

HIGH QUALITY OUTDOOR LEARNING 2025



Author

Dr Dave Harvey led the HQOL 2025 project. He runs his own consultancy, training and research business - daveharveyoutdoorlearning.co.uk/

Background

High Quality Outdoor Learning (HQOL) was first published by the English Outdoor Council in 2015, updating the earlier High Quality Outdoor Education (HQOE) from 2005. HQOL expanded on the traditional emphasis on outdoor pursuits, adopting a broader, more inclusive approach aligned with contemporary thinking (1). The guide referenced supporting documents and academic research, focusing on outcomes to provide a benchmarking framework for practitioners and organisations.

The 2015 version retained the original ten outcomes from HQOE, derived from practice rather than academic research. Later studies confirmed these outcomes could be achieved through various outdoor learning (OL) approaches, demonstrating their ongoing relevance. Since publication, HQOL 2015 has been widely adopted within the sector, including translations into Welsh and Chinese.

With growing awareness of outdoor learning's benefits and a robust evidence base, this revision ensures relevance and connection to current practices and agendas.

Scope and development

Building on HQOL (2015), HQOL 2025 expands its scope significantly by integrating a quality model that encompasses structures, practice and outcomes. Whereas the original document focused on children and young people, HQOL 2025 recognises outdoor learning as a lifelong endeavour, also including recreational contexts. The updated guide reflects the growing role of outdoor learning in the health and care sectors, accommodating adult participation as well as young people's.

HQOL 2025 is aimed at practitioners, providers, decision-makers, and non-specialists. As well as the full guide, IOL have also published a separate guide for policy and decision makers. IOL members will also be able to access each individual section as separate documents.

HQOL 2025 brings together research, standards and practitioner experience from the UK and further afield. Successive drafts underwent extensive review by the IOL's Trustees and the LPIOL community of practice, their contributions helping to shape content and ensure its relevance and currency.

Content

The guide consists of two main parts. The first part sets out the societal context for outdoor learning and the potential benefits, supported by extensive research references. This section is also available as a separate document aimed specifically at policy and decision-makers. The second part focuses on the structures, practice and outcomes associated with high quality outdoor learning (2).

- **Structures:** These encompass physical and organisational features critical to effective practice and achieving outcomes.
- **Practice:** This covers programme delivery and activities that practitioners can influence. Core elements include safety management, inclusion, relationships, environmental awareness and sustainability, intended outcomes and continuity of learning.
- **Outcomes:** These are the results of outdoor learning experiences. They may be defined by participants, providers, funders, or emerge naturally from the process. Outcomes might reflect specific group characteristics, such as teamwork, or align with organisational frameworks.

The guide is not a prescriptive manual. Providers and practitioners can use the descriptions of high-quality practice and reflective questions as a basis for self-evaluation and improvement. It also informs external observers, helping articulate good practices that may otherwise be implicit. The guide combines global research and practice with a UK perspective and while it outlines common good practices, the diversity of outdoor learning settings and approaches means that quality must be interpreted in context.

Conclusion

HQOL 2025 is more than an update, it offers a holistic perspective on high-quality outdoor learning, blending good practice with research. By addressing structures, practice and outcomes, the guide highlights how outdoor learning contributes to societal challenges faced by all age groups.

If you are interested in a hard copy of High Quality Outdoor Learning 2025 please email us at institute@outdoor-learning.org

References

1. EOC (2015) High Quality Outdoor Learning, English Outdoor Council
2. Harvey, D (2024) Assessing quality in outdoor learning. Horizons 104.

