

The value of Outdoor Education in schools

The vital role of Outdoor Education (OE) in students' lives was pronounced during Covid-19 as many organisations pivoted to provide new programs for student wellbeing and development.

Now, OE is once again flourishing as schools and students reap the many benefits that ensue.

OE is a field of study concerned with learning about self, others, and the environment in the outdoors. This learning can result in a range of personal benefits, improved relationships with others, better inclusion of disadvantaged groups, and support of social justice initiatives for Aboriginal Australians, as well as greater awareness of the environment, conservation, and sustainability.

Outdoor education (oe) is also a methodology to learn about other curriculum areas, with the Outdoor Learning Curriculum Connections resource available from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for Health and Physical Education (H&PE), Science, Humanities, and Social Sciences. A new 9.0 Australian Curriculum version will soon be available.

Recent research into the potential positive relationship between time outdoors (particularly in natural environments) and mental health has likely led to an increase in all levels of schools offering OE: either as Nature Play in Foundation years; a year-level camps program in primary and middle schools; a middle school semester based subject (often integrated within H&PE); an integrated extended stay middle school program; as an intervention for students that have experienced trauma or social challenges; or as a senior secondary subject (in all states except Queensland).

Schools that provide OE report many positive student impacts including enhanced student-student and student-staff relationships, better engagement in school and achievement, improved mental health, enhanced resilience and desire to take on challenges, enhanced attendance, critical thinking, and greater attention to environmental issues. Several Australian 'bush schools' report good results from students that might have not achieved so highly with mainstream schools.

Students that undertake OE at a senior level develop capabilities in self-management, leadership,

decision-making, and group cohesion, which are valuable for many careers including those in tourism, environment, and sustainability fields – our future.

Recent developments in OE include place-based education practices to increase knowledge about, and student relationships with, their local environment and to be part of positive actions to care for these places. It also incorporates an increased acknowledgement of Aboriginal relationships with landscape and knowledge of traditional and contemporary land management practices to support more sustainable ecological systems.

The risk of harm in taking part in an OE learning experience is relatively low, however, it is important to be mindful. The UPLOADS project is providing a deeper understanding of the causes of serious injury and how best to manage safety.

Recent debates among Outdoor Educators include whether to integrate technology from student learning in the outdoors; whether experiential learning can develop character or just enhance maturation; whether OE re-enforces inequities in our society or whether it can support positive social change; and whether increasing teaching of Aboriginal perspectives is cultural appropriation or is respectful of Aboriginal knowledge and culture.

Outdoor Education Australia (OEA) is the overarching Australian body concerned with teaching OE in Australian schools and is comprised of state OE bodies (OEAQ and OEASA) and or sub-committees of state outdoor organisations (Outdoors NSW, QLD, Victoria, W.A.).

OEA advocates for OE in Australian schools and supports the Journal of Outdoor Environmental Education. To get involved with OEA, contact the local state association listed on the OEA web page.

OEA has a strong relationship with the Outdoor Council of Australia, the Australian Bush Adventure Therapy Network, and the Australian Tertiary Outdoor Education Network.

What does the future hold for Outdoor Education?

The goal of OEA is that every Australian student, regardless of their postcode or socioeconomic situation, takes part in a high-quality OE



program from Foundation to year 10, with every Australian student provided the option to study senior OE to year 12.

Ideally, teachers would have the skills and knowledge to design effective learning experiences, however private and NFP providers can support high-quality programs.

Outdoor Education flourishes in schools whose leaders value it and value student-centred learning and development about themselves, others, and the natural world.

With an outdoor-educated student body to complement all the other learning that takes place in schools, Australia should be well-placed to meet the challenges of the future.

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Resources:
<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/curriculum-connections/portfolios/outdoor-learning/>



www.outdooreducationaustralia.org.au