

# The Nature And Scope Of Outdoor Education In Victorian Schools

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## Abstract

In 1999 a collaborative project between the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (VOEA) and the Department of Outdoor Education and Nature Tourism at La Trobe University Bendigo investigated the nature and scope of Outdoor Education being offered in Victorian secondary schools. The aim of the study was to attain a clearer understanding of *who* is teaching Outdoor Education, *where* it is being taught, *what programmes* are being offered, *what objectives* are emphasised and *what issues* or problems are encountered by Outdoor Education teachers or principals in the implementation of Outdoor Education in Victorian schools. Findings paint a picture of Outdoor Education in schools as personal development education, conducted beyond school hours, by staff who are largely lacking in qualifications. Significant findings are: (1) the majority of Outdoor Education teachers *do not* have specific Outdoor Education training, (2) most principals and Outdoor Education teachers responding to the survey see the development of group cooperation, self esteem and responsibility as the main objectives of Outdoor Education, (3) most Outdoor Education teachers are expected to work during out of school hours but receive minimal or no compensation for this, (4) the nature of programmes offered in Government schools is significantly different to that offered in Independent schools (non-Catholic). Many practical issues identified related to the difficulties of including Outdoor Education in the traditional school programme structure and particularly to problems with finding appropriate staff for Outdoor Education practical trips.

## Introduction

Outdoor Education is taught in some form in many Australian secondary schools and includes a great diversity of philosophies and practices (McRae, 1990: 5-7). In many schools it has been historically considered as 'extra-curricular', mainly being comprised of 'one off' camps or expeditions in outdoor settings. In Victoria, Outdoor Education has been a curriculum component in its own right since the publication of The Personal Development Framework in 1989. The subsequent introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Outdoor Education in 1992, has been a significant influence on the development of Outdoor Education thinking and practice in Victorian schools (Lugg, 1999: 28). The establishment of tertiary Outdoor Education courses during the last ten years has instigated further change in the way Outdoor Education is perceived and practiced in schools and the broader industry. Outdoor Education is thought by many to be more formally developed in Victoria than in any other Australian state or territory. The existence of formal curriculum and teacher training pathways cited above serve as evidence for this, as does the high level of VOA membership compared to elsewhere.

While the authors believe the above to be an accurate generalisation about the 'state of play' in Victorian schools there is scant specific information about Outdoor Education programmes, teachers or implementation issues in schools. Most of what we know comes from first hand observation or anecdotal evidence. The last study conducted on Outdoor Education in Victorian schools was conducted in 1990 (Kelly, S. and Allen-Craig, S., 1991). This was a small

study based on twenty-eight returned questionnaires, which examined the types of activities and objectives of Outdoor Education programmes offered. Other than this there has been little or no research conducted during the last ten years on Outdoor Education in Victorian schools.

Since school based Outdoor Education is the primary form of Outdoor Education conducted in this state, it is important for the VOA, the Australian Outdoor Education Council (AOEC) and individual outdoor educators that we have a sound understanding of what is going on in schools or school based settings. Without studies such as this we can only make assumptions based on rhetoric but not necessarily reality.

## Method

The study combines quantitative and qualitative methodology in that the survey instrument developed sought both objective and subjective information from respondents. Survey questions were constructed by the researchers and a draft survey piloted. The final survey instrument was developed in two parts: one requested responses from school and the other from the Outdoor Education teacher or coordinator in each school. Some questions sought objective information while others investigated attitudes and understandings of Outdoor Education outcomes, safety and staffing issues and support needs of teachers and principals in schools.

The survey was mailed out to all (461) secondary schools in Victoria. Completed responses were received from 143 schools (31% return): 83

Government, 29 Independent, 28 Catholic and 3 unspecified schools. Of the total respondents 3 indicated that they did not offer Outdoor Education in their schools and therefore responded only to those questions relevant to them.

Survey information was collated on a data base programme. Quantitative data were variously treated as percentages or sorted as rank order responses. Responses to open-ended questions were categorised according to emerging themes following a grounded theory model.

Data were interpreted according to key questions posed by the researchers with further questions arising as data were collated. Examples of key questions are:

- What kinds of Outdoor Education programmes are being conducted in Victorian secondary schools and for what year levels?
- Are offerings at senior secondary level likely to change with the advent of the new VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Outdoor Recreation Certificate 2 course?
- Who is teaching Outdoor Education in schools and what are their qualifications to do so?
- To what extent do teachers see themselves as sufficiently qualified or experienced to teach Outdoor Education?
- To what extent do schools employ outdoor instructors/teachers from outside the school and what kinds of experience and qualifications are they looking for?
- What do principals and teachers see as the key objectives of Outdoor Education? Does Outdoor Education training influence this?
- What issues relating to monitoring of safety management practices exist for teacher and principals?
- What issues relating to timetabling Outdoor Education and working outside 'normal' school hours exist? What measures are taken to address these issues?
- What barriers exist in implementing Outdoor Education in schools?
- Are responses to any of the above questions significantly different for different school sectors?
- How can the VCEA improve the support of Outdoor Education teachers and schools?

Results of the survey have been reported in both tabular and written form depending on the nature of the question and responses. Percentages have been provided where appropriate for comparative purposes.

## Results

Results of the survey are discussed in relation to specific survey questions or to groups of questions on related topics. Where necessary the question has been described.

### (i) Outdoor Education programmes in schools

Table 1, indicates the number and percentage of schools who returned surveys and the type of programmes offered. A few points are worthy of note. School camping programmes are the most common form of Outdoor Education occurring in all types of schools, although from additional comments gained, the role of these camps in the school is diverse.

The VCE is more attractive for government schools, with a to be expected decrease in offerings at year 12 compared to year 11. It seems clear that for independent schools the VCE is less attractive, although Outdoor Education is used extensively in other ways in these schools.

Responses to other questions indicated that although Outdoor Education occurs at all levels of schooling, the majority occurs at years 9 and 10 especially in Government schools. Outdoor Education in the form of camps, clubs or extra-curricula activity (eg. Duke of Edinburgh Scheme), is significantly higher in Independent schools than in Government or Catholic schools. This suggests that in Independent schools, Outdoor Education is still predominantly considered as extra or co-curricular rather than as an integral component of the curriculum. The lower level of support for the VCE in these schools would seem to confirm this. The inclusion of Outdoor Education as a semester elective, mainly in years 9 and/or 10, indicates Outdoor Education programmes in the curriculum on a more ongoing basis although one semester is still reasonably short term. The only types of curriculum that offer Outdoor Education as a more ongoing study are the VCE and, possibly, residential programmes at bush-based school campuses where students live on-site for up to one year.

Consistent with data published by the Board of Studies (1996), results for this study indicate the lower popularity of VCE Environmental Studies. It is of interest to note that most schools currently offering VCE Outdoor Education intend to offer the new VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies and that this new subject seems more attractive than the current study for Independent schools. One could surmise that the perceived increase in academic content of the new VCE may be attractive here. This possibility is consistent with Independent schools indicating their lack of interest in the current VCE to be a function of factors such as: a focus on more "academic" subjects, "crowded curriculum" and lack of student interest.

Balancing the inclusion of environmental studies in the new VCE study, is the potential for schools to offer outdoor recreation certificates from the Sport and Recreation Training Package. Some interest in this possibility was expressed by schools, although at the time of the survey the Training Package had not yet been accredited and was not available to schools. That interest existed at such an early time could foreshadow significant support for this option in time to come.

Table 1: Summary of Outdoor Education programmes offered in schools

|                                              | Government |     | Catholic |     | Independent |     |
|----------------------------------------------|------------|-----|----------|-----|-------------|-----|
| Number of returns                            | 83         |     | 28       |     | 29          |     |
| Offering OE VCE units 1&2                    | 38         | 46% | 9        | 32% | 3           | 10% |
| Offering OE VCE units 3&4                    | 32         | 39% | 8        | 29% | 5           | 17% |
| Camping programme                            | 55         | 66% | 15       | 54% | 24          | 82% |
| Semester elective                            | 43         | 52% | 7        | 25% | 5           | 17% |
| Residential programme or site                | 7          | 8%  | 3        | 11% | 7           | 24% |
| Club or extra curricula                      | 14         | 16% | 3        | 11% | 18          | 62% |
| Offering VCE Enviro in 99                    | 14         | 16% | 5        | 18% | 3           | 10% |
| Envisage offering new VCE OE/Enviro in 2001  | 35         | 42% | 9        | 32% | 6           | 21% |
| Envisage offering new Recreation VET in 2001 | 15         | 18% | 3        | 11% | 2           | 7%  |

## (ii) Learning Outcomes:

Principals and Outdoor Education teachers were asked to indicate the importance that they place on twelve possible Outdoor Education learning outcomes. For each outcome respondents were asked to choose one option from: *very important; quite important; of some importance or not very important*. Responses were then tallied for principals and teachers in each type of school and a rank order assigned to each learning outcome. The results are summarised in figure one.

Results indicate that group cooperation, improved self esteem and increased responsibility were considered the most important outcomes of Outdoor Education. Fitness, survival skills and recreation/leisure skills were considered the least important. Interestingly environmental appreciation and knowledge were considered quite important while understanding of human-nature relationships was considered less important by all but the Independent school principals and teachers. Environmental action (such as conservation activity) rated poorly in comparison to other environmental outcomes. Leadership was generally considered more important by principals than by Outdoor Education teachers.

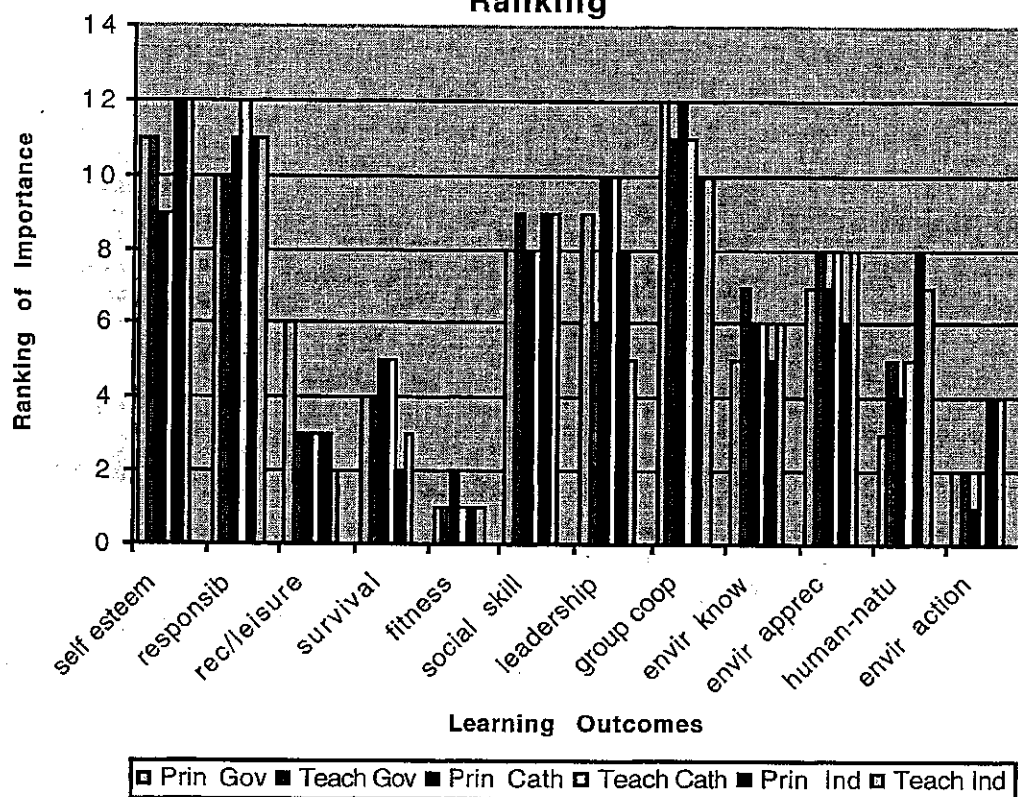
These findings essentially paint Outdoor Education as personal development education, a finding consistent with the inclusion of Outdoor Education in the Personal Development framework, or the Health and Physical Education key learning area. This finding comes as a disappointment to some who have argued for Outdoor Education to develop a more distinctive role in education (Brookes 1993, Martin 1993). This emphasis on Outdoor Education process rather than

content may in fact contribute to the difficulties that Outdoor Education teachers face in establishing and implementing their programmes in schools (refer to tables 2, 3 and 4). If the school community does not see Outdoor Education as having distinctive content it may be more difficult to justify as an essential component of what is often perceived as a 'crowded' curriculum.

Responses to the Outdoor Education learning outcomes question were also analysed in relation to the qualifications of the Outdoor Education teacher responding to the survey. Responses by those who have tertiary Outdoor Education qualifications were compared with those who had qualifications in other disciplines (Physical Education, Science etc). For most of the learning outcomes listed, the degree of importance placed on them was similar for both groups. However a significant difference was evident in the perceived importance of *environmental appreciation* as an outcome of Outdoor Education. Those teachers with Outdoor Education qualifications considered environmental appreciation as much more important (ranked equal 2<sup>nd</sup>) compared to those without Outdoor Education qualifications (ranked 7<sup>th</sup> most important). This indicates a different perspective about the educational objectives of Outdoor Education and has implications for the way Outdoor Education is taught and the ways in which curriculum and programmes are developed.

That teachers trained in Outdoor Education differ in their views on the role of Outdoor Education in schooling is perhaps not surprising, and is consistent with the findings of an earlier study by Lugg (1996) on the changing conceptions of pre-service teachers about Outdoor Education.

**Fig. 1: Outdoor Education Learning Outcomes Ranking**



**(iii) Working conditions of Outdoor Education teachers**

Folklore and anecdotes concerning working lives of outdoor educators are not hard to find, especially from their partners! We asked principals and teachers about the working conditions for Outdoor Education teachers. The results are described in the tables below. The total number

of school survey responses considered in the data in tables 2 and 3 is 140 (excluding the 3 schools that do not have Outdoor Education programmes). We have indicated whether responses are from principals or teachers for each table.

**Table 2. Schools that require Outdoor Education staff to work outside normal school hours (Principals' responses):**

| Work period | Number of schools | Percentage of total survey respondents |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Weekends    | 76                | 54 %                                   |
| Overnight   | 106               | 76%                                    |
| Holidays    | 34                | 24%                                    |
| Other       | 4                 | 3%                                     |

**Table 3. Schools offering compensation for out of 'normal' hours work by OE staff (Principals' responses):**

| Number of Schools | Percentage of Total | Type of Compensation                                                                                        |
|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 29                | 21%                 | Time in lieu<br>Adjustments to workload<br>Flexi-time approach<br>Early finish after trips<br>Higher salary |

From the above data it is clear that at least three quarters of the schools responding to the survey require Outdoor Education teachers to work hours that are outside the normal school working day. Principals pointed out that most other teachers would also work outside 'normal' working hours – a valid point which should be acknowledged. However, teachers of other subjects are not often required as part of their ordinary workload, to work overnight, on weekends or on holidays as Outdoor Education teachers seem to be required to do.

Interestingly while principals seemed to be able to identify ways in which compensation was offered for out of hours work, this was not as easily acknowledged by teachers. Perhaps teachers don't recognise that going home at

3:00pm on Friday after the week's camp returns is actually a form of compensation!

#### (iv) Barriers to the conduct of Outdoor Education in schools:

In the survey we sought to find out more about what teachers saw as barriers to the conduct of Outdoor Education in schools. Table 4 lists in order of notoriety the obstacles which teachers think stand in the way of programme delivery. We have chosen to list all of the barriers teachers raised. Knowing that for example only one teacher thought an emphasis on safety was a barrier to participation seems as interesting as knowing that 36% of teachers thought finding appropriate staffing the main issue.

**Table 4. Barriers to conducting Outdoor Education programmes in schools (Teacher responses):**

| Barrier                              | Number of schools | % of total respondents |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Finding appropriate staff            | 50                | 36                     |
| Costs of Programme                   | 44                | 31                     |
| Staff-student ratios                 | 23                | 16                     |
| School inflexible timetable          | 20                | 15                     |
| Staff absence from school            | 21                | 15                     |
| School perceptions of OE             | 19                | 14                     |
| Demand on staff personal time        | 18                | 13                     |
| Student absence from school          | 15                | 11                     |
| Lack of resources                    | 12                | 9                      |
| Paperwork/organisation               | 7                 | 5                      |
| Limited access to prac venues        | 6                 | 4                      |
| Risks involved in prac               | 5                 | 4                      |
| Expense of updating quals            | 4                 | 3                      |
| 'Crowded' curriculum                 | 4                 | 3                      |
| Class sizes                          | 3                 | 2                      |
| Lack of student interest             | 2                 | 1                      |
| Emphasis on safety & standardisation | 1                 | 0.7                    |

Staffing, cost and timetable are the big three, which is no surprise. Generally teachers looking at conducting Outdoor Education programmes seemed thwarted by the need to find appropriate staff to support the practical excursions seen as essential to Outdoor Education. Central issues here were the need for a range of skill levels in staff, staff flexible enough to attend excursions and ensuring a gender mix on excursions. Clearly the structure of schools and the economic model within which they operate, impacts on their capacity to offer the perceived 'resource expensive' curriculum areas such as Outdoor Education. Interestingly perceptions of Outdoor Education by members of the school community was seen as a significant barrier. While there are probably multiple reasons for these perceptions, it is an issue that organisations such as the VOA and the AOEC could tackle to support their members and to promote Outdoor Education. At the school level though, it is an important issue for Outdoor Education teachers to address since it impacts on most of the other barriers.

#### (v) Outdoor Education Staff Qualifications

Staff expertise and qualifications is an underlying issue in identification of barriers to the conduct of programmes. To

explore this further we asked respondents to indicate the type of tertiary qualifications and Outdoor Education/recreation related certificates held by staff teaching or assisting with the Outdoor Education programmes in the school. Results displayed in table 5, show that while teachers of Outdoor Education have a range of qualifications, the dominant tertiary qualification is a Physical Education (or Human Movement) degree. This is particularly evident in Government schools. In contrast, Independent schools seem to employ a higher proportion of staff with tertiary Outdoor Education qualifications. These results are particularly interesting with significant implications for the development of Outdoor Education curriculum and professional development programmes in Victoria (compare with the results of the learning outcomes section presented earlier.) With the introduction of VCE Outdoor and Environmental studies there may be an urgent need for more environmentally oriented professional development programmes for teachers and assisting staff in the next few years.

Many Outdoor Education staff hold certification in addition to their tertiary qualification. The most common types of certificates held are First Aid (various levels), Bronze

Medallion and/or Surf Bronze and Canoeing or Bushwalking leadership certificates. Fewer staff had

certificates in climbing or skiing/ski touring instruction.

**Table 5: Summary of Outdoor Education Staff Qualifications and Certification**

| Outdoor Education Staff Qualifications<br>(n = no. of staff) | Staff with Qualification<br>(% of respondents from each sector) |          |                    | Total<br>(n = 171 staff) | % with<br>First Aid, Bronze Surf<br>(% relate to the no.<br>staff in each row) | % with Activity specific certificates<br>(% relate to the no. of staff in each row) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------|--------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                              | Govt                                                            | Catholic | Indep <sup>1</sup> |                          |                                                                                |                                                                                     |
| Grad Dip/Cert OE (25)                                        | 12                                                              | 13       | 20                 | 15                       | 65                                                                             | 54                                                                                  |
| BA OE (15)                                                   | 5                                                               | 2        | 20                 | 9                        | 73                                                                             | 53                                                                                  |
| B Ed PE (60)                                                 | 47                                                              | 30       | 22                 | 35                       | 62                                                                             | 32                                                                                  |
| App Sci PE (9)                                               | 5                                                               | 4        | 2                  | 5                        | 66                                                                             | 22                                                                                  |
| B Ed (23)                                                    | 9                                                               | 18       | 16                 | 14                       | 57                                                                             | 61                                                                                  |
| B Sc (14)                                                    | 9                                                               | 7        | 8                  | 8                        | 50                                                                             | 57                                                                                  |
| BA (8)                                                       | 4                                                               | 7        | 4                  | 5                        | 50                                                                             | 25                                                                                  |
| Other (17)                                                   | 9                                                               | 13       | 8                  | 9                        | 65                                                                             | 35                                                                                  |

The above figures relate to the Outdoor Education teacher(s) and other teaching staff who assist with the Outdoor Education programmes in schools. Teachers were also asked to indicate the extent to which they felt well qualified to teach Outdoor Education. The responses were varied but generally indicated that those who had specific Outdoor Education tertiary qualifications felt well qualified to teach Outdoor Education in secondary schools. Those with physical education qualifications also felt generally well qualified although many recognised deficiencies in relation to aspects of practical activity instruction and teaching of theory. Very few felt that they were not well qualified. The respondents' experience in teaching Outdoor Education in schools seemed to have a bearing on responses to this question. A substantial number of teachers indicated that they also employ activity specific instructors for particular programmes when they have insufficient expertise and/or when additional staff with expertise are needed for supervision of adventure activities. This correlates with the main barrier to the conduct of programmes, reported above, being the finding of appropriate staff.

Staffing qualifications is an emotive issue. However it seems clear from this survey that Outdoor Education is predominantly taught by those who were trained to teach in another curriculum area. If Outdoor Education is conceived as personal development education the physical education teachers are as well qualified as any school teacher to pursue these outcomes (is all education personal development?). It is only when Outdoor Education is conceived as having content specific learning outcomes that teachers will need to know more than how to operate the adventure tools the area has traditionally utilised. Until this occurs, such as with the new VCE Outdoor and Environmental studies, employing activity instructors are probably a fair substitute for a trained teacher in relation to safety management and activity participation. However activity instructors employed to work on a casual basis are likely to lack the

curriculum expertise of teachers and they don't know the kids!

#### (v) Safety procedures

We asked principals how they maintained an appropriate level of safety management within their outdoor programmes and to which sources they referred for advice. Predictably principals relied heavily on safety guidelines published by the education department. Very few criticised these documents.

An outcome of interest was that principals of Independent schools tended to more often rely on advice from their Outdoor Education staff, expressing a confidence in the staff member's ability to make appropriate decisions with respect to safety. There may be several underlying reasons but two immediate choices come to mind. Firstly the Independent system is less constrained by government guidelines so may naturally seek more internal flexibility in its safety management. Alternatively, given the finding that Independent schools are more likely to have employed Outdoor Education tertiary graduates, principals may prefer to defer such issues to known expertise.

#### Conclusions

This research has sought to describe the state of play for Outdoor Education in Victorian schools. While it is interesting to muse on underlying reasons for the current findings it is beyond the scope of this study to explore such reasons. There is considerable potential here for further research. The data obtained for this study does however identify key issues for the Outdoor Education profession. It is clear that there is considerable enthusiasm for the inclusion of some form of Outdoor Education in Victorian schools. However apart from the VCE study, Outdoor Education is invariably on the periphery of mainstream curriculum and programmes are predominantly short term. The majority of teachers and principals see the educational

value of Outdoor Education as primarily related to personal development objectives with environmental objectives of secondary importance.

Key barriers to the conduct of Outdoor Education in schools relate to practical and resource difficulties in implementing outdoor learning experiences away from the school site. These barriers *may* be compounded by the fact that the majority of people teaching Outdoor Education in Victorian secondary schools have qualifications in discipline areas other than Outdoor Education.

What seems inescapable is that in Victoria at present, Outdoor Education is predominantly taught by enthusiastic, underqualified, overworked teachers who are trying to achieve in their own time what most other teachers get paid to do during work hours. Until this set of situations is addressed we doubt Outdoor Education will rise far beyond the curriculum backwater it now is. And this is occurring in Victoria where Outdoor Education in schools is further developed than in other states – or is it??

It is anticipated that the information provided by this study will allow the VOA to improve its service to members who work in or with schools. We anticipate that other states might conduct similar studies so that a greater understanding of Outdoor Education, as it is practiced in Australian schools, might be developed. This aim is not unrealistic since a similar study has already been conducted in South Australia. Ultimately the information obtained from such studies can be used to further develop Outdoor Education in schools and as a profession.

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