

The Influence of a 'Gap Year' on Medical Students

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Abstract

This study reports the views of second year medical students from 6 Universities on the value or not of deferring entry to medical school in order to take a 'Gap Year' obtained from an anonymous questionnaire. Data were analysed using Fisher's exact test to produce a two tailed P value, with significance defined as $p < 0.05$. A total of 184 questionnaires returned, 79 from gap year students and 105 non gap year students. Nearly all who had taken a gap year (77/79) would advise current school leavers to take one, compared to only 48/105 who had not ($p < 0.0001$). A similar difference was observed between the two groups when asked if they thought a gap year helped students become more mature (78/79 v 46/105, $p < 0.0001$). Similarly, gap year students were significantly more likely to consider that a gap year made it easier for them to make friends (70/79 v 26/105, $p < 0.0001$). There was no significant difference between the two groups in finding it difficult to settle into work at University (31/79 v 36/105, $p = 0.5373$). This study shows overwhelming support for deferring entry to medical school and taking a gap year from those students who took one, and nearly half of those students who did not. Medical school entrance committees should re-consider their advice to students who wish to defer entry in order to take a 'gap year'.

Key words: Gap year, deferred entry, medical school, medical student, year out

1. Introduction

Over recent years there has been a steady deferral rate after a successful offer into medical school of approximately 7% for all Universities in the UK according to the Central Council of Admissions (UCAS) (Table 1). However this fell by 37% between 2011 and 2012 following the rise in tuition fees (Table 1), perhaps due to students wishing to start their courses before this rise took place. There are a variety of reasons why students might defer their entry into medical school and take a 'gap year' including: unsuccessful initial application, travel, working to save money before starting University, gaining further work experience, or even to re-sit examinations. Brown (2004) suggested that the greatest reason is that "young people feel the need to take a breather before going on to higher education". This is understandable when many school leavers have undertaken significant exams on a regular basis for most of their secondary school life. There has also been interest in the sociological impact of a gap year with Snee (2013) stating, "Gappers display a willingness to interact with, and gain knowledge about, their host communities" and there would be merit in the investigation of "development of cosmopolitan attitudes and competencies through undertaking a gap year".

Table 1. Deferred entry rates (Gap Advice UK)

For 2013, deferred to 2014
5.1% of accepted applicants deferred a year (25,521 of 495,596)
For 2012, deferred to 2013
5.2% of accepted applicants deferred a year (24,189 of 464,910)
For 2011, deferred to 2012
3.3% of accepted applicants deferred a year (16,299 of 492,030)
For 2010, deferred to 2011
6.9% of accepted applicants deferred a year (33,426 of 487,329)
For 2009, deferred to 2010
7.1% of accepted applicants deferred a year (34,049 of 481,854)
For 2008, deferred to 2009
7.3% of accepted applicants deferred a year (33,171 of 456,627)
For 2007, deferred to 2008
7.0% of accepted applicants deferred a year (28,863 of 413,430)

Deferred entry rates to UK Universities in recent years (gapadvice.org)

Although there are many positive and beneficial reasons for taking a gap year before starting medical studies, there are also some reasons why it might be considered unadvisable. James and Chilvers (2001) demonstrated in a retrospective study that for the 1970-85 cohort of students, “those not taking a year out were more successful”, but for the 1986-90 cohort this “had no influence on outcome”. Gap years may be considered unadvisable for number of reasons: perhaps some feel that students may change their minds during their gap year and then not take up their places at Medical School, while others may find it unsettling or challenging to return to the routine of studying and leave the course before completion. Parker, Thoemmes, Duineveld and Salmela-Aro (2015) found that “gap-year students were more likely to drop out of a university degree” when looking broadly at university students studying different academic subjects. Some medical schools do not encourage deferred entry, perhaps because of the potential uncertainty of whether their offers will in fact be taken up and the associated increase in administration required, or perhaps they have concerns as to whether these students will complete their degree.

In 2000, 10% of doctors questioned at the end of their first post graduate year of training in the UK were considering leaving medicine (Moss, Lambert, Goldacre, Lee 2004), and a sequential study of students who graduated in 1974, 1977, 1983, 1988 and 1993 demonstrated that 15% were not working in the NHS 2 years after graduation (Goldacre, Lambert, Davidson 2001). Although there are many reasons behind these figures, including research, maternity, working overseas and illness, these figures have to be a concern to both University entrance committees and those who teach and train. With figures such as these it would make sense to examine the potential influence, either positive or negative, of a gap year on medical students in order to provide better advice from medical school entrance committees to those who are considering embarking on one before entering medical school.

In recent years there has been more interest in a gap year from North American universities, with O’Shea (2013) concluding that a “year, done well, can be a springboard to college success by giving students strength, grit, confidence, inspiration, knowledge, curiosity, empathy and more”. Although yearly statistics are available outlining current deferral rates (Table 1), a review of the literature has not demonstrated any current data on which to base any advice for either medical students, or medical school entrance committees, as to the benefits or otherwise of deferring entry in order to take a gap year.

The aim of this study was therefore to find out from current medical students what their views are on taking a gap year before entering medical school; whether or not they took one; and what they would advise to current school leavers applying to medicine. Our research question was “Do students who have taken a gap year feel that this was advantageous compared to students who did not have a gap year?” This will provide data to aid current school leavers and medical school entrance committees when making a decision for which there is minimal literature available at present to provide assistance.

2. Methods

In April 2012 an electronic questionnaire (Appendix A, Appendix B) was sent to as many second year medical students

as possible using social media in six UK medical schools: University College London, Kings College London, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Edinburgh University, Leeds University and Bristol University. This questionnaire asked students firstly for the data regarding whether or not they took a gap year and if so, what did they do. They were then asked to detail their opinions on a gap year and what they would advise to current school leavers. All answers were anonymised. Data was analysed using Fishers exact test to produce a two tailed P value where significance is defined as $p < 0.05$.

A total of 184 questionnaires were completed and returned, 79 from students who had undertaken a gap year and 105 who had not (Table 2). As a result of an electronic questionnaire sent out by email to large databases of students it was not possible to record the total number of students who received it.

Table 2. Demographics of respondents

	Gap year	No gap year	Total
Female	52	67	119
Male	26	38	64
Private school	33	34	67
State school	46	70	116
London	11	13	24
Newcastle	23	42	65
Edinburgh	6	14	20
Leeds	26	25	51
Bristol	12	11	23

Demographics of students responding to electronic questionnaire

3. Results

When asked the question “Would you advise a gap year to current school leavers?” 77/79 of those who had taken a gap year (97.5%) said ‘yes’, compared to 48/105 (52.9%) who had not taken a gap year.

3.1 Gap Year Students

There were 79 medical students completing the questionnaire who had undertaken a gap year between school and University. Of the students who had taken a gap year, 50 (63.3%) were planned and 23 (29.1%) were due to an unsuccessful Medical School application. Overall 65 of the students (82.3%) used the year to travel abroad with 47 (59.5%) undertaking some volunteer work. Over half of the students (45, 57%) took some form of employment to save money for university and 39 (49.4%) used the year to gain more medical work experience. Only one student took a gap year to re-sit exams.

The majority of students taking a gap year (65, 82.3%) believed that they had benefited greatly by increasing in maturity and independence. Forty-four students (55.7%) felt that their gap year also helped them to make friends and settle into university life. Just over a third of students (31, 39.2%) felt that it was difficult to settle back into academic life on return from their gap year.

There were two students who were forced to take a gap year due to an unsuccessful entrance application. One of these students did not enjoy their gap year but the other did as it increased their commitment and determination to apply again to Medical School during their gap year.

Examples of the advice these gap year students would give to current students on the effects of a gap year include:

‘An amazing experience with many opportunities which may not be possible later in life’.

‘Learning life skills and gain confidence before starting university’.

‘Wider experience, throws you out of your comfort zone, learn life skills, more open minded, less self conscious and increases confidence.’

‘The maturity and experience gained along with awareness of both myself and the world around me enabled me to realise why I wanted to study medicine and to deal with the pressure of medical school.’

‘Although it was a little tricky getting back to work, the year provided invaluable life-experience and I definitely grew up a lot (I sometimes notice a lack of this in some - but not all! - people who didn't take one)’

‘I definitely think I would have dropped out of medical school if I hadn't had time to have fun and travel’

3.2 Non Gap Year Students

A total of 105 students completing the questionnaire had not undertaken a gap year before beginning Medical School training. Of these students twenty-six (25.5%) had no interest in doing so, twenty-five (24.5%) felt that it would be too difficult to start academic life again and twenty-three (22.5%) felt that they did not want to delay university due to the length of the medical course. Only twelve (11.8%) thought that a gap year would be too expensive.

However when asked now whether they wished that they had taken a gap year, nearly half (50, 47.6%) replied in the

affirmative. Forty-one (39.4%) thought that a gap year would have helped “a little” to mature and prepare for independent life at university. Forty students (38.1%) did not think a gap year would have helped them to make friends at university. Interestingly a similar figure of students found it difficult to settle into academic work at university between the non-gap year and gap year students (34.3% and 39.2%).

The advice of non-gap year students to current school leavers was split between those who now wish they had taken a gap year and those that did not. Some of the students who did not wish they had a gap year felt that it would have been too expensive and they may “not have come back”. One student stated “medicine is great regardless” and there are opportunities for travelling in long summer holidays. Advice from students who do not wish that they had taken a gap year includes:

‘I’m happy and settled and have a nice group of friends, if I’d had a gap year I’m not sure it would be the same.’

‘It would have been a wasted a year and medicine is long enough anyway’

‘Whilst it would have been fun and a good experience, I am happy with where I am at the moment and don’t think I am missing out by not having had a gap year.’

‘Totally personal choice. I don’t think it is obvious who has taken a year out and who hasn’t.’

‘I’d rather have a gap year afterwards when I’m more mature’

Some students who wish they had taken a gap year felt that it was a missed opportunity where they perceived that gap year students were more confident and settled in quicker at university, which might have helped with courses using a “Problem Based Learning” teaching approach. These students also wished they had had more time to earn more money before university and decide what they “really want in life”. Advice from students who did wish that they had taken a gap year includes:

‘People seemed a lot more confident and seemed to fit in at uni with ease, I think a break before starting this intense course would have been great in hindsight.’

‘More time to figure out what I actually want for life?’

‘Feel like I missed out on a chance to travel and after undertaking such a long course I wish I’d let myself have a break.’

‘Life isn’t all about education and employment’

‘I found coming to university really hard and think a gap year would have better prepared me’

‘Only if you really know what you want to do, why, and what purpose it would serve.’

When comparing the two study groups, those who had taken a gap year and those who have not, there are some clear differences in responses. When asked would you advise a gap year to current school leavers, 77/79 gap year students and 48/105 non gap year students replied yes ($P < 0.0001$). A total of 78/79 gap year students felt that a gap year makes students more mature ‘greatly’ or a ‘medium’ amount compared to 46/105 non gap year students ($P < 0.0001$). Similarly 70/79 gap year students and 26/105 non gap year students answered ‘greatly’ or a ‘medium’ amount when asked whether a gap year makes it easier to make friends at university ($P < 0.0001$).

One of the main concerns always raised about a gap year is the potential difficulty to settle into work upon return and starting university. However this study demonstrated no significant difference between the two groups when asked did you find it difficult to settle into work at university (31/79 gap year students and 36/105 non gap year students replied yes $P=0.5373$).

4. Discussion

There appears to be overwhelming support for a gap year before entering medical school from those students who have taken one and nearly half of those students who did not. The advantages would seem to be numerous and disadvantages fewer than previously thought. In answer to the research question “Do students who have taken a gap year feel that this was advantageous compared to students who did not have a gap year?”, the answer is a very clear yes. The concerns that it might be difficult to settle back into academia are clearly unfounded with minimal difference found between the two groups. The benefits of greater maturity, independence, life experience and improved social interactions associated with taking a gap year may be seen for some as to outweigh some of the more negative perceptions. Perhaps university entrance committees should be more sympathetic to the potential benefits for students who are about to start a long and arduous course, with little opportunity to travel at the end.

A prominent message arising from the free text responses clearly indicates, not surprisingly, that each student should make their decision on an individual basis and that a gap year is not necessarily the best decision for every prospective medical student. However, better advice and support from universities is surely required in this area?

This study has some obvious limitations in that the total number of students who received the questionnaire is unknown but compared to the total number of medical students in second year at the six universities, the sample size can be considered relatively small, although perhaps still representative. Furthermore only second year medical students were chosen and opinions may change throughout university as students progress with their studies, gain more perspective on

life and begin to plan for their future. This study was undertaken before the student fees were increased and therefore this rise was not likely to influence student choice as it might have done a year later, or if first year students had been questioned. Second year students were chosen as it was thought they would still remember their gap year but had 18 months of medical studies to develop their opinion as to any benefit or otherwise from that year.

Current views from secondary schools and universities on taking a gap year are very variable, with some in favour and others actively discouraging students applying to medical school to take one. A number of university information websites provide a little guidance regarding applying with deferred entry. This advice includes: if the year has “a clear plan of activity for the year, preferably involving work of a caring nature” (abdn.ac.uk) or “provided that the intervening year is spent in a positive and worthwhile way” (cardiff.ac.uk) then deferred entry will be considered.

Other universities advise that while deferred entry will be considered, “successful applications for deferred entry will generally be among the strongest of the cohort” (medsci.ox.ac.uk), and also state that of the applicants requesting deferred entry during the 2014 medical school application process “none received an offer of a place” (medsci.ox.ac.uk) for this particular university. This information will clearly actively discourage some students from considering an application to medical school with deferred entry. Surely each student should have the choice to measure whether they feel that they would benefit from taking a gap year if there are perceived benefits from doing so? Some Universities do not provide any guidance at all to school leavers regarding applications with deferred entry to medical school (study.cam.ac.uk, gla.ac.uk). McManus (1998) demonstrated that students applying with a request for deferred entry were disadvantaged and therefore less likely to be offered a place at medical school.

In the light of our study it would be useful for more universities to provide formal, clear information regarding their views on deferred entry to help students make a decision. Although it would possibly make selection of each year entry more difficult, the long nature of the medical course and the persistent dropout rate after graduation (Brown 2004, James and Chilvers 2001) might indicate that a more flexible view is advisable. It may also be useful to repeat this questionnaire and review the responses following graduation from medical school to see if opinions of medical students change as they progress through the course under an increasing workload.

The final issue raised by this paper, relates to the views that several feel a gap year after completing medical school would be of more benefit than one undertaken at the age of seventeen or eighteen. This is clearly a different area that would be very interesting to explore, particularly as a result of the rising number of junior doctors delaying application to specialty programmes in the UK in order to take a year out. In 2011 it was estimated that only 71% of Foundation Doctors continued directly to the Specialty Training Programme in the UK (foundationprogramme.nhs.uk). This figure is unofficially thought to have fallen further in the intervening years with an increasingly large number of Foundation Doctors taking time out of the training programme to make important decisions regarding their future career, it's geographical location and earn a break from the intensity of junior doctor working life.

Medical schools should look more favourably on requests by school leavers to defer entry in order to take a gap year if the student can demonstrate a positive motive and clearly planned year. Universities should also provide more advice to those students applying as to the positive or negative effect a request for deferred entry will have on their application to a particular Medical School, in order that they can make a more informed decision.

Outstanding Research Questions:

1. What is the opinion of University entrance committees on this topic?
2. Do the views of students change following graduation?
3. What is the view of senior clinicians of junior doctors who have taken a gap year compared to those who have not?

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Appendix A: Questionnaires Sent to Gap Year Students

Gap Year Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
a. 17 b. 18 c. 19 d. 20 e. 21 f. 22+
2. Sex
a. Male b. Female
3. What medical school are you from?
a. London (UCL/Kings) b. Newcastle c. Edinburgh d. Leeds e. Bristol
4. What type of school did you go to?
a. State b. Private (day pupil) c. Private (boarding pupil)
5. Why did you take a gap year?
a. Planned b. Unsuccessful UCAS application c. Other (please specify)
6. What did you do during your gap year? (may select more than one)
a. Travel overseas b. Volunteer c. Work to save money for uni d. Medical work experience e. Resit exams f. Other (please specify)
7. Do you feel you became more mature/independent during your gap year?
a. Greatly b. Medium amount c. A little d. Not at all
8. Do you think your gap year made it easier for you to make friends and settle in at uni?
a. Greatly b. Medium amount c. A little d. Not at all
9. On starting uni, did you find it hard to settle into work?
a. Yes b. No
10. Would you advise a gap year to current school leavers?
a. Yes b. No
And why? (please specify)

Appendix B: Questionnaire Sent to Non Gap Year Students

No Gap Year Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
a. 17 b. 18 c. 19 d. 20 e. 21 f. 22+
2. Sex
a. Male b. Female
3. What medical school are you from?
a. London (UCL/Kings) b. Newcastle c. Edinburgh d. Leeds e. Bristol
4. What type of school did you go to?
a. State b. Private (day pupil) c. Private (boarding pupil)
5. Why did you not take a gap year?
a. Too expensive b. Medicine is a long course anyway c. Worried that starting academia again would be hard d. No interest in a gap year e. Other (please specify)
6. Do you now wish you had taken a gap year?
a. Yes b. No
Why? (please specify)
7. Do you feel a gap year would have helped you mature and prepare you more for independent life at uni?
a. Greatly b. Medium amount c. A little d. Not at all
8. Do you think a gap year would have made it easier to make friends and settle in at uni?
a. Greatly b. Medium amount c. A little d. Not at all
9. On starting uni, did you find it hard to settle into work?
a. Yes b. No
10. Would you advise a gap year to current school leavers?
a. Yes b. No
Why? (please specify)



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