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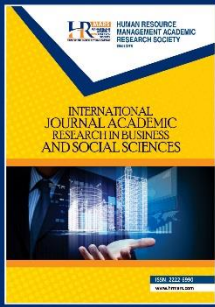
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Students' Knowledge and Attitudes about the Gap Year Programme: A Study at a Public University in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand students' knowledge and attitudes about a Gap Year programme at a public university in Malaysia. A survey questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 900 students representing all the 9 faculties at the university. The data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) involving descriptive analysis (frequency and percentage). The results showed that the students had limited knowledge about the Gap Year programme. Despite the students' limited knowledge, their attitudes towards the programme was positive. The findings of the study are expected to add to the existing literatures regarding the Gap Year and provide empirical evidence about the Gap Year programme in the Malaysian context. Additionally, the findings are expected to provide useful insights for the university and the Ministry of Education about the newly launched Gap Year programme. Thus, more effective strategies can be developed, and the ministry's aspiration to produce holistic, balanced and entrepreneurial graduates can be realized.

Keywords: Gap Year, Knowledge, Attitude, Public University, Malaysia

Introduction

In January 2017, the Minister of Higher Education announced the Gap Year programme, which allows students in tertiary education who are in their second year onwards to take a year or two semesters off their formal education for their personal growth (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). The Gap Year programme is part of Shift 1 of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), with the objective of producing holistic, balanced and entrepreneurial graduates (Malaysia Education Malaysia, 2015). There are three types of Gap Year programmes introduced by the ministry, namely the National Service Volunteer programme, the Volunteer programme and the general Gap Year programme. Under the

National Service Volunteer Gap Year programme, students will be attached for one year at a uniformed agency such as armed forces, police, civil defence or maritime enforcement agency. Two universities, i.e. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UITM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) are the pioneer for this project (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). On the other hand, The Gap Year programme (Volunteer) is where 7 pioneer universities collaborate with participating agencies, for example, Universiti Utara Malaysia collaborates with Social Welfare Department, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris collaborates with Ministry of Education and Perak Education Department, and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia collaborates with Islamic Relief Malaysia (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017). Students who choose this programme will do volunteer work with these agencies for a period of 3 months to 1 year. Unlike the first 2 programmes which are very structured, the third programme is general where students can take time out from the university to get involved in sports activities, entrepreneurship, increase their skills, travel etc, for a minimum of one semester and a maximum of one academic calendar (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2017).

Gap Year is a new concept in Malaysia, but the idea has been growing and developing in western countries for at least three decades (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015). In the United States for example, an increasing number of universities are encouraging gap years as well as providing deferral-friendly admissions options (Guidi, 2018). Among the initiatives include those by Tufts University's 1 + 4 Bridge Year, Princeton's Bridge Year, the University of North Carolina's Global Gap Year, Elon University's Global Pathfinders, and St. Norbert's College Gap Experience are in-house bridge year programs available to a limited number of incoming freshman who apply (Guidi, 2018). Not only in the United States (Grose, 2010; Tucker, 2012 & Guidi, 2018), existing studies on Gap Year students have attempted to understand this phenomenon and most of these studies have been conducted in the UK (Abidi, 2002; Heath, 2007), Australia (Birch & Miller, 2007) and getting popular in other countries as well, where some research has also been conducted in South Africa (Nieman, 2013) and China (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015).

The Gap Year phenomenon has been around in the above mentioned countries for decades, and most of the studies have focused on the students' experiences, their motivating factors, the benefits and drawbacks of the Gap Year experience, and their experience towards career decision-making (Haeth, 2007; Nieman, 2013; O'Shea, 2011; Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015). In Malaysia, where the Gap Year is a very new concept and was only started in September 2017, to the researcher's knowledge, very limited evidence of the Gap Year can be found in the Malaysian context. Therefore, the need to understand students' knowledge about the programme, and their attitudes regarding the programme are the critical issues that need to be addressed. If we understand the Gap Year from the students' perspectives, this will help universities and the ministry to provide support and guidance to the young people to pursue their educational and career goals. It may also assist the universities and the ministry to develop the appropriate strategies. Therefore, a study to examine these issues is clearly warranted.

Literature Review

The Gap Year is defined in a number of ways. Some defined it as a break in educational career that is usually taken between leaving school and beginning to study at a university (Jones, 2004; King, 2011). Other researchers refer to it as taking time out between high school and college, sometimes during college (Hulstrand, 2010, Torpey, 2009) or after college (Torpey, 2009). Stehlik (2010) uses the definition by UK's Department of Education and Skills, which describes it as a period of 3 to 24 months, during which the individual takes time out from a formal work or education trajectory. A similar length of time was also offered earlier by Jones (2004). Heath (2006) refers to the Gap Year as taking time out before engaging in a more settled career. Based on these definitions, although they may differ in time length or when Gap Year is taken, in essence, the Gap Year is where students departing from standard education move from high school to tertiary education or during tertiary education and then making another transition back in. A gap year can be structured or unstructured with a combination of voluntary work locally or overseas (Nieman, 2013). The purpose of the Gap Year is to open students' mind and create opportunities for their journey through tertiary education and their lives after that (Haightler & Nelson, 2005) and it should prepare students to develop particular knowledge, skills, abilities through hands-on experience (Cremin, 2007)

Taking a gap year has been popular in the UK and Australia. For example, in the UK since 2002, 2.2 % of university applicants had chosen to defer their acceptance to university to take a gap year (Abidi, 2004), while Heath (2007) proposed that approximately 45,000 young people took a Gap Year each year in that country. A similar trend can be seen in Australia where 11% of high school graduates chose to take a Gap Year (Birch and Miller, 2007). Taking a gap year between high school and tertiary education is also popular in the United States (Grose, 2010; Tucker, 2012) and the idea gained momentum when the oldest daughter of the previous President Barack Obama announced her plan to take a gap year before starting at Harvard University (US Fed New Service, 2017). It has also gained popularity in other parts of the world such as in South Africa (Nieman, 2013) and China (Wu, Pearce, Huang & Fang, 2015).

The Gap Year can be rewarding but it also has drawbacks. It is a great way for students to learn about their individual interests and their career pursuits, help students mature and choose the right path (Hulstrand, 2010). Students involved in the Gap Year can acquire a range of benefits from the transformative experience including the acquisition of soft skills and cross-cultural experience in a host country (Jones, 2005), significant gains in personal, civic, moral and intellectual development (O'Shea, 2011), developing confidence, maturity and independence (King, 2011). It also has its drawbacks. Postponing study which takes them off from the traditional path sometimes makes it challenging for the students to get back and they do not graduate on time as their peers do (Hulstrand, 2010)

Objectives of the Study

Realizing the critical needs as discussed earlier, this study seeks to address the following objectives:

1. To investigate students' knowledge about the Gap Year programme.
2. To investigate students' attitudes towards the Gap Year programme.

Methodology

The data was collected through a questionnaire survey. In the knowledge section, the questions directly measure students' knowledge about the gap year programme. Students were given some description about each type of Gap Year programme. The analysis to the knowledge questions were evaluated based on correctness of the answers. In the next section, the students were asked about their attitudes towards the programme. The questions on attitude employed the Likert scale of 5 rates of 1(strongly disagree), 2(disagree), 3(neutral), 4(agree) and 5(strongly agree). A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed to students from all the 9 faculties at the university, where 887 questionnaires were completed and utilised for the analysis. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Demographic profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	285	32.1
	Female	602	67.9
Ethnicity	Malay	668	75.3
	Chinese	48	5.4
	Indian	37	4.2
	Bumiputra Sabah/Sarawak	134	15.1

Knowledge

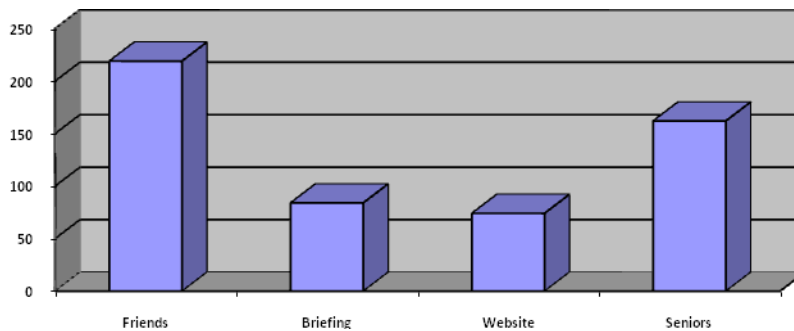
Students were first asked if they knew about the Gap Year programme. As illustrated in Table 2, more than half of the students (61.7%) did not know about the existence of the Gap Year programme in Malaysian universities.

Table 2: Knowledge

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	340	38.3	38.3	38.3
No	547	61.7	61.7	100.0
Total	887	100.0	100.0	

Students who knew about the Gap programme were asked to indicate the sources of information. The findings are shown in Figure 1.

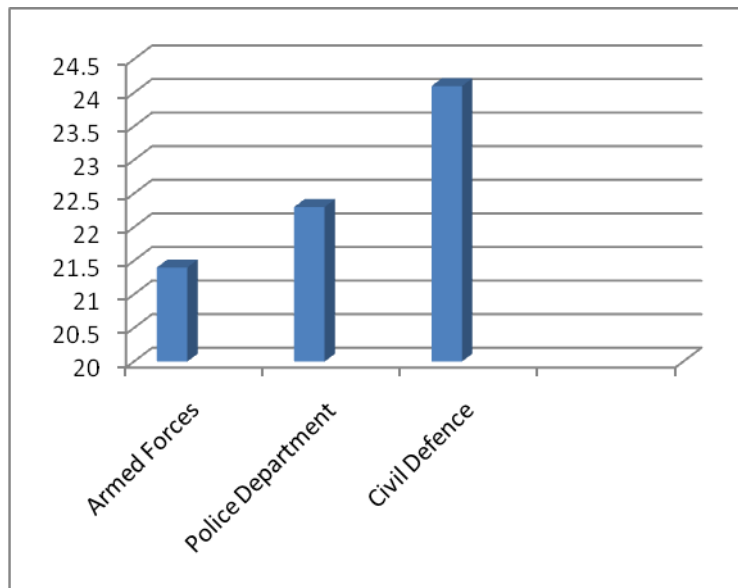
Figure 1: Sources of information about the Gap Year programme



As illustrated in Figure 1, the highest source of information was from friends (n=219), followed by seniors (n=162), university briefing(n=84) and university website (n=74).

As discussed in the literature section, there are three types of Gap Year programmes introduced by the ministry, namely the National Service Volunteer programme, the Volunteer programme and the general Gap Year programme. The first section asked questions about the students' knowledge of the National Service Volunteer programme. Respondents were asked about the agencies that students can be attached under National Service Volunteer programme. The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Agencies for National Service Volunteer programme

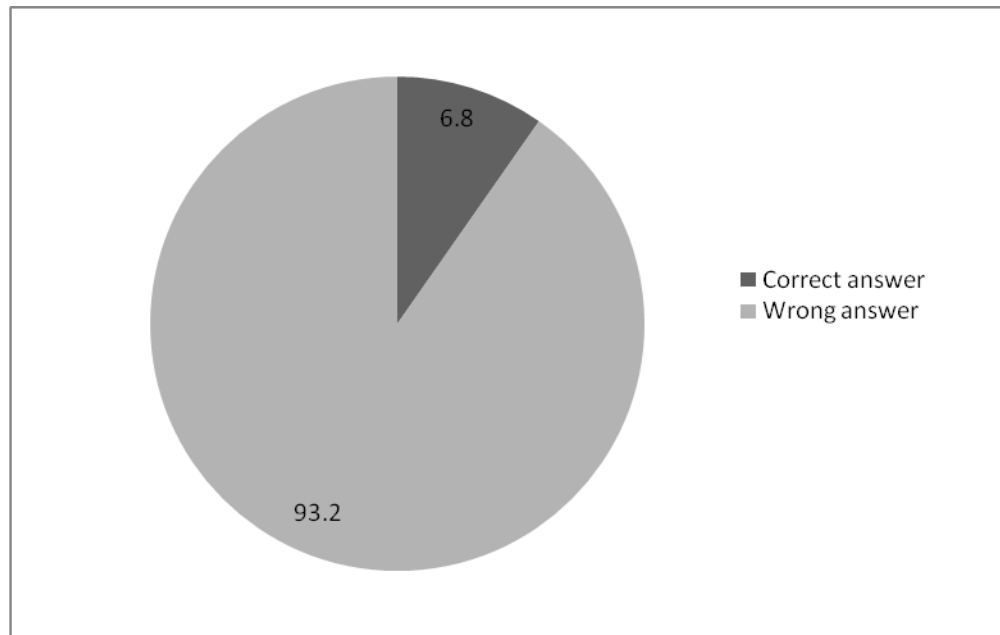


As illustrated in Figure 2, only 21.4% (n=190) knew that they could be attached to the Armed Forces for the Gap Year programme. 22.3% (n=198) knew that the attachment could be done at the Police Department and 24.1% (n=214) of the respondents knew they could be attached to the Civil Defence for the Gap Year National Service programme.

Students were then asked to name the two universities which become the pioneer for the National Service Volunteer programme. Only 2% (n=18) students gave the correct answers i.e. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UITM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

The next section focuses on the knowledge about the Volunteer programme. The first question investigated students' knowledge about the length of the volunteer programme. They were given four options of answers for the programme length. The finding is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Knowledge about the Volunteer programme



The result showed that only 6.8 % (n= 60) respondents answered the question correctly i.e. 3 months to 1 year for doing Gap Year Volunteerism.

For the volunteer programme, students were given a list of agencies and they were asked if these agencies were involved in the Gap Year Volunteerism and to name the 7 pioneer universities which collaborated with the participating agencies. The results are illustrated in Table 3.

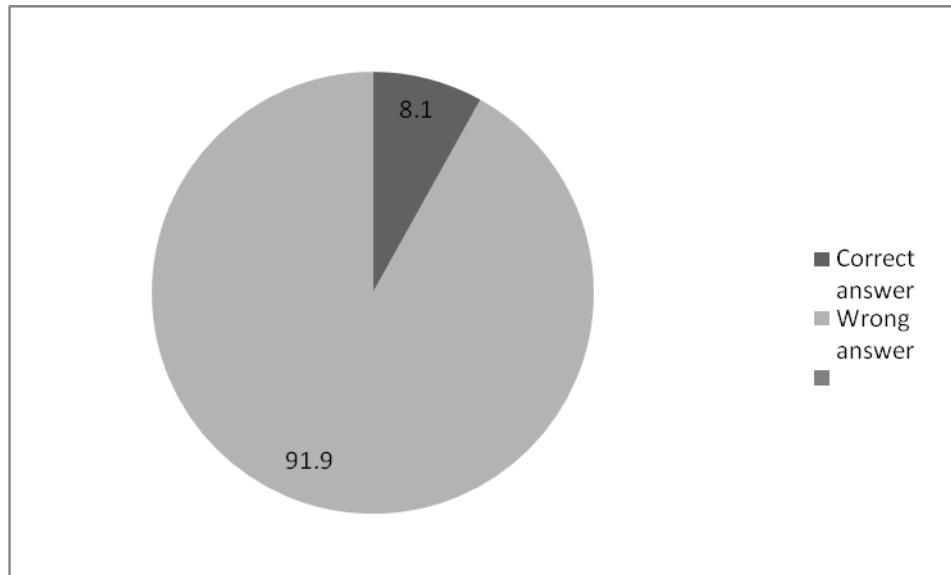
Table 3: Agencies and universities involved in the Gap Year Volunteerism

Agencies	Correct answer	Universities
Islamic Relief Malaysia	6.3% (n=56)	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Only one respondent named the university correctly.
Ministry of Education and Perak Education Department	6.5% (n=58)	Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Only 53 respondents named the university correctly.
Welfare Department	3.4% (n=30)	Universiti Utara Malaysia. Only 10 students named the university correctly.
Department of Orang Asli Development	3.3% (n=29)	Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin. Only 19 students named the university correctly.
National Disaster Management Agency	2.4% (n=21)	Universiti Malaysia Terangganu. Only 14 students named the university correctly.
Kota Kinabalu City Hall	5.2% (n=46)	Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Only 44 students named the university correctly.
State Welfare Department	3.9% (n=35)	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. Only 10 students named the university correctly.

The results in Table 3 showed that less than 10% of the respondents could answer the participating agencies and the 7 pioneer universities that collaborated with the participating agencies correctly.

The next section in knowledge asked about the General Gap Year. The students were asked about the length of programme. The result is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: General Gap Year programme length



The result showed that only 8.1% (n= 72) respondents answered the question correctly i.e. one semester to one year for doing General Gap Year programme.

In this section, students were asked about the activities that they can do for the General Gap Year programme. The responses are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Activities for the General Gap Year programme

Activities	Frequency	%
Sports	229	25.8
Entrepreneurship	319	36
Increase skills	346	39
Vacation	156	17.6

Table 4 shows that a number of students knew the activities that they could do in the General Gap year. However, the majority of students were not sure about the activities in the General Gap year programme.

The last section asked about requirements to join the Gap Year programme. The findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Requirements for Gap Year programme

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't know (%)	Correct answer
All students including international students can join the programme	67.1	27.1	5.9	No
Students at public university only	66.5	24	9.5	Yes
First year students can apply for Gap Year programme	71.3	21.6	7.1	No
Students can join Gap Year programme more than one time throughout their study	76.8	12.4	10.8	No

As shown in Table 5, the results showed that only 27.1% of the respondents knew that the programme was available for Malaysian students only. More than half knew that the programme was for students enrolled at the public universities only. Less than a quarter of the students knew that first-year students could not apply for the programme and they could only join once throughout their study.

Attitude

In this study, the attitude among respondents was investigated by responses to five questions towards the Gap Year programme. As shown in Table 6, the results showed that overall, the respondents had positive attitudes about the Gap Year programme.

Table 6: Attitudes towards the Gap Year programme.

	Mean	SD
I am confident Gap Year programme can improve student's soft skills	3.74	0.94
Joining Gap Year programme will not affect me to graduate on time	3.19	1.08
Gap Year programme promotes responsible culture, patriotism, caring and volunteer culture	3.78	0.90
Gap Year programme can increase students' employability	3.71	0.92
Gap Year programme enriches students' lives to become a holistic and useful student in the society	3.76	0.93
All students should take the opportunity to join Gap Year programme	3.19	1.07

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis demonstrated that the respondents in this study had very limited knowledge about Gap Year programme. Very few students knew the details of the programme such as the type of

programmes, the pioneer universities, the length of the programme and the agencies involved. The fact that the Gap Year was a newly launched concept in Malaysia (which started in September 2017), unlike in the UK or Australia where the concept is popular (Abidi, 2004 and Birch & Miller, 2007), could be the reason why the programme was not well-known by many students at the university. However, although the respondents had limited knowledge about Gap Year programme, their attitudes towards the programme were positive. This is evident by the mean values of the attitudes' items, where they ranged from 3.19 to 3.78. These positive attitudes were similar to previous studies abroad. In Hulstrand (2010) study, it was found that Gap Year was a great way for students to learn about their individual interests and their career pursuits, help students mature and choose the right path. In another study, it was found that students involved in the Gap Year can acquire a range of benefits from the transformative experience including the acquisition of soft skills and cross-cultural experience in a host country (Jones, 2005), significant gains in personal, civic, moral and intellectual development (O'Shea, 2011), developing confidence, maturity and independence (King, 2011).

The growth of gap years over the decades reflects wider opportunities for young people to develop their skills and potential. Gap year should be seen as an opportunity for young people to become more mature and holistic graduate, which can increase their employability and networking. The findings of this study provide some insight for the university and ministry about the students' knowledge and attitudes toward the Gap Year programme. Based on this finding, Malaysian universities should conduct more awareness programmes to make more students aware of the existence of Gap programme. Both the university and the ministry should identify and use the medium that is popular among students to ensure that the information reaches the target audience; as such, this can increase their knowledge about Gap Year programme, as well as the benefits of joining the programme. Future studies could be conducted in other public universities to get a more holistic view and the results can be generalized to a larger group.

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