



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Gappers: Taking time off
between high school and
post-secondary studies

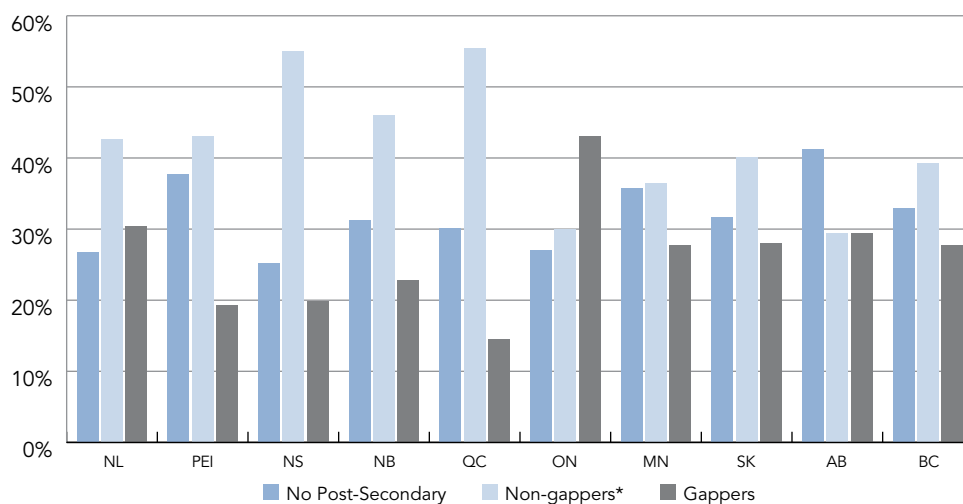
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Taking time off between high school and post-secondary education is often a pragmatic decision on the part of Canadian students who need to earn money to fund their post-secondary studies. Delaying post-secondary enrolment carries both risks and benefits, but earning a post-secondary credential is clearly beneficial—whether or not students delay their initial enrolment.

Educational pathways among young Canadians

Taking a “gap year” between high school and post-secondary education is a common phenomenon in the United Kingdom and Australia.¹ This practice is less common in Canada, but 27.8% of young Canadians delay their post-secondary studies for at least four months after graduating from high school (see Figure 1). These students are known as “gappers”.

Figure 1:
Proportion of students following various pathways after high school, by province



* Non-gappers go directly to post-secondary education after high school

Source: Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2004 Youth in Transition Survey. From Hango (2008).

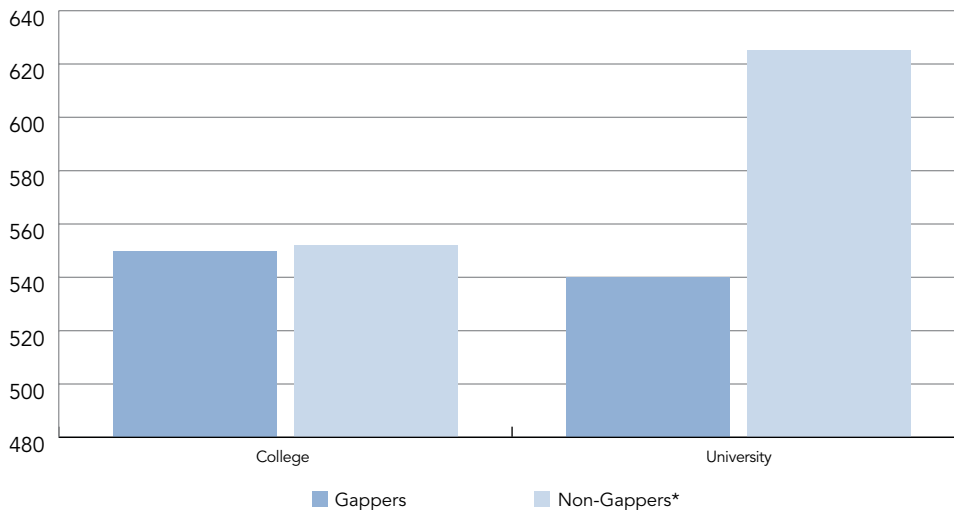
Why students delay enrolment

Students delay the start of their post-secondary studies for many different reasons—to travel, to improve their academic preparation, to decide what they want to study—but financial considerations appear to be among the most important. Students from low-income and low-socio-economic families are more likely to delay their entry into post-secondary studies.^{2,3,4} The same is true for students without scholarships, grants or bursaries and for students who worked more than 20 hours per week during high school.^{5,6} These findings suggest that many gappers take some extra time after high school to earn money in order to fund their post-secondary studies.

Risks and benefits of taking time off between high school and post-secondary education

In terms of labour market outcomes, there are both risks and benefits for gappers. In 2003, the employment rate among 22- to 24-year-old university graduates who took time off before university was 87.5%, whereas the rate for their non-gapper counterparts was 79.6%.⁷ However, non-gappers earned more than gappers in their first few years after completing their post-secondary education. For example, in 2003 the median salary for 22- to 24-year-old non-gapper university graduates was \$85 more per week than their gapper counterparts (see Figure 2).⁸

Figure 2:
Median weekly earnings for gappers and non-gappers



* Non-gappers go directly to post-secondary education after high school

Source: Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2004 Youth in Transition Survey. From Hango (2008).

The most likely explanation for these differences is that gappers are more employable immediately after graduation because they finish their post-secondary studies with more experience in the work force. Non-gappers, on the other hand, finish their post-secondary studies earlier and have more time to reap the income-based rewards of their post-secondary credentials.

While there is very limited empirical evidence, some research suggests that a gap year can provide students with 'soft skills,' such as interpersonal, communication and leadership skills, that employers covet.^{9,10} For example, a survey of U.K. companies in 2000 found that 88% of respondents felt that a well-structured gap year helped provide participants with 'soft skills' typically lacking in university graduates.¹¹ Although the evidence supporting this idea is largely anecdotal or based on small surveys, gap years may foster skills that offer students a competitive advantage when applying for post-graduation employment.

On the academic side, there are also risks and benefits for gappers. Post-secondary persistence (whether students complete their program) is an important concern for post-secondary students and institutions. In the United States, researchers have found that, even after controlling for socio-economic and academic characteristics, gappers are less likely to complete their post-secondary studies than non-gappers.¹² On the other hand, data from Australia suggest that gappers are more academically successful than non-gappers. Data from the 2002 to 2004 cohorts of first year students at the University of Western Australia show that gapper grades were 2.3% higher than non-gapper grades.¹³

It is unclear whether Canadian gappers face similar risks of non-completion or similar academic advantages, but the international data suggest that the academic risks and benefits of delayed post-secondary enrolment are evenly balanced. The same appears to be true for the labour-market risks and benefits.

There is, however, a clear benefit associated with earning a post-secondary credential for all students—regardless of the pathway they follow into their post-secondary studies.¹⁴ In 2006, employment rates for young Canadians (aged 20 to 24) were nine percentage points higher for those with a post-secondary credential than for those without.¹⁵ As well, in 2005, the median earnings of Canadian university graduates were 92% higher than those without a university credential.¹⁶ Other research indicates that young Canadians with post-secondary credentials find better jobs, earn more money, receive better employment benefits, and report higher job satisfaction than those without a post-secondary credential.

Given the clear advantages of post-secondary education, it is important to support successful transitions to higher education for students who delay their post-secondary enrolment.

Lessons in Learning: Supporting the gappers' return to education

Deferred enrolment is one approach that allows students extra time before beginning their post-secondary studies, while ensuring that they maintain tangible ties with post-secondary education. Deferred enrolment requires support on the part of post-secondary institutions. Some universities around the world have adopted this practice and explicitly suggest the option of enrolment deferral for their applicants.¹⁷

For example, Princeton University has embraced the notion of a gap year as a way to offer a break to high-achieving students, as well as to give students an opportunity to volunteer while learning about the world.¹⁸ Princeton plans to have a program in place by 2009 that would allow up to 10% of the incoming class to complete social work around the world prior to beginning their studies. The program may also include financial assistance for students during their gap year, although the gap year will not count toward academic credit.¹⁹

Bursaries can also be an effective way to support students in their return to education following a gap year. To support gap-year opportunities for lower-income students, bursaries can be awarded upon acceptance into a post-secondary institution. The bursaries can then be partially disbursed prior to and during the gap year with the remainder of the bursary disbursed upon enrolment in first-year classes. Typically, bursaries are only awarded to students entering or continuing a post-secondary program, but extending these awards to gap-year students, on a partially deferred basis, allows lower-income students the opportunity to take a gap year while simultaneously providing a strong incentive to return to formal education. Princeton's experience over the coming years may offer a best-practice model in this area for other institutions to follow.

Providing bursaries is not restricted to universities: Deloitte, a financial services company in the United Kingdom, has established a program called the Deloitte Scholar Scheme. This program allows high-school graduates to take a gap year that includes nine months of paid employment with Deloitte, a post-employment bursary, and annual bursaries during the student's university studies.²⁰

The University of Tasmania will begin a program in 2009 that provides financial assistance in the form of scholarships to students completing their first year so that students may take a gap year overseas. Part of the total aid will be available prior to the gap year to assist with travel expenses, while the remainder will be paid upon the student's resumption of studies.²¹ The funding structure at the University of Tasmania is designed to support a gap year after the first year of study has been concluded. This creates an incentive for students to take a gap year, but emphasizes a return to university after the conclusion of their time away.

The evidence suggests that taking time off between high school and post secondary programs may be a choice made out of necessity for many students who need extra time to earn and save money for their post-secondary studies. Current practices in the U.K. and Australia offer lessons for Canada regarding how to encourage gappers to return to their studies. All students should have the opportunity to make the choice that best suits their needs and be supported in their learning goals, whether they choose a direct or delayed entry pathway into post-secondary education.

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