

Executive Summary

In recent years, taking a gap year has become popular among secondary school leavers in western countries. It is often seen as a part of life planning. A gap year normally refers to a study break between the completion of secondary school studies and the start of tertiary studies. It involves students spending three months to one year, pursuing their personal dreams or taking part in a life experience. Recent research confirms that a gap year can provide time for personal reflection and development.

In Hong Kong, the government proposed “Strengthening Life Planning” in the 2014 Policy Address. Since the 2014/15 school year, schools operating classes at senior secondary levels have been provided with an additional recurrent grant of \$0.5 million to introduce more education for life planning.

An effective education for life planning can help secondary students to have a better understanding of their own abilities and interests, shape their future paths and set a goal for their lives. However, research found that most senior secondary students did not know their own capacities, were uncertain about the direction for their future development and were having difficulty in making decisions in life planning. The reasons for this might be that current life planning courses are mostly conducted in the form of talks and workshops. Therefore, students are facing difficulties in setting life goals because they lack life experience and practice opportunities.

Some organizations in Hong Kong have used the concept of gap year to offer a one-year internship programme, with guidance for senior secondary students, to help them develop their career goals. The main research questions in this research are: what do senior secondary students, parents and educators think about participating in a gap year and what recommendations are there to implement a gap year at the senior secondary stage?

This research involved data collection from June to July 2017, through a survey of 905 senior secondary students. Between June and July, seven focus groups were also conducted with a total of 28 senior secondary students and 17 parents. At the same time, interviews with four experts or educators were

conducted. It is expected that this research will provide views from senior secondary students on taking a gap year in their studies and will result in recommendations for implementing a gap year for senior secondary students.

Major Findings

- 1. More than 10% of the respondents said they did not have a dream, whilst about 55% of them said they did have a dream. In addition, about 30% of them found it difficult or unclear to identify their dream. The main reasons for not having a dream included not knowing their own abilities and interests.**

The results of the questionnaire survey showed that 12.7% of respondents said they did not have a dream, whilst 56.7% of them said they did have a dream. In addition, about 30% of them found it difficult or unclear to identify their dream.

When asked the reasons for not having a dream, the results showed that not knowing their own capacities (54.4%), not having discovered personal interests (53.6%) and uncertainty about the direction of their future development (40.8%) were the main reasons. These findings strongly suggest that the student respondents lacked self-knowledge.

The senior secondary student participants in the focus group interviews said they were realistic and were currently focused on the upcoming public examinations and so had not yet imagined any future goals. That was their reason for not having a dream.

- 2. The student respondents generally agreed that current secondary students lacked opportunities to develop their potential, had limited life experience and were not familiar with their personal lifework.**

On a scale of 0-10 where 10 indicated “strongly agree” and 5 denoted

“half-half”, when asked to rate their agreement about “secondary students lack opportunities to develop their potential”, 46.3% of the respondents rated it at 8 points or more. The average point was 7.15. In addition, when asked to rate their agreement about “secondary students have sufficient life-experience”, the average point was 5.32.

When asked if they agreed with the statement “I am not familiar with my personal lifework”, 53.3% of the respondents agreed (6-10 points). The average point was 5.90. This reveals that the student respondents lacked opportunities to develop their potential, had limited life-experience and were not familiar with their personal lifework.

Experts and educators in the interview indicated that the current life planning and secondary education in Hong Kong focused on didactic teaching, and students lacked opportunities for self-exploration and self-experience.

3. Different stakeholders agreed that a gap year could increase students’ life experiences, assist students in finding their life goals and prepare them for personal development.

The survey results showed that, in general, student respondents had a positive view of a gap year. Students agreed that the gap year could widen their horizons, with an average point of 8.10 on the same scale. At the same time, they also believed a gap year could boost their ability to be independent, help them to find their life goals and increase their self-understanding. The average points for these findings were 7.65, 7.58 and 7.33, respectively.

Experts, educators and parents also felt positive about senior secondary students participating in a gap year. They thought that current students lacked life experience. A gap year could increase students’ life experiences, give them a better understanding of themselves and help them to find their goals in life.

4. 75% of the student respondents said that they would consider participating in a gap year programme to enrich their life experiences.

Whilst those not planning to take a gap year, explained that their main reason was that they did not want to delay their studies. However, experts thought it was worth spending a few months to a year for the experiences that a gap year brought.

The survey results showed that 75.7% of the respondents said they would consider participating in a gap year and 4.6% thought otherwise. Enriching life experience (62.9%) was the main reason for taking a gap year. However, fear of delaying study (60.0%) was the main reason for not taking a gap year.

Experts and educators in the interviews believed that a few months to a year was not time-wasting, if students found their life goal in the gap year. It was also seen as helpful for students' future development.

5. The student respondents believed that government financial support, family support and benefit for life planning could encourage them to participate in a gap year programme.

According to the questionnaire survey, financial support from the government (67.1%), family support (51.9%) and benefit for life planning (40.7%) were the crucial elements that would encourage students to participate in a gap year programme. In addition, they believed that support from secondary school (34.9%), an admission policy supported by the university (34.8%) and motivation in the current social climate (25.2%) could also be helpful.

Apart from the financial barrier, some of the students who participated in the focus group interviews believed that a lack of understanding about a gap year was also one of the barriers. If the different stakeholders knew more about the positive impact of a gap year, they believed that would encourage more students to participate in a gap year and that it would also ease resistance from parents.

Main Discussion

- 1. Life planning education helps students to make wise decisions in choosing subjects for further studies and their career paths upon graduation. Yet, students are still facing difficulties when making a lifework decision.**

Life planning education in the secondary stage has become more important. With the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum, students are not only required to be familiar with information on further studies and career paths, but also to have a better understanding of their own interests and future development prospects.

The results showed that students were facing difficulties when practicing life planning. This might be as a result of their lack of self-knowledge and life experience. It is believed that experiencing different activities could help students to discover different possibilities and to have a deeper self-awareness so that they can improve their life planning.

- 2. Secondary students lack life experiences and opportunities to discover their potential. The respondents generally agreed that secondary students should be brave in chasing their dreams, but they lacked opportunities to discover their potential. Experts believed that life experiences would help students to have better self-awareness and to find their own pathway.**

Although the survey respondents agreed that secondary students should be brave in chasing their dreams, they lacked life experiences and opportunities to discover their potential. Experts believed that life experiences would help students to have better self-awareness so that they could find their own pathway. Life experiences were also seen as one of the key elements for life planning. Senior secondary students are facing difficulties in making decisions about further studies and careers; it would be helpful for students if they had more life experiences to make wise decisions.

- 3. Senior secondary students view gap years positively and look forward to participating in them to broaden their horizons, improve their independence and make new friends from different places.**

The purpose of a gap year for young people is that they can take a certain period away from their current lives and try different activities based on their own interests, thus increasing their life experiences and, potentially, discovering their goal for life.

In this research, based on overseas experiences, student respondents, experts, educators and parents all believed that a gap year could increase students' life experiences, help them to find their life goals and prepare them for their future development.

- 4. The main barriers to participating in a gap year are fear of delaying study, feeling homesick, lack of financial support, lack of understanding about gap years and views of parents.**

In the questionnaire survey and focus group interviews, students expressed that the main barriers to participating in a gap year are fear of delaying study, feeling homesick and a lack of financial support. Experts and educators also thought time was the biggest concern for participating in a gap year. Gap year participants might feel they lagged behind others because they did not continue their studies like their peers. When returning to their original position after a gap year, they might face new challenges after such huge change.

Therefore, it is necessary to address student's and parents' concerns about gap years regarding any financial issues faced by students when participating in a gap year and, at the same time, enhancing the general public's understanding of gap years.

- 5. Senior secondary stage is a good point at which to take a gap year and after secondary education is the most suitable time. However, the**

decision to participate in a gap year or not should be taken according to a student's own ability and a gap year is not right for everyone.

After secondary education, a gap year could serve as a good time to reflect on their future, to help them find subjects and careers they are interested in. At the same time, a gap year is also helpful for students who are confused about their future lives. They could become less confused by using the time a gap year offers to find a career that interests them.

Therefore, if a gap year is implemented at the secondary school stage, it should focus on the following students: for secondary school leavers, a gap year could serve as a time for reflection on their future, and for form 4 or 5 students with poor academic results, a gap year could serve as a way for them to discover their interests and potential careers.

Recommendations

This study proposes the following recommendations:

1. Introduce a gap year pilot scheme.

The study suggests introducing a gap year pilot scheme for interested students. An evaluation and impact assessment should be conducted on the gap year pilot scheme.

a. Mode of the pilot scheme

This study recommends the pilot scheme should target senior secondary students. Students can participate in cultural exchanges, internship programmes, developing new interests and social services, according to their own interest.

b. Guidance and Support

The pilot scheme could be undertaken by the current organizations that offer gap year programmes. At the same time, counselling teams in

secondary schools and universities could provide support to gap year participants.

c. Financial support

This study also recommends that the government provide financial support to gap year participants with reference to the Child Development Fund and university sponsorship for exchange or overseas internship students.

d. Evaluation and assessment

After the pilot scheme, it is recommended that an evaluation and impact assessment of gap year participants be undertaken as a reference for future development.

2. Place reservation mechanism

This study also recommends tertiary educational institutions establish a mechanism that enables students who have been accepted for tertiary courses to reserve their places in higher education. Secondary schools should also allow places to be reserved for one year. This might allay fears about delaying study.

3. Promotion and propaganda

Both the government and NGOs should promote the idea of gap years through talks and social media. By inviting those who have taken gap years to talk about their experiences to other students, the importance of life planning could be shown, and the value of gaining experience in a wider world would be better understood. Another positive outcome might be raised awareness among people of all ages of the inherent value of a gap year as an opportunity for young people to develop into more rounded, mature adults.