

*A study of
Australian employers' perceptions of
graduates from the
Bachelor of Arts
(Outdoor Education) Degree
at La Trobe University*

Overview

- Basis for the research
- Foundations for the research from past studies
- Results
- Conclusions and recommendations

Basis for the Research

La Trobe University's aim is to produce the best graduates of outdoor education in the country.

- Background to the degree

- Personal Motivation
- Desire to build connections between graduates-academics-employers
- Is there a benefit to having a degree?

Foundations for the research

- Current situation in Australia
- Academic basis for a degree
- Issues with current university outdoor education degrees
- What are employers saying they want in an outdoor educator?

Current State of Play

- Where are we at in the Australian outdoor profession
- Training
- Employment
- Development

Basis for a OE degree

- Academic ideology
- Added value (Plaut)
- Underpinning theory and philosophy
- Ability to go beyond the technical
- The validation of the profession
- A starting point

Issues with current university outdoor education degrees

- Articulation and certification
- Relevance
- Balance of theory and practice

“that a degree could not be expected to produce graduates for immediate start as outdoor leaders, but that it can provide the essential grounding in skills and theory to mark their progression into the profession.” (Little & Cosgriff)

Current Perceptions of Graduates

- UK & US based assessments (Barnes, Maningas & Simpson, Plaut, Garvey & Gass)

Benefits

- Understanding of theory & practice
- Personal attributes
- Ability to articulate role & purpose of OE - the bigger picture
- Blend of hard/ soft & Meta skills
- Concepts of analysis of practice and critique

Drawbacks:

- Articulation & certification
- Issues with arrogance
- Levels of competence/ judgments & unrealistic expectations
- Institution vs. practical experience

What are employers saying
they want in an outdoor
educator?

United Kingdom

Ranking	Skill Definition
1	Outdoor activity awards/ skills
2	Personal attributes
3	Experience
4	Group working skills
5	Communication skills
6	Knowledge and understanding
7	Problem solving skills
8	Project management skills
9	Information technology skills
10	Academic awards/ skills

United States

- Medical training & personal experience
- Personal attributes
- Generic Skills/ Certification
- Sophistication of employment process
- Issue of contradiction
- Degrees did imply a system of learning and flexibility
- Issue of needs versus wants

Guiding Questions

1. As an employer, what are the important skills/ attributes/ certifications/ qualifications a potential outdoor educator/ outdoor leader requires?
2. What are the employers' perceptions of university-based education, the subsequent graduates, and benefits of employment of these graduates?

3. How do employers' perceive La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates in areas of technical, environmental, teaching, and professional skills in comparison to other employees?
4. What do employers' perceive to be La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates strengths and deficiencies in regards to skills, attributes, and qualifications?

- Conference Presentations VOEA & OEAQ state conferences
- Advertising - VOEA, Tasmanian Outdoor Education Teachers Association, Outdoors WA, OEAQ, Recreation SA, Victorian Recreation Association, and the Australian Camping Association.
- La Trobe database of OE employers & organisations

Results

- Questionnaire Results
- The Employers & their organisations
- General Employment Characteristics
- Employers' Perceptions of University Outdoor Education Graduates
- Employers' Perceptions of La Trobe Outdoor Education Graduates

Questionnaire Results

- 150 Questionnaires posted
- 32 valid responses
- Conference & advertising recruitment proved to be most successful

The Employers & their Organisations

- 32 employers
- 24 employers having employed Bendigo graduates in past 10yrs.

Occupations

Occupation	No. of Employers
Director	8
Head of OE/ Leading Teacher	6
Outdoor Education Coordinator	5
Principal/ Deputy Principal	4
Owner	4
Human Resource Manager	2
Program/ Operations Manager	1
Unidentified	2

Location

Location of organisation	No. of Organisations
VIC	16
NSW	4
QLD	4
WA	4
NT	1
ACT	1
SA	0
TAS	0
Australia	1
No answer	1

Programs offered by the employers' organisations

Program Offered	Employers' offering these programs
School based outdoor education programs	29
School based outdoor recreation programs	9
Youth at risk programs	7
Holiday programs	6
Other (Duke of Edinburgh, Tourism)	6
Registered training organisation/ TAFE/ University	4
Residential camp	4
Corporate training	4
Consultant	2

Organisational Employment

- Total Employment: 850. Range: 1-274
- Full-time employees: 407
- Part-time employees: 208
- Sessional employees: 235

Employment of Bendigo Graduates

- Current employment: 75 graduates
- Total Employment: 325
- Represents 32% of graduate pop. past 20yrs
- VIC, NSW, NT, QLD & WA

Tertiary qualifications of organisations employees

- An average of 41-50% of staff in all organisations with tertiary qualifications.

General Employment Characteristics

Rank	Characteristic
1	Personal attributes
2	Previous experience and broad range of outdoor skills
3	Interpersonal and facilitation skills
4	First Aid (Wilderness first aid)
5	Skills/ Knowledge/ Qualifications in organisations relevant activities
6	Enthusiasm and passion for the profession
7	Instructional skills (bushwalking/ rock climbing and roping skills/ flat water paddling)
8	Professional attitude/ confidence/ competence/ judgment
9	Formal qualifications in outdoor education (degree/ diploma)
10	Team work

Personal Attributes

Attitude/ Motivation/ Initiative/ Flexibility

“At the end of the day, pieces of paper aside, they need to be someone who makes those around them feel comfortable and confident in their ability to fulfil their role.”

- Links with research that relates attitude to a persons effectiveness (Gassner 2002)

Experience

- Experience forms a basis & hurdle requirement for employment
- The need to go beyond certification/qualification experience

"I have seen good instructors come out of both TAFE and university courses and it is what the student does extra to these courses which seems to determine how dedicated to the cause they are."

Qualifications

- 3 key areas:
 1. Certifiable
 2. Fit the Requirements of their programs
 3. Ability to go beyond the activity to see the big picture

Specific Qualifications

- First Aid - Wilderness First Aid
- OE Degrees - advantageous to employment
- Bushwalking/ Roping Skills/ Flat water canoeing

Interpersonal Communication

- Ability to conduct but also facilitate activities

“They need to know how to communicate with students, fellow staff and school staff and know the difference in communicating with each of these groups.”

Employers' Perceptions of University Outdoor Education Graduates

What do employers think graduates should have?

- Skills, knowledge & qualifications in specialist area

“The capacity to understand their abilities and not overstate them.”

- High level of personal attributes

“I expect to find workers that are passionate about their work, are experienced and/or willing to learn through experiential learning”

- Ability to understand the theory & philosophy of OE

“They should have a deeper knowledge of why they are out there and what they are trying to achieve with the students”

- Professional considerations

“Understanding of the importance of planning, documentation and adherence to education guidelines.”

What are employers' perceptions of graduates?

The Benefits:

- ✓ Understanding of OE philosophy
 - ✓ Passion for & commitment to the profession
- “They [graduates] often view their occupation in a professional manner rather than a job within an industry, after-all, they have been tested both academically and practically in outdoor education”*

- ✓ Broader range of attributes
- ✓ Ability to structure & facilitate experiences for students

“I prefer university qualifications as it ensures teaching skills, environmental awareness and broader educational background”

The Drawbacks:

- Impact of philosophy of the institution

- Variances & inconsistencies in curriculum

“I do find it frustrating however that some university programs graduates do not come out with VET Certificate IV accreditation along with their degree”

- Issues of arrogance

“In our situation we find a degree brings out misplaced arrogance regarding their ability. We find that all graduates in outdoor education require a lot of additional training to enable them to fit into the workplace”

- Desire to train their own staff

Employers' Perceptions of Bendigo Graduates

- *Environmental*: Knowledge and capacity to implement environmental studies and practices
- *Teaching*: Knowledge and capacity to undertake facilitation, organisation, and instructional skills

- *Technical*: Knowledge and skill in outdoor activities
- *Professional*: Knowledge and capacity to incorporate judgement, ethics, risk management, and the integration of the Technical, Environmental, Teaching and Personal skills

Environmental Skills

- Employers rated Bendigo graduates as above average to excellent

“Superior as this is a focus of the La Trobe course and graduates tend to realise the importance of this element in a program”

“They are well qualified in environmental education and often passionate about it”

Teaching Skills

- A mix of excellent and average

Key themes: Fluctuations in individuals &
Experience levels

*“Quite obvious they have been trained as teachers.
Much greater development than non-graduates”*

*“It always concerns me to hear that a 22 year old is
going to do an in depth facilitation of an
experience.”*

Technical Skills

- Skills rated as “above average” but with some reservations

“Most graduates have good across the board technical skills. Many have found an area they are more comfortable to develop and are pursuing this as a personal passion.”

- Fluctuation between individuals
- Depth of experience

“they may be technically proficient but not practically proficient when leading a group”

- The need to formally assess

“Often do not have the necessary certificates that are needed for workplace protocols unless they have been proactive enough to do them themselves”

- Over confident in their skills

“Person specific, however over confident if recently graduated”

Professional Skills

Bendigo graduates rated as “average”

- Key themes:

- Realities of time & experience

“[Bendigo graduates] Have the theory but not the time or experience to have let it evolve yet. You ask too much of the students if you think that they will be able to do these. Most of these require years of experience”

- Judgment in comparison to ability

“Sometimes it seems as though the degree has given them a ‘false’ sense of their level of experience, hence their ability to adequately judge situations.”

Bendigo Graduates Key Strengths

- Foundations of Skills

“A very good foundation of soft and hard skills – a good combination for a group leader”

- Educational & Environmental Ethos

“They bring in the right ethos for our camp, focusing on environmental, social and personal sustainability”

- Environmental Knowledge

“Generally a greater environmental knowledge and understanding of why we take students out”

- Passion & Enthusiasm

“Energetic and passionate. A framework for learning”

- Experience

“Plenty of experience in handling groups’ needs and an empathy for our students”

- OE theory & knowledge

“A good theoretical base in leading outdoor programmes and an enthusiasm to learn”

Bendigo Graduates Weaknesses

- Accreditation

“The number one weakness is that they do not have their experiences mapped against the cert 4 industry qualifications.”

- Lack of field experience

“Often not totally comfortable taking on responsibility as a leader with little back up”

- Unreal expectations

“Unreal expectation of what they are worth as a first year graduate”

“Some can overstate their abilities – i.e. assume that they are finished in their training and learning and are experts and professionals.”

- Issues of arrogance in relation to skills & ability

“The only word that can best describe their weaknesses is that they tend to be a bit arrogant... because they are doing what is considered the best of the degree courses in Victoria.”

“Bendigo offers what it does, it is not going to fill all the roles for a leader, instructor, or guide. If its students wish to get good jobs in the field then they need to, in their own time, extend their personal hard skills and qualifications”

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Characteristics of an Outdoor Educator or Leader
- Perceptions of University Graduates
- Perceptions of Bendigo Outdoor Education Graduates

Characteristics of an Outdoor Educator or Leader

- Personal characteristics
- The ability to understand & work within an organisations framework
- Develop a matrix of skills/ qualifications & experience beyond that of a certification
- Employers reassess expectations

Perceptions of University Graduates

- Degrees are beneficial but form a background competency for employment
- Improve the articulation of degrees - VOEA Professional Activity Statement
- The acknowledgement that it is one system of knowledge
- Employers identify the basis for their employment

Perceptions of Bendigo Graduates

- The maintenance of a high standard of education and training,
- The development of knowledge related to the outdoor profession in Australia and its organisations,

- Specific qualifications,
- Building graduates recognition of their initial positions within the profession, and
- The necessity for personal experience beyond that offered within the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree.

A few thoughts for the future

- What do we determine as experience?
- Is there a case of needs versus wants?
- How much are graduates inhibited by financial constraints or is the paper trail forcing us out of having our own personal experiences?
- What role do employers play in developing clarity in employment?