Review of Gap Year Provision

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1.1.1 This review was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in the autumn of 2003 to provide a baseline overview of the policy issues surrounding gap year in the UK. In the context of rising gap year participation by young people over the last 15 years, the review originally aimed to provide a comprehensive summary and analysis of the existing literature and research into gap years **(2.1-2.3)**. The review's original key aims were **(2.4)**:

- to provide a definitional framework for understanding gap years taken by young people aged 16 to 25 years in a policy context;

- to build up a comprehensive picture of current gap year activity in the UK and overseas including an understanding of access and participation to different gap year opportunities

- to identify the barriers to undertaking a gap year, especially among groups of young people who do not currently take up opportunities;

- to identify existing standards and/or other approaches for quality assurance of gap year organisations/activities.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

1.2.1 In the course of conducting the review, a number of methodological issues arose. First, there is a severe lack of literature to 'review' on the subject of gap years and there has not been any substantial academic or policy research in the past. The literature review was therefore widened to include a range of other sources including website, gap year guidebooks and internal reports from gap year providing organisations (**3.1 to 3.3).**

1.2.2 Second, as a consequence the methodological approach was adapted in order to try to meet the aims as well as possible. A limited amount of original research was therefore conducted which had a number of components **(3.4)**. These were:

- Qualitative interviews with stakeholders including a limited number of young people **(3.5)**

- Sample surveys of providing organisations including initial analysis of datasets **(3.6)**

1.2.3 Third, whilst the findings of the review broadly meet the original aims, they should be treated with caution. The methodology undertaken was limited by the 'thin' nature of the evidence and the findings should thus be regarded as

indicative rather than definitive. Whilst every effort has been made to make a balanced assessment the existing evidence is not sufficient to make strong assertions around specific details (**3.7 to 3.9).** Furthermore, the original research contained in this report is *preliminary* in nature and should not be regarded with the same confidence as a fully-resourced study. Likewise, much of the literature 'reviewed' is not specifically concerned with gap years and relevant points have been inferred **(3.10 & 3.11).**

1.3   A DEFINITIONAL STRUCTURE FOR GAP YEARS

1.3.1   The term 'gap year' and 'year out' are problematic because neither represents a tightly-defined phenomenon. The more recent term is the 'gap year' which has been used widely to refer to the growing numbers of young people taking a year out in the last 15 years. **(4.2.1)**.

1.3.2   The limited academic literature on this subject covers issues such as youth travel, backpacker tourism, youth culture. However, neither it nor the commercial how-to-do literature provide on their own an adequate basis for understanding all the different groups of young people taking gap years or the diverse range of activities they undertake **(4.2.2 to 4.2.6)**.

1.3.3   ***A gap year is therefore defined in this report as "any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes 'out' of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory (4.3.3)*** This does not necessarily map directly onto a precise 12 month period for a variety of reasons but this report argues the period must be between 3 and 24 months **(4.3.4)**. In reality, most young people take a period of time out of around a year and because of the widespread circulation of the term 'gap year', this report uses it throughout **(4.3.5).** The report covers only those young people aged 16-25 **(4.3.6)** and suggests that the most useful basis for classifying gap years is one that groups participants according to the timing and relationship of their gap year to education, training or employment. This represents a classification based on 'life event' in the first instance (**4.3.7)**.

1.3.4 The possibility of a classification of gap years based on activities was considered but rejected because of the sheer number and diversity of possible activities. From a policy perspective we recommend tackling the definitional issue in two related steps. The first step uses the life event or break point and the second then offers a model typology for the kinds of activities which are undertaken during the gap year **(4.3.8)**.

1.3.5   Seven main categories of gap year are identified which is suggested to be a useful approach to a highly complex phenomenon (**4.4)**. The groups broadly divided between gap year participants who take a break after school or HE, during higher education, employment or training or in a complex combination of

all of these (**4.4.1 to 4.4.10).**

	Category of Gap Year
A1	Planned Post-School at 16
A2	Planned Post-School at 18
A3	Default Post-School at 18
B1	Undergraduate Break in Study
B2	Postgraduate Break In Study
C	Immediate Post-University
D1	Break in Postgraduate Study
D2	Postgraduate Combined with Course
E	Employment Break
F	Immediate Post-Training
G	Complex Gap Year

1.3.6   The choice of activity open to gap year participants can be summarised in the model shown below which distinguishes choices in broad types of activity:

Model of Choice in Gap Year Activities

First Layer of Choice

UK or Overseas?

Second Layer of Choice

Organised Travel

Learning   ***Paid Work***

Voluntary Work

Independent Travel

Leisure Activities

Structured or Unstructured?
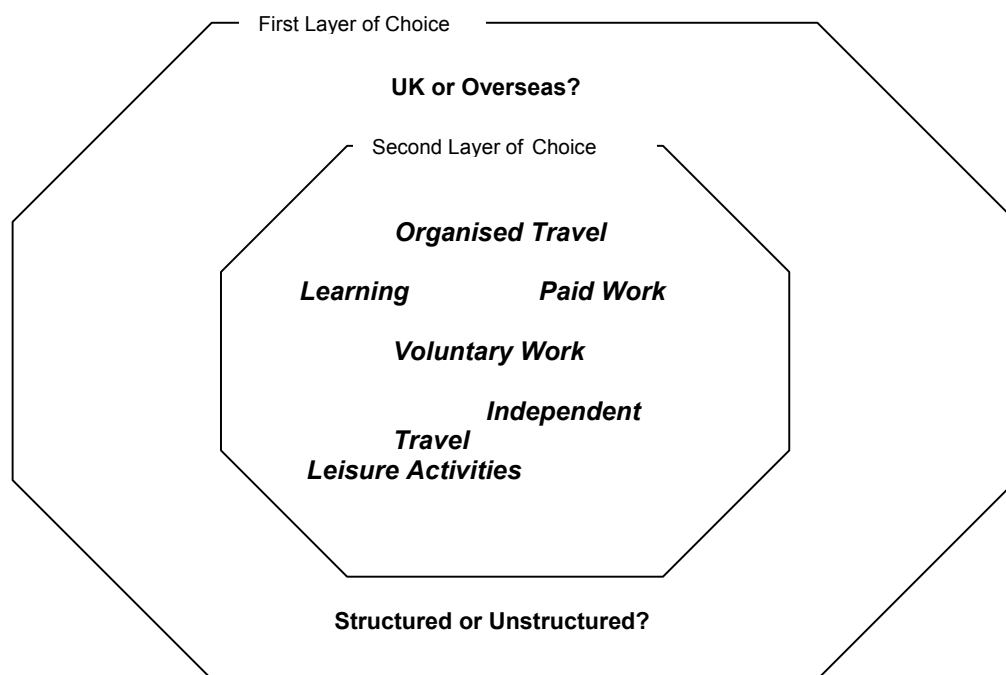
1.3.7   In policy terms, the distinction in the *type* of activities between UK and Overseas and structured or unstructured activities is important. In particular, structured activities refer to those set up, managed and facilitated by a providing organisation. Whilst the form of the structure varies, most involve components of training and instruction before the participant is placed on an organised scheme (**4.5.3)**. This contrasts with a wide variety of possible unstructured activities where the participant undertakes activities on an individual basis (**4.5.4)**

1.3.8 Six types of activity are suggested to be useful generalisations: work (paid and voluntary), learning, travel (organised and independent) and leisure **(4.5.5)**. Evidence suggests individual participants typically undertake a mix of these activities during a gap year and the activity model helps identify specific components of a gap year that are of interest from a policy perspective**.** The review also found evidence to suggest that a significant proportion of gap year participants are 'inactive' for all or part of their gap year **(4.5.6)**.

1.4   GAP YEAR ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION
1.4.1 Motivation
1.4.1.1 The review found that the motivations young people have to participate in a gap year are affected by circumstances and the influence of school, universities, friends and family **(5.2.1)**. The commonest factors cited in the literature for participating are **(5.3.1- 5.3.7)**:

- the desire to take a break from formal education or work;
- to gain a broader horizon on life;
- to experience different people, culture and places;
- to gain personal life skills;
- to enhance CV in relation to gaining university entry or employment (in a general sense);
- to earn money;
- to make a contribution to society (civic engagement);
- to help people (altruism);
- religious belief.

1.4.1.2 Certain factors appear to me more significant than others inasmuch that the desire for a break from education, training or employment is key for many participants. There is only limited recognition of the benefits in terms of skills or gaining a university place or employment (**5.3.8).** A limited amount of evidence suggests that participants have a mixed view of the benefit of a gap year in gaining HE admission which questions any role this plays as a motivational factor **(5.3.9).** The influences on these motivations are affected by the context of the participant, especially in terms of educational institutions, peers and family. There is evidence that a large number of unstructured post-school (A) participants 'drift' into a gap year with limited planning ahead **(5.3.10)**.

1.4.2 Access to Information
1.4.2.1 Concerning access to information on gap years, the review found there has been considerable improvement over the last decade as the providing sector has grown and coverage in the conventional media has increased. The availability of how-to-do books and web portals has facilitated information access for increasingly web-literate young people and this has been supported by better careers advice from schools and universities (**5.5)**.

1.4.3 Funding

1.4.3.1 Six main sources of funding for gap years can be used by young people (**5.6.1**):

- parental contributions;
- savings;
- loans;
- sponsorship
- paid work
- subsistence expenses included.

1.4.3.2 The funding situation across all participants is more complicated than the stereotype of middle class parents providing funding. Most participants, even those from affluent backgrounds, appear to make some contribution with young people working for part of the time, saving or borrowing money. Many provider organisations also encourage or even require participants to raise sponsorship towards the cost of their activities or placements. A limited amount is on offer from employers, often in relation to recruitment of gap year participants subsequently. Some placements with providers also include subsistence as a means of gap year participants supporting themselves **(5.6.2 to 5.6.10)**.

1.4.4 Participation

1.4.4.1 The review provided an indicative assessment of national levels of participation. Whilst a number of datasets were identified which might offer the means to quantify participation, no analysis has been carried out previously and the data is patchy. Thus, a number of insights are offered on quantifying total national participation. First, a wide range of estimates emerged for total participation ranging from 60,000 to 350,000. For a number of reasons, we suggest a best estimate at the higher end of between 200,000 and 250,000 according to the definition of a gap year proposed here. It is more likely this figure is an underestimate than an overestimate **(5.7.6)**

1.4.4.2 Second, for post-school (A) gap years there is data indicating significant growth evident in the rise in applications for deferred entry to university. Around 30,000 young people deferred during 2002 **(5.7.7)** but this number is likely to significantly underestimate even post-school gap year participants as the review found many young people apply for university during rather than before their post-A level (A2 and A3) gap year **(5.7.8)**. Future research should be able to quantify accurately post-school gap years and the review suggests post-university (C), employment break (E) and post training (F) should also be accurately quantifiable through ONS data. The most difficult to quantify will be the university-related gap years (B and D) although feasible national estimates will be possible from future research **(5.7.10)**. Complex gap years (G) are very difficult to quantify but represent only a small fraction of total participation, thus making the issue less problematic **(5.7.11).** Future analysis of data now being collected by provider organisations will enable a more detailed insight into the

nature of participation at the national level. **(5.7.12 to 5.7.14)**.

1.4.5 Participant Characteristics
1.4.5.1 The existing literature and research conducted through the review process suggest that gap year participants tend to have a series of characteristics as a social group **(5.8.1)**.

- predominantly white with few ethnic minority participants;
- women out-number men;
- from relatively affluent 'middle-class' backgrounds;
- over-representation of private and grammar school backgrounds;
- under-representation of disabilities;
- geographically, gap year participants (A1/2/3) are mainly from southern English HE institutions;

1.4.5.2 However, this generalisation requires important qualifications as in the context of rising gap year participation over the last decade, the kinds young people taking gap years are becoming more diverse **(5.8.2 to 5.8.5)** with growing participation amongst young people educated in state schools, black and ethnic minority groups and a falling over-representation of those from the south-east region.

1.4.6 Under-representation and excluded groups
1.4.6.1 A number of groups of young people in the UK are <u>proportionately</u> under-represented amongst gap year participants relative to the UK population as a whole **(5.9.2)**:

- young men;
- young people from deprived areas of the UK;
- young people from outside the south-east region;
- young people from state schools (excluding grammar schools);
- young people in employment;
- young people on the 'training track'.

1.4.6.2 A variety of factors are leading to this situation not all of which fit the media stereotype that gap years are the preserve of young people from affluent backgrounds **(5.9.3).** The review suggested that exclusionary factors inhibiting participation include **(5.9.4)**:

- lack of good career advice and support (institutional, parental and peer);
- prejudiced and uninformed view of the nature of gap year opportunities;
- lack of finance;
- lack of knowledge and planning.

1.4.6.3 The available evidence suggests that these exclusionary factors are

liable to be important in leading to the under-representation of the groups identified above.

1.5   ASSESSING THE BENEFITS OF GAP YEARS

1.5.1 The benefits of gap years divide around three areas: the benefit to the individual participant and the benefits to employers and the benefits to wider society. All are difficult to measure and have not been the subject of academic research (**6.2).**

1.5.1 Benefit to Participants

1.5.1.1 The review identified a range of benefits young people acquire from gap year participation which can be broadly divided into a number of categories **(6.4)**:

- improved educational performance;
- formation & development of career choices;
- improved 'employability' & career opportunities;
- non-academic skills & qualifications;
- life skills;
- developing social values.

1.5.1.2 Not all participants gain all of these types of benefits and different kinds of activities are more likely to lead to specific kinds of benefits **(6.4.3 to 6.4.5)**. Some evidence was identified to support the view that gap year participation can be linked to enhanced educational performance at university with those taking a gap year having greater self-discipline in study, greater perspective and knowledge from life experience and greater motivation to achieve goals **(6.5.1 to 6.5.4)**. Gap years also appear to help young people form career choices and, for graduate level employment, do enhance employability **(6.6 & 6.7).** A number of potential drawbacks to taking a gap year were identified although the review found no evidence to suggest these outweighed aggregate benefit **(6.10)**.

1.5.2 Benefits to Employers

1.5.2.1 Graduate employers seek to actively recruit former gap year participants and evidence suggests that the kinds of soft skills (interpersonal, communication & process skills) and life skills (leadership, communication, self-discipline) associated with gap year participation are widely sought by many employers **(6.7.1 to 6.7.8)**. However, employability is also less likely to be enhanced for non HE track young people **(6.7.9)** and the existing literature also suggests that employers in general are poor at recognising the value of these skills. Employers are unlikely to provide support for continued development of soft skills once the young person has entered the workplace **(6.7.10 & 6.7.11)**.

1.5.3 Benefits to Society

1.5.3.1 Many gap year activities are beneficial to wider society in general but of particular note are paid and voluntary work. In the case of paid work, any form undertaken by gap year participants is beneficial to society in a general sense. In

the case of voluntary work, the evidence suggests UK-based volunteering is likely to yield greater benefits because of more effective support for participants **(6.3.2 to 6.3.3)**. Structured schemes are also likely to yield greater benefit for the same reason. In the case of overseas volunteering, there are benefits but there are also more barriers to effective contribution because of the difficulties faced by participants overseas in terms of language, cultural and other differences. This finding in part contradicts the image sometimes presented by providing organisations **(6.3.4)**. Thus, the review found that volunteering projects require careful structuring and planning which is easier to achieve in the UK context although 'model' examples do exist amongst overseas volunteering providers **(6.3.5 to 6.3.7)**. Finally, travel and leisure activities offer little immediately tangible benefit to society although exposure to other peoples and cultures may well have positive effects on UK society in the longer term **(6.3.9)**.

1.6   THE GAP YEAR PROVIDING SECTOR

1.6.1   There are a very large number of UK-based organisations who provide UK and overseas placement opportunities for gap year participants. However, most are not targeted exclusively at young people taking gap years **(7.2)**. The review identified 85 specialist organisations whose primary 'market' represented gap year participants and the review suggests they provide at least 50,000 placements in the UK to gap year participants annually **(7.3)**. These specialist providers focus primarily on post-school and post-university gap years and most are small or medium sized offering between 250 and 1500 placements per annum. The specialist providers tend overall to focus on longer term, overseas and more costly placements than other more general activity providers.

1.6.2   With respect to UK volunteering no existing data identified current provision comprehensively **(7.4.1)**. Several hundred providing organisations were identified in the UK but accurate quantification is made difficult by the large number of small providers **(7.4.2)**. Many organisations offer less than 10 places per annum and there is a significant turnover in the population of organisations overall **(7.4.3)**. A small number of large providers do offer a sizeable number of annual placements However, the review cautiously estimates that at least 50 000 placements are on offer annually although this figure could be substantially greater **(7.4.4)**.

1.6.3   The review suggests that there is currently adequate 'market' provision of gap year opportunities in the UK and that the potential supply of placements currently exceeds the demand.

1.6.4   The research into these organisations indicates that UK-based placements generally represent a much lower cost placement in comparison to the fees charged by specialist providers **(7.4.5 & 7.4.6)**. Few UK volunteering placements require more than a £100 per week contribution by participants. They tend to be dominated by social and community activities such as teaching, with a

smaller fraction corresponding to conservation and environmental projects **(7.4.7)**

1.6.5 Regarding overseas volunteering placements, the review suggests there are upwards of 800 organisations offering overseas volunteering placements in 200 countries. In total these organisations offer around 350,000 placement opportunities annually world-wide with indications that a large proportion of these are taken up by UK-based gap year participants **(7.5.1)**. However the large number of organisations involved again makes It hard to accurately assess the absolute number of places from existing data **(7.5.2).**

1.6.6 Again, there are again a huge variety of possible types of voluntary work with the commonest types being similar to the UK case: community and social work, teaching, conservation and environmental projects **(7.5.4)**. Although on average also requiring only a low weekly contribution by participants below £100, overseas volunteering placements cost more than those in the UK due to placement fees. The review identified a typical fee range of £500 to £2000 **(7.5.5)**.

1.6.7 The review identified no comprehensive research or data on UK work placements being offered to gap year participants. Quantification is difficult as virtually any UK company can provide a placement potentially for a gap year participant **(7.6.1)**. A number of specialised providers do exist in this area but overall the available evidence suggests that work placements are highly diverse in nature and many are as likely to be organised independently as through a provider organisations **(7.6.2 & 7.6.3)**. In contrast, there exists a clear community of at least 30 organisations offering placements in overseas paid work. The five most common types of work placement offered involve:

- Au Pairing / Childcare;
- Internships;
- Sport Instruction;
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL);
- Seasonal Work.

1.6.8 The limited available evidence suggests only a fraction of gap year participants engaging in overseas paid work will use an organisation in the UK to gain work overseas **(7.7).**.

1.6.9 Lastly, in the case of travel and leisure provision for gap year participants, there are a significant number of providers that offer packages. These commercial organisations effectively represent part of the tourist industry targeting gap year participants. Policy interest in this area rests with possible targeting of this group to draw them into structured placements of some form **(7.8)**.

1.7   QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ACCREDITATION IN GAP YEAR PROVISION

1.7.1 Quality Assurance

The review identified no existing research into the issues surrounding quality assurance (QA) amongst providing organisation **(8.2.1)** with respect to the quality of the placement opportunities offered. There is no current sector-wide quality assurance structure amongst the large number of providers. A few of the largest provider organisations, under the guidance of The Year Out Group (an umbrella organisation), have developed a code of practice **(8.2.2)**. Large organisations do have internal quality assurance procedures **(8.2.3)** the review findings suggest there is little quality assurance amongst the many smaller organisations. This issue is most acute amongst overseas providers where there is more scope for problems with the quality of placement and there are limited resources available to providers to redress problems when they arise **(8.2.4).** The review thus supported the argument of the academic literature that a greater degree of professionalism and quality assurance needs to be developed across the providing sector **(8.2.5 to 8.2.7)** and that the sector as a whole did have the capacity to develop this area. However, it should be noted that the nature of the sector and of gap year activities does present considerable difficulties in terms of developing common standards of quality assurance. Furthermore, it would be difficult to check on and ensure compliance with any quality assurance mechanisms developed **(8.3)**.

1.7.2 Participant Accreditation Schemes

With respect to participant accreditation, a range of specific schemes exist which are run by individual organisations. They broadly divide into three categories:

- scheme completion certification;
- external skill qualifications;
- formal non-academic qualifications.

The review suggests that the various gap year stakeholders do not feel an overall scheme of participant accreditation would be appropriate or desirable. However, the review also again suggests that there is scope to make significant developments in participant accreditation and that new schemes could be developed in addition to enhancing those already in existence.

2   INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

2.1   This review was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) drawing heavily on the views of the Informal Consultation Group on Gap Years - an advisory body comprised of key stakeholders across the gap year sector in the UK which was set up to offer policy guidance and advice to Government. The main aim was to review existing literature and research into the provision of gap year or 'year out' opportunities in the UK. Compiled during the final quarter of 2003, it provides a base-line document to inform government policy and decisions about future research.

2.2   The taking of a gap year has become a growing phenomenon amongst young people in the UK over the last decade. From a position in the 1980s where taking a year out either between school and university or after university was relatively rare, during the 1990s there has been a substantial increase its the popularity. Quantification of gap year taking is difficult however as no comprehensive national level data sources for all possible categories of gap year participant exists. Some provider organisations estimate that there are up to 250,000 young people from the UK who are undertaking a gap year each year. It is hard to verify such figures but informed estimates suggest that certainly a minimum of at least 50,000 young people in the UK are currently taking a gap year of some form (The Year Out Group 2003; Gap Year.com 2003).

2.3   In this context, the last ten or fifteen years or so has also seen a significant growth in organisations providing opportunities for young people to undertake during their gap year. A commercial gap year industry sector has emerged in the UK consisting of a large number of diverse gap year activity providers offering a huge range of different potential activities for young people to undertake during their year out. These range through paid and voluntary work, various forms of training, travel and leisure activities located both in the UK and across the globe. The kinds of activities that gap year participants can undertake varies hugely including placements as diverse as, for example, structured overseas voluntary projects, backpacker travel and work experience placements in blue chip firms.

2.4   This represents the starting point for this review. The idea of a gap year has had little attention from either an academic research or a policy perspective and the ambiguous term also suffers from a lack of clear definition. This review sought to bring together all the available existing research, data and literature on gap year provision and participation in the UK. Its key objectives were:

    2.4.1   To build up a comprehensive picture of current gap year activity in the UK or overseas experience arranged by UK organisations, including the nature of the opportunities and the characteristics of those who take up opportunities. The definition of gap years should

be drawn widely to include structured and unstructured opportunities and mixtures of volunteering, paid employment and travelling;

2.4.2   To develop a clearer understanding of the objectives and benefits of different types of gap year opportunities and in particular the qualities, skills and competences which are developed in a young person as a result and the role which accreditation plays where appropriate;

2.4.3   To identify the progression routes – the destinations for young people following a gap year experience;

2.4.4   To identify the level of information and understanding about gap year experiences by the various stakeholders including young people;

2.4.5   To understand how advice and information on different opportunities is made available; the key influencers on young people's decisions on whether to undertake a gap year;

2.4.6   To identify the barriers to undertaking a gap year, especially among groups of young people who do not currently take up opportunities;

2.4.7   To identify existing standards and/or other approaches for quality assurance of gap year organisations/activities.

2.5   From the outset, this represented an ambitious task for a number of reasons. First, the report has been compiled in short time frame of some months and the review process quickly identified that there has been little systematic collection or compilation of research on gap years. The analysis and conclusions in this report have thus been compiled from a wide range of different and often piece-meal sources. Second, the diverse nature of gap years - as defined by the objectives - meant that finding all the relevant data, research or literature was difficult. Furthermore, including all possible material gathered from thousands of relevant organisations is impossible within a document of this size. In that sense the review aims to be as comprehensive as possible, but does not claim to offer an exhaustive view. Third, because of both the commercial nature of much gap year provision and the costs incurred by providers in collecting it, the review has also encountered considerable constraints on the release of existing data. In that sense, in relation to some of the objectives, this report both analyses existing data sources in relation to its objectives and also identifies potential data which could address those objectives if collected or made available.

2.6   It should also be noted that this review aims to inform understanding of what a gap year 'is' in the UK context in relation to young people in the age range

16 to 25 years. Whilst there is growing evidence that the idea of a gap year is relevant to people over the age of 25, and that there is likely to be a pertinent policy issues around lifelong learning objectives, this is beyond the scope of this document.

2.7   The remainder of this report is organised as a series of sections. Section 3 outlines the methodology used in compiling this review and outlines the strengths and limitations of that approach. Section 4 then tackles the key definitional objectives in relation to how gap years might be understood from a policy perspective. It provides a typology of gap years taken and examines how activities undertaken during gap years may be modelled. Section 5 addresses the important issues of access and participation. It examines evidence compiled concerning the motivations that young people have for taking gap years, the factors affecting access to gap year opportunities and the important issue of funding for gap years. It also provides an assessment of national levels of participation in gap years along with evidence on the social characteristics of young people who take gap years. This includes the question of under-represented groups.

2.8   Section 6 examines evidence concerning the benefits of taking a gap year. It assesses the different forms of benefits participants gain but also considers what drawbacks exist in gap year participation. Section 7 turns to the gap year providing sector. It provides an overview of the numerous and varied organisations involved in providing activities for young people on gap years including both UK and overseas opportunities across volunteering, paid work and leisure. Section 8 addresses the issue of accreditation and quality assurance in gap year provision. This divides into two distinct areas: the accreditation of participants in the gap year taking process in relation to different kinds of activities and the accreditation and / or quality assurance of gap year provider organisations. Evidence of existing accreditation and quality assurance is considered as well as the problems that are associated with such mechanisms and schemes.

3   METHODOLOGY

3.1   In the course of compiling this review, a number of methodological issues have arisen in relation to the original objectives which need to be discussed. This section provides an outline of the methodology adopted in conducting the review and in particular how that approach had to be adapted as the gathering of literature, research and other sources of relevant information on gap years progressed.

3.2   The first point to be highlighted is paucity of existing literature and research on the subject. The review was conducted over a short six month time period but it quickly became apparent that a conventional literature review would be impossible given the broad nature of the review objectives and the severe lack of literature to 'review'.

3.3   A key finding in this respect is therefore that gap years have not been the subject of any substantial academic or policy research in the past. As the review progressed it became quickly apparent that the existing literature and research would not be able to provide evidence to satisfactorily address many of the stated objectives of the review. Furthermore, in methodological terms, much of the work of compiling this report is only evident in part from this document since the compilation process involved a considerable amount of time pursuing potential sources of literature, research or information that turned out to be either fruitless or insufficiently reliable.

3.4   In this light, and secondly, the methodology adopted in compiling this review was altered. It was decided that rather than provide a largely inconclusive response to many of the policy questions identified in the objectives, the review would conduct a limited amount of 'original' and preliminary research. Whilst increasing the size of the task taken on within the review, we considered that this was a good use of resources because the original research could be combined with the activities of attempting to gather literature and data which would be carried out in any case.

3.5   This report consequently includes a significant proportion of original research data which was gathered in the manner described. This research consists primarily of two components. First, there are twenty-three qualitative interviews with key commentators and stakeholders in the gap year sector. Most of these are individuals in provider organisations or involved in dealing with gap year participants – for example, two university admissions representatives. However, nine gap year participants were spoken to.

3.6   Second, there is a considerable amount of original analysis of second-hand data sources. For example, much of the discussion in Section 7 on provider organisations is informed by a series of sampling and analysis exercises carried out by the review authors. Tables of information on provider organisations of

different types were compiling by using the literature, websites and the telephone interviews. To a large extent, these are samples of the providers rather than comprehensive lists. However, the process of compiling and analysing these tables was crucial in seeking to address the review's objectives as no existing sources of similar information were identified.

3.7   Overall, therefore, if initially conceived as a literature review, this report has gone beyond that framework. It incorporates a mixture of the limited existing literature and research and a strong component of original research.

3.8   This leads to a third key point on methodology – the limitations of this review. Whilst overall we consider the findings of this review to meet the original objectives well, a note of caution must be taken into account when considering the findings. This arises from several limitations to the methodology in relation to the objectives of the review.

3.9   The first of these is the 'thin' nature of the evidence. With only a limited literature, many of the findings of this review should be taken as indicative rather than definitive. The amount of existing research of all forms into gap years provide little to support a categorical defence of everything contained within this review. Whilst every endeavour has been made to take a balanced view based on an assessment of the existing evidence, it is quite possible that future research will cast more detailed light on specific findings and calls them into question. This is particularly true when applied to specific aspects of the topics covered. The existing evidence does not support strong assertions around specific details.

3.12   Second, the original research conducted to try to better address the review's objectives is also limited. The research is *preliminary* in nature and its findings do not offer the degree of confidence provided by a fully-resourced research study. Again the evidence is useful and likely to be broadly accurate but it does not afford confident conclusions around specific aspects of the gap year phenomenon.

3.13   Third, and finally, much of the literature which is referred to is also not explicitly concerned with the issue of gap years. Therefore relevant points have often had to be inferred. This should also lead the reader to be cautious in treating this review with the same degree of confidence as one into a policy area where a large academic and policy literature already exists.

4   A DEFINITIONAL STRUCTURE FOR GAP YEARS

4.1   Key Points

4.1.1   Defining gap years:

• The term 'gap year' is widely ill-defined and ambiguous
• For the purposes of this report a gap year is defined as a period of time between 3 and 24 months taken out of education or a work career
• The key criteria is the 'time out' from the formal aspect of a longer term career trajectory
• Gap years are best categorised in the first instance by the nature of the break taken from a educational, training or employment trajectory

4.1.2   Categories of gap year takers:

• The following table summaries the proposed framework for understanding under 25 years taking gap years

	Category of Gap Year
A1	Planned Post-School at 16
A2	Planned Post-School at 18
A3	Default Post-School at 18
B1	Undergraduate Break in Study
B2	Postgraduate Break In Study
C	Immediate Post-University
D1	Break in Postgraduate Study
D2	Postgraduate Combined with Course
E	Employment Break
F	Immediate Post-Training
G	Complex Gap Year

4.1.3   Types of Gap Year activity:

• Gap year activities are diverse but can be categorised according to location, degree of structure and nature of activity
• Gap year takers generally undertake a mixture of activities

4.2   A framework for defining gap years

4.2.1   The term 'gap year' and 'year out' are problematic because neither represents a tightly defined phenomenon. The idea of a year out is the longer standing term and the literature suggests that some young people in the UK have

been taking a year out since the 1960s (Butcher 1993; Simpson 2003; Griffiths 2003). The term gap year is more recent and corresponds with the growing trend for greater numbers of young people to take a year out in the last 15 years. The term gap year has also coincided with the dramatic growth of commercial and charitable organisations providing organising and facilitating support for young people in recent years.

4.2.2   There has been no identifiable attempt in the academic or policy literature identified by this study to categorise gap years. However, websites and publications from a range of organisations such as the Year Out Group and 'how-to-do' guide books aimed at young people have enabled a typology to be developed for policy purposes. This section addresses how gap years taken by young people under the age of 25 might be defined.

4.2.3   Young people taking gap years in the age range covered by this review can be grouped into different categories, depending on the timing of the gap year in their progress from education to paid work, nature of the activities they undertake and the length of time apportioned over the gap year to work and non-work activities.

4.2.4   There is a very limited literature tackling the issue of a gap year or year out specifically. With the odd exception (Griffiths, T. 2003), most of the 'how-to-do' books on the subject (e.g. Vandome 2003; Griffith, S. 2003) make little explicit distinction between the kinds of people undertaking a gap year. Many books in fact only make reference to the post-school gap year in their introductions, even if the opportunities they offer in later pages are clearly applicable and taken up by other groups of young people under 25.

4.2.5   Within the academic literature, there has again been only a very limited amount of research. Most of the relevant work conducted by social scientists has tackled questions of youth travel, backpacker tourism, youth culture and identity. There is little work directly engaged with the gap year as a topic specifically.

4.2.6   This review also draws on the input of the Informal Consultation Group on Gap Years convened by DfES. The Group comprises representatives from gap year provider organisations and other stakeholders in this policy area. It was set up in order to provide an advisory body for Government on gap year policy.

4.3   Definition of a Gap Year

4.3.1   There is no clear definition of what a gap year can be taken to be. Within the academic literature, commentators such as Simpson (2003) take a fairly narrow view of a gap year as a period of time when young people travel, often abroad, for at least part of the time and are also engaged in some kind of work of a voluntary or paid nature. The limited academic work on gap years is thus focused on the issues of travel, voluntary work and the organising industry in that

sector. This relates to social scientific research work that has considered youth identity, youth culture and travel (Riley 1988; Desforges 1998;), the nature of 'backpacker tourism' (Doorne 1993; Spreitzhofer 1998; Schevyens 2001) and other forms of independent travel (Kaur & Hutnyk 1999). The academic literature thus tends to restrict its interest in gap years to the role that travel and other experiences play in the 'transition from childhood to specified identities' (Banerjea 1999). This is clearly a crucial element to understanding gap year taking and to informing policy but it is only one part of the wider questions addressed in this review.

4.3.2   In contrast, the definitional implications that can be drawn from the commercial and how-to-do literature consisting of guide books (Lonely Planet 2003; Griffiths, T. 2003) and website material (Year Out Group 2004; WWV 2004) provide the basis to develop a more general definition of what a gap year is. Clearly the current academic areas of interest in gap years are not adequate to provide a broad enough understanding of all groups of young people taking a gap year, nor the diverse range of activities that they undertake.

4.3.3   Therefore, drawing on a wide rage of sources, a gap year in general can be defined as any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes 'out' from formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory. However, the question of a full year does pose a problem in definition. Whilst for some groups there is a clear 12 month period which corresponds to the gap year (for example, between school and a deferred university place), many gap year participants are in fact engaged in activities for a period shorter than twelve months. Re-entry into formal education tends to dictate a 12 month period by virtue of when courses commence, and some professional employers also follow this pattern (for example, the graduate 'milk round'). However, for many gap year takers entering work of some form, there is no specific reason to lead them to take a full 12 months. Similarly, many providers offer activities and placement opportunities that do not require a 12 month break. Sections 5 and 7 of this report will consider this issue further in assessing evidence for the length of time young people participate in gap year activities and the length of placement opportunities offered by providers respectively.

4.3.4   For these reasons, in defining a gap year for the purposes of this review, the definition is not restricted to those who take a full 12 months. We suggest that a useful minimum time-length is 3 months. This represents a time period longer than, for example, a university vacation. In terms of maximum time-length, it is suggested that a period longer than 24 months begins to blur the meaning of the break that young people are taking.

4.3.5   With regard to terminology, the variety of time-spans in which the break is taken calls into question the phrase 'gap year' itself. Given that many of the young people in question do not take exactly twelve months, an alternative might

be to refer to 'gap period' or just 'gap'. However, given the prevalence of the term 'gap year' it is suggested that this phrase is retained with the clear understanding in the context of this review that it does not refer literally to just those taking a 12 month break from study or work.

4.3.6   It should be noted that this definition of the gap year clearly can be applied to people of all ages and there is growing evidence (largely anecdotal) that people between the ages of 25 and 65 are taking gap years in the UK. However, this wider application to society as a whole is not the subject of this review.

4.3.7   Thus, for the purposes of this review, a gap year corresponds to a specified period of time out of formal education, training or employment, or a combination of these for people under the age of 25 years. It is suggested that the most useful classification for policy users is one that bases its classification around different groups of gap year takers according to timing and relationship of their gap year to education, training or employment. These gaps therefore sit in the context of a longer career trajectory, and this does not necessarily mean it is a full break from all forms of education or experiences relevant to that career trajectory. In short, this represents a 'life event' based classification.

4.3.8   The possibility of developing a primary classification of gap years based on activities undertaken was considered but rejected on the basis of the sheer number and diversity of different activities that gap year takers pursue. Consequently, in relation to the objectives identified for this report it is suggested that it is most appropriate from a policy perspective to tackle the definitional question concerning gap years in two related steps. In the first instance, gap years should be classified in respect of the life event or 'break point' of the young people undertaking them. A second stage to the typology proposes a model through which to generalise about the types of activities undertaken by young people during their gap years.

4.4   Categorising Gap Years

4.4.1   In compiling this report, we have identified seven main categories of gap year that can be usefully identified in respect of the kinds of young people involved. Several of these are divided into two sub-groups. Young people taking gap years can generally be fitted into one these seven categories or their sub-groups based around the nature of the life event corresponding to their break from a longer term life trajectory.

4.4.2 The evidence for the typology developed here has also been drawn from interviews with members of the Informal Consultation Group and with other practitioners in gap year providing organisations.

4.4.3 After considerable discussion over various options as to how to develop a

typology, the review concluded that given the huge diversity of gap year takers and activities, it is impossible to develop an entirely comprehensive framework in any depth. Rather than produce a complicated typology including many specific categories of gap year, the aim has been to produce a necessarily broad framework which generalises around the issue of the nature of the gap year taken. This is considered to be the most useful approach to a highly complex phenomenon.

4.4.4   Figure 4.1 summarises the different gap year categories proposed and Figure 4.2 provides a diagrammatic representation of how these categories relate to education, training or employment breaks.

Figure 4.1 Table of Gap Years Categories

	Category of Gap Year
A1	Planned Post-School at 16
A2	Planned Post-School at 18
A3	Default Post-School at 18
B1	Undergraduate Break in Study
B2	Postgraduate Break In Study
C	Immediate Post-University
D1	Break in Postgraduate Study
D2	Postgraduate Combined with Course
E	Employment Break
F	Immediate Post-Training
G	Complex Gap Year

Figure 4.2: Diagram of Career Path Breaks In Relation to Different Categories of Gap Year
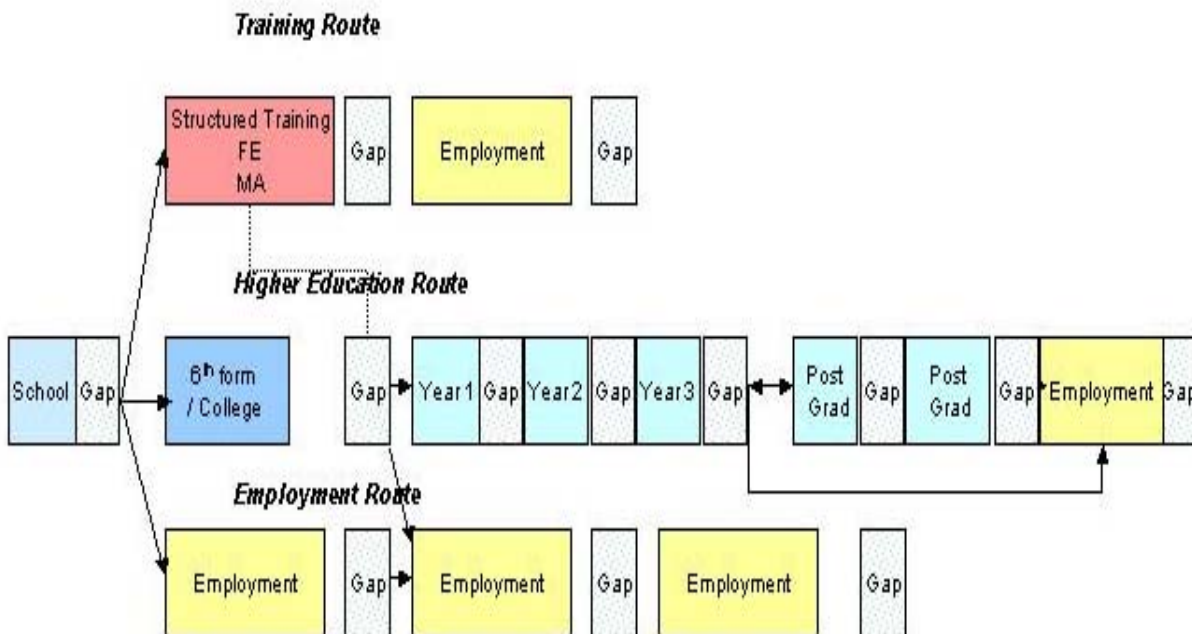
A) Post School

4.4.4   This group represent the stereotypical gap year takers who most closely meet the image of the gap year participant held by the lay-person. These are students who take a gap year after GCSE at 16 or have completed sixth form or further education up to the age of 18 and then take a gap year before tertiary education or employment. They can be divided along lines of whether the gap year is planned and taken by default in the case of 18 year olds.

A1 Planned Post-School at 16

4.4.4.1 Students who take a gap year after completing their GCSE level education. DfES figures on customer satisfaction for school-leavers provide evidence for this kind of gap year (DfES 2002). Young people may then continue with sixth-form or school to undertake A level or move towards a training or paid work career path subsequently.

A2 Planned Post-School at 18

4.4.4.2 Students who decide to take a gap year whilst still in sixth form or further education. Often with the support of career advice from within

schools, these gap year takers are likely to conduct research into and make arrangements for their year out in advance. In the case of future university entrants, a significant proportion will apply for deferred entry. Other tertiary providers offer a similar degree of deferred entry.

A3 Default Post-School at 18

4.4.4.3 Students who end up taking a gap year due to changing circumstances at the end of their school careers. In a sense, this is therefore a default option for them. Most common is failure to attain examination grades and consequential higher education entry. However, a default gap year may be taken if students change their minds about university or employment choices upon leaving school.

B) Undergraduate

4.4.5   These are undergraduate students who take a gap year. They divide into two sub-groups: those who take a break in the middle of a degree and those who undertake gap year activities as a significant component of a sandwich year related to the degree.

B1 Undergraduate Break in Study

4.4.5.1 Students who take a conventional mid-course break in study to undertake a gap year. This will often be a 12 month period given the nature of degree programmes as courses comprising a series of years.

B2 Undergraduate Combined with Course

4.4.5.2 These are students who are required to take a degree-related year which involves elements of vocational or course-required activity outside the 'home' university context. They are sometimes referred to as 'sandwich year' students. The review found evidence that the required element of this year can often consume as little as 6 months of the full year and that many sandwich students then engage in what is effectively a (short) gap year. It is the non-required element which constitutes the gap year. Provider organisations identified this group as significant participants. This kind of gap year is common in modern languages, engineering and business studies but is also a facet of many courses related to vocational degrees. Often this tends to be after the first or second year of the course with, for example, modern language students spending part or all of a year in the countries where the languages are spoken. Within this group are students who may have a shorter time out - medical and veterinary students who may be able to undertake qualification-related placements in combination with overseas travel.

4.4.6   Some sector commentators in the course of the review questioned whether these were 'true gappers' by virtue of the shorter nature of the time out

but the review suggested that these young people are taking up opportunities offered by provider organisations and hence this warrants their inclusion.

C) Immediate Post-University

4.4.7   This category corresponds to gap year participants who take a gap year upon completion of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree course. This group will normally consist of young people over the age of 21 and will include those up to 25 years. This gap year may be taken before entering paid work or continuing with a further university course.

D) Postgraduate

4.4.8   This group consists of young people who have completed a first degree and are undertaking postgraduate study. There are two sub-groups of potential gap year takers:

D1   Postgraduate Break in Study

4.4.8.1 Students who take a break in studies during a postgraduate degree for a more conventional gap period.

D2   Postgraduate Combined With Course

4.4.8.2 Students undertaking courses of a vocational and academic nature which provide opportunity for time-out to undertake gap year activities in combination with course-related activities. This group may include, for example, research degree (MPhil or PhD) and architectural students.

E) Employment Break

4.4.8   Young people who take a gap year from the context of paid employment. This category of gap year will be taken by young people with a range of educational and training backgrounds who are now active in the workplace.

F) Immediate Post Training

4.4.9   A gap year taken by young people who have been pursuing a training rather than a tertiary education career track.

G) Complex Gap Year

4.4.10 A gap year taken by young people who have a more complex set of circumstances than can be covered by the other categories. In reality, whilst most gap years will fall into one of the previous categories, there will be those that are more complicated in terms of the circumstances in which the young

persons takes a break. For example, individuals may leave and re-enter different configurations of educational and employment paths in a combination which does not allow their gap year to be fitted clearly into one category. In that sense, this final category of gap year covers these complex forms of gap year taking. This kind of gap year is often (although not always) a response to a traumatic life event or changing circumstances such as bereavement or illness.

4.5   Types of Gap Year Activities

4.5.1   All the sources of information drawn upon by this review confirm that there are a vast number of different activities undertaken by young people during a gap year. This makes the task of generalising about types of activity very difficult. We consider that attempting to do so is also a relatively fruitless exercise in terms of assisting policy makers since any given activity will only be undertaken by a small fraction of gap year participants.

4.5.2   We do suggest however that it is useful to generalise about broad genres of activity. Different types of activity can be grouped together and share both similar characteristics and issues of policy.

4.5.3   Figure 4.3 shows a diagrammatic representation of the different categories of activity open to gap year participants in terms of a 'choice diagram'. The categories proposed draw on a survey of how-to-do guides and web resources on gap years. The possible combinations of activities undertaken will vary from individual to individual which make an exhaustive list of categories far too long to be of use from a policy perspective.

4.5.2   We suggest that there are four principle divisions between different types of gap year activity important in policy considerations: UK or Overseas and structured or unstructured activities. Whilst the former geographical distinction is clear, the distinction between structured and unstructured activities refers to the involvement of providing organisation in setting up, managing and facilitating the activities that gap year participants undertake.

4.5.3   Structured activities include, for example, project based programmes with provider organisations such as Raleigh International or Gap Activity Projects. Whilst there are a variety of forms of structure, these placements tend to involve components of training and instruction before the gap year participant in placed in an organised scheme. The type of structured activity itself also varies. For example, organisations such as Raleigh run group-based expedition projects where young people are involved typically in an overseas community, research or environmental project. One example would be projects helping to construct community facilities in developing countries. In contrast, Gap Activity Projects provide a structured preparation and placement for individuals to volunteer overseas and in the UK, and although they have less direct involvement in the

day to day activities at the placement, they maintain close contact with the volunteer through their local representatives and project manager visiting from the UK.

4.5.4   It is should be noted however that the opposition of an unstructured versus structured gap year is not necessarily clear cut and that both categories cover a variety of possible forms. We suggest the label of structured as most often being associated with a gap year where a providing organisation is heavily involved. This is a consequence of evident pre-planning and direction produced through undertaking an organised programme. However, the qualitative research and input from sector commentators suggest that a considerable number of participants effectively organise an 'unstructured gap year' that has many of the characteristics of a structured gap package provided by a specialist provider. The important criteria for a gap year to be structured therefore are planning and directed activity. The review suggests this is most commonly associated with a provider but some young people will be able to achieve their own degree of structure with more limited involvement from providers.

Figure 4.3: Options in Choosing Gap Year Activities

First Layer of Choice

UK or Overseas?

Second Layer of Choice

Organised Travel

Learning   *Paid Work*

Voluntary Work

Independent Travel

Leisure Activities

Structured or Unstructured?
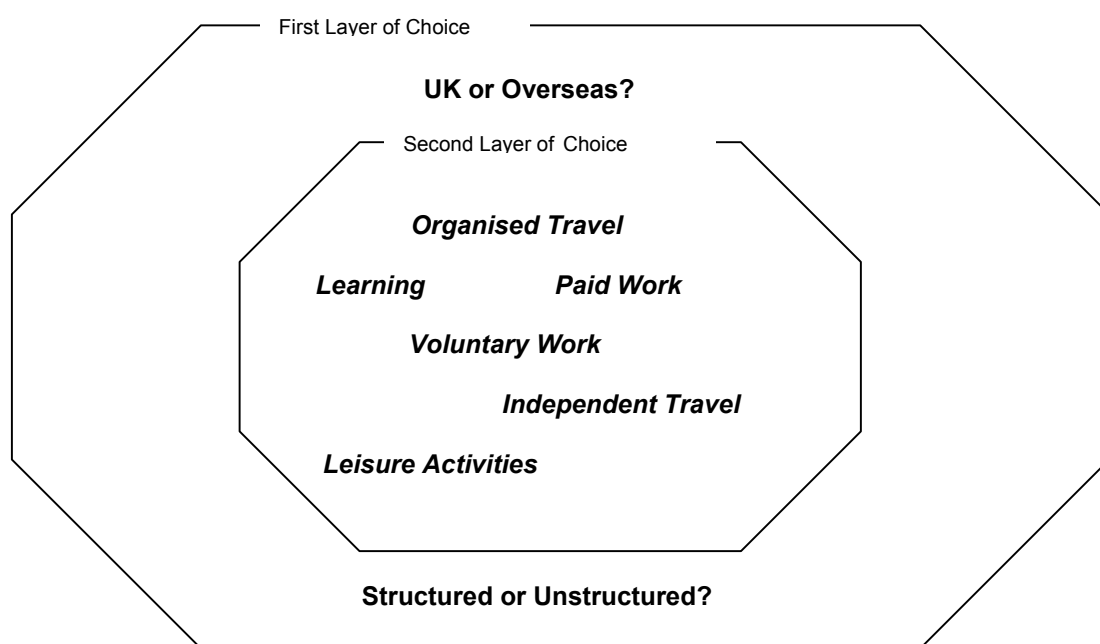
4.5.4   Unstructured activities thus cover a large number of possible areas where a gap year participant organises his or her own activities on an individual basis. Provider organisations offer information and placement into such activities but the key criteria is that there is no involvement by a provider organisation beyond

that point. As a consequence the kinds of activities undertaken have no pre-planned support and are likely to often have less clear goals and objectives.

4.5.5   Across the four dimensions participants in gap years spend time undertaking a variety of different activities which we suggest can be broadly divided into six groups: work (paid and voluntary), learning, travel (organised or independent) and leisure. Each of these three kinds of activity can be undertaken in the UK or abroad and likewise can be structured or unstructured. Clearly within these generalised groups there exist a huge number of possible specific types of activity which in reality can combine, for example, aspects of being structured, unstructured, work, and leisure. In that sense this model is not able to offer an exact classification of any given gap year but rather offer an indication of activity types.

4.5.6   Anecdotal evidence and the author's research suggested that many individuals typically undertake a complex mixture of several forms of these activities through their gap years. It is suggested that this model for understanding the nature of gap year activities provides a useful basis for focusing research agendas and policy questions.

4.5.7   The nature of gap year activities will be considered in more depth through section 7 of this report which examines the gap year providing sector. However, evidence from websites aimed at gap year participants indicates a proportion will undertake activities independently of provider organisations. The review identified limited evidence concerning this group of gap year takers which will be considered in the next section on access and participation.

4.5.8 It is important to emphasise the distinction between a non-structured gap year and a young person who is NEET (not in education, employment or training). Sector commentators emphasised that NEETs are not young people engaged in a gap year because of both the lack of their taking a break from a longer-term career trajectory and also the lack of participation in activities. The paraphrased words of one commentator illustrate this:

> *Sitting at home for a year and watching daytime TV is not the same as taking a gap year! It is the combination of a break from a longer term career trajectory and what a young person does which defines the gap year…*
> (Director, UK Gap Year Provider)

This is a key point insofar as a gap year is not simply 'time out doing nothing' but part of a longer term educational and / or life trajectory development. This can be unstructured and planned 'at the last minute' insofar as a young person undertakes independent organisation (for example, paid work and travel) but it is the *use* of the time through various activities in the context of a departure *and* re-entry into education, training or work which defines the gap year. Unplanned time

out of education, work or training doing nothing does not constitute a gap year. However, the qualitative research suggests that many participants may begin a gap year inactively and then move into a unstructured set of activities.

4.5.8   In summary, in terms of defining gap years, effective understanding of what forms of gap years are taken requires an understanding of both the category of young person involved and the types of activities undertaken. The nature of an individual gap year participant's experience can thus be modelled with some degree of generality through the framework outlined here.

5   GAP YEAR ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION

5.1   Key Points

On motivations:

- Young people have a wide variety of motivation to undertake a gap year reflecting the diverse range of possible activities;

- Key motivations include the desire to take a break from formal education or employment and broaden horizons through new experiences;

- Some but not all young people are motivated by altruistic, civic or religious factors;

- Young people can be motivated by a desire for different forms of informal learning, to gain life skills and to experience different places and cultures;

- The possibility of earning money is also a motivation for some.

On access:

- School and institutional contexts are very important factors in influencing young people's decision to take a gap year;

- Peer and parental support and advice is also important, although family background is a complex factor in influencing participation;

- Young people in employment and training have less access to careers information on gap years;

- Information resources are widely available to young people outside formal career advice in the form of guide, websites and other media;

- However, lack of career advice of any form is likely to be a key barrier to participation.

On funding:

- Six main sources of funding were identified: parental contribution, savings, loans, sponsorship, paid work and subsistence supported placements;

• No adequate data exists on the national picture of gap year funding;

• Parental contributions are important but the evidence suggests most gap year participants make at least some form of contribution themselves, including savings, earnings and commercial loans;

• Many provider organisations support young people in gaining sponsorship;

• Most gap years are funded from not one but a variety of funding streams.

On national participation levels:

• No adequate research or data exists to provide an accurate picture of national participation;

• A series of data sources offer the basis to provide accurate overall quantification through future research although a small fraction of certain categories of gap year will be very hard to collect data for;

• The review estimated that national participation of 16 to 25 year olds is between 250,000 and 350,000 at the present time;

• Post-school (A) gap year participation is likely to be significantly greater than the total of UCAS deferrals (c. 30,000) as many participants enter the UCAS system during their gap year;

• All the available evidence supports the view that gap year participation is growing significantly in the UK year-on-year.

On the social characteristics of participants:

• The review suggests that growing gap year participation is diluting the stereotypical gap year participant;

• However, evidence still suggests that as a social group gap year participants do have certain characteristics:

- predominantly white with few ethnic minority participants;
- indications of a female majority ;
- from relatively affluent 'middle-class' background;
- over-representation of private & grammar school backgrounds;
- under-representation of disabilities;
- geographically 'gap year participants' (A1/2/3) from southern English HE.

● The review identified further qualifying points that need to be considered in relation to these characteristics;

● There was limited evidence of growing participation amongst ethnic minorities;

● It also found wider qualitative evidence of recent growth beyond the stereotypical participant group and that growing numbers of participants had had a state school education;

● There are longstanding 'niche' groups of gap year participants; who differ considerably from these characteristics as sub-groups (e.g. religious-motivated overseas volunteers).

On under-represented groups:

● The review indicates that the following groups are under-represented amongst gap year participants:

- ● Young Men;
- ● Young People from Deprived Areas of the UK;
- ● Young People from Outside the south-east region;
- ● Young People from State Schools (excluding Grammar Schools);
- ● Young People in Employment;
- ● Young People on the 'Training Track'.

● A wide range of factors contribute to this under-representation .

5.2 Introduction

5.2.1 The ability of young people to access and participate in gap year opportunities is affected by a number of interrelated factors which are considered in this section of the review. We suggest that in terms of understanding these issues overall, the most important factors relate to the motivations young people have for taking a gap year. These consist primarily of the young person's own reasons, but the decision is also affected by circumstances and the influence of schools, universities, friends and family. In considering these different factors the section assesses how the ability of a young person to take a gap year is facilitated or restricted. From this basis, there are also the questions of what access to information resources a young person has to help them form their decision and how the gap year will be funded. The remainder of the section then provides an overview of the evidence on actual levels of participation in terms of national uptake of gap years, the social characteristics of participants and those groups of young people who are under-represented.

5.3 Why Young People Take a Gap Year

5.3.1   The existing literature and limited research into gap years indicates a variety of reasons why young people undertake a gap year and clearly there is the potential for enormous difference between individuals. However, the review suggests that it is possible to generalise about a number of factors which lead people to want to take a gap year.

5.3.2   The how-to-do literature in combination with websites and other advisory resources provides an insight into the most cited reasons given by young people. Whilst not rigorous academic research, these sources of information do draw upon the views of many young people over the last decade or so and so in that sense can be taken as a good guide.

5.3.3   The commonest factors cited in the literature can be summarised as:

- The desire to take a break from formal education or work;
- To gain a broader horizon on life;
- To experience different people, culture and places;
- To gain personal life skills;
- To enhance CV in relation to gaining university entry or employment (in a general sense);
- To earn money;
- To make a contribution to society (civic engagement);
- To help people (altruism);
- To meet a challenge;
- To have fun;
- Religious motivations.

5.3.4   These general points are also supported by limited qualitative and anecdotal evidence found on websites concerned with gap years and from the comments of interviewees from provider organisations when asked about their participants. However, as discussed in the previous section, the nature of an individual young person's gap year varies hugely in terms of activities undertaken. Evidence from websites suggests that young people often regard a gap year as an opportunity to gain 'a very individual experience' which will be achieved through a combination of activities (Gap Year.com 2003; Gap.org 2003). Consequently, not all gap year takers share the same motivations as different young people will be motivated differently (Alston 2003; Hecht 2003). In that sense, it is difficult to be too specific in statements referring to why an individual undertakes a certain form of gap year.

5.3.5   Bearing this point in mind, we suggest a number of observations can be drawn out from existing literature and research in relation to these general forms of motivation.

5.3.6   Firstly, the evidence suggests that many gap year participants who undertake voluntary work do so out of a combination of motivating factors but that an altruistic desire to contribute to society plays a significant role in that (Fagan 1992; Gaskin 1998; Palmer 2002). This falls in line with existing research into the reasons why people undertake volunteering more generally which presents a mix of instrumental and altruistic motivations (Rochester 2000). The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith 1998) found that 51% of 18-24 year olds became involved in volunteering because it was connected with their needs and interests. Forty seven percent said they became involved because someone asked them and 45% felt that it connected with the needs and interests of their family and friends. When comparing the age groups, however, Davis Smith (1998: 63) states: 'Younger people were the least likely to be motivated by the perception of a need in the local community and a desire to help people or improve things and most likely to see volunteering as an opportunity to learn new skills'. It seems likely that these findings are likely to be indicative of young people's view of volunteering activities during a gap year.

5.3.7   Second, whilst one kind of motivation, this altruistic desire will not be relevant to many gap year participants. The review also indicates, based on the how-to-do literature and web resources, that many young people are motivated to take gap years out of more experiential motivations: travel, lifestyle and leisure activities are central to this. Examples might include young people who work in activity holiday industries such as ski or sailing resorts as a means to spend a period of time where they are able to undertake these activities extensively.

5.3.8   Third, whilst the review suggests that young people have a number of motivating factors behind taking a gap year, there is preliminary evidence that some factors are more significant that others. Overall, we suggest that the desire to take a break to do something different from formal education or paid work in combination with the opportunities to experience different places, cultures and activities are key motivations. The benefits experienced in terms of life skills, university or workplace entrance or other forms of non-academic qualification are recognised by participants but are not regarded as being as important.

5.3.9   One area where the review identified important evidence in support of this point concerned university admission. In contrast to the stated position of universities in general (e.g. Sheffield Hallam 2003; Newcastle 2003; Lancaster 2003), it is worth noting anecdotal evidence of an unfavourable view of gap year takers applying for deferred entry amongst admissions tutors. Drawn from web-based message boards and feedback, the review identified initial indicators that a significant number of young people perceived it to be harder gain an accepted university place through deferred entry as opposed to applying in the preceding year before beginning a course. A number of how-to-do websites also offered advice against applying through deferred entry (Gap.org; Gap Year.com; The Year Out Group). This very limited evidence suggests that deferred-entry gap year takers (A2) may diminish increasingly in favour of entering the UCAS

system during the gap year itself. Whilst more research is needed in this area, it does cast doubt on the motivational effect that a gap year provides from the perspective of participants in terms of assisting getting into university.

5.3.10 The qualitative research suggests that many unstructured gap year participants 'drift' into a gap year. Some commentators suggest this may be a large fraction of the post-school gap year participants who have few reasons to take a gap year other than to have a break and to consider their future life trajectory.

5.3.11 In summary, young people choose to take a gap year for a wide variety of reasons which varies enormously between individuals. These reasons do in general include altruistic motivation and notions of civic contribution. However, whether these factors are more or less significant than the more general attraction of widening horizons, travel and new experiences is unclear. The limited evidence in existence suggests that volunteering activities are not necessarily as attractive as the more general draw of a break from formal education or paid work. There is also limited evidence to suggest that many post-school (A) gap year participants drift into a gap year primarily out of desire for a break and because they do not know what to do next.

5.4   Factors Influencing Young People's Decision to take a Gap Year

5.4.1   The reviews findings suggest, as might be expected, that the decision to take a gap year is influenced by a series of factors related to the social context in which a young person finds themselves. Whilst again there are many possible potential influences on a young person's decision-making process, the review suggests that three main dimensions to this context can be usefully identified from a policy perspective.

5.4.2   First, and most importantly, the available evidence suggests the educational context is the most significant deciding factor by far for post-school gap year participation (category A). Many of the provider organisations interviewed over the phone, and especially the larger providers, emphasised the role that schools play. Provider organisations and other sector commentators reported that in terms of recruiting 'gappers', relationships with 'supplier schools' are crucial. Many organisations draw gap year participants of the A category from schools where they have longstanding relationships. Limited evidence from website message boards also reinforces this with gap year participants highlighting the significant of good careers advice and information provision within schools, sixth forms or FE colleges.

5.4.3   With regard to during (B) and post-university (C) type gap years the telephone interviews conducted with university careers services indicate that they also play an important role in shaping participants decisions. However, this may

be less so than with schools and sixth form colleges. University gap year takers, especially those taking a gap during postgraduate study (D), are slightly older and have had more likelihood of meeting contemporaries who have already been on a gap year.

5.4.4   For those young people on the training or employment career routes, there is likely to be less direct access to careers advice. We suggest that they are more likely to be influenced by the second dimension to social context: the role of peers. For many young people the information, advice and inspiration provided by peers who had taken a gap year plays a significant role. Websites and how-to-do guides reflect the significance of the views of contemporaries in the way they include comments of previous participants and message boards (Hecht 2003; Griffiths, T. 2003; Lonely Planet 2003). Provider organisations also again emphasised the role of word-of-mouth in gaining gap year participants. Providers commonly cited the previous experience of 'friends and family' as being a common factor in leading a young person to them. Many organisations actively recruit through talks given by former participants to young people in schools, sixths forms and FE colleges. The how-to-do literature and similar web portals also direct potential gap year takers to discuss their ideas and plans with those who have experienced a gap year already (Potter 2002; Lansky 2003).

5.4.5   This latter point also applies to other types of gap year taken by young people at in the workplace. In this context, the availability of a good human resources department with career development support is important. In that sense, a supportive employer is also likely to be a factor affecting young people in the workplace.

5.4.6   Third, the review suggested that the role of family background in affecting gap year participation is complex. Parents are important influencers on young people and they are also key gatekeepers in terms of authority, funds (see section 5.5) and support. In that sense, the parents' view of a gap year and its component activities is an important factor influencing young people's decision (De'Ath *et al* 2003). This will clearly vary from family to family. However, the review did identify from the limited available research into young people's views that parental influence is probably not as significant as either school or peers. A number of the how-to-do guides and website provide evidence that some young people take gap years despite parental resistance to the idea. Many provider organisations offer information and advice for parents with a goal to appeasing parental concerns about safety and back-up (Gap Activity 2003; WWW 2003). Young people clearly are able to make their own decisions about whether to take a gap year and this can sometimes be in the face of considerable parental resistance.

5.4.7   Conversely, therefore, lack of a good careers advisor and stimulus from school or peers is a key restricting factor on uptake of gap years. Provider organisations were all in agreement that young people were less likely to come to

them 'cold' than if they had received careers advice or knew another former participant. Website message boards from young people also reflect this with messages, for example, outlining the uncertainly of participants about undertaking a gap year without school or peer advice and support (Gap Year.com 2003; Gap.org 2003). This certainly links to the role of Connexions which has been successful in recent years in offering young people a variety of career advice routes in an integrated way outside the school or workplace context.

5.5   Access to Information on Gap Year Opportunities

5.5.1   Overall, the review suggests that access to information resources gap year opportunities in general has improved considerably over the last decade. More young people are aware of the possibility of taking a gap year (Gap Year.com 2003) and have access to more information resources through which to inform their decision. There are several relevant factors.

5.5.2   First, the gap year providing sector has grown considerably in size over the last fifteen years. Even over the last five years, the sector has become more organised under the umbrella of organisations such as the Year Out Group whose membership has risen to 30 organisations.

5.5.3   Second, the publication of conventional paper media (magazines, books, news articles) on gap years has increased considerably. As opposed to five years ago, bookshops are now filled with how-to-guides focused particularly on the gap year (Flynn 2002; Griffith, T. 2003; Hecht 2003; Vandome 2003 etc.) as opposed to just independent travel. This sits within the context of the rising popularity of independent travel manifest in series of book such as Lonely Planet or the Rough Guides. The how-to-do guides have many similarities with these independent tourist guide-books but also provide information on voluntary and paid work placements. They also adopt a perspective appropriate to the gap year participant who will often tend to travel for longer than a conventional tourist. These publications thus provide an easily accessed and wide-ranging overview of the notion of a gap year to prospective participants.

5.5.4   Second, young people have become more web-literate and the information resources available on the web concerning gap years is considerable. Professional website portals are now well-established with clear and comprehensive information outlining all the issues around taking a gap year. In comparison to the situation even five years ago, there is now a lot more information on gap years with young people themselves providing advice, support and seeking opportunities through the web. Main web portals include:

- www.gap.org.uk
- www.GapYear.com

- www.yearoutgroup.com

5.5.5   Third, the review suggests that within the school and university context, the gap year has become are much more widely supported phenomenon. School and university careers services are increasingly briefing and able to provide information on gap year opportunities and there are far more people in a career advisory role who are able to offer young people knowledge and experience on taking a gap year. Several university career services, for example, have specific web pages and advice pamphlets on gap years both before, during and after university (Categories A to C) (Sheffield Hallam 2003; Newcastle 2003; Studylink 2003).

5.5.6   In sum, in terms of access to information concerning gap years young people now have before them a wide range of well-publicised and increasingly easily available sources on the gap year in general. In contrast to the situation even five years ago, we suggest that a young person will find it relatively easy to find detailed advice and information on taking a gap year of some form. However, access is more likely to be limited in respect of the large number of structured placements offered by the many small providers (see section 7). Many of the mainstream how-to-do guides include only the larger providers and web portals. Whilst they do offer a route to information on the placements offered by small providers (for example, World Wide Volunteering's web database), a young person is likely to have to do at least a moderate amount of research to find this information.

5.6   Funding Gap Years

5.6.1   The issue of how young people fund their gap year activities is one which suffers from little existing information and research. The review has gathered a limited amount of information from the literature, websites and interviews. We suggest that for most young people taking a gap year there are six main sources of funding that can be used:

- Parental contributions
- Savings
- Loans
- Sponsorship
- Paid Work
- Subsistence Expenses Included

5.6.2   No data sources were identified that can provide information onto the total numbers of gap year participants drawing on each of these different types of funding. Furthermore, individual participants are likely to combine two or more of these different types of funding sources. To quote one sector commentator:

> *"Gappers typically get the money to pay for a mixture of sources. Many will flip burgers for a few months to save the money to go travelling, maybe with some help from their parents as well. They might also have some sponsorship if they go on a structured project with Raleigh or something…"*
> (Team Manager, UK Specialist Gap Year Provider)

5.6.3 As far as parental contributions are concerned, the stereotypical affluent middle class gap year participant who is been entirely funded for a year at the expense of their parents is in fact rare. Whilst such young people can no doubt be found, the cost of a gap year is such that both providers and other commentators suggested this situation is not common. Even young people from affluent backgrounds are likely to make a contribution to the cost of the year themselves in order to support themselves. A contributory factor, furthermore, is that the ethos of the gap year in many ways constructs the notion of some degree of financial independence as desirable (Vandome 2003).

5.6.4 The review did identify the fact that some young people do save money over a period of time in order to undertake a gap year. A number of the how-to-do books and websites make this suggestion (Griffith, S. 2003; Hecht 2003) as a means to (at least in part) fund the year. Anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggests that some young people may plan a gap year several years in advance and undertake paid work with that objective in mind. For example, one young person quoted on a university careers service website refers to working through university vacations in order to take a post-university (C) gap year. Savings may also come from long-term savings or investments made for the young person by their parents in the past or inherited money.

5.6.5 A number of interviewees suggests that some young people use loans to fund their gap years. This was raised particularly in relation to university students using student loans. However, the view was also expressed that this practice was becoming less common with the rising costs of university education. In terms of commercial loans, there was some anecdotal and qualitative evidence to suggest that young people finishing university are using graduate loans from the high street banks as a source of financial contribution towards funding their gap years. This is also supported by the fact that several high street banks offer specific 'gap year loans' at preferable rates (e.g. HSBC 2003). These loans provide a relatively cheap source of borrowing which are offered to young people who have secured a university place (Type A) or employment (Type C). As such they provide a source of funding for a gap year for graduates before starting paid employment.

5.6.6 With regard to sponsorship, many of the how-to-do guides and website resources offer advice to young people on gaining financial support from companies, charities and other organisations. Sponsorship clearly is attached to

certain kinds of gap year activity – volunteering or other civic contribution activities, for example – and is actively encouraged by many specialist gap year providers. Organisations such as Raleigh, Gap Activity Projects and VSO's 'Youth for Development' scheme more-or-less require participants on their placements to raise money to fund themselves, preferably through sponsorship. Organisations such as these provide help and advice to help participants do this and providers in these kinds of areas of activity reported that young people are generally successful at gaining sponsorship. Clearly, however, many activities and periods of time during a gap year are not suitable for gaining sponsorship.

5.6.7   One similar but distinct aspect of gap year sponsorship which differs slightly is corporate bursaries. These are offered by large blue chip companies, normally to young people nearing the end of a degree, as a means to attract recruits. For example, Shell UK and the accountancy / consultancy firms Price Waterhouse Coopers and Accenture have such schemes (or have recently run them) where successful applicants receive a bursary of (up to £1000) if the company is interested in them as a potential employee.

5.6.8   As might be expected, given the cost of taking a year break which often includes considerable travel, the review found evidence that many, if not the majority of gap year participants undertake paid work for a period during their gap year. This can take a variety of forms from blue-collar and manual jobs to better-paid office jobs. There are a small minority of gap year participants whose paid work is more planned and structured. Several of the large accountancy firms, for example, offer work placements (normally of several months) before university for prospective longer term recruits. Organisations such as a 'Year In Industry' place gap year participants in longer placements absorbing up to the full twelve months and two year placements are not uncommon. However, in this latter type of work, the period of non paid-work during the gap year can be only a few months which blurs the boundary between this being a year in employment. Clearly, for participants spending longer placements in better-paid jobs the money earned may give them a surplus over and above the cost of funding the gap year.

5.6.9   Finally, in terms of financing gap year participation, a number of provider organisations of various types offer 'subsistence' support placements where, for example, the participants' food, accommodation and travel is provided. Examples include some of the UK volunteering placements where in exchange for voluntary work subsistence is covered for the participant.

5.6.10 Overall, most gap year participants fund their gap through one or more of these sources. Gap years do represent a costly undertaking and there are relatively few participants who can undertake a gap year purely on parental funding or savings. A more detailed consideration of what a significant component funding is used for is given in section seven which presents evidence on the cost of placements by gap year providing organisations.

5.7   National Levels of Participation

5.7.1   As a consequence of the diverse nature of the gap year phenomenon, there is no existing data set we have identified which quantifies the numbers of gap year takers in total. There are a number of ways in which national levels of participation can be quantified in relation to broad estimates. This review has identified the following existing or potential data-sets which provide quantitative data on provision:

- UCAS data
- ONS Labour Force Survey
- Organisation participation figures
- University data
- Existing research surveys

5.7.2   We suggest that three datasets provide the best resource for quantifying the majority of gap year participation in the UK. These comprise of the UCAS database, the ONS Labour Force Survey and Organisation Participation Figures.

5.7.3   At present, however, none of these data sources has been analysed in a manner which provides a detailed insight into levels of participation. In the case of the Organisation data, there is also 'patchy' in nature with uneven availability and collection of data across the providing sector.

5.7.4   In the absence of comprehensive data on total level of gap year participation, we can suggest a number of indicative estimates based on known figures and the response of sector commentators interviewed in the course of compiling the review. These provide an insight into current levels of national participation but require further research in order for a more accurate measurement to be given. A number of points can therefore be made on national levels of participation.

5.7.5   First, with respect to sector commentators, the review found a degree of disagreement on levels of national participation. A number of university admission advisors suggested that they estimated only around 60,000 to 80,000 young people in the UK were currently on a gap year. However, the interviews with providers offered a much higher level of estimated participation. The manager of one web portal suggested that the figure for 16 to 25 year olds was in the region of 250,000 young people. Furthermore, World Wide Volunteering stated that the organisations listed within their database of volunteering offered around 350,000 potential placements each year although these are available globally and not just to UK citizens. Whilst it was accepted that not all placements were filled, this again suggested a higher figure. It was also pointed out that this would not include all categories of gap year such as those young people in paid

work for example.

5.7.6   The qualitative research therefore suggests a wide range for total participation between 60 000 and around 250,000 young people. In the context of the wider review therefore we would suggest that a reasonable estimate of participation for all types of gap year activities probably is in a range from 200,000 to 250,000 young people by the time all of the categories of gap year identified by this review have been included. A number of qualitative interviews with providers and commentators indicate this level. However, this figure is provisional insofar as without further data analysis it is not possible to quantify all the categories of gap year identified to any good degree of accuracy. It is also worth noting that providers may, for a number of reasons, tend to overestimate the level of participation.

5.7.7   Second, within the typology of gap years it is possible to provide an accurate assessment of certain categories or sub-categories of gap year. For post-school categories A2 and A3, the UCAS data provides an indicative measurement and also evidence of growth in numbers of the last decade. In 2002, 29,139 applicants deferred entry until 2003. This represents 7.9% of total applications to UCAS. In absolute terms this also represented an increase of approximately 1000 young people when compared to the year before. Table 6.1 shows the trend in applicant deferrals over the last decade.

Figure 5.1: Trend in UCAS Deferred Place Applications 1995-2003
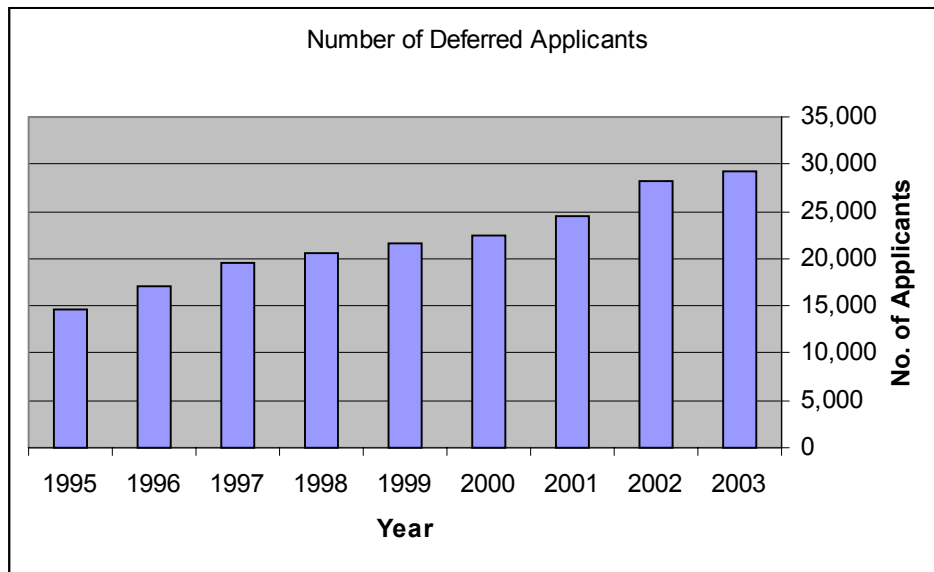
5.7.8   However, the review suggests that these figures are likely to significantly under-estimate the numbers of category A gap year participants. Commentators pointed out that increasing numbers of young people apply to university *during* their gap year rather than deferring through the UCAS system. Whilst future analysis of the UCAS data should be able to quantify the numbers of young people following this path, there is no data at present. It was not possible through the course of the review to provide a good estimate of the numbers involved although the qualitative interviews suggested that the there could be large numbers of category A gap year participants again not in the UCAS system. Figure 5.2 shows how deferral levels have been increasing in the UCAS system as a percentage of the total. They now account for 8% of a total UCAS applicant count of around 380 000 per year.

Figure 5.2: Percentage of Deferred Entries in Total UCAS Applications
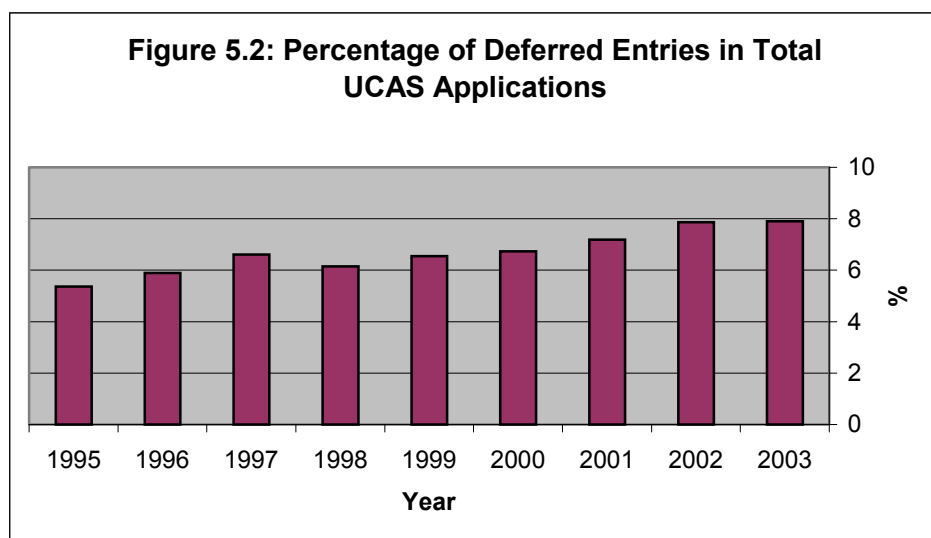
5.7.9   Third, certain categories of gap year as outlined in the typology are more easily quantified than others. We suggest that future research will be able to quantify accurately post-school (A) gap years through analysis of UCAS data. Post-university (C), work break (E) and training break (F) can be quantified through analysis of the ONS. The most difficult challenge will be the university-related break of categories B and D but we suggest it should be feasible to produce reliable estimated national figures from the analysis of a sample of university-collected student data on combined course and study breaks. The review identified a number of universities and university career services that are moving to quantify gap year participation more comprehensively. For example, Nottingham University has a project setting out to do this (Nottingham University Careers 2004). More of these kinds of research projects would be required to provide an accurate national picture.

5.7.10 The category G 'complex' gap year is likely to prove very difficult to measure but based on the evidence from qualitative interviews, the numbers of gap year participants that fall into this category are likely to only represent a small fraction. Thus, we suggest that modest future research will be able to provide reasonably accurate measurement of national participation across the different categories of gap year.

5.7.11 Fourth, the review process has suggested that the last of the main data sources – organisation data – can also be used to make a contribution to understanding the nature of national levels of participation. However, there are serious limitations to this source of data. The review identified no existing sector-wide research which has analysed participation at the national level using provider data. Section 7 will present initial research into the overall picture of placement provision, but this is not the same as participation data. The review found that few organisations collect accurate data on actual participation as

opposed to the hypothetical levels of potential placements.

5.7.12 Several of the larger organisations are in the process of constructing internal systems for collecting and processing this information at the time of writing but the qualitative interviews with provider organisations also indicate that only this small number of the largest providing organisations have any data on historical participation on their placements. Many organisations currently still have no formal participant monitoring and whilst most are able to provide some overall historical data on numbers of placements, gap year organisations in general have not had / put resources into collecting detailed information about participants.

5.7.13 A few of the larger organisations are also beginning to conduct alumni work. Organisations have a clear marketing interest in this type data and across the sector it is commercially sensitive. However, several providers did suggest as this report was being compiled that in the coming year they would have more detailed databases on their participants. This data does offer the potential for better future understanding of historical trends in the nature and level of participation.

5.7.14 In summary, there is no existing research which presents an accurate quantification on national levels of participation in gap years across all the categories identified in this review's typology. Current quantification of national participation is patchy and the subject of debate and disagreement amongst commentators and provider organisations. It is possible to state that gap year participation has been increasing significantly over the last decade and that trend appears to be continuing. A sensible estimate of national participation is that in the 16-25 year old age range between 250,000 and 350,000 young people are undertaking a gap year of some form (The Year Out Group 2003). However, there are unknown factors which cast some degree of uncertainty on these ball-park figures. We suggest that it is unlikely based on current evidence that the figure is less than the lower end of this range but it is possible that the actual total could be substantially more than the upper end of the range. Only further research can address this uncertainty.

5.8   Social Characteristics of Gap Year Participants

5.8.1   Qualitative research interviews feeding into this report along with a number of web-based sources all tentatively suggest that gap year takers tend to have a series of characteristics as a social group:

- predominantly white with few ethnic minority participants
- women out-number men
- from relatively affluent 'middle-class' backgrounds
- over-representation of private & grammar school backgrounds

- under-representation of disabilities
- geographically 'gap year participants' (A1/2) are mainly from southern English HE institutions

5.8.2   Whilst these generalisations have varying degrees of support from the existing evidence, the qualitative research fed into this study along with interviews conducted in the process of compilation provided a firm indication of their relevance.

5.8.3   For example, one recruitment officer in a specialist gap year volunteering organisations summed up these points:

> *The typical current gap year taker is a white female without any stated disability who either comes from a school or 6th form with a career advice service encouraging a gap year, or who is a friend or family of someone has taken a gap year.*
> [paraphrased, Officer, Specialist provider]

5.8.4   However, we would make a number of qualifying points in respect of these generalisations. First, whilst contested, levels of gap year participation have been rising significantly over the last decade in all categories of gap year. Supported by limited qualitative evidence from commentators and provider organisations, this indicates the likelihood that participation is widening beyond the 'average' participant outlined above. The review did identify evidence of limited growing participation amongst ethnic minority groups (Black Volunteering 2003) and of provider penetration into increasing numbers of state schools nationally (Gap Activity Projects 2003, WWW 2003). This includes the existing pilot schemes in deprived areas of the UK but more widely the review found provider organisations seeking to actively promote their opportunities in more state schools and through other career advice outlets. This suggests that there may be an existing trend of widening participation that is opening up gap years to a greater proportion of young people nationally. The interviews with providers certainly showed that organisations are attempting to actively broaden participation and to counter the stereotypical image of the gap year taker. It is likely that these efforts from the sector are already having an impact.

5.8.5   Second, given the rising levels of participation in the UK outlined in the previous section, the review identified qualitative evidence from some commentators and providers that the nature of gap year participation was changing. A number of interviewees doubted whether the growing numbers reflected a continuation of the white, middle class privileged, from an independent or grammar school, female gapper but instead corresponded to young people from all kinds of social backgrounds undertaking gap years. These arguments, however, are not supported by any existing evidence and would need to be investigated through future research. However, the interviewees conducted

supported this perspective with evidence that many providers have seen a very big growth in state school participation with some reporting over 70% of their clients originating from state schools.

5.8.6   Third, the review identified specific 'niche' groups of gap year participants who differ significantly from the average participant. This reflects the variety of motivations and activities that draw people to gap years. As will also be discussed in section 7 on providers, a significant fraction of gap year participants are in part motivated and involved because of religious belief. The review evidence suggests that the social characteristics of such participants is likely to be different overall to the average gapper. Such participants are more likely to come from a variety of parental income backgrounds and UK regions other than the south-east. The interviews suggest provisionally that this group of participants is less dominated by young people in the higher education track.

5.9   Under-represented Groups

5.9.1   The review compiled a variety of sources of information to indicate which groups of young people are under-represented in gap year participation. Given the lack of detailed data on national participation, it is again impossible to specify absolute levels of representation by different groups of young people with different social characteristics. However, the qualitative data collected along with a number of reports provided by individual organisations do provide a general view of under-representation.

5.9.2   Overall, across all types of gap year we suggest the following groups are – proportionately under-represented in comparison to the composition of the UK population as a whole:

- Young Men;
- Young People from deprived areas of the UK;
- Young People from outside the south-east region;
- Young People from state schools (excluding Grammar schools);
- Young People in employment;
- Young People on the 'training track'.

5.9.3   There are a variety of factors that converge to lead to this situation, not all of which fit the media stereotype of the gap year being the preserve of wealthy middle class public and grammar school educated people.

5.9.4   In particular, it is worth nothing that the review identified some but not conclusive evidence that black and ethnic minority groups are under-represented. Whilst the qualitative research suggests this is the case, black and ethnic minorities are not under-represented as a group (Bhattacharyya *et al* 2003) in HE overall - they represent 15% of the UK domiciled HE population

(Connor *et al* 2003). However, this figure hides the fact that Asian young people are the majority of that group and there are low levels of HE participation amongst Black and Caribbean young people. With respect to gap years, UCAS data on deferrals shows that black and ethnic minority groups are under-represented despite the existence of provision targeting ethnic minorities in the gap year providing sector. Black Volunteers, for example, target young black people and seek to involved them in volunteering activities. Detailed research would be needed to substantiate black and ethnic minority participation and to establish whether they were under-represented in gap year participation overall.

5.9.5   Overall, we suggest that under-represented groups can be crudely generalised as those following the pattern in higher education participation overall. In this respect, the academic literature provides relevant insight. Forsyth & Furlong (2000; 2003) in a recent set of studies for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that levels of participation and chances of academic success have remained lowest among young people from deprived neighbourhoods. In research which tracked socio-economically disadvantaged young people through higher education they highlighted a number of factors that hindered their progress:

- lack of familiarity with HE leading to enrolment on inappropriate courses;
- lack of funds limiting institution choice;
- fear of debt;
- lack of confidence in academic chances & employment prospects;
- fear of cultural isolation.

5.9.6   These findings have significant implications for gap year participation. The same factors are likely to reinforce low levels of participation amongst socio-economically disadvantaged and other under-represented groups. Furthermore, these factors act in combination not isolation which suggests policy measures aimed to tackle, for example, lack of financial resources are unlikely to have much impact on participation levels alone. To encourage participation amongst disadvantaged groups, policy needs to address most or all of these inhibiting factors which is likely to prove challenging.

6   ASSESSING THE BENEFITS OF GAP YEARS

6.1   Key Points

6.1.1 On the benefits to society of gap years:

• No direct research has been conducted examining specifically the benefits that accrues to wider society from gap year participation.

• Many gap year activities can be said to be beneficial, notably paid and voluntary work.

• With respect to voluntary work, the evidence suggests UK-based volunteering is likely to yield greater benefits because of more effective support for participants.

• The evidence also suggests that structured placements are likely to be more beneficial than unstructured for the same reason.

• Travel and leisure activities offer little immediately tangible benefit to society although exposure to other peoples and cultures may well have positive effects on UK society in the longer term.

6.1.2 On the benefits to participants:

• The review identified a range of benefits young people acquire from gap year participation which can be broadly divided into a number of categories:

• improved educational performance;
  • formation & development of career choices;
  • improved 'employability' & career opportunities;
  • non-academic skills & qualifications;
  • life skills;

• Not all participants gain all of these types of benefits and different kinds of activities are more likely to be improve specific kinds of benefits.

• The review identified some evidence to suggest that gap year participation enhances educational performance at university to some degree.

• Gap years also appear to give young people the opportunity to try out different occupations and make informed career choices.

• There is mixed evidence as to whether a gap year improves employability suggesting that for graduate employment it is an advantage but for other employment it was of less benefit.

• For young people in employment or training, no substantive evidence was identified either way to suggest whether a gap year was of benefit.

• The review did find evidence to suggest that gap year participation enhances a variety of skills employers consider to be important.

• Existing research however suggests that many employers are not able to recognise or utilise the skills that gap year activities improve.

• Many participants gain non-academic qualifications and skills during the course of a gap year across a wide range of areas from sports instruction to vocational courses related to specific occupations.

• Gap years enhance in general a variety of 'life skills' including:

  • greater independence & ability to take decisions;
  • the development of interpersonal skills;
  • problem solving;
  • self-discipline;
  • leadership skills;
  • communication skills (e.g. team-working);
  • managing money;

6.1.3 On the potential drawbacks of a gap year:

• There is an opportunity cost in time and money in gap year participation when a young person could be gaining valuable experience or earning money.

• Some evidence suggest young people can be de-motivated to continue study or find it difficult to return to formal education after a gap year.

• An unplanned gap year can produce a wasted period of time with little benefit.

• In a small number of subject areas, university departments may regard someone who has taken a gap year as being at a disadvantage.

• Gap years can be expensive and may lead to a young person accruing considerable personal debt.

6.2   Introduction

6.2.1   The question of the benefits that a gap year offers divides into two issues: the benefit to the individual participant and the wider benefit to society. This section will address both issues but will focus on the participant in line with the objectives of the review. However, across both issues the benefit that gap year participation accrues is widely held to be problematic amongst both practitioners and the literature. No detailed or systematic research on these issues came to light in the course of compiling the report, and measuring the benefit of the activities undertaken in gap years is acknowledged by sector commentators as being difficult. Many general benefits of a gap year to participants are highlighted by organisations, how-to-do guides, websites and commentators, but there is also a view that the benefits are intangible in nature (Simpson 2003).

6.3   The Wider Social and Economic Benefits of Gap Year Activity

6.3.1   There exists no direct research into the benefits that the gap year phenomenon can be said to have on wider society. Many of the activities undertaken in the gap year are regarded by commentators and the literature to be beneficial to varying degrees. However a number of other activities – for example, backpacker tourism - are regarded as potentially detrimental by some of the academic literature (Butler 1990; Hampton 1998; Goodwin 1999). As far as the scope of this review allows, a number of general points can be made.

6.3.2   First, there is a clear and substantial literature supporting the common sense perception that voluntary work and other forms of civic contribution by young people on gap years is of benefit to society (Roker *et al* 1999). There is little need to elaborate on this point further here. Clearly young people working on the kinds of projects run through volunteering organisations such as Community Service Volunteers will benefit communities and groups for whom the work is done. The qualitative research also points to the collective impact of volunteers' personal enhancement through volunteering as an important general component of wider societal benefit. However, with respect to overseas volunteering, there is an academic debate around the value that overseas voluntary work adds to wider development objectives in host communities (e.g. MacMichael 1996; Mowforth & Munt 1998; Butcher 2003) although there is little dissent from the view that it makes some kind of positive contribution.

6.3.3   However, following on from this last point, a contested issue that does arise is the relative benefit derived from different forms of volunteering in the gap year context. The qualitative interviews suggest that there is evidence to suggest in general that many overseas placements may be less beneficial to host communities in terms of the 'use' of a gap year participants time than if voluntary work is undertaken in the UK. There are several reasons for this which centre around the fact that it is often easier for a gap year participant to work more

effectively in a familiar environment as opposed to an unfamiliar foreign country. Different languages and cultural practices also feed into this, as does the ability of provider organisations to support young people. It is in general easier and cheaper to address problems and provide support in the UK.

6.3.4   In relation to this point, Simpson (2003) identifies that the Gap Year industry tends to 'evoke a highly simplistic conceptualisation of development' in its marketing and publicity material. Specialist organisations widely refer to the 'usefulness' of volunteers and how they are needed by the communities or environments in which they work. Simpson argues that this approach is questionable in that whilst volunteers abroad clearly produce some valuable contributions, there are also high risks. These risks centre around the appropriateness of the activities undertaken in relation to improving host communities lives, the diversion of development participation from local to non-locals and the relative cost-benefit issues around using high-cost volunteers from overseas as opposed to local people. Organisations tend to market themselves to young people as offering an opportunity to making major contributions to needy communities or environments, whereas the academic literature elsewhere cast doubts on the overall significance of the activities of these individuals especially when they have little on-the-ground support overseas. Furthermore, within development theory, there has been a significant critique of non-governmental organisations and charities role in wider development (Fennell 1999; Nederveen-Pieterse 2000) suggesting that Westerners are less important to achieving development than grassroots community activity.

6.3.5   The preliminary qualitative research findings undertaken during the review support this view to some extent. Key figures in providing organisations accept the view that the contribution of many young gap year takers may be relatively minor. Problems identified include the lack of relevant experience of occupations or cultures by young volunteers overseas along with the relative short-term placement of young people overseas.

6.3.6   Another relevant aspect to this issue is thus the degree of structure and support to the volunteering placement. Several of the interviews indicated that overseas volunteering is more likely to have greater benefits to host communities when run as part of group structured project (such as offered by Raleigh International) than when gap year participants are placed individually or in small groups. The review does suggest that in the case of overseas gap year volunteering, there are more potential barriers to effective contribution if the young person is not supported by an effective host organisations, provided with training and is not in location overseas for a sufficient length of time. Structured placements offer a greater likelihood of this kind of support being provided. However, ultimately the benefit to host communities is shaped by a variety of factors and continuing demand from overseas organisations for volunteers indicates that they must feel these participants are having a beneficial effect.

6.3.7   Second, and following on, this does not mean that overseas volunteering projects do not have benefits. For example, VSO's 'Youth for Development' scheme sends young people on structured and supported placements overseas where upon return they are required to undertake educational projects in schools or with disabled people on overseas development (VSO 2004). This kind of structured project offers a clear model for the way in which gap year overseas volunteering can make a significant contribution within the UK. The level of benefit to UK society depends therefore on how overseas projects are structured and how young people's experiences are embedded in the UK context upon their return.

6.3.8   Third, young people undertaking paid work of any form in the UK or abroad are clearly also contributing to economic activity and this can be taken as generally beneficial in the same manner as anyone contributing to society through paid employment.

6.3.9   Fourth, in terms of the range of gap year activities a young person may undertake, leisure and travel activities offer little tangible benefit to wider society. It can be argued that young people travelling increases cultural understanding, knowledge and thus tolerance amongst the UK population. However, on the detrimental side of the leisure activity argument, gap year participants represent a proportion of the labour market in the UK who are temporarily inactive. In that sense there is a societal cost associated with gap years in terms of a segment of the UK population who are not working and who delay entry into the labour market. Several commentators pointed out that this societal cost needed to be taken into account when considering the net benefit of gap years.

6.3.10 In summary, the available evidence suggests that gap years offer a range of positive benefits to UK and other societies in general. However, within that certain activities are likely to accrue much greater benefit than others. Paid and voluntary work make clear societal contributions with the evidence suggesting that UK-based volunteering particularly may make a more effective contribution. The benefit of gap year activities to wider society are also dependant on the degree of structure and support provided by facilitating organisations with the more structured activities likely to be more beneficial. Young people undertaking activities independently are likely to find it more difficult to be effective and whilst such types of activity may be more beneficial to them, the benefits to wider society are less.

6.4   Categorising Benefits to Gap Year Participants

6.4.1   Assessing the benefits of taking a gap year for the participant from the existing literature relies largely on inference from secondary or indirect research. The how-to-do literature provides the basis for a well-established list of broad benefits that can be attributed to the gap year experience (De'Ath *et al* 2002;

Hecht 2003; Griffith, S. 2003). Research conducted to date by the author also provides provisional qualitative sources that allows a series of general benefits of a gap year to be proposed. These relate to the benefits experience by the target age group (16-25 years) of this report.

6.4.2   In this context, the review identified at least five genres of benefit which an individual undertaking a gap year could potentially experience. These have been compiled from the how-to-do literature, websites and the qualitative interviews conducted in the review process. Gap year participants are likely to gain in terms of one or more of the following areas:

- improved educational performance;
- formation & development of educational and career choices;
- reduced likelihood of future 'drop out' from education, training or employment;
- improved 'employability' & career opportunities;
- non-academic skills & qualifications;
- social capital;
- life skills;
- developing social values.

6.4.3   Clearly, not every gap year taker will gain relevant experience which enhances all of these skills. Considering gap years in general offer some or all of these categories of benefit to participants.

6.4.4   Within the wider academic literature, the benefits of taking a gap year correspond to the benefits associated with 'social capital'. Social research suggests that activities undertaken during a gap year – for example, voluntary work – lead to a greater degree of participation in civil society, a wider interest in politics and greater ability to relate to wider society (Nyazi 1996; Astin *et al* 1999; Hall *et al* 2002). Academic research has suggested, in contrast to factual citizenship education in secondary schools, that the undertaking of voluntary work or similar itself by young people is a far better means to increase their social capital as citizens (Davis Smith *et al* 2002). By implication, this also has a likely positive affect on the ability as both student learners and employees in paid work. However it should also be noted that academic theories of social capital have also been criticised and questioned as providing an inadequate conception of the multiple social and cultural factors that lead to personal career development and occupational mobility (Baron *et al* 2001).

6.4.5   An individual gap year participant may gain a large number of specific benefits from the variety of activities they undertake during a gap year. However, in terms of the objectives of this review, it is the general benefits that are likely to be experienced by the majority of participants that are of interest and policy relevance. Each of these genres of benefit is considered in turn.

6.5 Improved Educational Performance

6.5.1   The review identified no existing detailed academic research into the educational benefits of taking a gap year. In general, the qualitative interviews and sector commentators most commonly refer to the argument that a gap year produces a greater degree of 'maturity' in a young person which enables them with a variety of skills to tackle a degree or other formal qualification more effectively. A number of further points arose out of the review.

6.5.2   First, the general argument is supported by the how-to-do literature and careers advice concerning gap years available on the web. In particular, support is provided by evidence that top-tier universities reflect this view of gap years in their approach to admissions. Many of the top-tier universities now openly advocate the taking of a gap year as an advantageous foundation for university study. The review identified widespread acceptance of the beneficial effects of gap year participation amongst the university sector admissions literature. Some quotations illustrate this from website and prospectuses:

> *6.5.2.1 "Ten percent of UCL's undergraduates elect to take a gap year between school and university…All departments at UCL encourage students to do this provided that they have a structured plan and know what they want to achieve…a gap year can bring benefits to students, not least of which is a broadening of perspective and an increase in maturity."*
> (UCL Undergraduate Prospectus, 2002 Entry)

> *6.5.2.2 "[Gap Years} are now widely recognised by universities and employers and cannot fail to stand you in good stead. Employers and universities increasingly attach importance to evidence of enterprise, maturity and sustain commitment both within and outside formal education"*
> (Extract from Sheffield Hallam Careers Advice website, December 2003)

6.5.3   Websites offering career advice on university admission and post-school opportunities cite a range of general ways in which gap year takers university performance may be enhanced:

- greater self-discipline in studying;
- perspective & knowledge from gap year life-experience;
- greater motivation to achieve educational goals.

6.5.4   Second, with regard to specific types of gap year activity, there is policy work of relevance that discusses the educational benefits of volunteering. In

reviewing the literature on university volunteering, Ellis (2002) cites findings showing wide-ranging benefits to young people, many of which can be linked to educational benefits. The evaluation of the UK's Millennium Volunteers programme found 84% of young people felt their confidence had increased. In general, there is some research that indicates young people in schools who are engaged in volunteering or community work perform better in examinations. Eccles & Barber (1999), reporting on a study of 1000 young people in the US, found that involvement in volunteering or similar prosocial activities was positively linked to better educational performance, liking school, higher marks and linked to lower rates of involvement in risky behaviour. This work associates the benefit participants accrue from volunteering with a wider ability to contextualise and apply academic knowledge, and make linkages between different ideas (Brunwin 2002)

6.5.5   Furthermore, research examining how young people accrue social capital[1], John & Morris (2003) point to the positive benefits that school-based group activities perform better in examinations. Again the weak implication is that activities such as volunteering or paid-work undertaken in gap years are likely to improve participants' academic abilities in an examination context by improving their knowledge base and also developing their knowledge analysis skills. Volunteering also has more obvious benefits in social capital terms as young people accrue a vocational and generic skills such as languages or First Aid skills.

6.5.6   In summary, there is limited evidence then to cautiously suggest that many types of gap year activity, largely by virtue of giving participants 'real life experience' in new social contexts will have positive impacts on their ability to tackle academic qualifications. This is a highly generalised point however and there is a clear need for further specific research.

6.6   Formation and Development of Career Choices

6.6.1   Qualitative interviews in conjunction with web-based careers advice concerning gap year participation also provides evidence to suggest that taking gap years aids young people in forming and developing longer term career choices. Presented as a negative stereotype by some participants on web message boards – "I didn't know what to do in life" , this is in fact arguably a benefit to gap year participation.

6.6.2   The review did identify evidence from the web that gap year takers often use the time to try out and / or explore different occupations of career paths. Several commentators held the view that many young people use the gap year to research careers and future education because they do not feel they have

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[1] Defined as 'the connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam 2000)

adequate time whilst still in school and in the public examinations system.

6.6.3   In this sense, the idea that the gap year provides a period of time for young people to think seriously about what they want to do in life appears to be highly credible. The wider benefit therefore is that taking a gap year will enable young people to make better choices about employment, training or education that may save time, money and other resources from being wasted in relation to career choices that are subsequently deemed to be wrong.

6.7   Improved 'employability' and career opportunities

6.7.1   In terms of employment opportunities and the UK labour market, there is again little or no direct quantitative (or quantifiable) data examining the impact of gap year taking on career opportunities for young people. There is also no research concerning the issue of enhanced labour market mobility as a consequence of taking a gap year. To address these issues what evidence the review again draws upon reported, anecdotal and limited qualitative sources. However, a number of these sources provide support for the argument that taking a gap year enhances the career prospect, employability and earnings potential of young people in the context of UK labour market.

6.7.2   First, there is clear evidence from graduate level employers in the UK economy that taking a gap year is regarded as beneficial. A number of 'blue-chip' firms across a range of sectors actively encourage applications for employment from those who have taken a gap year.

6.7.3   For example, two blue-chip firms which highlight the positive benefits of graduate recruits taking a gap year state in their literature:

> 6.7.3.11   *Through our graduate recruitment process, we look for graduates who can bring more to the table than pure academics. Typically the graduates who shine have work or life experience which differentiates them. Gap Years provide them experience they can draw from and use to demonstrate the key competencies we are looking for…"*
> (Graduate Resource Manager, Vodafone UK)

> 6.7.3.2   *"Graduates using their gap years wisely to learn new skills, stretch themselves and gain an insight into the 'real' world have great impact with employers when seeking careers."*
> (Recruitment Manager, Barclays)

6.7.4   Furthermore, firms such as Accenture and Shell offer bursaries to potential recruits which are marketed as being money to fund gap year activities (see section 5.5). Accenture cite in their literature a range of skills they find that

former gap year participants are more accomplished at. These include the kinds of life skills discussed in section 6.7 – interpersonal skills, team-working, organisation skills. In that sense, the review identified clear evidence from graduate-level employers that gap years can in certain sectors enhance employability.

6.7.5   However, and second, the review also suggests that a gap year and the activities associated with it do not necessarily enhance employability. The benefit in this respect appears to be dependant on both the nature of the gap year activities undertaken and the nature of employment sought. For example, there is a small amount of research reinforcing the anecdotal perception that structured volunteering enhances employability (CSV 2000; Mitchell 2003). In contrast, whilst there are numerous possible combinations, the review process suggested that young people on the training track seeking jobs in non-graduate sectors are unlikely to benefit as much from a gap year. An example of this comes from commentary on some of the pilot schemes being run in deprived areas by the larger gap year providers. A young man returning from one project overseas found that his experience, whilst of great personal satisfaction to him, was not understood by his prospective employer. In sum, the evidence suggests in a preliminary sense that gap years improve the employability of graduate level jobs but for young people not involved in the higher education system in some way, the benefits in terms of employability are more doubtful. This however clearly depends on the nature of the activities undertaken and there was not sufficient evidence identified in the review to determine whether this point is generally valid. More research is needed on this issue and analysis of DfES's current Young Volunteer Challenge for 18-19 year olds will also provide further evidence on this issue.

6.7.6   Third, the review identified relevant academic research amongst university career services which reinforced the likely desirability of the kinds of skills associated with taking a gap year with employers more generally. Bowden (1998) conducted a survey of employers for the University of Manchester and UMIST career services examining what skills employers stated they were looking for in graduates as opposed to the level of skills achieved by graduate applicants.

6.7.7   Figure 6.1 shows the findings of this research into employer perceptions of communications skills. It reveals that the kinds of communications skills valued by prospective employers are also the ones that employers felt applicants lacked. Figures 6.2 and 6.3 show a similar skills gap in relation to personal and process skills which employers desired new applicants to have a good degree of ability in.

Figure 6.1: Employer Perceptions of Communications Skills

Figure 6.2: Employer Perceptions of Personal Skills

Figure 6.3: Employer Perceptions of Process Skills
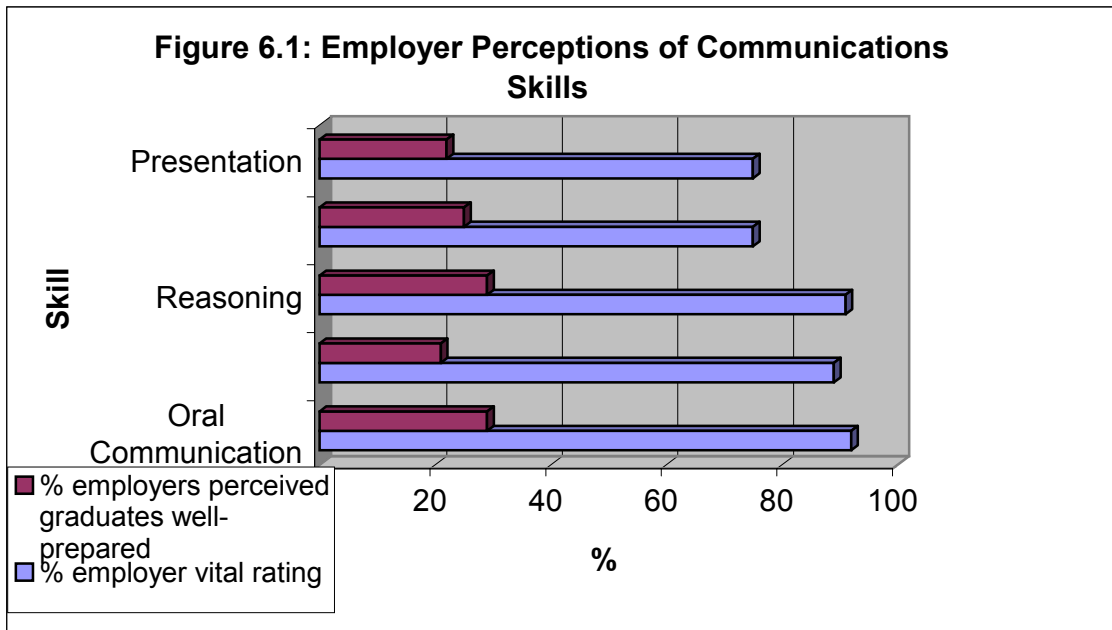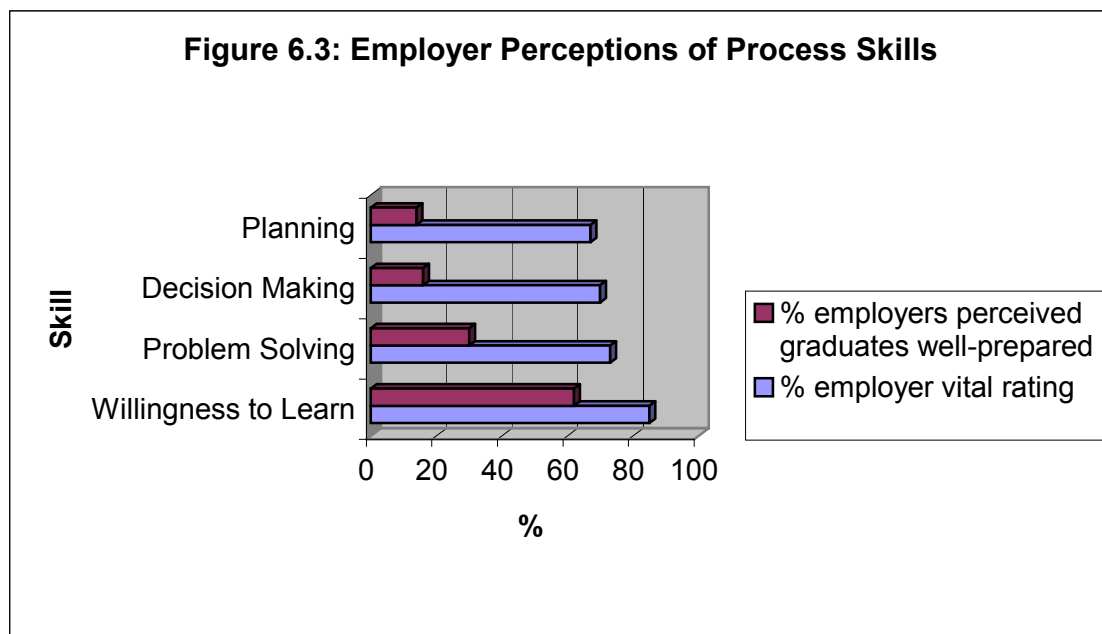
6.7.8   These results suggest that the kinds of skills associated with taking a gap year are seen by employers as an area where the average graduate recruit is lacking. Personal, life and not academic skills are seen as vital characteristics of those they seek to recruit and these are the kinds of skills commonly improved by participating in a gap year.

6.7.9   This validates to some degree the often stated view taken by most of the how-to-do books and advisory websites that potential employers value gap years. However, for the most part these are again large established firms referring to graduate recruitment. The employability benefits for those who reach a lower level of education achievement are less clear.

6.7.10 Furthermore, a research report by the think-tank DEMOS in 2001 (Thomas 2001) which investigated the way in which the UK educational system could address the higher order skills gap (of which many of the types of skills outlined in the Figures above can be included) suggests that employers themselves do not sufficiently recognise the contribution that activities such as international volunteering make to improving employees skill-based. The DEMOS report argues that international volunteers (of whom many will be gap year participants) find themselves in a 'skills trap' because although they have the skills the economy needs, employers do not recognise this. The report also argues that at the extreme international volunteering can be regarded negatively and actually reduce employability.

6.7.11 Such a finding casts doubt on whether in the case of gap year participants there is much integration of gap year experiences into workplace and career tracks. Employability enhancement may be a rather superficial effect for a

specific group (graduate recruits) amongst a limited number of employers and other factors may be far more significant in determining ultimately whether a young person is recruited. The DEMOS work does suggest that employers are unlikely to provide much support for transferring newly gained skills from activities such as international volunteering once the young person has entered the workplace.

6.7.12 In sum, gap year participation is generally perceived by graduate-level employers as beneficial and improving employability. However, this increased employability effect is not evident for non-graduate occupations and there is evidence in the literature to suggest that employer enthusiasm for the general skills acquired in gap years is not matched by a continued support for developing those skills when new recruits enter the labour market.

6.8   Non-academic skills and qualifications

6.8.1   The interviews with sector commentators provide anecdotal and qualitative evidence to suggest that many young people undertaking gap years gain non-academic skills and qualifications in the course of their gap year. These consist of a wide range of practical and other kinds of skills which often are associated with particular kinds of activity. For example, many gap year participants who spend time living and working in skiing, sailing or diving tourist resorts gain instruction qualifications in the course of this period. Other young people may gain skills qualifications in relation to paid employment undertaken during their gap years. Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, young people taking qualifications ranging across foreign languages, lifesaving, driving, chef's qualifications to forestry management.

6.8.2   Clearly not all gap year participants will necessarily derive this kind of benefit from taking a gap year but the available evidence suggests that non-academic skills and qualifications of a practical nature are a common benefit young people gain from a gap year. The break provides the opportunities to learn practical skills which may or may not result in a formal qualification. Furthermore, these kinds of skills gains span the range of types of activity undertaken and are not just restricted to paid or voluntary workplace environments.

6.9   Life Skills

6.9.1   A range of literature spanning how-to-do publications, university and school careers advice and recruitment literature from employers widely cite the general 'life skills' that taking a gap year improves in participants (Gap.org 2003; Gapwork.org 2004). In conjunction with the interviews with sector commentators, we suggest a general list of 'life skills' that are commonly associated with gap

year participation. These are indicative rather than exhaustive:

- greater independence & ability to take decisions;
- the development of interpersonal skills;
- problem solving;
- self-discipline;
- leadership skills;
- communication skills (e.g. team-working);
- managing money;

6.9.2   These 'life skills' are wide-ranging and general in nature and we suggest it is not helpful for this report to elaborate at length on them. To a considerable extent, they overlap with the same types of skills employers value and education institutions seek to develop and encourage aside from academic ability.

6.9.3   With respect to research into the degree to which gap year activities develop these skills, there is a limited amount of work that has examined the benefits of volunteering in developing life skills (Roker *et al* 1999; Davis Smith *et al* 2002). The general point to be taken from this literature is that activities such as volunteering are likely to improve these kinds of skills in young people. A number of commentators also suggest that the benefit is again likely to be enhanced through structured and supported volunteering programmes (Raskoff & Sundeen 1999; Gronksi & Pigg 2000). However, the review did not identify enough evidence to suggest that volunteering was necessarily more beneficial than paid employment or even independent travel. Too many factors are at play in young people's experiences and there is anecdotal and qualitative evidence that most gap years lead to some benefit in the area of life-skills regardless of specific activities. It is also impossible to make an assessment with how young people's life skills would have been enhanced if they had not taken a gap year. Thus, more research would be needed to make firm assertions in this area.

6.10 Drawbacks of a Gap Year for Participants

6.10.1 Whilst the common perception and assumption concerning gap years is that participation is a positive and beneficial experience for both the individual young person, the review did suggest that a number of drawbacks to taking gap year need to be identified. These do not undermine the arguments for participation in general but rather represent factors that need to be taken into account when considering policy intervention.

6.10.2   First, as with any component of a person's educational and career development, in taking a gap year there is an opportunity cost for the young person concerned. A year spent undertaking a gap year represents a year not in education or employment which has in the overall lifetime perspective a financial cost in terms of lost earnings and a social capital cost in terms of workplace

experience. In short, a gap year means a young person may start university or longer term employment later than would otherwise be the case.

6.10.3 Second, as a number of school and careers advice publications identify, there is evidence to suggest that a break in academic work and routine may have negative effects on motivation and progress (De'Ath 2002; Tonbridge School 2003) . A number of the university careers support services also make reference to this point and offer advice on how applicants taking a gap year might address this issue upon arriving at university.

6.10.4 Third, with inadequate planning, a gap year can produce a 'year's inadequate drifting' (ibid) which represents a wasted year. In the paraphrased advice of one former gapper on a web message-board:

> *"You've got to avoid the danger of lying in bed for a year doing nothing else than watching daytime TV. "*
> (Message posted, accessed November 2003)

6.10.5 Fourth, there was evidence to suggest that certain university departments do not look favourably upon gap year taking. Whilst not widespread, the review suggests that, for example, Mathematics departments seek to discourage applicants from taking a gap year (Studylink 2003) as it is seen as an unhelpful interruption to the formal learning process. However, the review suggests that this is not widespread across the university sector in general.

6.10.6 Fifth, and finally, there is the obvious potential drawback to a gap year for a young person in terms of cost. A gap year without adequate funding can saddle a young person with significant debt when they return to education, training or employment.

7 THE GAP YEAR PROVIDING SECTOR

7.1 Key Points

7.1.1 On Specialist Providers:

• The review identified between 80 and 100 specialist organisations in the UK focusing largely on gap year provision and providing at least 50,000 placements.

• Providers that target gap year participants only are especially focused on post-school (A) and post-university (C) gap years.

• Most specialist providers are small or medium sized in terms of provision offering between 250 and 1,500 placements.

• Specialist providers tend overall to focus on longer term, overseas and more costly placements than other more general activity providers.

• The extended gap year placement is not common with the majority of specialist provider placements in the 3 to 12 month range.

7.1.2 On UK Volunteering Organisations:

• No existing data was identified that comprehensively quantified potential provision for gap year takers.

• There are a very large number of UK volunteering providers with the majority being very small.

• A small number of larger providers do offer a sizeable number of annual placements.

• The review suggests an indicative figure of at least 50,000 available placements, although the actual figure could be very much higher.

• UK volunteering opportunities cover a wide range of areas with common areas being social work, childcare, environmental projects and teaching

• UK volunteering is low cost with few placements requiring more than a £100 per week contribution by participants

7.1.3 On Overseas Volunteering Organisations:

• The review suggests there are over 800 organisations offering overseas volunteering placements in 200 countries.

• Around 350,000 placement opportunities are available annually world-wide.

• There are again a huge variety of possible types of voluntary work with the commonest types being similar to the UK case.

• Overseas volunteering placements incur larger fees than those in the UK with the review identifying a typical fee range of £500 to £2000.

7.1.4 On UK Paid Work Providers:

• No comprehensive research or data on UK work placements was identified and quantification is difficult as virtually any UK company can provide a placement potentially for a gap year participant.

• The available evidence suggests that work placements are highly diverse in nature and many are as likely to be organised independently as through a provider organisations.

7.1.5 On Overseas Paid Work Providers:

• The review identified around 30 organising specialising in organisations overseas paid work placements, with five most common types of work:

  • Au Pairing / Childcare;
  • Internships;
  • Sport Instruction;
  • Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL);
  • Seasonal Work;

• Again the limited evidence suggests only a fraction of gap year participants engaging in overseas paid work will use an organisation in the UK to gain work overseas.

7.1.6 Travel & Leisure Providers:

• There are a significant number of providers that offer travel and leisure packages at gap year takers.

• These commercial organisations effectively represent part of the tourist industry targeting gap year participants.

7.2   Introduction

7.2.1   There are a vast number of different organisations in the UK and overseas which provide activities undertaken by young people taking gap years. Whilst some of these organisations are specialist providers, the greater number are not.

7.2.2   The nature of the activities that are offered by the gap year providing sector as a whole varies hugely and any discussion of provision is thus confronted with problems of definition and demarcation. Many organisations are not exclusively targeted at gap year takers and it is difficult to differentiate between provision for gap year participants and provision for a large number of other groups in society.

7.2.3   Broadly, we suggest the gap year providing sector incorporates a number of distinctive organisational functions which include:

> • commercial organisations acting as brokers to mediate between participants and a placement providers (e.g. GapYear.com);
> • non-profit umbrella organisations directing participants to other providers and which publicise and help to market gap year opportunities (e.g. The Year Out Group;
> • commercial organisations offering placements
> • charitable organisations offering placements (e.g. CSV)
> • host community organisations offering placements.

7.2.4   Many organisations in this sector fulfil one or more of these functions but an important issue arising from the review is the distinction that exists between for profit and not for profit organisations that provide gap year placements. Across the sector, different provider organisations have been set up for very different purposes (for example, public benefit as opposed to private gain). In this sense, there is a relationship between the nature of the organisation and the kinds of motivations that young people have for taking up placements in terms of, for example altruism as opposed to seeking interesting or exciting experiences.

7.2.5   The review has not identified any academic or policy work that has quantified the level of provision at the national level. Furthermore, in the course of this review, no suitable data sources have been identified that would allow an exhaustive assessment of provision levels. The provision of activities for gap year takers cover such a range of different organisations that any attempt to compile detailed comprehensive data is likely to be extremely demanding on resources. Furthermore, a key problem in assessing total provision is the overlap between different types of organisations. Many providers act as mediators for

others and many gap year takers undertake activities through more than one organisation during the course of their gap year. All of these factors make it difficult to accurately quantify provision.

7.2.6   Of the gap year websites and gateway organisations such as the Year Out Group and GapYear.com, the review suggested that these gap year portals do not have exhaustive data through which a complete quantitative assessment of provision can be made. These organisations do not necessarily know how many placements are made through the organisations they list, and provider organisations do not supply data on placements made in any systematic fashion. The best assessment of provision can thus only be made by collecting data on how many placements organisations state they offer annually.

7.2.7   However, this review is able to provide an indicative overview of provision in the UK in broad numerical terms and also in terms of the nature of that provision. From various sources, data has been compiled on different types of gap year providing organisations across the sector. In compiling the review, resources were concentrated in particular on collating data on specialist providers that target gap year takers.

7.2.8   This section thus assesses specialist provision first before going on to examine provision across different types of non-specialist organisations in the gap year sector. This categorisation is not exhaustive but does represent a comprehensive view of provision based on the organisations listed in how-to-do gap year books and on web portals. We suggest therefore that this section provides a good general overview of the level and nature of provision in the UK although specific number quoted should not be taken as exact.

7.3   Specialist Gap Year Organisations

7.3.1   The review identified around 85 specialist gap year provider organisations in the UK spanning all types of gap year activities (World Wide Volunteering, 2004). The organisations were identified from the how-to-do literature and from web-based directories and portals. To some extent the categorisation is arbitrary in terms of organisations that are 'specialist' but we suggest this group does represent the core of providing organisations targeting their efforts at gap year participants.
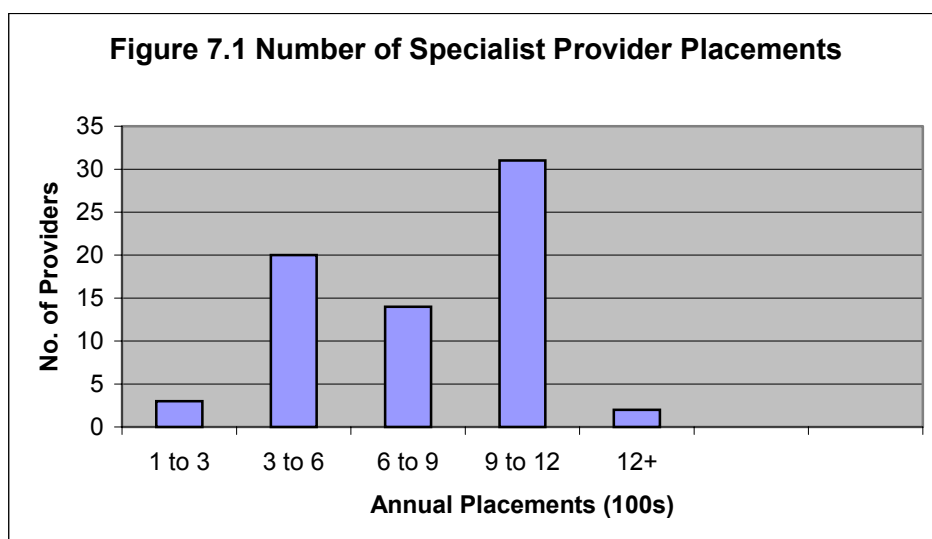
7.3.2   Comprehensive data on the exact level of provision in the UK could not be compiled within the scope of this study. However, a review of published literature, websites and a limited number of telephone interviews has enabled a good estimate of provision levels to be given.

7.3.3   In total we estimate that these specialist providers currently offer in excess of 50,000 potential gap year placements each year. This number is hard to

accurately assess because of the dynamic nature of provision. To some extent it is also arbitrary insofar as a much greater number of placements are also available beyond the specialist provision sector. Interviews with gap year providing organisations indicate that potential provision outstrips demand insofar as placing additional gap year students remains easier than attracting new gap year takers. Overall, therefore, the finding of the review is that there is no evidence of under-provision in the sector as a whole. It should be noted, however, that qualitative interviews suggests that excess provision capacity is lightly to be smallest for structured placements.

7.3.4   The placements offered by specialist providers are largely but not exclusively aimed at 16-25 year olds. Many organisations have a much broader age range and thus a proportion of these placements will be taken up by those over 25. However, in general specialist providers' target market is dominated by groups A and C and so as a providing sector, we suggest that their placement numbers align closely with provision to a large proportion of the young people who form the focus of this review. There are a number of points that can be made with respect to the nature of this specialist provision sector as a whole.

7.3.5   First, with respect to the nature of the specialist gap year sector, the numbers of placements being made by individual organisations in the sector varies considerably. Figure 7.1 shows the number of placements made from the review survey. Specialist organisations range from those that place less than 50 gap year participants per year to a small number of large organisations with the capacity to place several thousand.

Figure 7.1 Number of Specialist Provider Placements

No. of Providers (y-axis, 0 to 35)

Annual Placements (100s): 1 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 9, 9 to 12, 12+
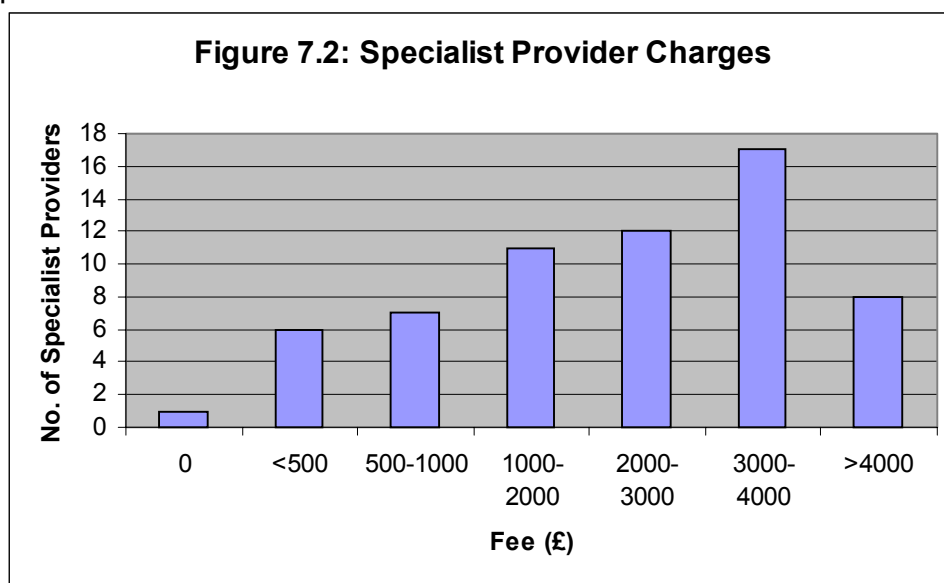
[Source: Review survey of 73 organisations; no data for 9]

7.3.6   Overall, the review suggests that the typical specialist gap year providers are offering and placing some hundreds of people each year. The specialist

sector is therefore comprised of a large number of small and medium sized providers with only a small number able to place thousands of gap year participants.

7.3.7   Second, Figure 7.2 provides an illustration of the cost profile of gap year opportunities offered by specialist providers. This data should be treated as indicative rather than definitive but it does indicate that the majority of specialist providers require participants to contribute between one thousand and four thousand pounds to go on a placement. We would suggest that specialist gap year organisations tend to focus on the longer term (and thus more costly) placements.

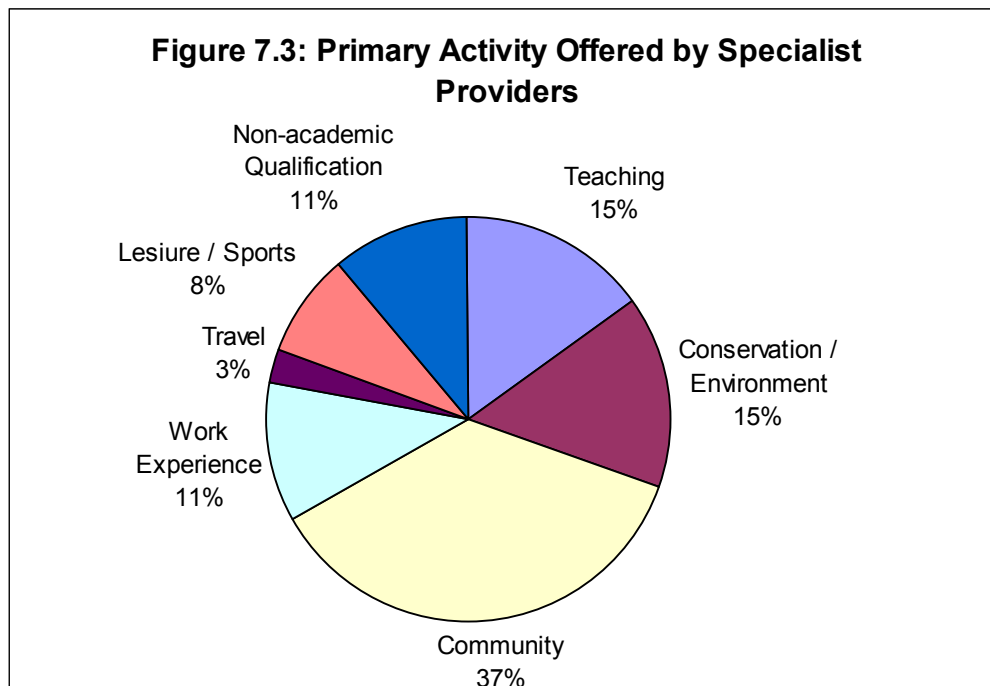**Figure 7.2: Specialist Provider Charges**

[Source: Review survey of 73 organisations; no data for 9]

7.3.8   The typical gap year provider is thus charging a fee of between £500 and £4000 with a small number offering more costly placements. Gap year provision therefore represents an industry with a potentially very large turnover.

7.3.9   Third, Figure 7.3 below shows the approximate proportion of annual placements by the type of activity. Whilst to some extent the classification of activities is arbitrary, it does provide an indication of how specialist provision divides between different types of placement. Specialist providers were counted by their primary or 'dominant' kind of placement, although many offered more than one kind of activity and this is a crude form of measurement. The survey did suggest that the majority of specialist providers offer opportunities abroad rather than in the UK. The chart thus indicates the commonest kinds of activities provided by the specialist organisations which target gap year participants.

7.3.10 The approximate finding does provide evidence of the importance of volunteering based community, teaching and environmental work as the

dominant kinds of placements for gap year specialists. It suggests that gap year takers tend not to use specialist organisations so much for leisure, travel and work activities where there are many other potential support and provider organisations.

Figure 7.3: Primary Activity Offered by Specialist Providers

Non-academic Qualification 11%
Teaching 15%
Lesiure / Sports 8%
Travel 3%
Conservation / Environment 15%
Work Experience 11%
Community 37%

[Source: Review Survey of 73 providers]

7.3.11 Fourth, concerning the length of gap year placements being offered, Figure 7.4 presents findings from the review survey on the (maximum) length of placements being offered by specialist gap year providers. Perhaps not surprisingly, it shows that most providers offer placements in the 3 to 12 month range. Relatively few providers only offer placements below the three month time period. However, it does also indicate that the extended gap year placement is not widespread with few providers offering placement beyond a 12 month period. Sector commentators also suggested that there is a growing trend towards shorter periods of structured or provider-offered placements as participants spend a greater proportion of the gap year earning money through paid work.

Figure 7.4: Length of Specialist Provider Placements (up to x months)
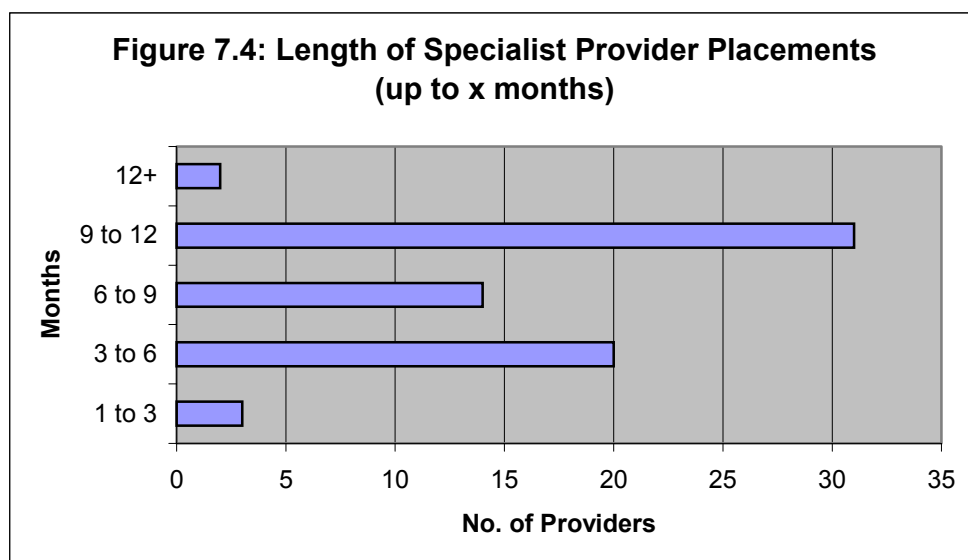
[Source: Review Survey of 73 providers]

7.3.12 In summary, specialist providers tend to offer a wide range of activities focused on overseas placements. This is reflected in the relatively high financial contributions being required by these organisations from participants. Their target market also appears to reflect the more conventional gap year participants on placements within a 12 month period.

7.4   UK Volunteering Organisations

7.4.1   In terms of quantifying the level of placement provision for UK volunteering placements, the review identified no existing research or sources of comprehensive data that dealt specifically with the provision of UK volunteering opportunities for young people during a gap year.

7.4.2   A very large number of UK volunteering organisations provide places for gap year takers each year. The review researched a sample of such organisations, detailing the nature of gap year provision in each case. It is not a comprehensive list. This sample is drawn from the organisations listed across the range of how-to-do books marketed at gap year takers. In reviewing the sector, we identified the existence of at least several hundred such organisations based in the UK.
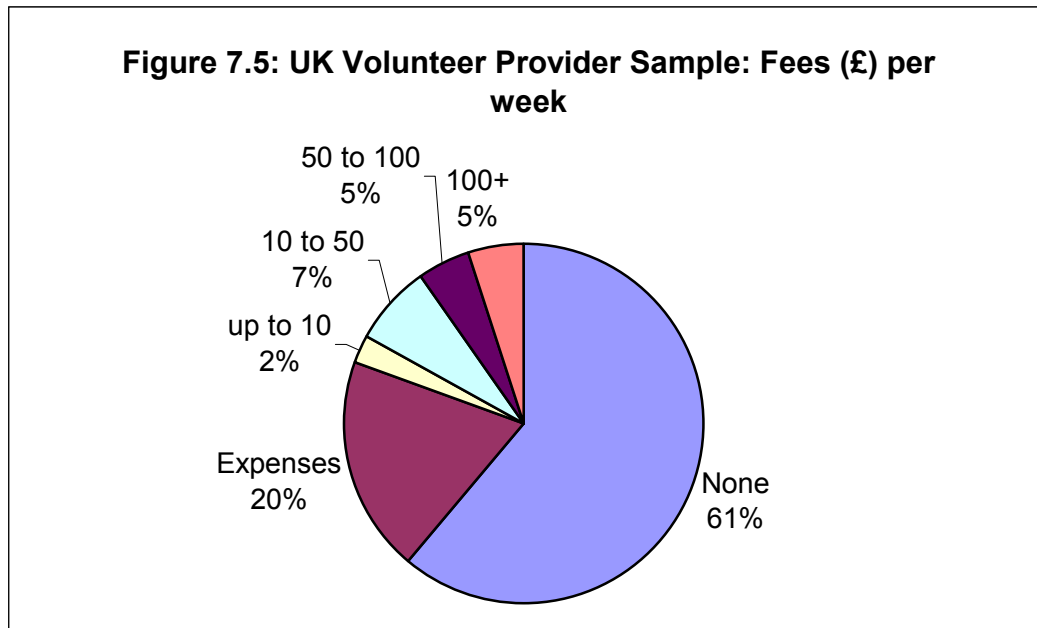
7.4.3   In contrast to the specialist gap year providers, amongst UK volunteering organisations there are a large number of very small organisations offering a small number of placements (under 10) each year. This makes a precise census of places on offer in a given year difficult. In addition, many of these organisations do not necessarily offer or fill places each year and the overall population of UK volunteering organisations itself varies significantly on a yearly basis. New small organisations are founded and existing ones cease operations

on an annual basis. A significant fraction of organisations offering small numbers of placements are also charities and other non-profit organisations that may decide to take gap year placements on an ad hoc and irregular basis.
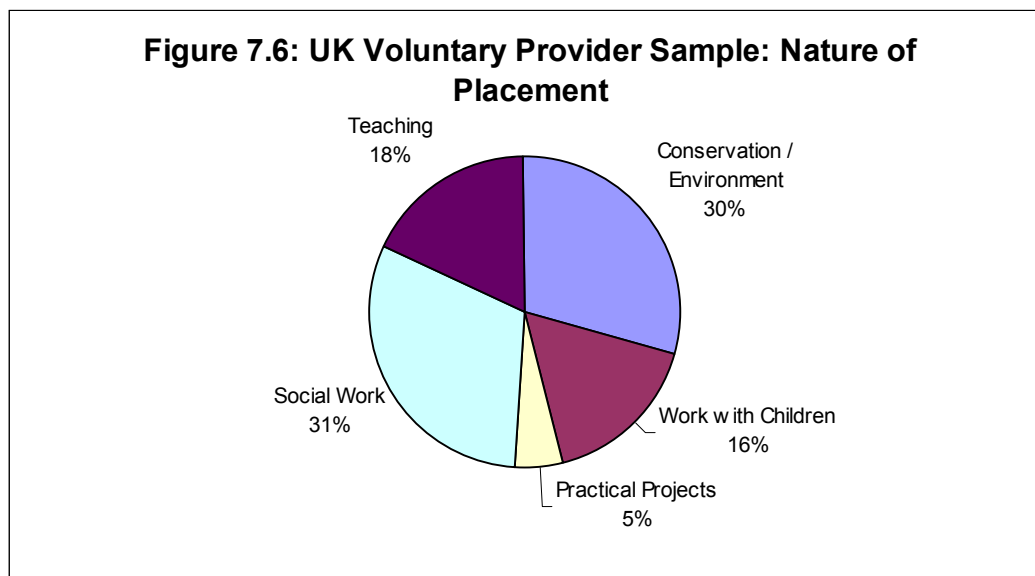
7.4.4   Overall, we estimate based on reported figures from website portals and guide books that there are at least 50,000 UK-based volunteering opportunities on offer to UK-based gap year takers. However, this figure is more speculative than in the case of specialist providers and given the nature providing organisations, it could be significantly greater. Again, the potential supply of such opportunities outstrips demand and interviews with some organisations suggests the sector appears able to provide more placements if needed in future years.

7.4.5   This review is therefore able to provide some evidence based on a sample of UK volunteering providers to gap year takers from which a number of useful indicators can be drawn. A number of relevant points can be drawn out from the survey.

7.4.6   First, Figure 7.5 shows the fee charged to participants by UK volunteering organisations for a placement. In contrast to the level of fees that specialist providers cited as the contribution of gap year takers, UK volunteering organisations represent a much lower cost placement. Many organisations do not require a financial contribution from participants, and of those that do many more require only living costs and expenses to be covered. Few UK volunteering require participants to contribute more than £100 per week. This suggests that gap year takers placed with these organisations are paying considerably less for their placement activities than those that use specialist providers. Sector commentators also pointed out that in contrast to overseas volunteer organisations, UK volunteer organisations often try to make use of placements that contribute toward meeting the living and out of pocket expenses of their volunteers.

Figure 7.5: UK Volunteer Provider Sample: Fees (£) per week

50 to 100
5%

100+
5%

10 to 50
7%

up to 10
2%

Expenses
20%

None
61%

7.4.7   Second, Figure 7.6 provides an insight into the nature of the placements offered by the sample of UK volunteering organisations. It indicates tentatively that UK volunteering places are dominated by social and community volunteering activities. Conservation and environmental activities form a significant proportion. These primary activities probably reflect the overall composition of voluntary sector organisations in the UK. Commentators from the UK volunteering sector also highlighted the point that many of the social and community voluntary (including health) placements were key contributors to supporting the provision of public services.

Figure 7.6: UK Voluntary Provider Sample: Nature of Placement

Teaching 18%

Conservation / Environment 30%

Social Work 31%

Work with Children 16%

Practical Projects 5%

7.4.8   In summary, the level of provision to gap year takers from UK volunteering organisations is substantial but difficult to quantify. The review suggests that most placements reflect the social work and community nature of the volunteering sector and there are likely to be a larger number of potential placements available than are currently being taken up for gap year participants.
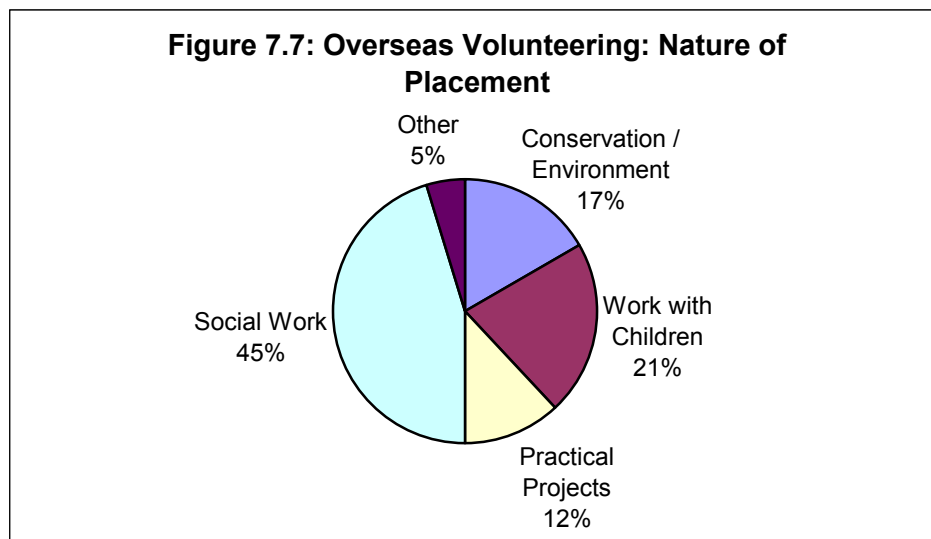

7.5   Overseas Volunteering Organisations

7.5.1   The leading umbrella organisation *Worldwide Volunteering for Young People* offers a database of placements for young people from over 1000 volunteer organisations in over 200 countries. The organisations suggests that it has around 350,000 possible placements for young people aged 16-25 years but these are offered world-wide and not just to UK-based young people.

7.5.2   In terms of provision in the UK, the review has not identified any better data source or evidence on the levels of overseas volunteering. Furthermore, as with UK volunteering placements, the nature of the providing sector makes it very difficult if not impossible to accurately assess absolute numbers of placements available to young people in the UK. Again with the large numbers of diverse organisations involved, many of which are small, levels of provision will vary between organisations and from year to year (Pybus 2003).

7.5.3   The review has identified and generated some findings drawn from a sample of overseas volunteering organisations which do provide a number of indicators about the nature of provision to gap year takers in this area. Again a number of points drawn from the sample survey provide helpful insight.

7.5.4   First, Figure 7.7 provides an overview of the nature of primary activities offered by organisations in the sample of overseas volunteering organisations. Again it is social, community and teaching based volunteering (subsumed in the social category in this sample) that form the majority of primary placements being offered by organisations. There is an indication that environmental and conservation projects represent a smaller proportion of the overseas volunteering placements.

Figure 7.7: Overseas Volunteering: Nature of Placement

Other
5%

Conservation / Environment
17%

Work with Children
21%

Social Work
45%

Practical Projects
12%

7.5.5   Second, Figure 7.8 shows the fees charged by overseas volunteering organisations in the sample. Whilst these placement fees are greater than for UK volunteering placements, it is notable that in general the level is lower than the amounts cited by specialist providers. The majority of providers in the sample indicate a fee in the £500 to £2000 range. We suggest that this gives some indication of the cost of international volunteering as a component in a gap year where specialist providers may well be providing wider packages including travel and leisure activities. Furthermore, the lower contribution levels by participants undertaking overseas volunteering as a specific activity may also be a reflection of the volunteering placement including the provision of accommodation or a contribution towards living costs.

Figure 7.8: Overseas Volunteering Providers: Placement Fees
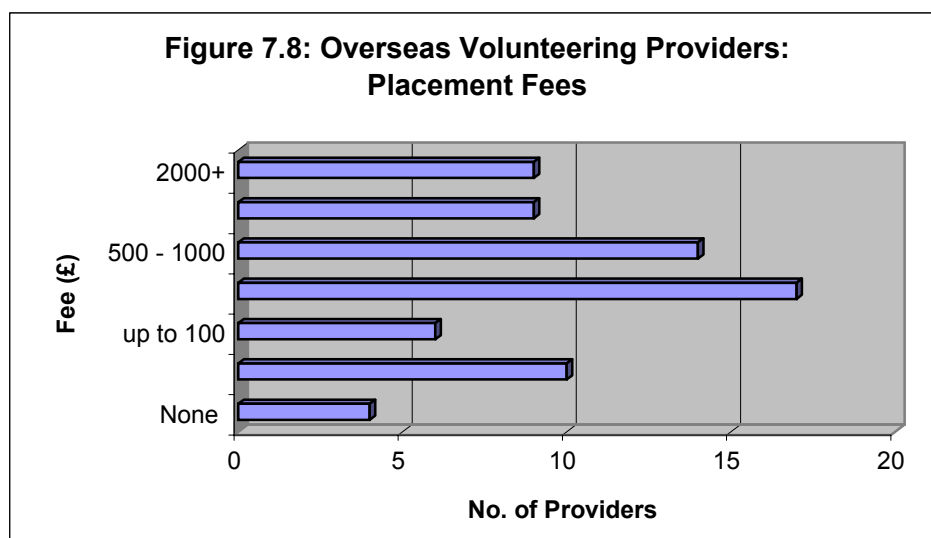
7.5.6   In summary, there are a large number of overseas volunteering organisations offering a large number of potential placements. In general the review survey suggests that costs incurred by participants are lower than for the placements offered by specialist organisations but this probably reflects the mixture of other activities specialist providers are being paid for by participants. Overseas volunteering is not surprisingly a more costly undertaking for participants than UK-based volunteering.

7.6   UK Work Placement Organisations

7.6.1   Provision of annual gap year placements in paid work is again difficult to quantify. There are a number of dedicated organisations in this area, the most notable of which is *Year in Industry* which places more than 600 students a year. However, as Vandome (2002) notes in her introduction to this kind of placement, there is potentially a much larger provision of these placements in the UK than source has identified. Virtually any medium or large size firm in the UK has the potential to offer a gap year placement and anecdotal evidence suggests that many do.

7.6.2   In light of this, collecting any kind of quantifiable data on paid work places will be difficult. Various websites and other gap year organisations estimate that thousands of such placements are taken up in the UK each year, but as the review identified no mechanism by which firms with gap year employees report this fact, quantifying the level of provision accurately is likely to be impossible. Many gap year participants are likely (and are encouraged by how-to-do books) to find these placements independently and through contacts or informal channels. In this context, we did not consider that presenting evidence from a small sample of work placement providers would provide any relevant insight into the sector. Future research needs to address this area of provision.

7.6.3   With respect to the nature of work placement provision, this is also highly diverse. The review identified blue-chip companies that recruit graduates as having dedicated schemes in this respect but in many employment sectors, young people in the C category of post-university gap year takers may seek work experience in firms as part of a longer term career trajectory. This is highly relevant in, for example, journalism, advertising, accountancy and law to name a few.

7.6.4   Sector commentators also identified the growing significant of work 'internships' and unpaid work placements as becoming increasingly common. Whilst no quantitative evidence on provision was identified, qualitative evidence suggests that gap year participants are often placed as, for example, parliamentary or political research assistants, journalists, media and broadcasting. These periods of work experience are key stages in developing a longer term career path in these fields.

7.6.4   In summary, there is a large amount of provision for gap year takers to gain paid work placements in the UK. A small number of placements can be identified through formal dedicated schemes run through organisations such as year in industry or by large employer firms. However, the level of provision beyond these visible providers is likely to be substantial.

7.7   Overseas Work Placement Organisations

7.7.1   There are a small number of organisations based or with offices in the UK which offer paid employment overseas. However, from a review of the how-to-do guide books addressing this issue (Hecht 2003), many of the overseas work placements are offered as one of the range of opportunities offered by specialist providers. The how-to-do guides cover around 30 or organisations which offer overseas paid work as their main type of placement. These divide for the most part into five types of the most common kind of paid overseas work:

- Au Pairing / Childcare;
- Internships;
- Sport Instruction;
- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL);
- Seasonal Work.

7.7.2   Taking each of these categories in turn, au pairing is a longstanding type of gap year paid employment. Providers in the UK offer a range of placements largely in Europe and North America. Generally provider organisations play a key role with young people unlikely to organise au pairing work independently because of the issues around child-care and vetting. With regard to internships, provider organisations exist that offer a range of work experience style

internships in companies, charities and other organisations such as political bodies (for example, the UN, the US State Department).

7.7.3   Sport Instruction is also a type of overseas work for which there are specialised providers helping young people find placements. These vary across a wide range of different kinds of sports including skiing, snowboarding, sailing, canoeing, football, diving and tennis. Many of these jobs involve gap year participants teaching young people these activities overseas and will require also a process of achieving instruction qualifications.

7.7.4   The review suggests that Teaching English as a Foreign Language TEFL is also a well-provided sector for gap year participants. Hecht (2003) points out that for some of the age range under consideration here, it is perhaps over-provided as young people under 21 will find it very difficult to find TEFL work despite having a relevant TEFL qualification. The organisations in the sector offer TEFL placements world-wide although the degree to which they are 'paid employment' as opposed to subsistence living abroad varies.

7.7.5   Finally, with respect to seasonal work, this category includes a wide range of paid employment in sectors of the global economy dominated by a young educated labour force. Seasonal work ranges from the stereotypical agricultural work of grape harvesting in France to the well-supported summer camp placements, tourism, selling books in the US to more general manual and lower paid service jobs. There are, for example, organisations that specialise in placing people in hotel or secretarial office work.

7.7.6   Overall, the review suggests that only a fraction of gap year participants who work overseas are likely to use a UK based organisation specialising in that provision. Many participants find paid employment once overseas on an ad hoc basis. For example, anecdotal and qualitative evidence from the qualitative interviews reinforces the common view that is it possible to 'work your way around the world'. British gap year participants thus travel to the North America or Australasia and find work in bars, restaurants or the tourist industry. The providing sector for overseas work placements therefore we suggest represents only a small fraction of the total number of paid positions gap year participants from the UK take overseas.

7.8   Travel and Leisure Providers

7.8.1   In terms of the gap year provision industry, the last group of organisations which need to be discussed are the commercial providers of travel and leisure activities. These are commercial companies which offer packages of travel or leisure activities aimed at the specialised gap year market. In this group companies that offer, for example, overland travel expeditions and safaris are included. Whilst this kind of travel / leisure does differ from much of the tourist

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industry, and certainly may well play a role in broadening young people's horizons, this provision is not an appropriate area for government to take a role directly. Many gap year participants may use these kinds of providers but overall such organisations merge as category into the commercial tourism industry. However, these participants are of key interest insofar as they should be the target for policy aimed at drawing gap year takers into spending at least part of their gap year in structured placements which accrue greater benefit.

8   ACCREDITATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE IN GAP YEAR PROVISION

8.1   Key Points

8.1.1 On Quality Assurance in Provision

• No sector wide QA currently occurs in the gap year providing sector.

• A small number of the larger providers have developed a code of practice and are developing QA measures.

• The large number of small providers combined with the diversity of gap year activities does present considerable difficulty in terms of developing common standards of quality assurance.

8.1.2 On participant accreditation

• A range of participant accreditation schemes exist which in general are run by individual organisations.

• They broadly divide into three categories:

> • scheme completion certification;
> • external skill qualifications;
> • formal non-academic qualifications;

• The review suggests that the various gap year stakeholders do not feel an overall of scheme of participant accreditation would be desirable.

8.2   Evidence of Quality Assurance in Provision

8.2.1 The review identified no existing research into the issue of quality assurance amongst providing organisations. The limited academic and commentary literature which exists highlights the current lack of existing quality assurance at the sector level amongst providing organisations. There is no sector-wide formal structure or benchmark for assessment as to the quality of provision service being offer by providing organisations. However, some efforts and important steps have been made at the sector-level in the form of codes of practice. The Year Out Group has such a code which its 30 members agree to adhere to. Members of this group have to demonstrate certain operating standards in relation to placements before admission with more stringent

standards applied in the case of overseas placements.

8.2.2   The Year Out Group's code in general includes the key issues of:

- Providing accurate information and literature;
- Commitment to continuous improvement & participant evaluation of placements;
- Ethical standards in placements in relation to social, environmental and local circumstances;
- Financial security to protect clients payments;
- Providing internal quality assurance
- Providing complaints procedures

8.2.3   In addition, the review found evidence to suggest that some of the larger individual organisations do conduct their own internal quality assurance checks and do have quality assurance procedures. Larger specialist providers such as Raleigh, Gap Activity and CSV, for example, do have complaints procedures and mechanisms for addressing problems with the placements they offer. However, whilst this is true for the minority of large providers, anecdotal evidence from qualitative interviews with participating young people suggests that there is little quality assurance from the many small organisations.

8.2.4   The issue is particularly acute in the case of overseas gap year placements. Again the limited qualitative evidence along with anecdotal materials identified few mechanisms for gap year takers to redress problems with their placements. This tends to happen at an individual level during the placement and providing organisations, even the larger ones, have limited resources and capacity to address problems with individuals.

8.2.5   For example, several gap year participants interviewed by the author who had been on foreign language placements in Asia pointed to the potential weakness of being placed in small groups in distant countries with only one representative of the organisation in that country. It depended very much whether individual participants and individual country representatives could resolve problems in situ. In the case of the country support worker being uninterested or ineffective, there is little scope for a young person to resolve difficulties because there was no other representative of the provider in a position to tackle problems.

8.2.6   It should be noted that to some extent there is recognition that this low level of support from organisations is what a gap year is all about, and that the level of financial contribution made by participants is insufficient to cover the greater costs of a more nanny-like structure. However, Simpson (2003) argues in one of the few academic pieces of research on the gap year industry that the sector as a whole has yet to get to grips with the quality assurance and professionalism required for the diverse kinds of activities that are provided. She argues that the gap year sector understands itself as primarily a form of tourism

but enters into the spectrum of development work. Her argument is that its approach in terms of adopting a professional approach at this cross-over needs to be developed and worked through if the sector is to be able to make a true contribution to society.

8.2.7   Sector commentators also highlighted the differences in potential external scrutiny and quality assurance in relation to the nature of gap year providers. Those providers which are registered charities are subject to considerably more scrutiny than the commercial private businesses under charities law. Registered charities have greater transparency as organisations and those dissatisfied with their activities have great recourse to regulatory bodies for complaint.

8.2.8   Overall, therefore, we suggest that levels of quality assurance in gap year provision are currently low and not adequate for the future requirements that growth may place on the industry. The measures that have begun to be developed are a necessary first step in the right direction but more should be done at the sector level with respect to quality assurance.

8.3   Problems and Constraints on Quality Assurance

8.3.1   Unfortunately, given the need for more quality assurance structures, the review also suggests that the nature of the gap year providing sector presents a number of difficulties for any future development of quality assurance. Firstly, the sector covers a large number of very small organisations that are operating on tight budgets and limited resources. Such organisations are unlikely to have much capacity to develop or implement resource consuming quality assurance procedures. The scope to therefore require or even force gap year providers into any scheme of quality assurance is restricted by a severe lack of resources available to enable compliance.

8.3.2   Second, a further problem is the diverse nature of gap year activities provided across the sector. It is difficult for any potential overseeing body to come up with a universal set of criteria by which the quality of gap year provision can be assured at anything other than a very general level. In terms of offering 'unique' life experiences, gap year providing organisations can also point out that specific activities have a small number of possible comparators. Again, the financial costs involved in undertaking any detailed external quality assurance assessment are likely to be prohibitive. We therefore suggest the Year Out Group's code of practice is as developed an approach as is possible. However this code is subject to annual review and the Group states its intention to continue to develop and improve it. This may not be considered sufficient however from the perspective of possible policy intervention.

8.3.3   Third, even if in future a system of sector-wide quality assurance was instigated, it is unlikely in our view that there would be any satisfactory mechanism for checking compliance and enforcing measures. The very large

number of mostly small organisations involved precludes the possibility of even the most streamlined process of checks. In that sense, quality assurance in gap year provision is unlikely to be feasible beyond signing up to the kinds of codes of practice that are already in existence.

8.4   Existing Participant Accreditation Schemes

8.4.1   With regard to accreditation schemes for gap year participants themselves, a range of specialist and other providers are involved in or offer a variety of different forms of accreditation in relation to their placement opportunities. These tend to fall in one of three main categories:

- scheme completion certification;
- external skill qualifications;
- formal non-academic qualifications;

8.4.2   These existing accreditation schemes have generally evolved around specific organisations and sets of activities – for example, the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.

8.4.3   The review also identified the widely-held viewpoint that there was only a limited role for an kind of accreditation process in the gap year sector. Qualitative interviews with sector commentators as well as the views of gap year participants from web message-boards and interviews reinforced the point that taking a gap year is not regarded by young people as an opportunity to gain another kind of accredited qualification on their CV or UCAS form. The review suggests that provider organisations regard participant accreditation with a degree of caution.

8.4.4   In sum, there are a number of participant accreditation schemes in existence in relation to specific project placements which tend to focus on practical assessment or completion as the criteria for successful accreditation. None of the sector-wide umbrella organisations have any kind of generic gap year participant scheme in existence or in development.

8.5   Problems and Constraints on Participant Accreditation

8.5.1   It is worth expanding further on the potential problems and constraints on further development of participant accreditation. The review suggests that generic accreditation is difficult to achieve because:

- Gap year activities are hugely diverse and therefore not comparably accreditable.

- Gap year providers are reluctant and regard accreditation as potentially

off-putting to potential participants.

- The sector lacks financial & other resources to implement extensive accreditation schemes beyond completion certificates.

- There is no evidence of employer or education institution desire to see further accreditation schemes although the qualitative research suggests that the key force affecting the development of accreditation are the desires of young people as customers and their parents.

8.6　Future Participant Accreditation Opportunities

8.6.1　Commentators suggested that a sector-wide gap year accreditation scheme would not be appropriate give the diverse nature of activities undertaken during a gap year. We support this view. However, we suggest that gap year accreditation schemes could be consolidated and strengthened in conjunction with certain kinds of structured gap year activity. A number of possibilities emerged from the comments of interviewees in the sector:

- 8.6.1.1 The development of a more formal umbrella organisation which recognises and validates existing and future gap year accreditation schemes (i.e. "Gap Year Accreditation Approved" labelling). The Year Out Group is working with the British Standards Institute in researching the possibility for a standard for adventure activities overseas.

- 8.6.1.2 Sector-wide agreement on the aims of participant accreditation and the development of a code practice for developing participant accreditation.

- 8.6.1.3 Consultation with gap year participants and other stakeholders such as universities and employers to find out what kinds of accreditation would be well-received.

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