



The nature and scope of Outdoor Education in Western Australia

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Abstract

Outdoor Education has evolved as a learning area in Western Australia over many years. In this paper we document historical elements of an investigation into the nature and scope of Outdoor Education in Western Australia. Previous investigations conducted by other researchers on the nature and scope of Outdoor Education focused on Victoria, South Australia, and New Zealand guided the design and conduct of this study. We examine the introduction of the Outdoor Education course offered as an option in the Western Australian Certificate of Education. We provide signposts of significant events with consideration of the secondary and tertiary education settings. Outdoor Education, in its many formats, has a strong historical presence in Western Australia and continues to hold great potential within the curriculum.

Keywords Outdoor education · Curriculum · Secondary education · Tertiary education · Student · Teacher

Introduction

This paper describes the developmental growth of Outdoor Education (OE) in Western Australia (WA), a state of Australia. The research team has extensive experience in both the secondary and tertiary education settings and familiarity with similar projects conducted in Victoria (Lugg & Martin, 2001), South Australia (Polley &

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Pickett, 2003) and New Zealand (Zink & Boyes, 2006), and believed that a similar investigation would contribute to the educational landscape of WA and allow for national comparison. This paper aims to provide a history, signpost significant events, and contribute to the discussion regarding policy and practice for OE in WA. We also include a historical account of the development of OE in WA, an investigation of the curriculum at both state and national levels in secondary education, and the development of OE in WA tertiary education settings.

Development of Outdoor Education in Western Australia

There has been a historical discrepancy regarding the terminology surrounding learning in the outdoors and whether OE should be considered a learning methodology or a subject. To provide some context, Quay and Seaman (2013) highlight the contribution educational reformer John Dewey made to experiential education, considered an integral component of learning in the outdoors, and describe the never-ending debate about educational priorities and approaches associated with OE. Quay and Seaman (2013) explain that the “persistent dichotomy between method and subject matter, or as Dewey famously put it, child and curriculum” (p. 2) remains evident and assert that “outdoor education can be characterised as confused, in the sense that Dewey used this word, meaning it has vacillated between the two poles of method and subject matter, occasionally trying to overcome, but ultimately reproducing this dualism” (Quay & Seaman, 2013, p. 10).

Keith Cook and Lesley Pearse taught in Western Australian schools, held positions within the Western Australian Department of Education and are recognised for their contributions to Outdoor Education in this state. Pearse and Cook (1990) state that “there are a wide variety of programmes from all areas of the curriculum in Western Australian education which are described by the term outdoor education” (p. 276). They continue by describing what they perceive to be a common factor amongst these programs, which is the “method of learning: through direct experience in the natural environment” (p.276). The growth of OE in the WA school setting can be considered to have formally begun with the Department of Education purchasing Camp Schools beginning in 1946 (Pearse & Cook, 1990). The Department of Education continued to purchase and develop Camp Schools; by 1986, there were eight Camp Schools located throughout WA. In addition to Department of Education-owned Camp Schools, an OE Centre was built at Point Walter in 1975, and in 1984 the Marine Expedition Boatshed was purchased, with programs focusing on sailing expeditions. To support the development of Camp Schools, the position of an OE Officer was created within the Department of Education in 1970, with advisory staff employed to support teacher development. At this time, OE also became a Secondary Education Achievement Certificate option for Year 9 and 10 students (Pearse & Cook, 1990).

In the early 1980s, OE was recognised as a separate subject in the Health and Physical Education (HPE) learning area. The Department of Education provided training courses for teachers, which operated for one week during school vacation time, and organisations such as Outward Bound Australia contributed to expedition opportunities (Pearse & Cook, 1990). By 1986, eight Camp Schools throughout WA

catered mainly for primary school students, with secondary schools being encouraged to implement their own OE programs, including multi-day expeditions. Given that the Camp Schools were owned and managed by the Department of Education, they predominantly catered for Government schools, so Independent and Catholic schools implemented similar OE programs. Camp Schools continued to be supervised by an OE Officer, and in 1986, the Department of Education created an Expedition Leadership Advisory Board tasked with overseeing the OE curriculum and the implementation of programs in the school setting (Pearse & Cook, 1990).

In addition to developing the ability to cope with physical challenges in the natural environment, Pearse and Cook (1990) argued that an OE curriculum for WA schools “must involve a study of the effects of the outdoor environment on the human being, on group behaviour, and the effect of the human being on the ecological balance” (p. 279). Learning content was sequentially structured from primary to secondary school and included personal comfort, hygiene, safety, shelter and protection, nutrition and cooking, finding the way, social relationships, ecological awareness, planning and democracy, outdoor emergency response, expedition work, wilderness activities and outdoor leadership (McRae, 1990). Teachers were provided with curriculum support and in-service training in outdoor pursuits such as bushwalking, sailing and canoeing. At this time, one aim of the HPE learning area was to develop all aspects of the person through a specific focus on physical fitness and skill development. Bunting (1989) also highlights the importance of the development of the whole person but argued that OE emphasises this aim through holistic learning activities and a strong focus on the natural environment.

Specifically, in Year 11, the OE course content area was titled Wilderness Activities and contained four main areas: living in the natural environment, adventure pursuits, navigation, and survival awareness. The Year 12 course content area was titled Outdoor Leadership and had four main areas: wilderness, planning and route-finding, leadership, and search and rescue (McRae, 1990). In 1989, Outdoor Education as a subject was accredited by the WA Secondary Education Authority (SEA) (Secondary Education Authority, 1989a, b). In 1990, the SEA OE syllabus was not placed within the HPE learning area; instead, it was positioned within Personal and Vocational Education, and in 1992 was repositioned in Personal Development Studies.

In 1995, the Year 12 OE course had a minor content area title change from Wilderness Expedition to Natural Environment Expedition, with the underlying rationale for OE remaining unchanged. In 1996, the WA Department of Education released the organisational guidelines for Physical Education and Outdoor Education, which provided an intended sequence for the delivery of OE. At this time, OE became firmly positioned in the HPE learning area (Curriculum Council of Western Australia [CCWA], 2000). In 1999, as part of a major Australian-wide education reform, the existing Curriculum Framework was rewritten to meet the needs of outcomes-based education (CCWA, 2000). From 1999 to 2007, OE was delivered using the outcomes-based education model common in all learning areas. The CCWA noted that the OE course aimed to promote both the individual and the group by “creating a sense of responsibility for self, others and the natural environment” (CCWA, 2000, p. 117). Some schools continued to include OE as a part of the curriculum without following the set syllabus as Government schools were required to do, which was particularly

evident in schools that offered sequentially developed programs across multiple year levels as part of a whole-school approach. This style of program continued to grow within Independent schools, and to a lesser extent, in the Catholic school sector.

The broad scope of OE programs in WA was similar to that of other Australian states. Nationally, Neill (2003) provided a comprehensive analysis of the extensive range of outdoor program formats, which may have different foci, including personal and social development, leadership, environmental awareness, connection to nature, and service-based learning. These findings are consistent in Victoria (Lugg & Martin, 2001), South Australia (Polley & Pickett, 2003) and New Zealand (Zink & Boyes, 2006; Polley & Pickett, 2003) reported that programs could be curricular and non-curricular, be short or long in duration, and include school-based experiences, excursions, field trips, residential experiences, or expedition-based programs. All states offered programs individually or as part of larger curriculum planning.

In 2008, all learning areas in WA were adapted to meet another educational requirement, namely the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE), which is the credential awarded to students who have completed senior secondary education (Year 11 and Year 12). The WACE OE course was based upon the rationale, learning outcomes and guidelines developed for teaching OE in Victoria (Martin, 2008b). The course had four stages (preliminary, stage one, stage two, and stage three), with outcomes addressed in three overarching sections: outdoor experiences, self and others, and environmental awareness. The course was intended to be delivered sequentially and allow for flexibility to meet the needs of individual school settings. The preliminary syllabus was entry-level, stage one allowed for a transition from the existing curriculum into the new WACE curriculum, and stages two and three were designed to demonstrate a greater depth of knowledge required by students for external examinations.

When the lead author of this current research, Duncan Picknoll, collected initial data in 2008, the nature and scope of OE varied between school sectors, given underpinning structural, financial and curriculum differences. OE programs were taught either as part of the mandated WACE curriculum or, in some schools, as part of a more sequentially developed program separate from WACE requirements. As required by the WACE, from 2009, stages two and three of the WACE included an external examination, providing a pathway for students towards tertiary study entrance. Some years later, this structure was refined, and the WACE for all learning areas was renamed Foundation, General and ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank).

The WACE OE course created a new challenge for OE teachers to meet the necessary academic requirements of the course. Professional development opportunities for teachers were delivered by the CCWA, with support from Outdoors WA (2023), the peak body for the outdoor sector in WA, including outdoor recreation, outdoor education, adventure tourism and camping. Engagement in these events was primarily up to the individual teacher's desire to add to their skill set. The Department of Education provided little direction or compulsion to ensure teachers gained sufficient theoretical and associated practical outdoor skills.

At this time, work had commenced towards another curriculum change, the Australian Curriculum. Initially, OE had very little representation in the developing

curriculum. A focused national effort was made by individuals and groups interested in advocating for OE as a distinct learning area. In 2011, HPE was brought within the remit of the work being conducted in the Australian Curriculum, and although substantial progress was made to include OE as a distinct learning area, it was instead embedded within HPE. Martin and McCullagh (2011, p. 67) argued that “clarity of the respective contributions of PE and OE is even more compelling ... [and] will ultimately benefit curriculum planners, teachers, students and the wider community.”

Additionally, Gray and Martin (2012) advocated for OE to maintain a strong presence given the experiential processes that can be applied across many curriculum areas, stating that “Outdoor Education offers distinctive content and learning experiences that would be lost in the current draft framework” (p. 39). Further consultation was undertaken, and in 2012, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) released the Final Shape Paper for HPE (ACARA, 2022). Continued lobbying for OE resulted in greater curriculum representation in the Draft HPE Curriculum, released in 2013.

In September 2015, Australian Education Ministers endorsed the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum in all eight learning areas: English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health and Physical Education, Technologies, The Arts, and Languages. Outdoor learning was located within the HPE learning area, with a clear direction for more to be done in teacher preparation and the associated implementation of outdoor excursions. ACARA (2018) noted that the organisation of learning could be adapted to the individual needs of schools, given resource availability and timetabling structures. It also suggested that the content of the HPE curriculum could be delivered through other learning areas, such as Home Economics or OE (ACARA, 2018). The document acknowledged that OE provides unique learning experiences conducted in natural environments outside the school boundary. These opportunities allow students to develop specific knowledge, risk management concepts, and a positive relationship with nature, including environmental sustainability (ACARA, 2015). It further suggested that OE would draw on content from many subject areas of the Australian Curriculum and noted that OE could provide a valid opportunity for developing movement competence, connection to natural environments, an understanding of the concept of risk versus challenge, enhanced personal and social skills, and would promote lifelong physical activity health and well-being (ACARA, 2015). Similarly, the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia developed a comprehensive mapping framework to encourage education in the outdoors for Pre-Primary to Year 6. It clearly defined outcomes evidenced in nature pedagogy, linked curriculum across multiple learning areas, general capabilities, and cross-curriculum priorities (Wynne & Gorman, 2015).

Given these developments, Polley and Pill (2015) noted that “despite the apparent widespread use of OE in schools, it [OE] is not a compulsory component of any current state curriculum” (p. 35). Although OE had not been identified as a discrete learning area, the Australian Curriculum encouraged OE content to support learning areas, general capabilities, and cross-curricular priorities. Further, it encouraged using outdoor learning as one of the “curriculum connections” (ACARA, 2018) to allow teachers to draw connections across the Australian Curriculum. The outdoor learning curriculum provides examples of how this learning can be taught within

HPE, Humanities and Social Sciences, Geography and Science. It shows that general capabilities and cross-curricular priorities can be organised and delivered in various ways through learning outdoors within F–6 and 7–10. These may include OE as a sequential, standalone subject, camps programs and field trips, and a teaching methodology promoting learning in, about, and for the outdoors (ACARA, 2018).

In WA, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) is responsible for Kindergarten to Year 12 curriculum, assessment, standards and reporting for all Western Australian schools. Although the learning areas remain broadly consistent with the Australian Curriculum, some parts have been contextualised to make them more suitable for WA students and teachers, realising the Western Australian Curriculum (SCSA, 2018).

A search on the SCSA website for ‘Outdoor Education’ finds it in the glossary within the Kindergarten to Year 10 Curriculum and Assessment Outline. OE is defined as “physical activity in the outdoors or natural settings which provides opportunities to connect as a community and to the natural environment” (SCSA, 2018, para. 1). There is a general reference to the “use of natural environments” within the HPE learning area, general capabilities, and cross-curricular priorities. A simple comparison between the Australian Curriculum and the Western Australian Curriculum (WAC) of the HPE scope and sequence shows a reduction in the emphasis on the “use of natural environments” in the WAC. A separate WA scope and sequence for HPE – additional content is provided, including a reference to cross-curricular priorities and the use of natural environments. OE is not recognised as a curriculum connection, as identified in the Australian Curriculum. However, in Years 11 and 12, in the WACE, OE is included within HPE and may be offered at the Foundation, General or ATAR level, which can be used towards school graduation or university entry.

In 2018, the Minister for Education in WA announced the imminent closure of Camp Schools, except for one site in Broome, WA. As previously stated, these Camp Schools played a significant role in the historical development of OE in this state. In a meeting with the then Vice-Chairman (the lead author of this paper, Duncan Picknoll) and Executive Officer of Outdoors WA, the Minister supported the ongoing role of OE in schools. The Minister also confirmed that Camp Schools were not the core business of education and that it did not make sense for the Department to manage them, indicating a transition of the facilities to non-government organisations to reduce the burden on the education budget. The Minister stated that “the Department has committed to making sure those campsites remain available for priority bookings for schools and with priority pricing for schools so that they continue to remain an affordable exercise for schools to use” (Minister for Education, personal communication, March 9, 2018). At the time of submitting this article for publication, the Camp Schools remain open, accessible to schools, and managed by Fairbridge (n.d.), a not-for-profit organisation.

Tertiary development of Outdoor Education in Western Australia

To better understand the current issues associated with curriculum development and OE in the school setting, it is valuable to reflect on the history of teacher training for OE in WA, which has also evolved. As has historically been the case

in Victoria and South Australia, OE has been taught primarily by those who engage in the outdoors themselves (Lugg & Martin, 2001; Polley & Pickett, 2003). In WA during the 1990s, students studying for the Bachelor of Health and Physical Education at Edith Cowan University (ECU) could elect to specialise in OE in their final year of study by enrolling in three specific units. Approximately 16 students per year graduated through this pathway until 1999, when ECU cut back this option to a single unit titled “HMS4340 Expedition Planning,” which was considered the most valuable unit for teachers to plan and conduct expeditions. During this time, ECU also ran the Abseiling Instructor Course in partnership with the Department of Sport and Recreation and the Cave Leader Course with the Department of Conservation and Land Management (D. Byers, Program Coordinator, personal communication, July 18, 2008).

The WA State Government’s Marine Education Boatshed continued to provide programs for schools and training for teachers, including undergraduate students from the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the postgraduate course at the WA College of Advanced Education, which was later offered through ECU as the Graduate Diploma of Science (Outdoor Pursuits). The Graduate Diploma of Science (Outdoor Pursuits) ran from 1986 to 1999 inclusive, with approximately 130 graduates in total (D. Byers, Program Coordinator, personal communication, July 18, 2008). Of these, around 80 were teachers, comprising youth workers, Department of Conservation and Land Management employees, commercial or casual instructors, and others. This course ceased in 1999 due to financial viability and low student numbers. No other postgraduate tertiary teacher training was available in WA until 2006, when Malcom Gilbey developed a Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma and Master of Outdoor Education at The University of Notre Dame, Australia (UNDA) in Fremantle. These postgraduate degrees were archived in 2010 due to low student numbers. Eight students graduated with the Postgraduate Certificate, three with the Diploma, and one with the Master of Outdoor Education, with two Master of Outdoor Education students transferring to a Master of Education and Leadership when the course closed.

In 2007, Gilbey established a three-year Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation, which could be combined with a one-year Diploma of Education at UNDA. An environmental scan of OE offerings in tertiary institutions in WA was conducted in 2012 as part of an audit process within the School of Health Sciences at UNDA. At this time, UNDA offered the Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation, ECU offered an OE minor as part of a Health and Physical Education degree, the University of Western Australia offered one unit in Outdoor Pursuits in the Bachelor of Science (Exercise and Health) and one unit in the Diploma of Education, and UNDA continued to offer two compulsory OE units in the Bachelor of Health and Physical Education (BHPE) degree, as had been the case since the introduction of the degree in 2006. Since 2012, students of the BHPE have been able to elect an Outdoor Education specialisation (four units), minor (six units) or major (eight units). Since 2012 the BHPE has been accredited by the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA) under the Teacher Registration Act 2012, which has provided the administration of an accreditation scheme for initial

teacher education (ITE) programs (TRBWA, 2023). The Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation continues to offer ten specific OE units.

Zaurs (2009) investigated the qualifications held by teachers of OE and their perceived content knowledge of the WACE OE course and reported that strong historical connections still exist with past university courses. This research identified that teachers of OE displayed strong tendencies towards the skills-based requirements of outdoor activities required within the Outdoor Experiences component of the WACE OE course, with other components related to Self and Others and Environmental Awareness not as well understood. Zaurs (2009) concluded that the transition to greater academic rigour associated with OE in South Australia and Victoria was yet to occur within WA, stating that “units of study within an undergraduate degree which were indicated to be OE were minimal. This ... does not allow the development of OE, nor does it do justice to those who are either asked, told or choose to teach OE” (Zaurs, 2009, p. 87).

Politics in the development of Outdoor Education

Outdoor Education has struggled to cement a place in curriculum development in Australia. Neill and Richards (1998) commented on this issue more than twenty years ago, suggesting that the reason for the lack of recognition was due to a lack of collective professional effort and commitment. Lugg and Martin (2001) in Victoria, and Polley and Pickett (2003) in South Australia, identified that politics influenced the growth of OE in their respective states. Politics also seems to be an influence in WA, as highlighted in a letter from a previous Minister for Education, The Honourable Mark McGowan, to Professor Beth Hands, the president of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER), which was the state association mainly focused on Physical Education but also with interest in OE. Professor Hands communicated a portion of this letter from the Minister:

I acknowledge your concerns in relation to the new Course of Study in Outdoor Education due to be implemented in 2008 for Years 11 and 12. It is vitally important that all teachers have an adequate level of teacher training and appropriate qualifications. The Department has representation on several university advisory boards and deems university graduates to be suitably qualified to teach all contexts of HPE. The Department supports ACHPER in encouraging universities to ensure that sufficient Outdoor Education content is provided to those students undertaking degrees in Health and Physical Education (B. Hands, personal communication, April 2007).

Minister McGowan’s response revealed a lack of understanding of what essential knowledge and skills OE teachers in WA require, highlighting the need for greater clarity in establishing an appropriate training level for this group. In WA, most OE is taught by BHPE-trained teachers (Zaurs, 2009). This delivery style is consistent

with findings in SA, Victoria, and New Zealand (Lugg & Martin, 2001; Polley & Pickett, 2003; Zink & Boyes, 2006). This was particularly evident in Government and Catholic schools, with teachers in Independent schools required to have greater specific OE tertiary education by those schools in connection with employment.

Support for OE in WA appears to have remained unchanged since the statement from McGowan in 2007. In 2018, the decision was made by the current Minister for Education, The Honourable Sue Ellery, to liquidate Government-owned assets in the form of the Camp School properties throughout the state, a decision that may ultimately decrease the opportunity for WA school students to participate in and benefit from learning in the outdoors. This example shows how local and state government decisions directly influence our schools in Western Australia. Similarly, the organisation of the Australian federal, state and local governments has also influenced the development of OE, given different levels of success within each of these settings ((Martin, 2008a, (2010) suggested that OE programs have, therefore, developed differently, and consequently, the perception of OE at each level of the government differs. Martin (2010) suggests that outdoor educators do not seem to have a history of political astuteness and national advocacy. When Outdoor Education Australia agreed to support a bid for OE in the national curriculum, key federal education position papers had already been written, public consultation periods had already closed, and no outdoor education submissions had been received, making the chances of success far less likely (Martin, 2010, p. 4).

The contribution of Outdoor Education needs to be “grounded in time, place and culture” (Martin & Ho, 2009, p. 79). As such, the place of OE in WA should be considered given the recent developments, including the Australian Curriculum, the transfer of ownership of Camp Schools and most recently, the impact of COVID on health and wellbeing.

Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia

The Western Australian Department of Training and Workforce Development (2023) has mandated that teachers complete specific requirements for their tertiary training. To become a Physical Education teacher, you usually need to study for a degree in education, majoring in HPE. Alternatively, you can study a degree in Exercise and Health, Sport Science, Movement Science, or a relevant area, followed by a post-graduate qualification in Education. In addition, an individual must obtain a Working With Children Check (WWCC), a National Police History Check and a registration with the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA). To be eligible for the grant of Full Registration, the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA, 2023) states that you must:

- hold a teaching qualification from an accredited initial teacher education program or a teaching qualification recognised by the Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia (TRBWA) as equivalent;
- be proficient to the prescribed standard in English, both oral and written;

- meet the Professional Standards for Teachers in Western Australia at the Proficient Career Stage;
- be a fit and proper person to be a registered teacher; and
- have either taught for a minimum of 100 days in the five years before application in one or more educational venues in Western Australia or other Australian or New Zealand schools.

In 2008, the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) provided specialist area guidelines for all subject areas that advised teacher training institutions on what needed to be included in these degrees. For OE, this included eight tertiary units of specific training containing both skill and theoretical content (VIT, 2008). These units should embrace understanding outdoor learning, sustainable practices, personal development, natural environments, ecological literacy, and safety management. In addition to theory, the development of specific skills for base camping, overnight bushwalking, flatwater paddling, environmental interpretation, facilitation, organisation, risk management, and outdoor leadership should be covered ((Martin, 2008b). However, this arrangement has now changed, with the responsibility for specifying these requirements shifting from the VIT to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Teacher training institutions design their initial teacher education programs based on program accreditation guidelines produced by AITSL (2021), with the VIT monitoring these via program accreditation processes. These AITSL guidelines include mandatory content requirements related to subject areas (pp. 52–53), but the specific content detail is determined chiefly by the teacher training institution.

As earlier provided by the VIT, such guidelines have not existed in WA with the Teacher Registration Board of WA. However, this change to national guidelines provided by AITSL does not negate the need for further guidance related to program content that professional associations for teachers, such as ACHPER and Outdoors WA, could develop and advocate for. This guidance may help inform the development of specific OE content by teacher training institutions.

Beyond initial teacher education, once teachers are employed at a school, they may be required by the school to teach “out of field,” a circumstance that has been investigated in WA (McConney & Price, 2009a, b). Teaching “out of field” is defined as allowing or assigning teachers to roles for which they have no formal qualifications, a practice that 24 per cent of WA teachers reported experiencing a little over ten years ago (McConney & Price, 2009a, b). This practice has developed due to teacher shortages, the challenges of staffing schools in small communities, and changing workforce patterns, all of which have increased in prominence since COVID. Further research is needed regarding the effect of this practice on students, teachers and the community.

Conclusion

This work has examined the historical development of OE in WA. Outdoor Education in WA has a unique history but shares commonalities with other Australian states. Programs vary greatly between school sectors, given their structural,

financial and curriculum differences, resulting in the delivery of OE either as a discrete subject, as a co-curricular offering, or as informing outdoor learning occurring in other subject areas.

Through the curriculum connections in the Australian Curriculum, outdoor learning is at least identified in a formal curriculum document. ACARA encourages content related to OE to support the learning areas, general capabilities, and cross-curricular priorities through the outdoor learning curriculum connection, a development that could be considered a positive step towards academic recognition for OE as a subject. There is great potential for building the profile of outdoor learning in the curriculum, which could prove to be very useful in gaining a compulsory K-12 progression for OE as a discrete subject. Perhaps in time, OE as a subject will be considered the cement that will join other learning areas, thus forming a whole school approach towards outdoor learning. The Western Australian Curriculum for OE reflects the Australian Curriculum but shows a reduction in content, intention, and commitment to implementation. In years 11 and 12, OE remains included within HPE and may be offered at ATAR, General or Foundation level. Most recently, in Victoria, Ambrosy et al. (2023) have highlighted that the use of outdoor learning to deliver curriculum “is a positive pedagogical initiative but does not address the area of learning encapsulated in OE as curriculum. Outdoor learning is not a replacement for OE.” The authors of this article are part of The Outdoor Education in the Victorian Curriculum (OEVIC) Project, which advocates for the inclusion of an outdoor education curriculum in Years 7–10.

Universities in WA have had a historically discontinuous commitment to OE. OE has been most commonly included within an HPE degree at the undergraduate level, ranging from a single unit to up to eight units forming a major. The Graduate Diploma of Science (Outdoor Pursuits) at ECU made a large historical contribution to the education setting in WA. Recent attempts to reinvigorate postgraduate OE at UNDA have not attracted support.

The development of OE programs in primary and secondary schools may have been limited, given the lack of curriculum representation in the tertiary setting. Consequently, this may have led to limited specific OE research opportunities in Western Australia, with some notable exceptions (Down et al., 2021, 2023). Overall, tertiary OE in WA has not progressed at the same rate as in other Australian states. As we have suggested in this paper, explanations for the lack of progress include the role of politics and the stance of the TRBWA. Political discourse has continually revealed a misunderstanding of OE over a significant period; therefore, a lack of support has been evident. Most recently, this has been seen in the decision to outsource the Department of Education Camp Schools. As aptly stated by Martin (2008a, p. 23), “the future directions and prospects for OE will remain driven by such biases, differing personalities, political circumstances and resultant educational ideologies of individuals and different education authorities.”

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Data availability The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

MD is a Deputy Editor for the Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education but was not involved in the editing or review of this manuscript and was not given any priority over other manuscripts – editorial status had no bearing on editorial consideration. DP, MD, and BH are directly employed by The University of Notre Dame Australia but have no other relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical approval Institutional ethical approval was granted for the study by the University of Notre Dame Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 061906).

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