

significant challenge as their support must be earned before the government will look into subsidizing gap years.

The biggest part of the population can also not afford a gap year. Many previous disadvantaged people rely on study loans to get through university, and increasing the debt amount for participating in a gap year is not an option.

5.2.2.4 Marketing of a gap year

As gap years are privately owned, the cost of marketing is a challenge. Word of mouth is currently the biggest marketing tool that the industry uses. However, the industry still has to do effective advertising because it's difficult to explain to somebody. It mostly takes place on a personal, face to face level. It can also be costly to advertise. In order to effectively market a gap year, the gap years should also find their own niche and gain an advantage over other gap years. Many gap years consist of a limited number of staff members. Their main focus is not necessarily marketing, but they do it themselves because outsourcing is so expensive.

5.2.2.5 COVID-19 pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is severe on many businesses. As many people were retrenched and many businesses closed down, less money is circulating around to consider taking a gap year. Some programs also involve travelling around the country that placed a constraint on the gap years during the pandemic.

5.2.2.6 The value of a gap year is not clear to students

Many students are not aware of the benefits of taking a gap year or know of the different offerings available in the market. Participants also stated that students do not want to tell their peers that they will participate in a gap year as it may look like they don't know what they want to do with their lives.

From the interviews conducted with the students who participated in gap years, some felt that the gap year program exceeded many expectations.

5.2.2.7 Parents perception of a gap year

In South Africa, the parent's perception of the gap year industry is a big challenge. Many parents feel that participants might not like to attend a tertiary education institution after a gap year (Tenser, 2015).

Parents do not understand the objectives and do not see the value of letting their children participate in a gap year. Most view it as a vacation and wasting time and money. Also, with the

high unemployment rates and the majority of people living below the bread line, considering taking a gap year does not even cross most of the population's minds. If there is any money available, most parents will put it towards university fees rather than spending it on a gap year.

5.2.2.8 Awareness of gap years

The lack of awareness of the existence of gap year institutions is a challenge. In order to change this, the institutions must visit schools. Participants said that there is a lot of red tape when it comes to visiting schools, and they have been more successful in connecting with schools overseas than in South Africa. Awareness is also directly connected to the industry's marketing, which has financial restraints.

5.2.2.9 The intimacy of the gap year program and the fears surrounding the impact that expansion will have hereon

Most gap year institutions work closely with their students, tracking their progress, drawing up reports, discussing reports and establishing personal relationships with them. Expanding the number of students taken into a gap year program would require more staff that is dedicated to the same mission. This is a challenge for institutions because the value mostly lies within the intimacy between the staff and the students.

5.2.3 Opportunities

Another part of the second primary objective of this study was to determine the opportunities within the gap year industry of South Africa.

5.2.3.1 Establishment of a regulatory body

A regulatory board would give direction to prospective gap years that want to enter the market, creating international standardisation of gap year guidelines and benefiting the industry. By complying with set out rules, more people would trust the industry. Also, gap year institutions that do not deliver on their initial promises will cease, giving the other gap years a bigger market share. One participant mentioned that a governing board would eliminate gap years that are not on a standard to offer certified programs.

Many emerging gap years also take existing programs and market them as their own. By having a regulatory board to adhere to, situations like this one can be avoided.

5.2.3.2 Establishment of networking platform in the gap year industry

Creating a network as a platform for the different gap years to communicate with each other. Many gap years are not even aware of other offerings in the market. There is also little to no

contact with other gap year institutions. The network can keep the gap years up to date with what's new in the market and any news related to the industry. Managers of gap years can also refer prospective students to other gap years if they are aware of their offerings and where they are situated if they get enquiries and their own offering does not suit the student's needs, feeding the market.

5.2.3.3 Collaboration within the industry

Many participants are open to this opportunity. Current gap years in South Africa have different offerings. The bases of these offerings are mostly adventure-based, religion-based or focused on career guidance. There is little to no collaboration at the moment between gap years as they are all privately owned and focused on promoting their own program. The collaboration will open up the industry to new opportunities and attract more clients. Competition is not highly strung as offerings are so widely diverse, even where the gap years are situated are not close. If a career-focused gap year can, for instance, collaborate with an adventure gap year, they can send their students on camps or excursions without having to obtain facilities to do so or move away from what they know and focus on. The adventure-based gap year can in turn send their students during this time to obtain some career guidance, thus, developing and growing the student as a whole.

Gap years can also attract more students if they offer a bigger, more extensive program. Having more comprehensive gap years in each province would also make it more accessible. One participant said that cross-pollination would be beneficial for every gap year program. Letting the students partake in other programs from other gap years will give them tremendous exposure and create fantastic opportunities.

In the words of one participant: "There is power if you stand together".

5.2.3.4 Financial support by the government to both gap years and students

Receiving support from the government can stimulate the industry. Subsidies for gap year institutions to keep a high standard of offerings and sponsorships for students that are previously disadvantage that can give them the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and be a positive influx to the economy. Subsidies can also create more jobs and enable the institutions to expand their program and amount of students they can accommodate.

5.2.3.5 Diversification of students

By marketing to different cultures and people from different backgrounds can attract a more diverse group. This is a big part of the market that has been left untapped as most participants of

gap years in South Africa comes from white families that received a medium to high income. Growing the intake of diverse students will possibly also grow the amount of sponsorships received.

5.2.3.6 Conversion to a non-profit organisation

One participant said that one of the strategies to overcome some of the challenges is to become a non-profit company. However, they are still in a phase to discover how to do fundraising because it is quite specialized. Converting to a non-profit can hold tax benefits such as not paying any tax on donations received.

5.2.3.7 Diversification of gap year program

Many gap year programs in South Africa is religion-based. One participant indicated that they should formulate a gap year that is not entirely Christian-based because it excludes many South African students.

Programs are also mostly either religious-based, adventure-based or focussed on career guidance. All with the underlying objective of developing the youth and assisting them on a personal level. By diversifying the programs to include different offerings can attract more students. This walks hand in hand with collaboration within the industry and being adaptable to what the demand in the market is.

5.2.3.8 Infiltrating international market to attract more students

Most participants talked about infiltrating international markets to attract more students. Ideally, the influx of students from overseas can support the program's cash flow to have South African students at a discount. Our country offers beautiful nature attractions that can easily be promoted and the fees are cheap to the international market. This is also an excellent opportunity for South African students and international students alike to build networks.

5.2.3.9 The adaptability of a gap year program

Gap year programs should become more flexible to adapt to changing times and situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Having the option of online- and shorter courses between holidays can increase their numbers. One participant indicated that they have an excellent opportunity to create a space for people to rethink how they are running their program. People are becoming more and more open to exploring different options after completing matric, and having a program that is exciting, flexible and up to date with the times will attract these prospective clients.

5.2.3.10 Increase awareness/marketing of gap year

Increasing awareness of the gap year industry by promoting the results and benefits of such is an ample opportunity. Gap years can use website marketing and visit more schools to increase awareness of gap year.

By speaking to young people and becoming more and more of a hot topic in South Africa that it can, in turn, create a strong platform for gap years to get subsidized as well possibly.

5.2.3.11 Collaboration with institutions outside of the gap year industry

By collaborating with businesses in and around the area where the gap year is located, sponsorships can possibly be obtained. Internship opportunities after participating in a gap year can be a significant venture. As the financial restraint is heavy on the industry, the need to get access to capital is high. If gap years plan to expand and improve their programs or give sponsorships to students who cannot participate in a gap year, they will need investors and sponsorships. Therefore, working with other businesses within their vicinity is an opportunity worth pursuing. In turn, the students can work at the companies over holidays and internships can be considered.

5.2.3.12 Personal development opportunities

Another opportunity is to focus program offerings more towards personal development, leadership development, or skills development. Although this is an added benefit of taking a gap year, programs and marketing can be improved to gain better results.

5.2.3.13 The positive impact of COVID-19 on the gap year industry

Students are in more isolated conditions than before the pandemic, emotionally and socially, which can leave them in a depressed state because there is no stimulation. Some university students have not been to campus since the pandemic started. Times are uncertain and students are reconsidering going to university straight out of high school since they are deprived of all the social aspects of attending university. Students can socialize, communicate, learn more about building relationships, deal with conflict, and grow emotionally by attending a gap year.

Participants said that there is a lot of growth in this sector, and they believe that COVID-19 has positively impacted this. Many parents are now looking for an opportunity to give students this kind of experience, especially after the stress and anxiety caused by lockdown, no socialisation, cancellation of sport etc. This is also an excellent opportunity to adjust to the times that's changed and address all that's new.

5.3 Recommendations

The participants described several challenges and opportunities, and most opportunities give means to overcoming challenges, grouped into three themes. This section provides recommendations on how gap years can exploit these opportunities.

- **Collaboration**

It is recommended that gap years start collaborating with other gap years, other businesses within the immediate area, and the government.

Collaborating within the industry will provide better offerings to each gap year individually and increase the industry's standard. Gap years can expand its offering without any further capital investment and attract more students. Creating a network platform will also enable gap years to collaborate more as they would have the means to do so.

Collaborating with other businesses can increase sponsorships to students and donations, in turn the students can also apply for internships at these businesses.

It is also highly recommended to start collaborating with the government to set up a regulatory board to govern the gap year industry by setting clear guidelines and enquiring about subsidies and sponsorships for previously disadvantaged students.

- **Marketing and awareness**

The gap years are recommended to invest a lot more time and money into marketing, especially directed towards the international markets. Outsourcing this domain of the business might be the best option as it is not the staff member's main focus. South Africa is an affordable travel destination. By increasing the number of international students enrolling, more local students can participate in a gap year at a discounted rate.

It is also recommended that institutions visit more schools more often. Many students and parents are not aware of the offerings nor the benefits of participating in a gap year. By educating them on the value of gap years, participating in one might become viable. This will also overcome the challenge of changing parents' perceptions to a degree.

Marketing to South African students should also be more directed to showcase the personal growth, skills and career guidance obtained by participating in a gap year.

- **Adaptability and flexibility**

It is recommended that gap years improve their programs to be better adapted to change and the demand of the market. Using the COVID-19 pandemic to their benefit to promote social interaction, outside activities and reassessing one's future. Staying up to date with new trends, better approaches and more effective program offerings can improve market share.

Part of the adaptability of the gap year program might also be to move to a non-profit organization as the main objective of many of the gap years are to empower and develop the youth and not to gain profit. The tax benefit will assist them in using the donations for expansion and taking in more students.

It is also recommended that gap years adopt a more diverse approach when it comes to students and their offerings.

5.4 Achievement of the study objectives

A crucial factor determining the success of a research project is whether the objectives of the study have been achieved. The study's primary objective was to explore and describe the value, challenges, and opportunities gap year institutions face in South Africa. The study has five secondary objectives to assist with the achievement of the primary objective. The section continues by listing the secondary objective and describing how each of the objectives was achieved.

To review the literature on the gap year phenomenon and the institutions offering structured gap year programs

The literature review in Chapter 2 discusses the gap year industry in the USA, UK, and South Africa. The literature review continues with a discussion on three themes of motivates of taking a gap year, two themes of challenges and three themes of opportunities. As a whole, the literature review provides a significant insight into the global gap year industry.

To explore the value that gap year programs offer to participants

The three themes of the value of participating in a gap year are supported by the description provided by participants during the qualitative interview. An additional three themes of the value of a gap year were identified during the interviews with managers and students.

To explore and describe the challenges faced by gap year institutions in South Africa that hinder new entrepreneurship towards gap year systems

The two themes of challenges facing the gap year industry are supported by the description provided by participants during the qualitative interview. An additional seven themes of challenges were identified during the interviews.

To explore the opportunities available to gap year institutions in South Africa

The descriptions provided by the participants supported the three opportunities identified through the literature review. However, the participants did describe an additional ten themes of opportunities.

To explore recommendations on dealing with the challenges that gap year institutions in South Africa face

Three main themes of recommendations were made for the opportunities that emerged. Recommendations on how to overcome the challenges are incorporated into the opportunities.

All five of the secondary objectives were achieved during the study. The primary objectives were also achieved. The value, challenges and opportunities of gap year institutions within South Africa were explored through the qualitative interviews held with several managers of gap year institutions and students of gap year institutions. The findings of the interviews were described in Chapter 4. The problem statement indicated that there is limited academic research on the gap year industry in South Africa. The findings of this study supplement the academic research available on the gap year industry in South Africa. However, there is a need for future research on the gap year industry in South Africa.

5.5 Considerations for future research

Due to limited research available on the gap year industry of South Africa, this study explored the value, challenges in this industry. However, this study was limited to seven institutions within South Africa. Future studies can expand the study area to include more institutions in order to obtain a more significant understanding of the industry. It can also be expanded to include the financial and business models of the industry. It is recommended that future studies explore and describe these modules and the demand and need in the market, locally and for international students. It will benefit the industry to understand better what will attract more students and how their programs compare to the need and demand.

Due to the study following a qualitative research method, only a limited number of participants were interviewed. The value, challenges and opportunities identified in this study can be used to design a quantitative questionnaire for a future study. A quantitative study can reach more gap years and students that will allow for statistical analysis, which may reveal additional information.

5.6 Summary

This chapter concludes the study on exploring and describing the value, challenges and opportunities of gap year institutions in South Africa. All five secondary objectives and the two primary objectives of the study were achieved. The empirical research was conducted using a

qualitative research method with a descriptive research design, which is ideal for research topics with limited research available.

The empirical research made three main recommendations to exploit opportunities and simultaneously overcome the challenges. The main recommendation of the study is to collaborate within the industry, outside of the industry, and with government. This will help to overcome most of the challenges and create a better program offering and standard throughout the industry.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH MANAGERS

1. Tell me about the institution, how did it all start?
2. In your opinion, how would you describe the role of gap year institutions to better prepare students for university?

- Probe: What is your perspective on the current gap year institutions availability to school leavers in South Africa?
- Probe: What gap year institutions are you aware of?

Considering what we have discussed up to now, I would like to ask you the following questions which specifically focus on the challenges of gap year institutions in South Africa.

3. In your opinion, what are the challenges of gap year institutions in South Africa?
 - Probe: What are the unique challenges for your institution?
 - Probe: What are the challenges for the gap year institution sector in South Africa?
 - Probe: What could these institutions do to overcome these challenges?

Considering your response regarding the challenges of gap year institutions, allow me to ask you a few more questions.

4. What are the opportunities for gap year institutions in South Africa?
 - Probe: How will you pursue these opportunities?
5. What advice could you give to other gap year institutions?

Is there anything else that you might want to discuss regarding the role of gap year institutions in South Africa?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH STUDENTS

Before the Gap Year

1. What experiences and/or who led you to believe that a gap year program was the right choice for you?
2. What were the factors that made you select the specific gap year program that you did?
3. According to your understanding what were the main objectives of the program to be?
4. What were the biggest concerns or challenges you faced against taking a gap year?
5. Did you know what you wanted to study before taking the Gap Year?

During the Gap year

6. Did you participate in a structured gap year program during your gap year? (e.g. a program offered by: a service organization, a gap year company, a school etc.)
7. How long was your gap year?
8. What activities did you do during your gap year period?
9. Were the gap year program activities what you had expected to be doing?
10. Did the gap year program experience match or exceeded your expectations?
11. Did you further develop or learn new skills during the gap year program?

At the end of the Gap Year

12. Did you have any concerns about what it would be like to go to a tertiary institution (University/ College) after taking a gap year? Where those concerns still true after you started your tertiary studies?
13. Were you satisfied with the experiences and skills gained from participating in a gap year program?
14. Do you intend to or currently make use of any services provided or skills learnt during gap year program?
15. To what extent do you think taking a gap year influenced your choice of career?
16. Did you gain any practical experience towards your chosen career path during your Gap Year?

During higher Education

17. Do you think participating in a gap year made you more prepared for college/university than your peers?
18. Have you ever changed courses since starting your tertiary studies?
19. Have you ever failed a course during your tertiary studies (University/ College)?
20. Have you ever dropped out of a higher education program or institute?
21. Have you ever received financial aid during your undergraduate tertiary studies?
22. What academic challenges did you face when you started your tertiary studies?
23. To what extent do you think your gap year experience had an impact on the way you viewed and/or handled academic challenges?

Perceptions of the Gap Year

24. Would you consider your gap year program as of a high standard and informative?
25. What about your gap year program experience did you find useful?
26. If it is possible to repeat your gap year would you do it exactly the same way, or would you change some things? What would you change?
27. Do you have any regrets or misgivings regarding taking a gap year?
28. Would you consider participating in a gap year program as an overall positive or negative experience?
29. Would you recommend participating in a gap year program to other people?
30. Any other comments apart from what was discussed?

APPENDIX C: LETTER OF CONSENT

Informed consent letter

To whom it may be concerned

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW

Date: _____

Participant code: _____

My name is Minke Hattingh and I am an MBA student at the North-West University Business School. This study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of Gap Year institutions in selected provinces in South Africa. This study forms part of a dissertation to be submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Business Administration at the North-West University. It is an internationally accredited degree that requires adherence to strict ethical standards as a prerequisite to conducting this research.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the interview. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If at any time, you do not want to continue with the interview, you may decline. Your time and involvement are profoundly appreciated. The entire interview will take approximately 45 minutes. To maintain the essence of your words for the research, I will record the information. At any time, you may request to see or hear the information I collect. The interview will be voice-recorded, however, your name will not be recorded. The interviewer will take notes. This is done for data analysis. The recording will be transcribed by the interviewer and kept confidential in a password-protected computer. The transcripts and recordings will be destroyed after three years.

Furthermore, all individual identification will be removed from the hard copy of the transcript. Participant identity and confidentiality will be concealed using coding procedures. Please note that excerpts from the interview may be included in the final

dissertation report or other later publications. However, under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics appear in these writings.

Limited demographic information will be collected with the purpose to form a profile of the participants, but will not be used to make comparisons between groups or for further statistical analyses.

The study was approved by the Scientific Committee of the NWU Business School. The Chair of the Scientific Committee is Prof Christoff Botha. He can be reached at 018 299 1672 and his email address is christoff.botha@nwu.ac.za.

Ethical clearance was obtained by the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Ethics Committee (EMS-REC) and the ethical clearance number was allocated [NWU-00730-20-A4]. The Chair of the Ethical Committee is Mark Rathbone. He can be reached at 018 299 1356 and his e-mail address is mark.rathbone@nwu.ac.za.

The supervisor of the mini-dissertation is Professor Stephan Van der Merwe. He can be reached at 018 299 1414 (Email address: stephan.vandermerwe@nwu.ac.za) for further questions or concerns about the research project.

Your input is of great value to this research and I appreciate your help in providing this information.

Sincerely,

MINKE HATTINGH

NWU Business School

North-West University, Potchefstroom

APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE OF A TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW WITH MANAGERS

I: Tell me about your institution and how it all started?

E: Equilibrium School of Life started 11 years ago. It was started by a doctor who was 'n lecturer at the University of Potchefstroom. It was she that noticed that there's a huge gap between Matric and University which lead to a high rate of students failing the first year of University. Equilibrium school of Life originated from this concept. A Gap year program with amazing results. They help the students to achieve a greater success rate with the course that they choose at the end of the day. Since then it became an absolute amazing gap year program to be reckoned with, which many wonderful testimonies followed. They have been able to find the correct career and make the right decisions. They equip the students with life skills and a whole comprehensive career guidance component to assist students to make those decisions.

I: What are the main factors that Equilibria focuses on?

E: Seventy percent of people in the workforce are unhappy at their work. If you don't make the right decision you will also end up joining the seventy percent that are also not content with what they are doing. It is not a one month course but a full year, comprehensive program that does not force you into a specific field but rather guides you to make decisions for yourself. The role that Equilibria plays is not necessarily to tell you what you need to do but rather to equip you in a way and help build your skills as well as decision-making skills in order for you to make the right decisions.

I: What type of things do you focus on to get to that goal and what is the program about?

E: Life-skill components like business-etiquette skills, financial skills etc.; purpose in life and purpose in God; career guidance being a seven-step program to identify a couple of careers they can go into; job shadowing - "go into the field" by interviewing people in different directions or careers; and reports of the pros and the cons.

I: How do you decide on a direction/course?

E: We allow the students to identify their own interests and we have speakers or guests from those fields that come to talk to the students.

I: What is your opinion on the current gap year industry?

E: It's not just because I work for Equilibria, but I believe we have the most comprehensive gap year program. There are great options available for the students. This program gets selected over and above all the programs that are available. There is a great variety of programs available. We also have the students involved in community service projects: They have to raise the money by themselves and then give back to the community by supporting the schools or helping an old age home. It doesn't matter what they choose, but they have to generate the finance themselves. This is one of the skills that they get taught. The options are endless; churches, adventure camps *etc.* Many opportunities are available. None of them according to me has got such a great comprehensive program than this one. The proof is in the pudding, it works.

I: What gap year institutions are you aware of?

E: Metamorpho; the Warrior Academy, an Adventure camp and environmental leadership program (AEL). The Equilibrium program was the only one in Potchefstroom but now that it has moved to Johannesburg, I think there will be a lot more competition going on here with these programs.

I: What would you say are the unique challenges for your current institute?

E: The current Covid-19 component, especially for people coming from all over South Africa., because as soon as the President closes the borders, we have a problem. What we have now gone with is a hybrid model. As soon as we go in lockdown mode we will immediately revert to a hybrid solution, but this is a real problem for us because students want students as they learn from each other. Students think that a gap year is a waste of money because they or their parents pay for a course that does not directly go towards

their studies, but what they don't realize is that this course can really set you up for success. The financial component. if you take finances out of this component, most students will choose a gap year opportunity. Not everyone can afford a gap year study course.

I: What will you do to overcome these challenges?

E: Set up a donors' fund for companies who want to donate towards students who would like to join us and who shows a real interest. They can select from a pool of students. Help students who cannot afford the course but are academically gifted, that haven't decided what they want to do in the future. We wanted a diverse group of different cultures and languages, and that's why we have an institution in Johannesburg. We've also set up an advisory council and we've included different people in different roles to answer our panels.

I: What other opportunities do you see for the gap year Institute of South Africa?

E: Since Covid-19, it has become an international platform. There are opportunities for students from abroad to come to do a gap year in South Africa. The only thing that can hinder us is that the career guidance is a little different here. We will not take in more than seventy students so that we can continue with our program, even if we have to go into lockdown.

I: How would you pursue these opportunities that we have mentioned?

E: Collaboration, there is power if you stand together; assisting international students as well as South Africans living abroad; affordability; attractiveness; safety; and keeping student as well as parents happy.

I: What advice would you give to other gap year institutions?

E: Everybody should focus on their own niche and abilities. It's not necessary to focus on competition for students as everyone is doing their own thing. Everybody's niche is sitting somewhere else and your student will come to you for what you offer. Everybody offers

something completely different and you will attract the student that you need to attract into your academy.

APPENDIX E: EXAMPLE OF A TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW WITH STUDENTS

Before the Gap Year

I: What experiences and/or who led you to believe that a gap year program was the right choice for you?

P: I have always been someone that is pedantic when it comes to life choices and did not consider myself ready to make a life decision that would impact my entire life forward when I finished school, I was also very drawn to the idea of spending an entire year or at least a substantial part thereof giving back to the community.

I: What were the factors that made you select the specific gap year program that you did?

P: As previously stated, despite not knowing what I wanted to do with my life, I was very sure that the year following my final year of school I wanted to be engaged with the community in a hands on manner. The specific program that I selected offered me exactly this.

I: According to your understanding what were the main objectives of the program to be?

P: Giving the participants an opportunity to understand the world we live in on a deeper level and breaking down the walls that 12 years of schooling inevitably creates. Essentially finding yourself by serving others.

I: What were the biggest concerns or challenges you faced against taking a gap year?

P: The general societal perception that the step one has to take after finishing school is to peruse higher education and to make a decision as to what career you will follow. This was elevated by the fact that I finished school with 7 distinctions and at the top of my class. People's expectations of you are heightened and they expect you to have all of the answers ready as soon as you write your final exam paper in matric.

I: Did you know what you wanted to study before taking the Gap Year?

P: I had very clear options but my decision was not made.

During the Gap year

I: Did you participate in a structured gap year program during your gap year? (e.g. a program offered by: a service organization, a gap year company, a school etc.)

P: It was more of a society driven initiative as opposed to a fully structured gap year, but it was structured in such a manner so as to give participants a platform for result driven introspection.

I: How long was your gap year?

P: 8 Months

I: What activities did you do during your gap year period?

P: The gap year was centred on the goal of running a fully-fledged community service project of your choice. Participants were required to deal with various aspects of starting and completing the project which included, but was not limited to: approaching the institution/community, raising awareness/marketing, fundraising, and compliance with regularities, logistics and implementation.

I: Were the gap year program activities what you had expected to be doing?

P: The activities I expected to do was to serve the community and to be involved in charity related work. I was doing this and so much more. The program assisted me in understanding the holistic approach to community based projects. Dealing with the various aspects of setting up such a program and implementing it gave me exposure to a vast array of activities, all whilst helping others.

I: Did the gap year program experience match or exceeded your expectations?

P:: As I have stated in question 9, the program completely exceeded my expectations.

I: Did you further develop or learn new skills during the gap year program?

P: I developed an entire new skillset during the gap year program and my mind was opened to so many things.

At the end of the Gap Year

I: Did you have any concerns about what it would be like to go to a tertiary institution (University/ College) after taking a gap year? Where those concerns still true after you started your tertiary studies?

P: I did not have any concerns. I always knew that I wanted to go to a tertiary institution and at the end of my gap year I felt equipped and ready.

I: Were you satisfied with the experiences and skills gained from participating in a gap year program?

P: Yes, I experienced and learned more during this year than I could ever hope for.

I: Do you intend to or currently make use of any services provided or skills learnt during gap year program?

P: I make use of the skills that I acquired on a daily basis.

I: To what extent do you think taking a gap year influenced your choice of career?

P: Becoming an advocate was always an option but my gap year turned the option into a certainty. I had the opportunity of interacting with the community and I had a platform to serve others. I've always considered myself as an activist, I've always had a passion for writing, public speaking and the community. The gap year solidified all of this and I was provided with certainty that being an advocate would bring everything I am passionate about together.

I: Did you gain any practical experience towards your chosen career path during your Gap Year?

P: Yes. My gap year most importantly gave me practical experience in problem solving and interacting with a vast array of individuals,

During higher Education

I: Do you think participating in a gap year made you more prepared for college/university than your peers?

P: I would not necessarily say that I was more prepared than everyone, but I felt more prepared than those who were facing the same difficulties that I was when I left school.

I: Have you ever changed courses since starting your tertiary studies?

P: No

I: Have you ever failed a course during your tertiary studies (University/ College)?

P: No

I: Have you ever dropped out of a higher education program or institute?

P: No

I: Have you ever received financial aid during your undergraduate tertiary studies?

P: No (My parents funded my undergraduate tertiary studies)

I: What academic challenges did you face when you started your tertiary studies?

P: Tertiary education is completely different to high-school. I found high-school quite easy and received good marks without really putting in much of an effort. University demanded much more of an effort from my side and this was a very important realisation.

I: To what extent do you think your gap year experience had an impact on the way you viewed and/or handled academic challenges?

P: I was thrown with more curveballs during my gap year than within my entire four years at university. My gap year matured me and taught me that there are people that face massive obstacles on the daily. Problems and challenges that would normally seem like the end of the world to someone that comes from a confined and protected environment became manageable to me.

Perceptions of the Gap Year

I: Would you consider your gap year program as of a high standard and informative?

P: Yes it was. You also had the power of controlling how much and what you would get out of the gap year.

I: What about your gap year program experience did you find useful?

P: Despite not being as structured, it provided real life experiences and exposure that I found to be invaluable.

I: If it is possible to repeat your gap year would you do it exactly the same way, or would you change some things? What would you change?

P: For me personally it was perfect as I am now extremely happy in my career.

I: Do you have any regrets or misgivings regarding taking a gap year?

P: No

I: Would you consider participating in a gap year program as an overall positive or negative experience?

P: It was overall a positive experienced despite being a more challenging approach to a gap year.

I: Would you recommend participating in a gap year program to other people?

P: I would and I would even recommend a gap year when you think that you are certain of what career path you want to follow.

I: Any other comments apart from what was discussed?

P: N/A

APPENDIX F: ETHICAL APPROVAL



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT

Private Bag X8001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 289-1111/02222
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Economic and Management Sciences Research
Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)

21 July 2020

Prof Stephan van der Merwe
Per e-mail
Dear Prof van der Merwe,

EMS-REC FEEDBACK: 19062020

Student: Hattingh, M (22908773)(NWU-00730-20-A4)

Applicant: Prof Stephan van der Merwe - MBA

Your ethics application on, *Exploring the challenges and opportunities of gap year institutions in selected provinces in South Africa*, which served on the EMS-REC meeting of 19 June 2020, refers.

Outcome:

Approved as a minimal risk study. A number NWU-00730-20-A4 is given for one year of ethics clearance.

Due to the Covid-19 lock down ethics clearance for applications that involve data collection or any form of contact with participants are subject to the restrictions imposed by the South African government.

Kind regards,

Mark
Rathbone

Digitally signed by Mark Rathbone
DN: cn=Mark Rathbone, o=North West
University, ou=Business Management
and Economics, email=mark.rathbone@nwu.ac.za

Prof Mark Rathbone

Chairperson: Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)