The nature and scope of outdoor education in Western Australian secondary schools

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Importance of OE as a Learning Area

Globally, Outdoor Education (OE) has become a valued contributor in a holistic education. The historical philosophies of Plato and Aristotle valued the potential of outdoor learning and the work of Kurt Hahn (1936) led to the development of Outward Bound, which further reinforced outdoor learning as a vital supporter of youth and their potential to contribute to society. John Dewey (1897) challenged the traditional methods of teaching and developed an educational philosophy which has been embraced within outdoor learning. In 1965, the National Outdoor Leadership School, was founded and today states that ‘we’ve explored and expanded over time to serve and educate students around the globe in leadership, wilderness skills, and risk management’ (NOLS, 2017). The NOLS curriculum has led the development of an array of educational programmes including representation in tertiary education. In Australia, there is a great diversity of OE-based programmes in schools, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, tertiary settings, in the wider communities of ‘for-profit’ and ‘not-for-profit’ organisations, as well as within the domains of recreation and adventure therapy. Specifically, in the school setting, OE opportunities are diverse, from being in the classroom and on the school campus, to single-day field experiences, to multi-day expeditions or in some cases, residential-based programmes that allow students to spend a year studying a curriculum that is based on the philosophy of outdoor learning (e.g., schools such as ‘Timbertop’ at Geelong Grammar).

In keeping with these underlying philosophies, Richard Louv published Last child in the woods in 2005, coining the phrase ‘nature deficit disorder’ to explain that the reduced time that children now spend outdoors may be contributing to a wide
range of behavioural problems. Recent developments stemming from this book have resulted in a wider community understanding of the importance of outdoor learning. Globally, programmes have been developed to increase the awareness of, and associated opportunities for children to participate in, nature-based learning. Similarly, in Western Australia (WA), this has led to the ‘Nature Play WA’ initiative, which in (2011) became an independent, not-for-profit organisation in partnership with the Department of Sport and Recreation (DSR).

If community understanding of the importance of outdoor learning is growing, then this momentum could be potentially carried into schools, where it could be argued this education should occur. Education in WA could rediscover the curriculum intentions of over 20 years ago, clearly contained within the Organisational Guidelines for Physical Education and Outdoor Education (Education Department of Western Australia, 1996). Consideration of a well-sequenced, compulsory OE curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12, as was intended in 1996, could be revisited today.

1.2 Purpose

This study, which was conducted between 2007 to 2013 had two purposes. The first was to gather baseline data to investigate the nature and scope of OE in WA secondary school sectors, including consideration of the existing barriers and enablers regarding the inclusion of OE. The second was to track the uptake of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) Outdoor Education course from its implementation in 2008 to 2013 and to consider the school- or sector-specific factors that may have influenced the programmes being delivered.
1.3 Significance

As there has been very little specific OE research conducted in WA, there is little understanding of how OE is valued and delivered in our schools. It was hoped that the findings of this research could influence teachers and administrators positively and therefore assist the growth and development of OE in this state. Recent developments towards an Australian Curriculum have included OE in the Health and Physical Education (HPE) programme as an elective that may be offered in a school’s curriculum. To consolidate the place of OE in the Australian Curriculum, a focus on developing new initiatives and providing guidelines to identify the way OE can contribute to a school’s curriculum in other learning areas (particularly, HPE, Geography and Science) has begun (Outdoor Education Australia [OEA], 2015).

This endeavour has reignited debate regarding both the content taught and the need for appropriate OE-specific teacher training. The literature review in this study highlighted that globally, teacher-training pathways for OE are ambiguous. Currently in America, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and most parts of Australia, there does not seem to be a set pathway for becoming qualified as an OE teacher (Mann, 2004). Research conducted by Zaurs (2009) confirmed this finding in WA, saying that the term ‘qualified for OE itself may be misconstrued as only holding outdoor activity skill-based qualifications. This political misinterpretation by administrators, teachers and academics could be placing OE at risk of being poorly understood and undervalued within the community’ (p. 2).

Historically in WA, attempts have been made to address this issue through various educational avenues, including TAFE qualifications and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. In 2007, Malcom Gilbey established a three-year Bachelor of
Outdoor Recreation at the University of Notre Dame Australia, which includes 10 OE units and could be combined with a fourth-year Diploma of Education. An environmental scan of OE offerings in tertiary institutions in WA was conducted in 2012 as part of an audit process by the School of Health Sciences at the University of Notre Dame Australia. At this time, Edith Cowan University offered an OE minor as part of a HPE degree and the University of Western Australia offered one unit in outdoor pursuits within the Bachelor of Science (Exercise and Health) and one unit within the Diploma of Education. The University of Notre Dame Australia has offered two compulsory OE units within the HPE degree since the degree began in 2006. Since 2012, HPE students have been able to elect an OE specialisation (4 units), minor (6 units) or major (8 units).

There have been two major attempts at delivering an OE postgraduate degree. Edith Cowan University offered a Graduate Diploma of Science (Outdoor Pursuits) from 1986 to 1999 and produced approximately 130 graduates. More recently, the University of Notre Dame Australia offered OE postgraduate degrees, including a Certificate, Diploma and Masters of Outdoor Education, producing 14 graduates. These courses were archived in 2010 because of low student enrolment.

There are no preferred or mandated curricula suggesting the competencies or knowledge required for teaching OE in WA. Zaurs (2009) suggested that the current WACE Outdoor Education course, particularly at Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) level, may influence the need for future teacher training in this state. He identified the necessary outdoor-specific requirements for the teaching of OE as
outdoor pursuits, environmental theory and social theory. He concluded that while Vocational Education Training (VET) pathways appear to be the most common for gaining specific outdoor pursuit competencies, they do not allow for the development of associated academic content or pedagogical processes.

In Victoria, the Victorian Institute of Teaching (2008) includes OE within the Specialist Area Guidelines for Nationally Accredited Programmes. To teach secondary school OE, an individual must complete a minimum of one year of tertiary OE study, plus OE pedagogy and a teaching practicum. These guidelines are endorsed by OEA (2015), which recommends these standards for professional OE teachers.

The information regarding OE delivery and associated teacher qualifications in WA that was gathered for this current research, identifying enablers and barriers, provides valuable information for the key stakeholders within the education domain, including the Department of Education and Training (DET), Catholic Education Office, Associated Independent Schools Western Australia and individual school administrators who develop OE-associated policies. In addition, TAFE, universities, commercial training organisations and peak professional associations, including Outdoors WA and the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) may use the results to plan professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers responsible for the delivery of OE in WA.
Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework for the Study of the Nature and Scope of Outdoor Education in Secondary Schools in Western Australia
1.4 Research Questions: Objectives and Specific Aims of This Thesis

This research was a descriptive study using survey methodology. A conceptual framework (Figure 1.1) provides an overview of this project. Research questions were designed to collect information specific to the nature and scope of OE from mainstream secondary schools in WA. The questions aimed to gather the profiles of the secondary schools delivering OE programmes, the perceived importance of the learning area in the various curriculum formats, the existing barriers that prevent growth and the OE opportunities that are available for students with special needs.

1.4.1 The primary research questions

1) How did the nature and scope of OE within school sectors contribute to delivery of OE in WA in 2007?

2) How did sector differences affect the uptake and delivery of the WACE Outdoor Education course between 2008 and 2013?

1.4.2 Secondary questions: Nature and scope

1) What differences exist between school sectors in the delivery of OE?

2) What are the key learning outcomes of OE?

3) What are the most common practical activities used to achieve these outcomes?

4) What cross-curriculum linkages exist?

5) What OE opportunities are available for students with special needs?

6) Does the nature and scope of programmes vary between the school sectors?

1.4.3 Secondary questions: Barriers and enablers

1) What barriers and enablers affect the delivery of OE in WA secondary schools?

2) Do the barriers and enablers differ between sectors?
3) Do the qualifications held by teaching staff differ between sectors?

4) What are the safety and legal issues related to the delivery of OE?

5) What professional association affiliations and memberships exist?

6) Do the professional association affiliations and memberships held by teaching staff differ between sectors?

1.4.4 Secondary questions: The WACE Outdoor Education course

1) Does the intended uptake for the WACE Outdoor Education course vary between school sectors?

2) What has been the actual delivery of the WACE Outdoor Education course from 2008 to 2013?

3) How has the baseline data in schools sectors contributed to the delivery of the WACE Outdoor Education course between 2008 and 2013?

4) How has the WACE Outdoor Education course contributed to the profile of OE in WA?

1.5 Delimitations

A number of choices were made in setting the parameters of this study. These were primarily made given the context of OE in WA.

1) Only OE programmes taught within the mainstream educational setting of secondary schools in WA, namely Government, Catholic and Independent schools, were included. Organisations that were employed externally to deliver OE programmes were excluded, as the study aimed to investigate teacher qualifications. No recognition of the school location was made.

2) Only staff employed as the OE Coordinator/OE Teacher/Head of Physical Education (PE)/HPE Learning Area Coordinator or Principal were invited to participate. This ensured that responses were gathered from the staff member
who held the most information regarding the delivery of OE in their respective school.

3) Information regarding students’, parents’ and bureaucrats’ perceptions of OE were not included. While these groups may hold valuable information regarding OE in their schools, the scope of this research project needed to be kept manageable.

1.6 Limitations

A number of uncontrollable influences and conditions restricted the methodology, results and conclusions of this project.

1) This study may not be totally representative of the OE being delivered in WA.

2) Recruitment was problematic. (see 3.2.2.1, Recruitment for further detail).

3) Sample size was low and resulted in uneven sector representation.

4) To obtain the desired information, the survey required up to 45 minutes to complete.

5) The survey may not have been completed by the most appropriate individual.

6) Inaccuracy in responses may have occurred if the respondent was not the key teacher of OE and did not have accurate knowledge of the specific structure and content or a genuine interest in the study.

7) A respondent’s concept of OE may differ from the definition of OE provided in the context of this research and therefore responses may not be truly reflective of all OE options being taught in some schools.

1.7 Conclusion

The parameters of this research ensured a focused approach in the literature review. A simplified history of outdoor learning was explored and the Australian
setting was considered in detail. Other relevant topics, including teacher training and existing barriers, are examined in the following chapters.