Gaining New Experiences in the Gap Year Contributes to The Decision-Making Process for a

Higher Education Programme

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Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of taking a gap year amongst students, no previous studies have investigated to what extent a gap year between secondary school and higher education contributes to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. Therefore, this descriptive study aims to create a deeper understanding regarding the considerations of advising a gap year before a higher education programme. By conducting fifteen semi-structured interviews it is shown that the majority of students confirmed that a gap year provided insight in the educational choice. These findings indicate that a gap year is able to provide higher levels of self- and environmental exploration, due to the fact that a gap year provides more opportunities to shape students' interests and choices as they gain more experiences in different environments. Experiences in the gap year provide new perspectives, and stimulates self-reflection. Implications for higher educational theory suggest to study the decision-making process in different contexts, since experiences in different environments positively influence levels of self- and environmental exploration. Implications for practice suggest that students should be more encouraged to gain experiences during the decision-making process.

Key words: gap year, students, higher education programme, complex decision-making process, discontinuity, experiences

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Every year many students have to make a decision for a higher education programme. A decision for higher education usually implies a complex decision-making process in which students are faced with decisional tasks or activities such as exploring different alternatives, reflecting on interests and skills, comparing suitable alternatives, and choosing one option (Germeijs, Luyckx, Notelaers, Goossens, & Verschueren, 2012). Students usually strive to choose a higher education programme that fits with their present interests, while at the same time they try to achieve a proper match between a study programme and an attractive study-life and working-life in general (Holmegaard, Ulriksen, & Madsen, 2014). They often express that they can choose whatever they want to study, and they also try to figure out what kind of person they are going to be (Schwartz, 2004). Additionally, many students experience the decision-making process as an insecure process. They fear they will not be able to make the 'right choice', considering it crucial for their future lives to choose the right path of study (Holmegaard et al., 2014).

In the Netherlands, there is a growing popularity amongst students to take a gap year between secondary school and higher education (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2018). A recent study conducted by ResearchNed (2018) showed a clear majority of students who have taken a gap year indicated they have become more certain of their educational choice. Previous studies suggest that taking a gap year might contribute to increased self-development, higher performance outcomes, better career choice formation, and an increase in a variety of life skills such as leadership, communication and self-discipline (Heath, 2007; King, 2011; Jones, 2004).

Recently, evidence suggest that taking a gap year can play a positive role in students' decision-making process for a higher education programme. Despite the growing popularity of taking a gap year amongst students, there is a lack in higher educational theory. So far, less is

known in literature in what way a gap year contributes to students' the decision-making process. Therefore, this study wants to create a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. It is necessary to get more insight, in order to provide better guidance and information to students, parents, deans, counsellors and mentors. In this way, they are better informed about the considerations of taking a gap year before a higher education programme. Therefore, the findings of this study add new theoretical and practical insights to offer the right guidance during the decision-making process for a higher education programme.

Theoretical Framework

Complex decision-making process

Making a decision for a higher education programme is a complex process, in which some students experience difficulties that prevent them from making a sustainable educational choice (Gati & Saka, 2001). To create a better understanding of the decision-making process for a higher education programme, it is necessary to describe this process first. Previous studies indicate that students' interests are seen as the most important factor when making a decision for higher education (Vulperhorst, Wessels, Bakker, & Akkerman, 2018; Holmegaard et al., 2014). Interests are combined with cognition, motivation, and affection (Renninger & Hidi, 2011), and are associated to the wish to spend more time and effort to related subjects and activities (Vulperhorst et al., 2018). Since interests play an important role in making sustainable study and career choices, making a decision for a higher education programme is an interest-based choice (Eccles & Wigfield 2002; Holmegaard et al. 2014).

Interests develop both across contexts (e.g. interests out of school) and in isolated environments (e.g. interests in school) (Barron, 2006). Interests and choices can change due to the information available, which may be modified by influential contexts such as peers,

teachers, counsellors, parents and other adults (Moogan & Baron, 2003). Through interaction with the environment and the influential contexts, students' interests might be shaped (Renninger, Hidi, & Krapp, 1992; Holmegaard, 2015). During the decision-making process for a higher education programme, students may go through a more active reflecting process and weigh more consciously which interests they want to pursue. However, due to time constraints, it is not always possible for students to pursue all interests in a higher education programme, and interests may compete with each other (Hofer, 2010; Vulperhorst et al., 2018). Therefore, this implies that active reflecting, weighing and contrasting interests can make the decision-making process complex for students, since they cannot pursue all of the interests in a higher education programme.

To make a well-informed and sustainable choice for a future higher education programme, is it important that students make use of a self-, broad and in-depth exploration during the decision-making process. Through self-exploration students gain more insight in who they are, what their goals, interests and values are, and which directions they want to choose in life. Broad and in-depth (e.g. environmental) exploration contributes to gain more insight in how they can proceed with a specific interest into a higher education programme (Germeijs et al., 2012). It has been suggested that higher levels of self- and environmental exploration results in a better match between the student and the chosen career, which in turn results in higher levels of satisfaction, and identification with the educational choice (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007).

In sum, students make an interest-based choice for a future higher education programme. The decision-making process is complex and difficult due to the fact that students need to weigh more consciously which interests they want to pursue in a higher education programme. If students achieve higher levels of self- and environmental exploration, it is possible that they will be more satisfied with the educational choice. However, so far, it is

unclear whether a gap year contributes to achieving higher levels of self- and environmental exploration.

Gap year

A gap year can be defined as a period of time in "which an individual takes out of formal education in the context of a longer-term career trajectory" (Jones, 2004). A gap year can involve structured activities, such as part-time work, volunteering, or unstructured leisure activities (Martin, 2010). Most gap year students undertake or combine these different activities at different points during their gap year (Jones, 2004; Martin, 2010).

Previously, several studies demonstrated that taking a gap year provide an opportunity for self-development (Van Trijp, & Minca, 2014; Hermann, Peters, & Van Trijp, 2017). Self-development can be seen as developing confidence, maturity and independence, which implies that a gap year enables students to indicate that their current self, differs from a past self (Heath, 2007; King, 2011). In addition, it is reported that gap year students have higher performance outcomes, increased career choice formation, and an increase in a variety of life skills such as leadership, communication and self-discipline (Jones, 2004). They value a gap year as a way to become better informed about advanced education choices (Hermann et al., 2017). Therefore, the gap year might enhance student's sense of perspective and facilitates informed decisions about their plans for studying and future career options. However, the study of Jones (2004) also described several drawbacks of taking a gap year. It is mentioned that taking a gap year might affect students' motivation to progress with studying again. Additionally, an inadequate planning during the gap year may result in risking a wasted year. Yet, it is unclear whether this plays a role in students' decision-making process.

To conclude, previous research showed mixed findings of taking a gap year. Several studies suggest that taking a gap year enhances students' self-development. This indicates that

a gap year might play a role in students' self- and environmental exploration, as a gap year may help to figure out what kind of person they are, what their values are and what kind of study they want to choose. However, previous studies indicated several drawbacks of taking a gap year, such as less motivated to start again with a higher education programme and creating a wasted year. Therefore, it remains unclear in what way a gap year contributes to students' decision-making process.

Present study

This study aims to describe in-depth to what extent a gap year contributes to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. Students go through a difficult decision-making process, while they need to make a sustainable choice for their future career. There is a possibility that students, who have taken a gap year, go through higher levels of self- and environmental exploration due to the fact that they are better in defining who they are, what their goals, values and interests are and in which directions they want to choose their future career. However, it is not known whether gap year students have explored broader and more in-depth and whether students feel that their sense of self matches with the higher education programme they choose after the gap year. Therefore, the following research question is formulated: *To what extent does taking a gap year, between secondary school and higher education, contribute to the decision-making process for a higher education programme?*

Given the descriptive design of this study, expectations are difficult to formulate beforehand. The added value of this study it to create a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Method

Research design

This study was conducted from a Naturalistic Paradigm (Lincoln, Guba & Pilotta, 1985), which means that this study was carried out in a natural setting with qualitative methods (Bowen, 2008). Qualitative methods were used, because they fit the descriptive nature of the research question (Boeije, 2010). This was done by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews consisting of open questions.

The Dutch context

This study examines students who have taken a gap year between secondary school and higher education in the Netherlands. Most Dutch students graduate from secondary school at the age of 17 or 18 years old. One out of ten students in the Netherlands took a gap year in the year of 2017 - 2018, and about 12.000 Dutch students take a gap year each year (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2018). Three levels of secondary education can be distinguished in the Dutch school system: vmbo is pre-vocational secondary education, havo is senior general secondary education and vwo is pre-university education. Also, three levels in higher education can be distinguished: mbo is vocational education, hbo is education at a university of applied sciences and wo is education at university. Graduating from vmbo provides access to vocational education, graduating from havo gives access to the university of applied sciences, and graduating from vwo provides access to the university.

Participants

The participants were fifteen Dutch students, who have taken a gap year between secondary school, havo ($n = 4$) or vwo ($n = 11$), and higher education (see Appendix A). All participants took a gap year of one year. The participants were between 18 and 21 years old (M

= 19,8) at the time of data collection. Taking a gap year was for 13 participants a conscious choice. One participant was not admitted to the preferred higher education programme. Another participant quit after one month with the higher education programme and took the rest of the year as a gap year. At time of the participation, the students were studying in a higher education programme in their first year ($n = 9$) or second year ($n = 6$) at a Dutch university of applied sciences ($n = 5$) or university ($n = 10$).

Selection of participants

The number of participants has been determined on saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). It was chosen to select fifteen participants for maintaining the balance between first- and second-year students. Purposive sampling and snowballing have been used to select the participants. Only students who met the specific requirements were selected. The selection requirements were: 1) Dutch students who took a gap year between secondary school and higher education, 2) Dutch students who were currently studying at a Dutch university or an university of applied sciences in their first or second year. As these students were studying in their first- or second year, it was expected the experience of the gap year and decision-making process was still as close to the phenomenon as possible, making it easier for the participants to recapitulate their experiences during the decision-making process. Students with school level vmbo or mbo were not selected because these students mostly finish secondary school at the age of 16 years and often have compulsory attendance at vocational education (Rijksoverheid, 2019), which means that these students often do not opt a gap year.

Instrument and procedure

A topic list has been used for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). The sensitizing concepts derived from the theoretical framework were operationalized into two topics. The two topics included open questions about the gap year, and the experience of the

complex decision-making process. An example of a question in the semi-structured interview is: '*To what extent did the gap year provide you more insight in your interests?*'.

The personal and professional network of the researcher have been used in order to recruit the participants for this study. The data gathering started with contacting possible participants for this study. The participants were informed by an online link via a contact form (Appendix C). Interested participants were able to leave their contact details. Furthermore, an advert has been placed on social media (Appendix D). The message was posted on the Facebook page 'Wilweg', of which many gap year students are a member. Furthermore, contact has been made with various teachers and study coordinators from various Dutch (applied) universities. To make participation among students more attractive, a small prize was raffled among the participants in the form of a gift card worth twenty-five euros from a web shop.

After recruiting the participants, individual appointments were planned. The interview location was always determined in consultation with the participant. Most interviews took place in a meeting room at the university the student studies at. All interviews were conducted in Dutch. Before starting the interview, the interview procedure was briefly introduced, and students were asked to sign the informed consent form (Appendix E). The interviews lasted between half an hour to an hour, were recorded, and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were anonymized to protect the privacy of the participants in this study. Pseudonym names were used to represent quotes of the participants.

Quality assurance

The naturalistic terms of credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability) and, dependability (consistency) have been used as criteria for the quality assurance of this study (Guba, 1981; Cho & Lee, 2014). In order to increase the quality assurance of the instrument, a pilot interview and expert validation have been conducted, after which the instrument was

adapted. For example, the pilot interview indicated a few overlapping questions. Next to that, the structure of the topic list has been refined. For example, the question: '*How did you experience the gap year?*' has been added as an introductory question of the topic Gap Year. The pilot interview indicated that the semi-structured interview would take approximately 30 minutes.

After the pilot interview, an expert validation has been conducted. An expert from the Gap Year Knowledge Centre (TussenjaarKenniscentrum) was contacted to check the content of the questions in the instrument. The expert advised to ask more open and exploratory questions. For example, the question: *'Did you develop skills during the gap year that you did not learn or develop at school?'* was now adapted into: *'Did you develop skills during the gap year?'*.

Thereafter, to increase the credibility, a member check was conducted by sending the transcribed data to the participants for an extra check (Cho & Lee, 2014). All participants agreed with the transcribed data. Furthermore, participants were selected with various experiences of activities in their gap year and various study backgrounds (see Appendix A). This all contributed to a richer understanding of the studied phenomenon (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Additionally, purposive sampling has been used and the presentation of appropriate quotations enhanced the transferability of the findings (Guba, 1981). Also, a clear description of culture and context, selection and characteristics of participants, data collection and process of analysis contributed to the transferability of the finding (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Lastly, to achieve unbiased results, an audit trail has been conducted with another auditor (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The auditor was also working in the educational research field, but not involved in this study (Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans, & Oost, 2008). Through

conducting an audit trail the dependability of this study has been enhanced. The audit trail included all records, notes, transcripts and decisions made (e.g. logbook) proceeded and corrected (Cho & Lee, 2014). The logbook and assessment scheme of this audit trail can be found in Appendix H. After the audit, the transparency of the data analysis was improved.

Data analyses and procedure

After collecting and transcribing the data, a conventional content analysis has been conducted. With this approach, codes, categories, or themes were directly drawn from the data. Relevant theories or other research findings were addressed in the discussion section of the study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The focus of the data was to analyse what was told by the participants and to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). The program NVivo was used in order to analyse the qualitative data. The final code scheme can be found in Appendix F.

The analysis process in qualitative content analysis comprises selecting the unit of analysis, categorizing and finding themes from categories (Cho & Lee, 2014). First, the data transcripts were openly coded in open categories. Second, the open codes were grouped into axial codes. Third, the axial codes were determined to selected codes. These selected codes were linked to themes from the data. Fourth, the thematic analysis steps were used in order to identify the themes from the open, axial and selected codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four key themes: self-development, change in environment, time to reflect, and time to explore appeared from the codes. The fifth step was a review of the themes to check if themes and quotations were representing the data. Sixth, quotations from the participants were used to draw conclusions on the research question. The quotes were selected as illustrations of the sub-themes and themes. These themes guided the presentation of the results section.

Results

The results describe from students perspective whether the gap year contributed to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. During the data analysis three subthemes, namely: change in environment, time to reflect and time to explore were derived from the codes. These subthemes indicate why students have pursued a gap year and how this is related to their choice process for a higher education programme. All three subthemes contributed to the broader theme: self-development.

The gap year as self-development tool

The most interesting result was the sense amongst thirteen students that the gap year supported their self-development. Most students mentioned they felt they were more independent, confident or mature after the gap year. One common reason was the responsibility for arranging their own activities in the gap year. As Daniel explained:

> I am standing on my own feet and now I do everything myself, the gap year has made me a lot more mature. I think that a gap year makes you more mature because you have to give substance to what you are going to do, it is not a standard year. You do not go to school anymore, so you do not have fixed hours in which you have something to do. You have to make sure you have work and you must entertain yourself in that sense.

Daniel mentioned he felt more self-developed because taking a gap year is not a standard year. He needed to fix and plan his own hours. Furthermore, students mentioned that during the gap year they were in new environments where they were responsible for themselves. As a result, students were making decisions on their own and arranging activities. Taking responsibility and organize activities all contributed to the sense of being more self-developed.

The increased feeling of self-development, was mainly confirmed at the moment when gap year students started with their higher education programme. As student Kim said:

> I started my studies so much older and wiser that I think everyone should actually take a gap year because you learn so much. You can just do what you like and you have time to learn new things during the gap year. I noticed when I started my study here that I was definitely one step further in certain things than the people around me.

From the moment Kim started her studies, she felt more developed compared to her fellow students. As Kim explained in the gap year she had more time to learn new things and to do whatever she wanted.

Developing yourself through changes in environment, time to reflect and time to explore

During the data analysis, three subthemes emerged: change in environment, time to reflect and time to explore. Table 1 presents an overview of the relatedness of the codes to these subthemes.

Table 1. Codes related to the subthemes.

Subtheme	Codes	Number of students	Example in data
Change in environment Represents the feeling among students that their environment had changed compared to the environment before the gap year.	Meeting new people	4	*'I think it is very positive I have got my own network.'*
	Change in social connections	5	*'Everyone around you has a study and new friends.'*
	Feeling of standing still	5	*'Just the idea you are standing still. You are not standing still but you have that idea.'*
	Feeling of being alone	8	*'At the beginning of the gap year you are quite on your own. I wanted to go out or to do something nice but you cannot see your friends all the time because most of them are studying.'*
	No routine	4	*'You get a bit out of your routine, the school routine. For example I was the only one who worked.'*
	Planning activities	4	*'Sometimes the gap year is a bit long. You have to organize activities for yourself. Otherwise you are too much at home'*
Time to reflect Demonstrates the inward focus on self-reflection: the time to think about what students want to do in future career, about themselves and their interests.	Extra time to think	13	*'Because of my gap year, I had the time and energy to look for a future study. And the time for looking more broadly about what I want.'*
	Self-reflection	9	*'I had more time to reflect on myself. To think about what I really want to do in my future career.'*
	Interests	9	*'Through the gap year, it became clear for me I want to do something in the sector of social sciences.'*
Time to explore Represents the outward focus: the time to gain new experiences through working,	Doing something different	11	*'I always had difficulties with learning, so I wanted to do something different than studying.'*
	Life experience	4	*'I went so much older and wiser into my studies. I think everyone should take a gap year because you learn so much in such a year.'*

	Work experience	4	*'I think it is really good to get more work experience.'*
volunteering or doing different activities.			
	Less pressure and more rest	10	*'You hear from everyone: 'yes I go to school I need this and that.' I only had to work and not much else. So, it was actually relaxing.'*

In certain ways, these three subthemes contributed to an increased feeling of self-development. Table 2 illustrates several quotations with explanations how these subthemes were related in different ways to an opportunity of self-development.

Table 2. Explanation of the subthemes related to self-development.
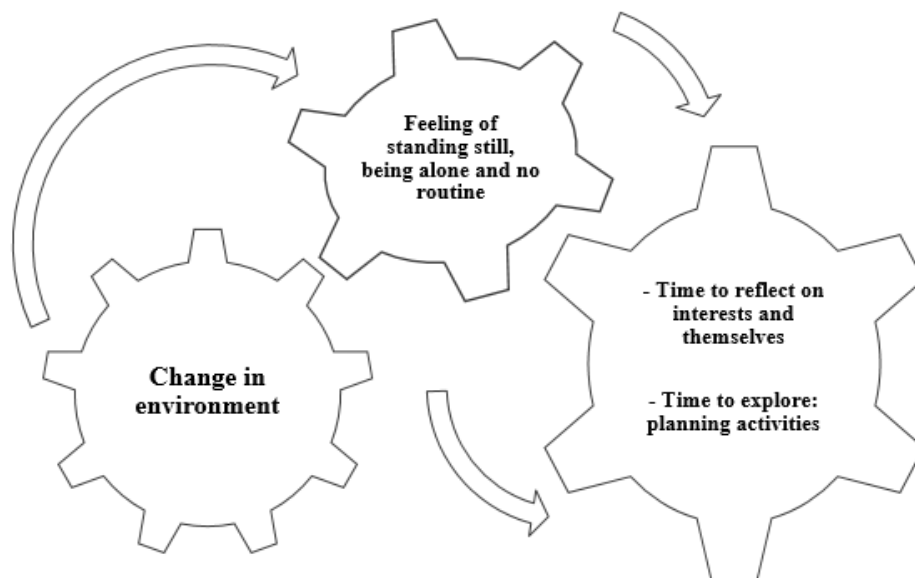
Theme	Subtheme	Example in data
Self-development	**Change in environment**	*'Well, you become more independent. The gap year provides this opportunity. In my case I was completely alone in the beginning. I did not know anyone. So you are in a new situation. This situation contributes to becoming more self-developed because you have to push yourself to go outside and to get in touch with new people. That was very useful for me.'*
	Time to reflect	*'For myself I have just taken a lot of steps during the gap year in terms of: Where do I want to go? What do I want to do in the future? It has made me a lot more mature and more ready for the future and for the start of my higher education programme.'*
	Time to explore	*'I became more mature and independent because I needed to organize many things for myself. I was a civil servant before my twenties. Through this work experience I developed myself towards university. Also, going to evening school was helping me to become more independent and confident than I was before this gap year.'*

Self- and environmental exploration during the gap year

The majority of students suggested that a gap year helped them in self- and environmental exploration, which contributed to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. As Hannah commented:

> The gap year helped me with my educational choice because you explore more, develop yourself and find out more what you like.

This indicates that the themes in one way or another contributed to her decision-making for a higher education programme. The process of these themes towards student's self- and environmental exploration in the gap year was visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Diagram representing the themes related to the self- and environmental exploration.

Figure 1 shows that change in environment might be the starting point in the process of self- and environmental exploration. The experienced change in environment created the feeling of standing still, being alone and no routine for some students. But, experiencing these feelings helped students to organize and plan activities in the gap year. It seems this change contributes to self-reflection about themselves, and their interests. In addition, it stimulated students to explore activities like working, or traveling but also activities related to the orientation for a higher education programme. Therefore, change in environment, time to reflect and time to explore were overlapping and stimulating in different ways to students' self- and environmental exploration in the gap year.

The following paragraphs describe the subthemes independently towards self- and environmental exploration.

Change in environment. The subtheme 'change in environment' represents the feeling amongst students that their environment had changed compared to the environment before the gap year. A common view amongst students was the fact that they were all operating in a different environment than in a school setting, for the first time. This change in environment was experienced by students in two ways. First, students who stayed at home during the gap year experience changes in the environment because their friends were moving out of town. As Fiona explained as follows:

> Everyone of your friends around you has new friends and is living in a new city: they all go away out of town. During the gap year, you get the idea they all go further and you stand still a bit. So, you really have to take care of yourself by planning activities. You have to make sure you have something to do. That is really a thing, because sometimes you do not have so much to do when you have a day off and your friends are at university. This means you cannot meet them every day and they are also busy when you are just at home. So, you have to arrange activities for yourself, otherwise you are completely at home and you do nothing at all and that does not make you happy for a while. That is the negative side of the gap year.

The quote of Fiona illustrates the feeling of being alone, having no routine, standing still, and changes in social connections were experienced due to the fact that her environment had changed. In order to decrease these feelings Fiona mentioned she took the responsibility to arrange activities in the gap year by herself.

Secondly, change in environment was experienced when gap year students went to travel, study or work abroad during the gap year. Being in a new environment contributed for most students to plan activities. As Bart commented:

> At the start of my trip, I was not that active with organizing activities. I was just chilling in the hostel. At some point you find out that this is super boring to stay 3 or 4 days in a hostel, while there are so many fun things to do outside. The same thing happened with my decision-making process. I just let it happen. At one point I thought now I have to undertake action. I really have to prepare myself. So, I think I learned that kind of organization skills during my gap year.

Bart explained that he learned new skills, such as organizing activities, when he was abroad in a new environment. Thus, both quotes from Fiona and Bart show that change in environment contributes to undertaking action in the gap year, like exploration activities.

Time to reflect. The subtheme 'time to reflect' represents the inward focus on self-reflection. Thirteen students explained how they experienced this positively related to the decision-making process, because they had more to the reflect on themselves. As Laura said:

> I had extra time to reflect about what do I really like to do and what I want in my future career. This reflection time in the gap year helped me to get insight in the educational choice.

Interestingly, all students agreed with the statement that their educational choice for a higher education programme was based on their interests. Nine students argued the gap year provided insights in their interests, since they had more time to reflect. The following quote contained elements of this. As student Nick commented:

> The gap year provided me with more insight in my interests and that helped with my educational choice. Because at first, I spent all my time looking for studies matching my profile from secondary education. But then I thought it could also be something else. So, in the gap year I had more time to do some extra activities.

The quote of Nick explains that having time to reflect in the gap year was helping to gain better insight in his interests. Therefore, through the gap year he knew better which interests he wanted to pursue in a higher education programme.

Time to explore. The subtheme 'time to explore' demonstrates the time to gain new experiences through work, volunteering or doing different activities. As student Daniel said:

> The biggest reason to for taking a gap year was that I was completely done with school. I really wanted to do something different than studying.

Students often experienced the exam year as a hardworking, difficult and stressful year. Therefore, it was hard to focus on studying and thinking about the educational choice at the same time. As one student commented:

> During the gap year, I had more rest and less pressure. The time to do whatever I wanted. And to orientate, to explore, but also to reflect instead of having an exam week next week.

Due to these reasons, most students took a gap year to have more time to explore and to do something different than studying.

The contribution of these themes towards the decision-making process

These subthemes experienced in the gap year supports the self- and environmental exploration of students. Doing different activities and having more time to explore and to reflect in the gap year, was helping students to gain more insight in their interests and what higher education programme they wanted to pursue. Students mentioned that change in environment contributed to exploration activities, this helped them to get more insight in their interests related to the educational choice. As the following quote illustrates:

> Researcher: 'How did you experience the gap year?'
>
> Gwen: 'Yes, as really great. There is so much that you come across and what comes on your way. And the independence is huge, because everything depends on you for what you want to do. While traveling I came across things that I thought, yes you see there is interest in sustainable solutions.'
>
> Researcher: 'Okay, so during your trip the educational choice was kind of confirmed too?'
>
> Gwen: 'Yes, sort of, because I wanted to continue with taking a gap year for several years, but I also thought it would be really useful to start studying something now. And this is also a study with many opportunities to go abroad again. So, it kind of comes together in that way.'

As Gwen explained in this quote, travelling abroad and being in a new environment was helped her to find out that her interest in sustainable solutions was confirmed. Furthermore, several students explained they already knew before the gap year what they wanted to study. However, the gap year actually confirmed their educational choice due to the changed environment, the time to reflect and the time to explore. As Laura told:

> I already decided to do this study before I left for England. Of course I was able to think a bit more during my gap year and look a little further. But in the end, I decided that it would be this study. I had a lot of time to be busy with nutrition and health in general to sort things out. And during that year, I found out that I was very interested in this. So, it actually confirmed my educational choice.

Furthermore, a consequence of having more time to reflect and to explore was the fact that they were more motivated to start again with studying, as twelve students explained. For example explained by one student:

> I certainly think my gap year ensured me that I was a lot more motivated. During secondary school in class 1 and 2, I was very motivated. However, that motivation decreased a bit over the years. In class 6, I was completely done with school. And now I am super motivated again. I think this is due to the gap year, because of taking some distance. Also, at the end of the gap year I really wanted to start studying, because I was looking forward to it. That helped a lot. So, that was certainly one of the biggest benefits for me.

Students mentioned that taking distance from studying and exploring new activities helped to get them more motivated again in the gap year. The reason for this was that students had the feeling they were ready to start again. Doing something different for one year was nice, but after the gap year they were ready for a new challenge.

The ease of decision-making through self- and environmental exploration in the gap year

Interestingly, the represented themes indicate that the gap year contributes to students' self-development and their decision-making process. Regarding the experience of the decision-making process, six students mentioned the educational choice process was an easy decision. As student Jesse said:

> During the gap year, there was more rest and less pressure compared to the exam year. Because of that, it felt way better to make an educational choice. It did not feel like making a certain choice under pressure, which you could regret afterwards.

So, these feelings of experiencing the process as easy were often related to having more time to reflect and feeling less pressure.

Even though several students mentioned that the decision-making process was easier because of the gap year, still nine students explained that the decision-making process was difficult for them. These feelings were often related to: 1) choice overload, 2) choosing into a specific direction and, 3) having too many interests. For example as told by Olivia:

> I think it was mainly difficult that I had far too many interests but not in a specific direction. I had all interests in different areas and I did not know which way to go. So, I found it very difficult.

For this reason, it was often not the case that the decision-making was easier because students were weighing their interests during the process.

Although most students experienced the decision-making process as difficult, fourteen students commented they were still satisfied with their educational choice and said they will see what the higher education programme will bring them in their future career. One student said she had some doubts about the current higher education programme, since she felt the education was too scientific at the moment.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to describe to what extent taking a gap year contributes to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. The findings of this study indicate students have the feeling they were more self-developed and taking a gap year contributes to the decision-making process. Gaining new experiences in the gap year supported self-reflection, their interests and the educational choice for a higher education programme. Also, most of them confirmed they were still satisfied with the educational choice. The findings of this study offer new insights in order to provide improved guidance and information for advising a gap year before a higher education programme.

The gap year provides higher levels of self- and environmental exploration

The results further support the idea that higher levels of self- and environmental exploration results in a better match between the student and the chosen career, which in turn results in higher levels of satisfaction, and identification with the choice (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007). The results show that students have more time in the gap year for undertaking activities (e.g. working, traveling, or studying abroad) and time to reflect on their interests, and themselves. It seems that the gap year is able to provide higher levels of self- and environmental exploration due to the fact that the gap year provides more opportunities to shape student's interests and choices as they gain more experiences in different environments.

These findings are in line with Brown (2004), he found that experiences, which refers to any situation or activity, structured or unstructured, during the decision-making process have the most impact on students' decision making because experiences provide a new perspective, and stimulates students' self-reflection. In addition, the social cognitive career theory mentioned that students' environment and experiences shape their occupational interests and choices (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). Through learning experiences, students learn more about their choices and what their competencies are (Van Vianen, De Pater, & Preenen, 2009). Therefore, this indicates that exploring activities in different environments contributes to new learning experiences, which gives students new perspectives on themselves, their interests and on their educational choice. Accordingly, this study shows that learning experiences in the gap year contribute towards students' self-development and satisfaction with the educational choice.

In addition, the findings are in line with previous studies, as taking a gap year provides an opportunity for self-development (Van Trijp & Minca, 2014, Heath, 2007; King, 2011, Hermann et al., 2017). The findings indicate that a gap year enables students to be more confident, mature and independent due to the fact that they needed to take their own responsibility for organizing and undertaking activities. From a life course perspective, it can be explained why students, after the gap year, felt more self-developed than before. During the exploration stage, students collect information about themselves, and the world of work. This can shape students' self-concepts, interests and skills (Super, 1990). Taking a gap year might contribute to gaining new knowledge, which positively influence students' self-concepts, skills, and interests. Therefore, the exploration stage can be linked to the decision-making process of gap year students. Students who have taken a gap year are undertaking more exploring activities and the experiences of these activities during the gap year can contribute to students' self-development. Thus, from a life course perspective it can be explained that students, who have

taken a gap year, experience the feeling that they are more self-developed compared to their fellow students in a higher education programme.

The ease of decision-making from students perspective

Although gap year students have more time to reflect on their interests and skills, surprisingly most students experience the decision-making process still as difficult and complex. This result is likely to be related to having many interests and experiencing a choice overload during the decision-making process. This is in line with the study of Schwartz (2009), who mentioned that people often face an abundance of choice. This abundance of choice was experienced by the majority of students and was one of the reasons why the decision-making process was still difficult. As the range of choices increases, choosing one option can be more difficult. On the one hand, a higher education programme might be more attractive because of the interests it relates to. On the other hand, it might be less attractive, because parallel interests do not relate to this programme (Vulperhorst et al., 2018). Therefore, the reflecting and weighing of interests into a specific higher education programme can be experienced as complex. Furthermore, this finding can be explained by the fact that career-related choices are among the most important decisions people make during their lifetime (Gati & Tal, 2008). Students want to make the educational choice autonomous and independently, but they are relatively inexperienced with making important life choices (Galotti, Ciner, Altenbaumer, Geerts, Rupp, & Woulfe, 2006).

Change in environment as a motor of self-development

The results illustrate that taking a gap year often concurs with changes in one's environment. These changes were often experienced as negative, since students felt disconnected from friends and no set routine to fall back on. Although students reported this to be a drawback of taking a gap year, it actually lead to action and planning activities. In

conclusion, experiencing change in environment during the gap year can contribute to students' self-development.

When a stable environment is disrupted, behavioural patterns associated with that context are broken too, according to Wood and Verplanken (2006). Context changes have the potential to change behaviour, because discontinuities may force to create a need for information to make new choices, and a mind-set of being in the mood for change (Verplanken & Roy, 2016). The finding that change in environment works as a motor for students' self-development might be explained through the disruption stage of Brammer (1992). The disruption stage emerges through experiencing discontinuity, as discontinuities provide an opportunity to reconsider behaviour and choices. When change in environment in the gap year is experienced, the feeling of discontinuity can support students to plan, organize and undertake activities, which can contribute to students' self-development. Since, students mentioned they have become more mature and independent because of the responsibility for themselves in the gap year. Therefore, it seems the disruption stage experienced in the gap year might contribute to self-development and may be a necessary element to make a sustainable choice for higher education

Limitations

In interpreting the findings some possible limitations should be kept in mind. First, there is potentially a bias in the results, because the participants volunteered to participate in this study. This can create a selected group, with students who are positive, enthusiastic and interested in talking about their experiences of the gap year and the decision-making process. This potential bias could have influenced the finding that students were more motivated to start studying again. In addition, there could be a bias in the finding that a gap year contributed

positively to the decision-making process for a higher education programme, because these students were more willing to talk about their experiences.

Another limitation of this study is there could be a potential bias on the finding of the ease of the decision-making process, because this study did not investigate the experience of the gap year and the decision-making process with a story line instrument. It seems the decision-making process is experienced more difficult if students reflect back on the earlier stage of the process. The feelings of having many interests, choosing a specific direction and choice overload were probably more often faced in the beginning of the process. Students explained that the process was experienced easier when they had less options, more time to think, felt less pressure and when they started early with the process. It seems that students who formulated the process as easy were reflecting back to the end of the decision-making process. However, the questions in this instrument did not zoom into the specific moments during the gap year and the decision-making process. Therefore, it is not entirely clear whether the decision-making process was experienced easier or more difficult.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study are important to gain new knowledge about the relation of taking a gap year to the decision-making process for a higher education programme.

Future research

For future research it would be interesting to study the decision-making process of students who have taken a gap year and students who have not taken a gap year. Additional studies are needed to research the two different groups of students towards their decision-making process for a higher education programme. By doing so, a broader picture can be developed of the motivation of students towards a higher education programme, their feeling of self-development, the influence of operating in different environments, experiencing

discontinuity and the differences in their decisional processes. This could be done by conducting a large-scale study over time. It is suggested to select a broader sample of participants and to interview these participants in different moments during the decision-making process. For example, start data gathering at three different moments in the decision-making process of students: by the start of the process in secondary school, in the middle of the process (e.g. in the gap year, or students who are in their first year) and in the end of the process when the educational choice has been made. By doing so, the different groups can be compared in different time points in their decision-making process, to develop a full picture of their experiences.

Another suggestion for future studies is to conduct this study with a story line instrument or a critical incidents method. By investigating the meaningful moments in students' decision-making process, the experience of the decision-making process can be analysed more in-depth from the start till the end. In addition, by using a story line instrument, it would be interesting to compare students who have taken a gap year and students who did not have taken a gap year. Through this way an interesting research in this phenomenon can be described and compared.

Implications for higher educational choice theory

The present study is the first to attempt an theoretical understanding of how taking a gap year contributes to students' decision-making process. So far, in higher educational choice theory less is known about this phenomenon. The findings indicate that discontinuity (e.g. change in environment) can contribute to students' decision-making process. As it seems that this stage might explain why change in environment during the gap year can contribute to students' self-development, in order to gain higher levels of self- and environmental exploration during the decision-making process for a higher education programme.

For future educational choice theory, it is suggested to investigate the disruption stage in educational choice models (Brammer, 1992; Brown, 2004). It is important for higher educational choice models to encourage students in gaining new experiences, since experiences can shape interests and therefore help students during the educational choice process. Therefore, future research should study the contribution of different contexts, and experiences of discontinuity in the decision-making process for a higher education programme

Practical implications

The gap year is, at the moment, not always recommended to future students, because not much is known in what way a gap year can contribute to students' decision-making process. The findings of this study create a practical understanding about a gap year and the contribution of it towards the decision-making process.

First, an implication for students, parents, mentors, deans and career counsellors – taking a gap year can actually contribute to students' decision-making process for a higher education programme, because a gap year contributes in gaining more 'experiences'. Experiences, such as working, traveling, volunteering or studying abroad, contribute to students' self-development, but also to get a confirmation in their interests and choices. Additionally, experiences, such as doing nothing or the feeling of standing still can help students, since they realize they are responsible for themselves in terms of career development. Experiencing discontinuity during the gap year can activate behaviour in undertaking and organizing activities. So, all these positive or negative experiences in the gap year can contribute to students' self-development. Therefore, this study advices that students should be more encouraged to gain experiences during the decision-making process. Taking a gap year can contribute to this, since taking a gap year can be seen as an optimal tool for gaining insight in themselves, interests, choices and future directions.

Second, an implication for students, parents and career counsellors – for most students is making a decision for a higher education programme a complex process. Most students, who have taken a gap year, mentioned that they have experienced the process as difficult. But, the decision-making process felt more relaxed because, students have more time to reflect and to explore in the gap year. Send the message that taking a gap year can contribute on reflecting on interests and therefore help them to make a sustainable choice for a future higher education programme.

Conclusion

Gaining new experiences in the gap year contributes to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. A gap year enables students to gain new experiences in different environment, which contributes to students' self-reflection, about who they are and want to become, their interests and their choices. Therefore, it seems that the gap year provides an opportunity to make a sustainable educational choice for a higher education programme.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participants background

Appendix B: Topic List Interview

Appendix C: Contact form participants

Appendix D: Facebook Advert

Appendix E: Informed Consent

Appendix F: Code scheme

Appendix G: FETC-Form

Appendix H: Logbook and assessment scheme audit trail

Appendix A – Participants background

Pseudonym	Sex	Activities Gap Year	Secondary education	Higher education	Type of university	Year
Anna	F	Travelling and volunteering abroad, working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Sociology	university	1
Bart	M	Travelling abroad, working in the Netherlands	Havo	Technical Business Management	applied university	1
Christianne	F	Studying abroad, working in the Netherlands	Havo	Fashion Business Management	applied university	1
Daan	M	Gap Year Programme and working in the Netherlands	Havo	Applied Psychology	applied university	1
Evelyn	F	Working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Nutrition & Health	university	2
Fiona	F	Travelling abroad, working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Landscape Architecture & Planning	university	1
Gwen	F	Travelling abroad	Vwo	International Land & Water Management	university	2
Hannah	F	Volunteering abroad, working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Nutrition & Health	university	2
Jesse	M	Studying abroad	Vwo	International Land & Water Management	university	2
Kim	F	Au-pair abroad	Vwo	Nutrition & Health	university	2
Laura	F	Au-pair abroad	Vwo	Health & Society	university	1
Manon	F	Travelling abroad, working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Food Technology	university	1
Niek	M	Working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Landscape Architecture & planning	university	2
Olivia	F	Studying abroad, and working in the Netherlands	Havo	Marketing & Communication	applied university	1
Patrick	M	Working abroad, and working in the Netherlands	Vwo	Sports Science	applied university	1

Appendix B – Topic List Interview

Introductie

Welkom, super fijn dat je wilt deelnemen aan het onderzoek, leuk dat jij je ervaringen van het tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces wilt delen. Ik ben Jessica en ik studeer momenteel aan de masteropleiding Onderwijswetenschappen aan de universiteit Utrecht. Het doel van het onderzoek is om inzicht te krijgen in de ervaringen van het tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces. Ik wil je vragen om het *informed consent* door te lezen en deze te ondertekenen voordat we met het gesprek gaan beginnen.

Alle gegevens in dit onderzoek worden vertrouwelijk behandeld en anoniem verwerkt. De gegevens worden alleen voor onderzoeksdoeleinden gebruikt en niet verstrekt aan derden. Deelname aan dit onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig. Dat betekent dat je vrij bent om te zeggen dat je niet mee wilt doen. Het betekent ook dat als je tijdens het onderzoek op elk moment mag stoppen. Verder wordt het gesprek dus opgenomen en alleen voor de onderzoeksdoeleinden gebruikt.

Tijdens het interview kan het soms voorkomen dat er dubbele vragen worden gesteld.

Small talk
- Hoe oud ben je?
- Wat voor vooropleiding heb je gedaan op de middelbare school?
- Aan welke school instelling studeer je nu?
- Wat is de naam van de studie die je momenteel doet? En in welk studiejaar zit je nu?
- Werk je momenteel naast je studie?

Dan gaan we nu verder naar de onderwerpen van het tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces. We gaan het eerst hebben over het tussenjaar en daarna gaan we verder praten over het studiekeuzeproces.

Tussenjaar
1. Kan je uitleggen waarom je een tussenjaar hebt gedaan?
   a. Wat is de belangrijkste reden geweest om een tussenjaar te doen?
   b. Zijn er nog andere redenen geweest om een tussenjaar te doen?
2. Wat heb je tijdens je tussenjaar gedaan? Kan je dit toelichten?
3. Hoe heb je het tussenjaar ervaren?
   a. Wat vond je positief en negatief?
4. Wat waren volgens jouw de voordelen van een tussenjaar?
   a. Heb je het idee dat door het tussenjaar je meer inzicht hebt gekregen in wie je bent?
   b. Heb je het idee dat je bent veranderd door het nemen van een tussenjaar? Waarom wel/niet?
   c. Ben je door het tussenjaar meer volwassen, onafhankelijk en zelfverzekerd geworden? Kan je daar een voorbeeld van geven?
5. Als je terugblikt wat waren de nadelen van een tussenjaar?

6. Heb je tijdens het tussenjaar vaardigheden ontwikkeld? Kan je dit toelichten?
   a. Zijn dit vaardigheden die je anders niet had geleerd?
7. In hoeverre heeft het tussenjaar meer inzicht gegeven in jouw interesses?
8. Als je terugdenkt aan de tijd voor het tussenjaar, wat waren jouw studiekeuze plannen toen?
   a. Zijn jouw studiekeuze plannen veranderd na het tussenjaar?
   b. Hoe komt dat volgens jou?

Studiekeuzeproces

1. Kan je uitleggen hoe je het studiekeuzeproces hebt ervaren?
   a. Kan je uitleggen waarom je het moeilijk of makkelijk vond om een studiekeuze te maken?
2. Als je terugdenkt aan het studiekeuzeproces, heb je gezocht naar een studie die aansluit bij jouw interesses? Hoe heb je dat gedaan?
3. Heb je tijdens het studiekeuzeproces gekeken naar wat jij belangrijk vond in een studie? Hoe heb je dat gedaan?
4. Welke activiteiten heb je gedaan tijdens de oriëntatie voor een studie?
   a. Heb je met mensen gepraat over mogelijke opties? Met wie en waarom?
   b. Heb je informatie via internet of open dagen opgezocht?
   c. Was deze oriëntatie breed genoeg?
5. Hoe heb je een definitieve keuze gemaakt uit de verschillende studie opties?
   a. Heb je gereflecteerd in het tussenjaar op alle verschillende studie opties?
6. Heb je het idee dat je uiteindelijk goed geïnformeerd was om de juiste studiekeuze te maken? Kan je dit toelichten?
7. Kan je uitleggen waarom je uiteindelijk voor deze studie hebt gekozen?
8. Kan je uitleggen of je nog steeds tevreden bent met deze studie?
9. Heeft het tussenjaar jou geholpen met het maken van de juiste studiekeuze?
10. Kan je uitleggen hoe je de overgang van het tussenjaar naar de start van deze bacheloropleiding hebt ervaren?
11. Heb jij het gevoel dat je door het tussenjaar betere keuzes en beslissingen kan maken?

Appendix C - Contact form participants

Contactgegevens student

Voor mijn masterthesis ben ik op zoek naar studenten die een tussenjaar hebben gehad (tussen de middelbare school en het hoger onderwijs) en momenteel studeren in het eerste of tweede jaar van een hbo of universitaire bacheloropleiding. Studeer jij momenteel en heb jij hiervoor een tussenjaar gehad? Dan hoor ik graag jouw ervaringen!

Met dit onderzoek hoop ik meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe jij het tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces voor een vervolgopleiding hebt ervaren. Jouw ervaring met het tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces, kunnen nieuwe inzichten bieden voor andere studenten, begeleiders en ondersteuners. Om deze reden hoop ik dat je jouw tussenjaar en studiekeuzeproces ervaringen wilt delen middels een individueel interview van ongeveer 30 minuten. De onderzoeker komt naar de school instelling waar je momenteel studeert voor het gesprek, waarbij het gesprek kan plaatsvinden tijdens een tussenuur. Onder de studenten die zich aanmelden voor het interview wordt een Bol.com cadeaubon verloot ter waarde van €25,-.

Laat hieronder jouw contactgegevens achter voor deelname aan het onderzoek van de universiteit Utrecht. De onderzoeker, Jessica Tadema, neemt zo snel mogelijk contact met je op om een gesprek te plannen.

Voor overige vragen, kan er contact opgenomen worden via j.tadema@students.uu.nl

Appendix D – Facebook Advert

WilWeg
21 februari om 13:21 · 🌐

Studeer jij momenteel en heb jij hiervoor een tussenjaar gedaan? Help Jessica met haar onderzoek!

Voor haar masterthesis is ze op zoek naar studenten die een tussenjaar hebben gedaan en momenteel studeren in het eerste of tweede jaar van een hbo of universitaire bacheloropleiding.

Onder de deelnemers wordt een Bol.com cadeaubon verloot ter waarde van €25. Geïnteresseerd? Meld je aan via https://bit.ly/2tv6D2x

Appendix E – Informed Consent

Betreft: Onderzoek tussenjaar en studiekeuzeproces

In het kader van een onderzoek voor de masteropleiding
Onderwijswetenschappen van Universiteit Utrecht doe ik een
onderzoek naar de ervaringen van het keuzeproces voor een vervolgstudie bij tussenjaar
studenten. Het doel van dit onderzoek is inzicht te krijgen in jouw ervaring van het
studiekeuzeproces.

In te vullen door de deelnemer

Toestemmingsverklaring voor gebruik gegevens ten behoeve van het onderzoek
Hierbij verleen ik toestemming aan de voor het onderzoek verantwoordelijke onderzoeker van
de Universiteit Utrecht, het interview op te nemen en de informatie die ik tijdens het interview
heb gegeven, gebruikt mag worden voor het onderzoek.

Mijn gegevens zullen enkel gebruikt worden voor dit onderzoek.
Mijn gegevens zijn in het onderzoek niet te herleiden naar de persoon.

Ik verklaar hierbij volledig te zijn ingelicht over het doel van het onderzoek. Mijn (eventuele)
vragen zijn naar tevredenheid beantwoord. Ik heb genoeg tijd gehad om te beslissen of ik mee
zou doen.
Ik weet dat meedoen helemaal vrijwillig is. Ik weet dat ik op ieder moment kan beslissen om
toch niet mee te doen. Daarvoor hoef ik geen reden op te geven.

Naam:………………………………………………………………………………

Plaats: ...., Datum:…………………………………

Handtekening deelnemer:

Handtekening onderzoeker:

Voor inhoudelijke vragen over het onderzoek kunt u contact opnemen met Jessica Tadema.

Contactgegevens:
Jessica Tadema (student): j.tadema@uu.students.nl

Appendix F – Code scheme

Name Code	Files	References
Activities Gap Year	15	19
Au-pair abroad	2	2
Doing nothing	1	1
Gap Year programme	1	1
Studying abroad	3	5
Thinking about study choice	3	3
Travelling	5	5
Working	8	10
Working abroad	1	1
Advantages Gap Year	15	27
Time to explore	10	11
Doing something different	3	3
Freedom & time	5	6
Life experience	4	6
Meeting new people	4	5
More motivated	12	17
Saving money	3	4
Self-development	10	21
Time to reflect - more time to think about choice for he	13	27
Work experience	2	3
Broad and in-depth exploration	15	22
Important factors in program	13	15
Interest-based choice	15	24
Broader topic HE	10	14
Orientation activities	12	18
Internet	15	19

Name Code	Files	References
Matching day	11	16
Striping list	5	7
Talking to people	15	31
Visiting HE schools (open)	13	21
Conclusion Gap Year	13	15
Experienced disadvantage	1	1
Experienced more advantages	12	13
Disadvantages Gap Year	15	19
Being alone	7	8
Doing boring work	1	2
Feeling of standing still	5	6
No routine	4	6
Social connections	5	5
Environment	3	5
Parents	4	6
School	1	1
Sister	1	1
Experience decision-making process HE	15	15
Decision-making was difficult	11	14
Choice overload	5	9
Hard work during exam year	2	2
Specific direction	4	4
Stress	1	1
Too many interests	7	9
Decision-making was easy	6	6
Start early	2	2
Time to think	3	5

Name Code	Files	References
two options	3	3
Experience Gap Year	15	15
Negative experiences during gap year	6	7
Positive experiences during gap year	15	15
Gap Year provided insights in educational choice	15	18
Gap year did not contribute to choice process	2	2
Gap year provided insight and supported the choice process	14	14
Advice in different environment	1	1
Time to reflect	5	5
Undertaking action	2	2
Satisfaction choice	15	17
Doubts	3	5
Satisfied	14	15
Information from prior school	6	7
Main factor choice Gap Year	15	16
Doing something for yourself	4	5
Exploring	7	9
New environment	2	2
Thinking about study choice	7	8
Making choices in life	8	15
More motivated to start with HE	12	17
Reasoning choice gap year	15	16
Do not know what to study	10	15
Gap year programme	1	2
Idea to travel	6	7
Not admitted to HE	1	1

Name Code	Files	References
Young age	7	7
Study plans	15	15
Gap Year confirmed choice	6	9
Started with study plans during gap year	3	3
Study plans after Gap Year	13	13
Study plans before Gap Year	14	15
Study plans changed through Gap Year	7	7
Theme - change in environment	5	6
Being alone	8	10
Doing something important during gap year - planning activities	4	7
Feeling of standing still	5	6
Meeting new people	4	5
No routine	4	6
Social connections	5	5
Theme - self-development	3	3
Decision-making skills	15	19
Improved	9	9
Not improved	6	6
Personal growth as advantage	10	21
Self-development	15	17
Confirmed self-development	13	13
Current self differs from past self	15	16
Feeling changed	8	9
Other persons told that students was changed after gap year	1	1
Not changed through gap year	7	7
Developing confidence, maturity and independence	15	24
Feeling confident	5	9

Name Code	Files	References
Feeling independent	6	8
Feeling mature	9	13
Making decisions on your own	5	7
Older and wiser compared to fellow students	2	4
Organizing activities	8	12
Taking responsibility on your own	10	14
Through exploring in new environment	11	27
Skills development	15	15
Language	4	4
Organising	2	3
Social skills	6	6
Teaching	2	2
Theme - time to explore	3	3
Doing something different than studying	11	16
Explore activities contributed	5	7
Life experience	4	6
Work experience	4	7
Less pressure more rest	10	16
Theme - time to reflect	6	6
Freedom & time	5	6
Interests during gap year	15	15
Confirmed in choice	9	9
Traveling	3	4
Self-reflection	9	14
Time to think	13	27
Transition gap year to HE	15	17
Need to adapt to new environment	7	8

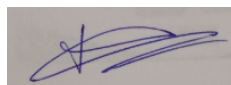| Name Code	Files	References
Settle down	8	9

Appendix G – FETC form

APPLICATION FORM FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF A RESEARCH PROTOCOL BY THE FACULTY ETHICS REVIEW BOARD (FERB) OF THE FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES

General guidelines for the use of this form
1. This form can be used for a single research project or a series of related studies (hereinafter referred to as: "research programme"). Researchers are encouraged to apply for the assessment of a research programme if their proposal covers multiple studies with related content, identical procedures (methods and instruments) and contains informed consent forms and participant information, with a similar population. For studies by students, the FERB recommends submitting, in advance, a research programme under which protocol multiple student projects can be conducted so that their execution will not be delayed by the review procedure. The application of such a research programme must include a proper description by the researcher(s) of the programme as a whole in terms of the maximum burden on the participants (e.g. maximum duration, strain/efforts, types of stimuli, strength and frequency, etc.). If it is impossible to describe all the studies within the research programme, it should, in any case, include a description of the most invasive study known so far.
2. Solely the first responsible senior researcher(s) (from post-doctoral level onwards) may submit a protocol.
3. Any approval by the FERB is valid for 5 years or until the information to be provided in the application form below is modified to such an extent that the study becomes more invasive. For a research programme, the term of validity is 2 years and any extension is subject to approval. The researcher(s) and staff below commit themselves to treating the participants in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Dutch Code of Conduct for Scientific Practices as determined by the VSNU Association of Universities in the Netherlands (which can both be downloaded from the FERB site on the Intranet[1]) and guarantee that the participants (whether decisionally competent or incompetent and/or in a dependent relationship vis-a-vis the researcher or not) may at all times terminate their participation without any further consequences.
4. The researcher(s) commit themselves to maximising the quality of the study, the statistical analysis and the reports, and to respect the specific regulations and legislation pertaining to the specific methods.
5. The procedure will run more smoothly if the FERB receives all the relevant documents, such as questionnaires and other measurement instruments as well as literature and other sources on studies using similar methods which were found to be ethically acceptable and that testify to the fact that this procedure has no harmful consequences. Examples of studies where the latter will always be an issue are studies into bullying behaviour, sexuality, and parent-child relationships. The FERB asks the researcher(s) to be as specific as possible when they answer the relevant questions while limiting their answers to 500 words maximum per question. It is helpful to the FERB if the answers are brief and to the point.
6. **Our FAQ document that can be accessed through the Intranet provides background information with regards to any questions.**
7. The researcher(s) declare to have described the study truthfully and with a particular focus on its ethical aspects.

8. Signed for approval[2]:   Date: 11-06-2019

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[1] See: https://intranet.uu.nl/facultaire-ethische-toetsingscommissie-fetc

[2] The senior researcher (holding at least a doctoral degree) should sign here.

A.   GENERAL INFORMATION/PERSONAL DETAILS

1.. Name(s), position(s) and department(s) of the responsible researcher(s):
Jessica Tadema, Master student Educational Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences

2. Title of the study or research programme:

Final thesis master's degree course of Educational Sciences

Gaining New Experiences in the Gap Year Contributes to The Decision-Making Process for a Higher Education Programme

3. Type of study (with a brief rationale):

-   Descriptive. The study is an in-depth study, which describes to what extent taking a gap year contributes to the decision-making process for a future higher education programme.

4. Grant provider:

There is no (external) funding, this research project is facilitated by the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences (Utrecht University).

5. Intended start and end date for the study:

February 2019 till June 2019

6. Research area/discipline:

Educational Sciences, Theme: Boundary Crossing

7. For some (larger) projects it is advisable to appoint an independent contact or expert whom participants can contact in case of questions and/or complaints. Has an independent expert been appointed for this study?[3]:

No

8. Does the study concern a multi-centre project, e.g. in collaboration with other universities, a GGZ mental health care institution, a university medical centre? Where exactly will the study be conducted? By which institute(s) are the executive researcher(s) employed?:

The study was conducted in the Netherlands. The study is an independent study and was not conducted for an institution.

9. Is the study related to a prior research project that has been assessed by a recognised Medical Ethics Review Board (MERB) or FERB?

No

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[3] This contact may, in principle, also be a researcher (within the same department, or not) who is able to respond to the question or complaint in detail. Independent is to say: not involved in the study themselves. The FERB upholds that an independent contact is not obligatory, but will be necessary when the study is more invasive.

B. SUMMARY OF THE BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Background
1. What is the study's theoretical and practical relevance? (500 words max.):

In the Netherlands, there is a growing popularity amongst students to take a gap year between secondary school and higher education (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2018). A recent study conducted by ResearchNed (2018) showed a clear majority of students who have taken a gap year indicated they have become more certain of their educational choice. Previous studies suggest that taking a gap year might contribute to increased self-development, higher performance outcomes, better career choice formation, and an increase in a variety of life skills such as leadership, communication and self-discipline (Heath, 2007; King, 2011; Jones, 2004).

Recently, evidence suggest that taking a gap year can play a positive role in students' decision-making process for a higher education programme. Despite the growing popularity of taking a gap year amongst students, so far there is a lack in higher educational choice theory in this phenomenon. Less is known about students' decision-making process and the relation of taking a gap year. Therefore, this study wants to create a deeper understanding of the contribution of a gap year towards the decision-making process of students. It is necessary to get more insight about this phenomenon, in order to provide better guidance and information to students, parents, deans, counsellors and mentors. In this way, they are better informed about the considerations of taking a gap year before a higher education programme. Therefore, the findings of this study add new theoretical and practical insights to offer the right guidance during the decision-making process for a higher education programme.

2. What is the study's objective/central question?:

The following research question is formulated:
To what extent does taking a gap year, between secondary school and higher education, contribute to the decision-making process for a higher education program?

This study aims to describe in-depth to what extent a gap year contributes to the decision-making process for a higher education programme. Students go through a difficult decision-making process while they need to make a sustainable choice for their future career. There is a possibility that gap year students go through higher levels of self- and environmental exploration due to the fact that they are better in defining who they are, what their goals, values and interests are and in which directions they want to choose their future career. However, it is unclear whether gap year students have explored broader and more in-depth and whether students feel that their sense of self matches with the higher education programme they choose after the gap year.

3. What are the hypothesis/hypotheses and expectation(s)?:

Given the descriptive design of the research, expectations are difficult to formulate. Therefore, no hypothesis or expectations were formulated in this study.

Design/procedure/invasiveness

4. What is the study's design and procedure? (500 words max.):

To answer the main question fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted. Qualitative methods were used, because this fits the descriptive nature of the research question. A topic list as instrument was used, which covers the research questions (Appendix B). The topic list was based on sensitizing concepts derived from the theoretical framework and included two topics: gap year and decision-making process. Each topic included several questions to guide the interviewer and indicate the scope of the topic.

5.

    a. Which measurement instruments, stimuli and/or manipulations will be used?[4]:

        A topic list was used in order to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in a meeting room at the university the participant studied at.

    b. What does the study's burden on the participants comprise in terms of time, frequency and strain/efforts?:

        The interviews were taking between 25 minutes and 50 minutes

    c. Will the participants be subjected to interventions or a certain manner of conduct that cannot be considered as part of a normal lifestyle?:

        No

    d. Will unobtrusive methods be used (e.g. data collection of uninformed subjects by means of observations or video recordings)?:

        No

    e. Will the study involve any deception? If so, will there be an adequate debriefing and will the deception hold any potential risks?:

        No

6. Will the participants be tested beforehand as to their health condition or according to certain disorders? Are there any inclusion and/or exclusion criteria or specific conditions to be met in order for a participant to take part in this study?:

No

7. Risks for the participants -

    a. Which risks does the study hold for its participants?:

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[4] Examples: invasive questionnaires; interviews; physical/psychological examination, inducing stress, pressure to overstep important standards and values; inducing false memories; exposure to aversive materials like a unpleasant film, video clip, photos or electrical stimulus; long-term of very frequent questioning; ambulatory measurements, participation in an intervention, evoking unpleasant psychological or physical symptoms in an experiment, denial, diet, blood sampling, fMRI, TMS, ECG, administering stimuli, showing pictures, etc. In case of the use of a device (apparatus) or administration of a substance, please enclose the CE marking brochure for the relevant apparatus or substance, if possible.

The risk could be a data leak of the conducted interview.

b. To what extent are the risks and objections limited? Are the risks run by the participants similar to those in daily life?:

Yes the risks are similar to the risks in daily life. The risks of this study were limited because, the only risk was a potential data leak.

8. How does the burden on the participants compare to the study's potential scientific contribution (theory formation, practical usability)?:

The investment in participants in this study was not a lot of burden. The time invested by participants was 25 – 50 minutes.

9. Will a method be used that may, by coincidence, lead to a finding of which the participant should be informed?[5] If so, what actions will be taken in the case of a coincidental finding?:

No

Analysis/power
10. How will the researchers analyse the data? Which statistical analyses will be used?:

After collecting and transcribing the data, a conventional content analysis has been conducted. With this approach, codes, categories, or themes were directly drawn from the data. The analysis process in qualitative content analysis comprises selecting the unit of analysis, categorizing and finding themes from categories (Cho & Lee, 2014). First, the data transcripts were coded in open categories. Second, the open codes were grouped into axial codes. Third, the axial codes were determined to selected codes. These selected codes were linked to themes from the data. Fourth, the thematic analysis steps were used in order to identify the themes from the open, axial and selected codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four key themes: self-development, change in environment, time to reflect, and time to explore appeared from the codes. The fifth step was a review of the themes to check if themes and quotations were representing the data. Sixth, quotations from the participants were used to draw conclusions on the research question. The quotes were selected as illustrations of the sub-themes and themes. The final code scheme can be found in Appendix G.

11. What is the number of participants? Provide a power analysis and/or motivation for the number of participants. The current convention is a power of 0.80. If the study deviates from this power, the FERB would like you to justify why this is necessary:

The number of participants has been determined on saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). It was chosen to select fifteen Dutch participants for maintaining the balance between first- and second-year students.

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[5] For instance: dementia, dyslexia, giftedness, depression, extremely low heartbeat in an ECG, etc. If coincidental findings may be found, this should be included in the informed consent, including a description of the actions that will be taken in such an event.

C.   PARTICIPANTS, RECRUITMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURE

1. The nature of the research population (please tick):

<u>General population without complaints/symptoms</u>

2. Age category of the participants (please tick):

<u>18 years or older</u>

3. Does the study require a specific target group? If so, justify why the study cannot be conducted without the participation of this group (e.g. minors):

Yes, only students who met the specific requirements were selected. The selection requirements were: 1) Dutch students who took a gap year between secondary school and higher education, 2) Dutch students who were currently studying at a Dutch university or an university of applied sciences in their first or second year. The participants background can be found in Appendix A.

4. Recruitment of participants -
      a.   How will the participants be recruited?:

     The personal and professional network of the researcher have been used in order to recruit the participants for this study. The data gathering started with contacting possible participants for this study. The participants were informed by an online link via a contact form (Appendix C). Interested participants were able to leave their contact details. Furthermore, an advert has been placed on social media (Appendix D). The message was posted on the Facebook page 'Wilweg', of which many gap year students are a member. Furthermore, contact has been made with various teachers and study coordinators from various Dutch (applied) universities. To make participation among students more attractive, a small prize was raffled among the participants in the form of a gift card worth twenty-five euros from a web shop.

      b.   How much time will the prospective participants have to decide as to whether they will indeed participate in the study?:

If the participant agreed to participate in the study, then an individual appointment was arranged. There was no specific time limit.

5. Does the study involve informed consent or mutual consent? Clarify the design of the consent procedure (who gives permission, when and how). Does the study involve active consent or passive consent? If no informed consent will be sought, please clarify the reason:

The study involved an active informed consent (Appendix E). Each participant was presented with an informed consent form to ensure confidentiality and to gain permission for recording the interview.

6. Are the participants fully free to participate and terminate their participation whenever they want and without stating their grounds for doing so?:

Yes, the participants volunteered in this study

7. Will the participants be in a dependent relationship with the researcher?:

No

8. Compensation
   a. Will the participants be compensated for their efforts? If so, what is included in this recompense (financial reimbursement, travelling expenses, otherwise). What is the amount?

       Coffee or thee was provided during the interview

   b. Will this compensation depend on certain conditions, such as the completion of the study?

       No

D. PRIVACY AND INFORMATION

1.
    a. Will the study adhere to the requirements for anonymity and privacy, as referred to in the Faculty Protocol for Data Storage[6]?:
- anonymous processing and confidential storage of data (i.e. storage of raw data separate from identifiable data):
- the participants' rights to inspect their own data:
- access to the data for all the researchers involved in the project:

        Yes, this study will adhere the requirements for anonymity and privacy. The Data Storage YODA was used to protect the data.

    b. Has a Data Management Plan been designed?

    Guidelines provided from the master thesis were followed.

2.
    a. Will the participant be offered the opportunity to receive the results (whether or not at the group level)?:

    Yes, participants receive the results from this study. A member check was conducted.

    b. Will the results of the study be fed back to persons other than the participants (e.g. teachers, parents)?:

    Yes, teachers at the department of Education at Utrecht University
and experts from the TussenjaarKenniscentrum

3.
    a. Will the data be stored on the faculty's data server?:

    Yes

    b. Will the data that can be traced back to the individual be stored separately on the other faculty server available for this specific purpose?:
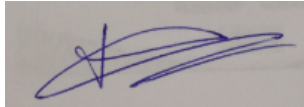
    Yes

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[6] This can be found on the Intranet: https://intranet.uu.nl/wetenschappelijke-integriteit-facultair-protocol-dataopslag

E.   FORMS TO BE ENCLOSED (CHECKLIST)

- Participants background (Appendix A)
- Topic list (Appendix B)
- Contact form participants (Appendix C)
- Facebook Advert (Appendix D)
- Informed consent form for participants (Appendix E)
- Logbook and assessment scheme audit trail (Appendix F)
- Code scheme (Appendix G)
- Literature/references

Signature(s):[7]   Date and place: 11-06-2019, Utrecht

Jessica Tadema, Master Student Educational Sciences

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[7] The senior researcher (holding at least a doctoral degree) should sign here.

Appendix H – Logbook and audit trail

Logbook

Month	Week	Description	Result
February	**Week 5-6**	Deleted the interest-based choice concept in the theoretical framework derived from the research plan	Two concepts left in theoretical framework: gap year and decision-making process.
February	**Week 5-7**	Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used, because I wanted to study the sensitizing concepts in-depth from the perspective of the students. Started deriving themes from theoretical framework into the topic list. Two sensitizing concepts were used.	Derived theme's: activities gap year, benefits, experience decision-making process, exploration, relation of gap year and decision-making
February	**Week 5-7**	Semi-structured interviews: developed topic list, to study these two topics more in-depth	Topic list with two sensitizing concepts: gap year, and decision-making process
February	**Week 5-7**	The sample requirements were determined because I wanted to study the experiences of students who have taken a gap year and were already finished with the decision-making process for a higher education programme	Studenten die momenteel al een tussenjaar en het studiekeuzeproces hebben doorlopen zijn geselecteerd in onderzoek
February	**Week 5-7**	When the sample selection for participants was clear, I started recruiting participants for this study. I contacted potential connections in my personal and professional network. Purposive sampling and snowballing was used.	Recruitment of participants went smoothly. Participants were interested in participating in this study. Therefore, it was possible to plan the interviews in the beginning of March.
February	**Week 8**	19-2 Pilot interview: conducted a pilot interview with a student who have taken a gap year and already were studying in a higher education programme	After the pilot interviews several questions were refined, deleted and restructured in the topic list.

February	**Week 9**	27-2: Conducted an expert validation with a professional from the company Tussenjaarkenniscentrum.	Handed my topic list and we discussed the questions. The expert mention the topic list was too much focused on the benefits of taking a gap year. Therefore, I decided to change the questions in the topic list more broadly. So from this moment I decided to research the advantages and disadvantages of taking a gap year.
March	**Week 9 – 10**	After this expert validation, the theoretical framework and topic list has been restructured and refined.	Added disadvantages of taking a gap year into the theoretical framework and changed the topic list with more open asked questions. Therefore the research question was changed into: *To what extent do students, who have taken a gap year between secondary school and higher education, experience the advantages or disadvantages of taking a gap year during the decision-making process for a higher education programme?*
March	**Week 10 – 12**	Conducted all 15 interviews at different Universities across the Netherlands	Started with transcribing the interviews
March	**Week 13 -15**	A conventional content analysis approach was used because I worked with sensitizing concepts. This procedure is also explained in the method section Started data driven open coding in the programme Nvivo	139 open codes derived from the data analysis
April – May	**Week 14 - 21**	Started to group the open codes into axial and selective codes	In the end 147 codes appeared in Nvivo

April	**Week 15**	11 April: discussed with supervisor to look up for relations into the codes, related to the research question	Trying to look for the themes and relations in the codes
May	**Week 20**	Started to group the selective codes into themes	Looking for patterns in the data
May	**Week 21**	21 May: discussed with supervisor to write the result section into themes	Subthemes: change in environment, time to reflect and time to explore derived from the data analysis. Main theme was self-development
May	**Week 21 - 23**	Writing the results and discussion section of thesis	Results were written in the most interesting themes derived from the data analysis. Furthermore two main points were discussed in the discussion section.
June	**Week 23**	3 June: feedback on concept thesis	Changed the final research question in order to write the study more descriptive. The main question is changed into: *To what extent does taking a gap year, between secondary school and higher education, contribute to the decision-making process for a higher education programme?*
June	**Week 23**	3 June: conducted an audit trail with an auditor	Created an assessment scheme and this logbook, in order to increase the dependability of this study
June	**Week 24**	11 June: Handed in the final thesis	

Assessment scheme audit trail

Audit trail Assessment scheme		Quality Assurance		
		Visibility *Are decisions explicated and communicated?*	**Comprehensibility** *Are these decisions substantiated?*	**Acceptability** *Are these substantiated decisions acceptable according to the standards, norms, values in the research domain?*
Data gathering	Planned	Semi-structured interviews were determined on saturation.	The topic list was based on two sensitizing concepts derived from the literature. It was planned to conduct a pilot interview and an expert validation of the instrument.	Data-triangulation in the instrument was taken into account through: sensitizing concepts based on existing literature, pilot interview, and an expert validation.
	Realized	Conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews. Explanation of the sample selection of participants was found in the method section and logbook.	The sensitizing concepts were visible in the topic list. After the pilot interview and the expert validation several changed were made in the topic list. A description about these changes were included in the quality assurance paragraph and logbook.	Questions in the topic list instrument were checked by an expert. The quality of the instruments was therefore acceptable. The semi-structured interviews were appropriate for the research design of this study.
Data analysis	Planned	Conventional content analysis approach (inductive). Steps were open, axial and selective coding. Final step was thematic analysis.	An inductive approach was fitting the best, due to exploring the sensitizing concepts. Therefore an conventional content analysis was chosen. The focus was to create a better understanding of this phenomenon.	The qualitative data analysis was logical and therefore acceptable.
	Realized	Clear description of the data analysis procedure was explained in the method section. Also, the final coding-scheme was included the appendix. Examples of codes related to the (sub)themes were included in the results section.	Conducted the data analysis through the conventional content analysis approach. The procedure of the data analysis was described in the method. Four key themes derived from the data analysis. Representative quotations were used in the results.	The analysis and audit trail (e.g. transcripts, coding schemes, logbook) gave transparency about process of this study.