

The Outdoor Education Group has begun an extensive research programme into the effectiveness of our programmes in delivering positive outcomes to students.

RESEARCH: THE WAY FORWARD

How do we know that outdoor education delivers?

Drama, music, sport, debating – most of us are convinced that these activities should be part of the central educative experience of every young person. To this list we should add outdoor education. Once seen as largely extra-school experiences, then extracurricular, then co-curricular experiences, they are now regarded by many of us as vital parts of an holistic curriculum. We make considerable claims as to the developmental and learning advantages to students of these non-classroom programmes.

In the independent schools sector, at least, education has long since moved out of the classroom. We make no attempt, for example, to separate off the pastoral care of students from their schooling. For many years we have acknowledged the character building potential of team sports. Increasingly we have come to recognize the enrichment, which comes to students from the whole co-curriculum (for want of a better word) and specific benefits, which originate in each separate programme. We are now in tune with the concept that education is like a great symphony with major and minor themes, contributed to by a vast variety of instruments, playing their own separate parts, but in harmony with one another; all the themes entwined into one massive work. The central theme and core purpose of all secondary education remain the development of adolescents into complete, purposeful, well directed, self-motivated, community minded adults, whose physical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual lives make a complete whole.

We know that the co-curriculum achieves these things, in partnership with the classroom, because we as teachers and leaders recognize the changes, which occur in individual young people. We see them for ourselves. Parents, who observe their children, know it also. Often even the students know it.

Increasingly education has become outcomes driven. There is no point in undertaking an educational activity, if the subject has not changed for the better at the end of it. Outcomes range from gaining university places to enhanced awareness of others, to increased sensitivity, to greater self-knowledge, to an increased ability to work in teams, to personal resilience, to enhanced spiritual awareness, to ongoing physical fitness, to an increased awareness of responsibility and duty. In its own sphere the Outdoor Education Group sums up these outcomes under the headings of self, others and the natural world. There are thirteen specific competencies in the area of self, nine in the area of others and three in the area of the natural world. Each of the competencies, for example personal responsibility, emotional resilience, self-confidence and empathy interact on and interrelate with the others. Each has a description, and all OEG activities and programmes, in partnership with schools, are assessed against these desired educational outcomes.

In all of this the idiosyncratic approach of the Outdoor Education Group is in step with the rest of the educational world. The academic world, however, is not satisfied with “knowing” desired outcomes. Increasingly research is undertaken to assess outcomes as

objectively as possible. What are the desired outcomes of students' undertaking Year 12 studies? Are these outcomes realized? In recent years the desired outcomes of the middle years of schooling have been questioned. Research has revealed in sharp clarity that desirable outcomes have not been realized. Where research has shown that literacy and numeracy levels have actually declined in many schools in the middle years of schooling and student dissatisfaction and disillusionment have increased, clearly the outcomes of the middle years are not positive. It is not enough to rely on "what we have always thought to be true": research has to demonstrate that the outcomes are what we say they are and want them to be.

In the co-curriculum we have not always thought through clearly what we want the outcomes to be. Where we have, we tend to rely on "gut feeling" and subjective personal observation as to whether these outcomes are being achieved. This is not good enough. Drama and music programmes, to say nothing of sport and outdoor education, are expensive in their use of financial and human resources. The colossal expenditure involved in maintaining, for example, a rowing programme, to say nothing of the disruption involved to other school programmes, can hardly be justified, if the only outcome is the feeling of euphoria when the school wins the Head of the River once every ten years or so! We are rightly convinced that there is much more to rowing than that, but we need to be able to demonstrate this conviction objectively.

It is for this reason that the Outdoor Education Group has begun an extensive research programme into the effectiveness of our programmes in delivering positive outcomes to students.

The research is being co-ordinated by Dr Lorraine Smith, National Director of Educational Development and Head of Curriculum and Research, who is profiled later in this journal. OEG has contracted from the University of Canberra the services of James Neill, a lecturer in the Centre of Applied Psychology. He has worked in the area of outdoor education research for twelve years. The Australian Council of Educational Research also will be assisting in part of the research programme. There is a lack of a body of professional research into outdoor education, despite some constructive work at Latrobe University Bendigo and at Outward Bound. The current academic community, however, still tends to talk at the philosophical level, rather than tunnelling down to the practical application. As yet the research, which has been completed, has done little to inform practice in schools. There is also a tendency for outdoor educators to be stuck at the environmental impact end of the spectrum. Schools on the other hand relate to the impact on personal development. Schools take young people out of their comfortable urban environment and put them into the bush, believing that this enables them to learn

The research aims to establish first the effectiveness of specific courses in delivering desired outcomes and second, the comparative value of different kinds of courses.

more about themselves and others. The Outdoor Education Group is committed to the idea that outdoor education contributes to the whole person. It helps young people to consolidate the way they think and how they solve problems. It is part of a thinking curriculum.

Initially the project will take three years, but out of it also will come a longitudinal study. Pilot studies are being run at St Michael's Grammar School and Whitefriars College in Melbourne and Kambala Anglican Girls' School in Sydney – a co-educational school, a boys' school and a girls' school. The research aims to

Alice Sloan



The Chairman, Mr Scott Chapman, and all the members of the Board of Directors, the Chief Executive Officer, Mr Tony Pammer, and all the staff and friends of the Outdoor Education Group join with the Toorak College

community in expressing our strongest feelings of distress and our deepest sympathy to Mr and Mrs John Sloan and their family on the tragic death of their eldest daughter, Alice, in the early morning of Wednesday 31 August at McKillop's Bridge, Victoria.

Year 10 student, sixteen years old Alice loved outdoor education and on the first night of her group's planned journey down the Snowy River had already begun to exercise a leadership role. She was also a keen sportswoman and was proud to represent her school in rowing. Given the opportunity she took part in any sport she could. She was immensely popular with other girls, especially those in Year 10 and in her house. She had an active social life, when she was able to fit it in around her many school and out of school activities. She was cheerful and full of fun and always the first to be involved. She loved her School, and her School from the Principal down was united in loving her.

Her fellow students chose to honour her in death as in life in a number of ways, which showed their deep affection for her. Some filled the Chapel with candles. Others decorated a condolence tree. A group of senior students made a banner and strung it on a bridge across the Nepean Highway: it read Keep Smiling for Alice. The members of her house, surrounded by the rest of the School on the oval, each released a balloon in her honour. A great crowd of her family and friends, members of the School community and OEG staff farewelled her at a Gathering of Love on the School oval, at the end of which a tree was planted in her perpetual memory. ■

establish first the effectiveness of specific courses in delivering desired outcomes and second the comparative value of different kinds of courses – journey based expeditions versus static programmes, unhutted versus hutted programmes, hiking versus activities such as canoeing and rockclimbing and so on. Hopefully the research will point to the relative effectiveness of short and long courses, and the value of a sequential programme during a student's secondary school life as opposed to one off experiences. As a side benefit the research will provide also rapid feedback on the impact of a course on individual students to those students, parents or schools, who desire it, and this service will be available on-line from February 2006.

The initial thrust of the research will be quantitative, but it will move into a qualitative stage, when individual students will be asked to comment on their experiences. The quantitative evidence, which is gathered, will inform OEG's practice internally and will enable schools to assess what OEG achieves, and can achieve, for them. It will also inform schools of the value of their own practice in partnership with OEG and will provide hard data to school governing bodies and parents concerning the effectiveness of their programmes and ways in which they can be changed to achieve ends more in line with the school's policy. It will be of great value to the outdoor education profession as a whole and will reinforce OEG's belief in the need for the highest standards of professionalism in outdoor education practice. Furthermore hopefully it will be of value politically, perhaps persuading government that the drift of outdoor education to the very edge of government schooling over the past thirty years should be reversed by government action.

James Neill and Lorraine Smith will work over the next six months to validate the tool to be used in the research. James Neill has already developed the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire, which uses 8 of the 13 competencies under "Self". OEG has expanded the competencies from 8 to 23 – the Educational Outcomes Framework. The competencies include issues such as decision making, personal responsibility and personal resilience. ACER has been asked to validate the 23 competencies, deciding whether they are relevant in the context of contemporary curriculum around Australia. They are being tested in terms of national and state curricular guidelines. ACER will validate the descriptors of each of the five curricular strands in keeping with contemporary curricular structure. As a result of ACER's work it will be established that the version of the Educational Outcomes Framework, which eventually emerges, is a framework of quality, relevant to contemporary needs.

Around each of the competencies, a set of questions, psychometrically tested, are being designed. Students will answer these questions in a questionnaire delivered before and after the course, in which they will respond on a scale of five choices from very high to very low. A great deal of the work will go into establishing that the questions mean to the young people answering them what the researcher wants them to mean. They can be delivered on-line. The data is then analyzed. Obviously the outcomes will not be right, if the courses are not right. Schools will be able to see that one course has brought about, say, a 3% positive change, while another has brought about a 20% change. The school and OEG can then work together to adjust the courses accordingly.

There are some competencies, such as respect, responsibility and judgement, which OEG considers part of the core curriculum, and so they will always be present, but schools may wish to emphasize other specific competencies, and the programme will be adjusted accordingly. There may be competencies, which are especially

relevant to a particular student. To reiterate what has already been stated, for individual students James Neill is developing a reporting mechanism, which is web-based and immediate, an important service to students, their parents and schools.

Thus the research is being conducted in seven studies:

Study 1. "The Main Study". This revolves around student based outcome reporting and action (as opposed to purely academic) research. The framework will be validated. Courses will be aligned in accordance with the validated framework, and data will be gathered on student change in the competencies chosen as especially relevant to them. Students, parents and schools will get immediate feedback on the competencies chosen for the course. OEG will be able to report to schools on the effectiveness of the programme. A significant fund of data will be amassed for use in Studies 2 to 7. It should be stressed that it will be entirely voluntary for schools to participate and there will be no additional fees charged by OEG to partner schools.

Study 2. This will involve a thorough literature review.

Study 3. There will be two longitudinal studies in selected schools, one over four years and the other over ten years. There will be qualitative studies – interviews with selected schools and students to gather data and put it alongside the results of Study 1. There will be 50 students involved in each study. There will be a control group. Some of the more interesting long term qualitative studies may well be with past students well into adulthood.

Studies 4 to 7. These will assess the different types of courses – wilderness versus hutted, sequential versus one off and so on. This will be a major academic project, supported hopefully by an Australian Research Council grant.

OEG is only too aware that accountability is at the centre of modern schooling. Schools are themselves increasingly assessed, and they quite rightly want assessment, before plunging into a highly costly co-curricular programme. There has to be transparency of performance. Very many members of the educational profession have always had difficulty in facing up to the reality of their own effectiveness, witness the dislike of teachers to others entering their classrooms and the ongoing suspicion of teacher appraisal. It is confronting, but it is necessary.

To sum up, this research will:

1. Assess the educational value of outdoor education.
2. Assess the effectiveness of specific outdoor education courses.
3. Allow schools to measure their desired outcomes from their outdoor education programme, and from the individual parts of it, and to assess whether these outcomes are being met.
4. Report back to schools, parents and students on individual student development as a result of experience in the outdoors.
5. Assess the relative effectiveness of different kinds of outdoor education programmes.
6. Provide data to inform the decision making of government and school authorities.

Some might say that this kind of self-analysis – because that is what it largely is – is dangerous for OEG. OEG does not think so, because it is confident in what it does and what it stands for. But if it were to prove dangerous, so be it! All integrity is lost, when we deviate from seeking the truth and facing up to it.

There is much in the old saying:

"If you can't stand the heat, don't enter the kitchen".