



Gap year tourism: International debates, South African issues

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Abstract

Gap year travel is a rising element in the international economy of youth tourism. Moreover, it is observed that the gap year traveller has become an increasingly important segment of tourism in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa and especially South Africa which is both a source as well as a destination for gap year tourists. Notwithstanding a substantial growth of scholarship about tourism in South Africa over the past 20 years, issues around youth gap year travel have not been seriously addressed by the country's community of tourism scholars. The intention of this article is to provide a thematic overview of research on gap year travel and thereby to point to a number of issues that require further research in Africa and particularly in South Africa. The differentiated nature of gap year travel is highlighted and the importance for expanding local research is stressed.

Keywords: youth travel, gap year, international debates, South Africa

Introduction

A growing trend across the global North is for young adults to undertake some form of travel, study, work or residence abroad for a limited period of time once they have completed their formal schooling (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Frändberg, 2014; O'Reilly, 2006; O'Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2004; Wu, Pearce, Huang, & Fan, 2015). Young adults wishing to travel, are faced with numerous options relating to which type of travel they might undertake. One of the most institutionally recognised youth travel options available is that of embarking on a gap year. It has been argued that the gap year experience has the potential to encompass a number of different structured and unstructured activities throughout the year (Heath, 2007; Huxley, 2003; Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2004, 2005). Huxley (2003) argues that global travel during a gap year has become a common feature of contemporary youth culture which is characterised by a search for authenticity. By taking a gap year between school and university, youth travellers can engage in a variety of work, travel and volunteer practices not previously open to them (Griffin, 2013). However, much controversy surrounds the expansion of this form of youth travel. Among certain, predominantly privileged, social groups the action of taking a gap year is regarded to some extent as part of an individual's journey towards becoming a responsible adult (Cairns, 2008; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Frändberg, 2014; Haverig, 2011; Heath, 2007; Simpson, 2005; Snee, 2014; Veeck & Biles, 2009). The experiences gained by an individual through a period of travel are said to develop more confident, self-reliant and adaptable characteristics whilst concurrently broadening the perspectives of the traveller (Gmelch, 1997; Stone & Petrick, 2013; Veeck & Biles, 2009). Nevertheless, for critical observers such as Snee (2014), the gap year is less about promoting cultural acceptance and instead more often a vehicle to allow privileged young people (from families able to afford it) to feel good about travelling without reflecting on their privilege.



Over the past decade it can be observed that the gap year has become an increasingly important element of tourism in Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular (Govender & Rogerson, 2011). On the one hand, there is a mushrooming industry of service providers seeking to offer gap year products in many African countries such as Ghana, Tanzania and Southern Africa..... The range of these products often intersects with volunteer tourism programmes and also contains a substantial element of adventure tourism offerings. International gap year volunteers in South Africa can be engaged variously in a myriad of teaching and education projects, HIV awareness initiatives, sports development programmes, orphan care projects in impoverished local communities, marine or land-based conservation activities (Govender & Rogerson, 2011). On the other hand, South Africa is increasingly a source as well as a destination for gap year tourists. Coetzee and Bester (2009: 608) reflect that the option of taking of a gap year immediately after the completion of secondary school “is a growing phenomenon among young people in South Africa”. Rabie and Naidoo (2016: 138) argue that for South African matriculants the gap year has become transformed from what was formerly viewed as a ‘radical activity’ and instead to a positive process that “shapes new citizens for a global age”. Nieman (2010, 2013) suggests that South African ‘gappers’ usually are motivated to pursue a gap year because they were uncertain about a field of study for tertiary education, unclear about career choice or were suffering from burn out and wanting to earn money in order to finance their own studies.

With the expanding significance of gap year travel in the South African tourism landscape it is appropriate to undertake an international review of the ‘state of the issue’ in order to inform a local agenda regarding gap year tourism. Accordingly, the objective in this paper is to provide a thematic overview of research on gap year travel and thereby to point to a number of issues that require further research in Africa and particularly in South Africa. This review is deemed useful for two reasons. First, that notwithstanding a substantial growth of scholarship about tourism in South Africa, issues around the gap year and youth gap year travel have not been seriously addressed by the country’s community of tourism scholars (see Rogerson & Rogerson, 2001; Hoogendoorn & Rogerson, 2015; Visser, 2016a). Second, in Visser’s (2016b) recent overview prepared of over 700 student dissertations and theses of varying formats, which were produced between 1971 and 2015, it is baffling that there was not a single graduate study focussing on South Africa either as a source or destination for gap year travellers.

Gap year travel: definition and historical evolution

The definition of ‘gap year’ is contested in international scholarship. For example, one scholar avers that “the term ‘gap year’ or ‘year out’ are problematic because neither represents a tightly-defined phenomenon” (Jones, 2004: 22). It is considered that researchers have not necessarily frequently focused on an all-encompassing overview of ‘the gap year’ as this term can be used to refer to numerous activities that young adults may be undertaking throughout their time spent abroad. The view is advanced that the definition

of the term ‘gap year’ is subject to much debate within academic literature as often it is applied in an ill-defined and ambiguous manner (Jones, 2004). The sentiments of Jones (2004) are echoed by a number of authors in that it is emphasised that a scant amount of academic literature has focused directly on the ‘highly complex’ phenomenon of the gap year as a specific topic and thus in-depth, academic research on the gap year and the effects thereof is scarce (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; O’Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2005). This said, for the purpose of this review, a gap year, in its broadest context, is understood to be a



period of time that lasts anywhere from three to 24 months wherein an individual takes time 'out' of formal education, training or the workplace for travel, which is mostly abroad. This 'time out' that the individual takes often, but not always, lies within the progression of his or her professional career and the 'trajectory' (Cremin, 2007; Griffin, 2013; Jones, 2004). A characteristic of the gap year is thus noted in that traditionally, gap years, "...are a break from the normal course of things, yet are not a complete rupture from what comes before and after" (Snee, 2013: 143).

This broader definition can encapsulate not just post-school, pre-university gap years, but also an assortment of gap-year-type breaks which include post-university gap years, study breaks and career breaks at a later stage in one's lifetime (Jones, 2004; Heath, 2007). Cremin (2007: 526) states that "gap years are associated with periods or breaks, usually in an unfamiliar location, between secondary and tertiary education or one job and another." King (2011: 341) views "a gap year, or year out, is a break in an educational career that is usually taken between leaving school and beginning study at university". Furthermore, Griffin (2013: 853) states that the gap year "is characteristically associated with secondary and tertiary school leavers". For clarification, in this analysis the gap year focuses upon the post-school, pre-university gap year.

The Phenomenon of the Gap Year

A brief history of the phenomenon, an overview of the types of gap year classifications as well as the motivations and effects of embarking on a gap year now will be presented. It is generally accepted amongst scholars that the origin of the gap year is rooted in the 'Grand Tour' (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2004; Heath, 2007; King, 2011; O'Reilly, 2006; O'Shea, 2011). As a historical precursor to the modern gap year the Grand Tour was commonly associated with aspects of privilege (Simpson, 2004; Heath, 2007). Well-educated, upper-middle-class young men would use the 'Grand Tour' as a means of delaying their commencement of a professional career once completing their formal education (Heath, 2007; O'Shea, 2011). This period of travel was a trend which stretched from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century and advocated the purpose of an 'extended educational experience' (O'Shea, 2011: 565). These extended educational experiences would usually involve travelling to locations of diverse natural beauty or cities of classical European culture in order to broaden the mind (Heath, 2007; Snee, 2013, 2014). The period of 'extended education' was however criticised by some as being "an excuse for a life of leisure and entertainment free from the responsibilities of home" – which it may have been for some individuals (O'Reilly, 2006: 1006). It is noted by O'Reilly (2006) that although the Grand Tour was primarily associated with those of greater privilege and high status, this status began to decline as its popularity grew and the Grand Tour became accessible to the middle-class in its later years.

It is difficult to determine exactly when the modern gap year arose as a phenomenon although it is commonly suggested that it was during the 1960s (Jones, 2004; King, 2011; Griffin, 2013). It has further been postulated that the gap year was initiated after World War II for the purpose of encouraging interaction between youth of different countries. These interactions were meant to improve both cultural understanding and awareness as well increase cross-cultural compassion (Griffin, 2013). During the past two decades the gap year has grown from being regarded as a form of "rebellion and an escape from the formal institutions of education and employment in the UK into a bastion of those same structures" (Simpson, 2005: 466). Gap years, albeit occasionally conveyed as an interruption in an individual's institutional transitions or educational routine, have been noted as being



productive for individuals in assisting them to reach long term career goals (Cremin, 2007; King, 2011). Over the last two decades the gap year has been gradually shifting away from being a traditional break in formal education or employment in order to undertake an “extraordinary experience” (Simpson, 2005: 448) towards the undertaking of a more recognised, institutionalised and professionalised phenomenon (Simpson, 2004: 681). The decision to embark upon a gap year has further become a far more commonly adopted practice and is thus frequently “incorporated into formal educational and employment structures and institutions” (Simpson, 2005: 448).

A differentiated phenomenon

Would-be gap year attendees are bombarded with a variety of options when deciding how they wish to occupy themselves for their time abroad. Options include volunteering, short-term work abroad, backpacking or traveling with friends. It is stressed that the choices they make will determine whether or not their gap year is successful and beneficial to their personal development or just a period of hedonistic fulfilment. As the reputation and consumption of the gap year grows in popularity individuals wishing to embark on a gap year are faced with a number of gap year related critical choices which often determine the success of their gap year. The ever-growing trend of having students embark on a gap year or being able to take a year out between school and tertiary university education is clearly by no means a new phenomenon, but it has become a far more frequently mentioned practice in the last decade (Jones, 2004; Blackburn *et al.* 2005; Simpson, 2005; Birch & Miller, 2007; Heath, 2007; O’Shea, 2011). Gap year global travel is characterised by an increasing search for ‘authenticity’, a rapidly rising issue in contemporary youth culture. With an increasing interest in gap year travel it comes as no surprise that the growing popularity has been paralleled by the expansion of the gap year market (Huxley, 2003; Simpson, 2005; Heath, 2007). Simpson (2005: 447) notes that “the practice of the gap year has expanded considerably in the last ten years, with a corresponding rise in its public and institutional profile”. Individuals searching for ‘authentic’ experiences with meaning are thus able to undertake and choose from a number of different gap year options.

Potential gap year travellers are presented with what Jones (2004) classifies as three ‘layers of choice’. Young adults initially have the choice of location - choosing to remain local or to go abroad. Further consideration needs to be made regarding aspects of structure – whether the gap year is to be organised by an agency or by the individual. Final consideration is based around the activities one may wish to undertake throughout the gap year. Gap year activities may occur in various combinations of paid and unpaid work or volunteering, education, leisure and travel (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2005; Heath, 2007; Griffin, 2013). Blackburn, Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim (2005) elaborate further on the range of possible gap year activities mentioning being able to do something exciting, gaining working experience, seeing new cultures and also earning money to supplement university studies. Additionally, gap years are often categorised initially due to the nature of the ‘time out’ to be taken (Jones, 2004; Heath, 2007). Jones (2004) suggests the possibilities of six broadly generalised gap year choices that young adults are able to select from. These are the choices of; either paid work or voluntary work, learning, organised travel or independent travel or leisure activities. However, Jones (2004: 10) also maintains that “individual participants typically undertake a mix of these activities during a gap year” and additionally that “a significant proportion of gap year participants are ‘inactive’ for part or in some cases all of their gap year”.



In a direct reference to Prince William of the British Royal Family when he was taking a gap year it was observed that “no longer are gap years for rebels, dropouts and ‘people with nothing better to do’; now they are for hopeful professionals and future kings” (Simpson, 2005: 449). The perceptions surrounding the taking of a gap year have progressed from a view of it as a rebellious activity to something of an elitist endeavour. As with other forms of youth travel, what was once viewed as a rather ‘alternative’ life choice activity is now primarily undertaken by those who are fortunate and affluent enough to be able to afford to do so (Snee, 2014). In recent years however, this practice of taking time out before or between more ‘settled activities’ is not only adopted amongst the privileged young but also the less well-off also in pursuit of ‘horizon-broadening’ experiences (Heath, 2007).

The potential mix of individuals embarking on a gap year thus holds the potential to comprise a variety of individuals in a multitude of different life stages (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2005; Heath, 2007). Those wishing to take a gap year may be students who take a break after completing high school, those who take a year out after completing a degree or individuals who wish to take a break between jobs. Nevertheless, the action of taking a gap year is regarded predominantly as a student activity with the average age of those taking gap years being between 16 and 25 years old (Jones, 2004). This said, evidence is accumulating growing of individuals over the age of 25 taking gap years in between periods of permanent employment (Jones, 2004). The focus of this review, however, lies predominantly with young adults of school leaving age and the role which the gap year plays for these high school graduates before commencing university studies.

The scope of individuals looking to embark upon a gap year may also have broadened in recent years because of widened access to information surrounding gap years. Young people all over the world have increasing means of access to considerable amounts of well-publicised sources of information on gap years in general (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Simpson, 2005; Frändberg, 2014). As individuals are able to gain more information about a gap year and the personalised choices that are available to them as well as the potential for varying durations of the experience, it is argued the greater is the probability of them wishing to embark on such experiences (Jones, 2004; Veeck & Biles, 2009). Those who choose to take one of the many gap year differentiated options are often faced with the dilemma of when and for how long to do so. Commonly it is assumed that there is a 12 month period in which the gap year falls wherein individuals may undertake various activities for either all or just a fragment of the 12 months. This period of time commonly corresponds with a particular junction in life such as the interval between high school and a deferred place of tertiary education (Birch & Miller, 2007). This time frame can be exceeded, although it is suggested that any period longer than 24 months “begins to blur the meaning of the break” that the individual is taking (Jones, 2004: 24). It is further proposed that the break should extend longer than a three month period so as to differentiate between what would be a ‘normal’ vacation and a gap year.

As a result of the proliferation of gap year options and packages available secondary school graduates are presented with the option of personalising the gap year experience they wish to have in accordance with their needs and desires. It is forwarded that that there “are more tailored choices in more places and the duration of programs has also become more fluid, with options spanning several weeks to the traditional year abroad” (Veeck & Biles, 2009: 93). The choice between having structured or unstructured activities throughout the gap year allows for individuals to dictate how much control they wish to have over their actions during their gap year. For those looking to have a structured gap year, the time frame of when they



do which activities will be somewhat prescribed for them as opposed to those who have an unstructured gap year and can opt to change their activities and schedule whenever they see fit (Jones, 2004).

The differentiated nature of the gap year phenomenon cannot be understood without reference to the supply side of the industry. With the expansion in demand over the past 20 years there has been the emergence of an industry of suppliers for the gap year experience. An array of different organisations and agencies have become involved as providers including charitable and commercial organisations for the purpose of assisting would-be gap year travellers with the organisational necessities as well as facilitating various kinds of support necessary for embarking on a gap year (Heath, 2007). This surge of suppliers has meant that it is far easier for individuals to customise their 'perfect' gap year with a lower degree of risk as compared to those who opt for unplanned travel for the duration of a year or more (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2005). In the United Kingdom, it has been documented that a commercial gap year sector has become established "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" (Jones, 2004; 17). Indeed, it is argued that gap year "programmes such as those of Raleigh International offer participants the opportunity to visit and encounter geographically distant others with the promise that through such encounters their "horizons will be broadened" and knowledge of others enhanced" (Simpson, 2005; 448).

It is apparent that the incorporation of the support services of an agency into planning of the gap year makes it easier for individuals to take a gap year or choose which activities they wish to undertake. Although a large proportion of the gap year facilitation lies in the hands of the individual, when involving a gap year providing agency, the risk factor, to a large extent, is mitigated. Responsibility rests with the gappers themselves albeit it also remains partly the duty of the organisation offering the gap year to ensure that the gap year runs effectively in aspects such as the setting up, managing and facilitation of activities throughout the year. Indeed, this is often the way that youth travellers organise their gap years as it is perceived to be the least risk option as well as offering greater structure than a year spent with little direction or purpose (Birch & Miller, 2007). Accordingly, the incorporation of a gap year agency into gap year planning is perceived as beneficial for the would-be traveller. Agencies provide opportunities that attendees may not be able to access without their assistance. Arguably, the way in which the agencies' gap year product is marketed is paramount to its success as an enterprise.

The reasons youth travellers elect to pursue a gap year are differentiated. Indeed, Jones (2004: 34) notes that young people maintain a "wide variety of motivations" to embark upon gap year travel wherein they are presented with a "diverse range of possible activities". Although they will differ from one individual to another, motivations as to why young adults seek to undertake gap years range from those with the simple wish or desire to take a break from 'normal' day-to-day life in search of new, exciting and fun experiences, such as adventure tourism as part of the gap year to those who wish for a break from formal education yet still wish to broaden their horizons (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Simpson, 2005; Heath, 2007). Further motivation as to why individuals may take a gap year has been observed as an opportunity for self-reflection which in turn enhances the students' sense of perspective and facilitation in making better-informed decisions (Heath, 2007). The necessity to take time to make the correct decision on which future studies to begin or which career path to follow is seen as an important driver. This time-out can be used to acquire a number of necessary life skills such as in planning time and financial management (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Heath, 2007). The converse of this applies in that some individuals may be involuntarily forced to take a gap year – known as a deferred gap year – due to not being



accepted into tertiary education and thus having to make the most of an 'enforced' year out. Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim (2005) also suggest that taking a gap year is often the result of 'fashion' and 'following the crowd' with an 'everyone was taking one' mentality. This is given impetus by the fact that the "publication of conventional paper media (magazines, books, news articles) on gap years has increased considerably" (Jones 2004: 35). Furthermore, the available online content surrounding gap years through the internet and social media sites has increased exponentially in recent years adding a further stimulus for gap year travel.

For Cremin (2007: 526) "the gap year is a time of adventure" in addition to being a period of time wherein individuals are able to make a concerted effort in improving their "career and educational prospects." The gap year further associates itself with an "exposure to difference" in terms of global cultures (Snee, 2013: 144). It is thought to be advantageous for young adults to gain this exposure through travel as it may prove to ultimately be what is required of them to become "culturally competent in an increasingly globalised world" (Snee, 2013: 144). These can be strong motivations for some young adults to take a gap year. Overall, much of the reasoning as to why individuals opt for a gap year between school and university is that they feel it is in one way or another beneficial to them (Brown, 2004; Birch & Miller, 2007). Emphasis is placed on planning with Heath (2007: 94) stating that "a well-structured gap year could help to furnish graduates with the 'soft skills' that they often lack on leaving university." These sentiments are echoed by Jones (2004) who asserts that when planned correctly, the gap year has been demonstrated to have the potential to benefit young adults for a number of reasons, including boosting personal growth, maturity and levels of responsibility – these are all ultimately tools used throughout adulthood. This said, to view the motivations of taking a gap year solely as a means to advance the attendees educational and career prospects would be unrealistic as there are many other ways in which an individual could 'advance employability' without taking a gap year (Cremin, 2007).

Cremin (2007: 537) comments that "what the gap year signals is a desire to really live or to exceed the routine pressures of everyday life without having to assume the consequences of realising that desire – perhaps by becoming 'unemployable' in the process of taking an adventure into the 'unknown'". Furthermore, it is advanced that the underpinnings for individuals taking a gap year variously lie in aspects of dream fulfilment, the development of new skills or helping others or even assisting in some form of charity. All of these motivations are attached to the desire of many gap year attendees to "exceed the commodified limits of late-capitalism" (Cremin, 2007: 537). In sum, whether the motivations for embarking on a gap year are for the benefit of oneself, the attainment of self-realisation or for simple hedonistic reasons, the phenomenon of gap year travel is of rising significance in the global tourism economy.

Differentiated impacts

Considerable debate surrounds the impacts of gap year travel with several different schools of thought. One set of writings focuses on the essentially positive effects of the phenomenon or effects that are perceived as mainly beneficial to its participants (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Birch & Miller, 2007, Cremin, 2007; Heath, 2007; King, 2011; O'Shea, 2011; Snee, 2013). This said, Heath (2007: 100) cautions that in the "absence of much existing academic research on the gap year, many of the claims of the gap-year industry concerning the presumed benefits of taking a year out are based on perceptions rather than on solid



evidence.” Alongside this, Jones (2004) classifies some of the possible effects of the gap year as beneficial in three areas. These relate to the benefits accruing to the individual, the benefits to prospective employers and the benefits to society as a whole (Jones, 2004). None the less, it is noted these claims are vague as “all are difficult to measure and have not been the subject of academic research” (Jones, 2004: 13). In addition, Jones (2004: 53) observes that “no direct research has been conducted examining specifically the benefits that accrues to wider society from gap year participation” as with the likes of the possible negative societal effects.

The common opinion of the gap year as highly advantageous to young people lies in the premise of the individual attendee and their respective personal attainments (Heath, 2007). Some of the personal positive effects of gap year participation are anchored upon the presumption that the attendee acquires a number of non-academic ‘soft skills’ necessary for everyday adult life as well as enhances their maturity and self-awareness along with their independence and personal responsibility (Brown, 2004; Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; King, 2011). O’Shea (2011: 567) goes as far as to state that, “a gap year out of formal education does seem to offer students benefits beyond those available in the classroom” and that those particular students are noted to have developed substantially in personal, civic, moral and intellectual aspects. By effectively delaying higher education for a year it is forwarded that this postponement stimulates the individual in terms of an improved educational performance and in turn allows them to make more efficient use and time of their university experience (Jones, 2004; O’Shea, 2011). These beneficial effects relating to an academic career are echoed by Birch & Miller (2007) who aver that the commencement of a one year break of travel or work between high school and tertiary education has the potential to motivate students for university studies. Furthermore, another effect is of the achievement of better academic results than for those who commence tertiary studies straight after high school. The caveat is given, however, that this betterment of results is most pronounced amongst lower-performing students (Birch & Miller, 2007).

The gap year is further noted to impact positively an individual’s formation and development of career choices as well as contributing towards employability and career opportunities (Jones, 2004). Gap year participants were noted to project their acquired confidence, maturity and independence towards these prospects of future employability (Jones, 2004; King, 2011). This self-realisation is foreseen as beneficial to employers (Cremin, 2007). The maturity and self-realisation attained from the gap year along with the development of social skills and values along with the potential for travel to broaden the mind can result in improved employment opportunities and thus better future prospects for gap year participants (Blackburn, Clark & Pilgrim, 2005; Snee, 2014). Overall, in the opinion of King (2011: 153) the gap year “enabled these young people to indicate, in this context, that their current self, differed from a past self”. Accordingly, the gap year can be seen as having the effect of being a ‘zone of transition’ in the life of a young adult wherein they are able to undertake “identity work and negotiate the shift from one life stage to the next” (O’Shea, 2011: 566). Put simply, King (2011: 353) posits that these individuals had “in effect, become adults”. Accordingly, the modern gap year can be likened in its impacts to the personal effects of the Grand Tour in that it serves as a period for a ‘transition to adulthood’ (Snee, 2013).

Although much literature is in consensus of the gap year being beneficial to participants several potential negative effects have been identified. Gap year experiences are observed to be the domain of primarily privileged young people and can be a form of ‘rite of passage’ to adulthood (Heath, 2007; Snee, 2013). Highly critical is Snee (2014: 1) who suggests that gap years can reproduce amongst privileged individuals standard ways of thinking about



difference which are shaped by “historical legacies and dominant ideas about values and worth”. At a practical level it is noted that taking a gap year delays an individual’s educational completion and thus impacts the working career (King, 2011; O’Shea, 2011). What this means is that the individual enters the workplace a year later than they could have which, for some observers, can be disadvantageous (Jones, 2004). De’Ath, Doe, Evans & Steel (2002) suggest there is evidence that taking a break from the structures and routine of academic work may result in the gap year actually having an adverse effect on motivation and personal progress. Jones (2004) goes on to add that a gap year may also impact individuals negatively in a financial way as the gap year is a costly experience and can often be associated with periods of unemployment. Finally, Jones (2004) notes that if a gap year is attempted without adequate planning it can become a wasted year of ‘inadequate drifting’. Overall, as a ‘transition period’ to adulthood, in principle, it has been argued that gap year opportunities should be available to all young adults, yet it is evidently not so (Snee, 2014).

Conclusion

Arguably, the phenomenon of gap year travel is of mounting significance in the international tourism economy. The core objective in this paper was to draw the attention of African tourism scholars to what so far has been a neglected topic. Extant writings on the gap year experience have been mainly contributed by education scholars (Nieman, 2010, 2013; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016) with so far minimal contributions from tourism specialists. It is acknowledged, however, that South Africa is both a source and destination of gap year travellers. As a destination for international gap year tourists there is a considerable untapped research agenda about unpacking the size, organisation and local impacts of gap year tourism. As a source of gap year travellers once again, the South African research agenda is extensive both in terms of understanding the producers and consumers of the gap year experience. The works of education scholars such as Nieman (2013) and Rabie and Naidoo (2016) draw our important attention to the limited extent of scientific research on South African students’ gap year experiences. It is argued that the multiple dimensions of gap year travel warrant an expanded focus by South African tourism researchers. A growth of research around gap year travel would provide the foundation for informed recommendations to policy makers and destination marketing organizations.

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