

2.0: Understanding high quality outdoor learning

Within the outdoor sector there are multiple interpretations of quality, reflected in the range of available frameworks, qualifications, accreditations and awards. Ideas of quality can vary depending on a wide number of factors that relate to what is being assessed (e.g., a product, an experience, a facility, a service, etc.), expectations, value for money and the meeting of needs.

Any assessment of quality in outdoor learning contexts is often a compound of many different feelings, observations and experiences from before, during and after the experience itself. The structures in place that lead to effective outdoor learning experiences, including the pre-programme needs analysis, the delivery of the experiences and the outcomes achieved as a result all play a part. Perceptions of quality also reflect the cultural and societal expectations that are current at the time.

Different groups of people make quality judgements about outdoor learning practice. Beyond the providers' own in-house quality systems, there may also be judgments being made by people involved in formal staff training and assessment, performance management or accreditation inspections, funders (or whoever is paying for or commissioning the service, including parents) and government agencies. Activities that happen in the public eye are also subject to judgement from other practitioners, recreational participants and casual passers-by.

Also passing judgment are the participants themselves, and the accompanying adults/leaders if the participants are a group. Accordingly, there are different perspectives gained from experiencing and /or observing as a participant (potentially 'in the moment', experiencing something and supported by the facilitator), as an observer (with a different view that may enable them to see certain things that the participant is not consciously aware of), and, beyond that, as an observer with expert knowledge who will see an additional layer of practice evidence. However, for non-expert observers, it is important to recognise the difficulties that exist in trying to assess quality in a field in which they themselves are not an expert.

A model for understanding quality

In this guide, overall quality is seen as a blend of quality of structures (the physical and organisational characteristics of the provision), practice (what is delivered to the participants) and outcomes (the effects the programme has), all of which can be connected by a 'theory of change' that makes clear the link between what is delivered, the context in which the learning is situated, and the intended outcomes (Figure 1).

Underpinning structures

The physical and organisational characteristics of organisations that deliver high quality outdoor learning are integral to effective practice and achieving successful outcomes. A shared vision, underpinned by organisational values and beliefs provides the platform for a supportive and enabling culture with effective policies and procedures.

Practice

Outdoor learning can be interpreted in many ways, but in its broadest sense is as an umbrella term that incorporates numerous approaches. An alternative, and more specific way of defining it is as either a process or an outcome. This guide considers both, taking a position that practice and outcomes are interrelated. It focuses on the aspects of provision that bind the activities themselves together, and that can be controlled and influenced by the practitioners and providers. By concentrating on the quality of practice the intended outcomes are far more likely to be achieved than by focusing solely on the outcomes.

Outcomes

Whether the outcomes of high quality outdoor learning are targeted and specific, or more open ended, they provide a focus for activities and experiences that can also frame assessment and evaluation processes.

Desired outcomes can be developed in a variety of ways. They may be co-generated by the provider and participants, by the provider themselves, by a funder or service commissioner or be entirely generated by the participants themselves.

They can simply reflect a known characteristic of the group that there is a desire to develop (e.g. 'teamwork') or be part of an outcomes framework that a particular organisation uses.

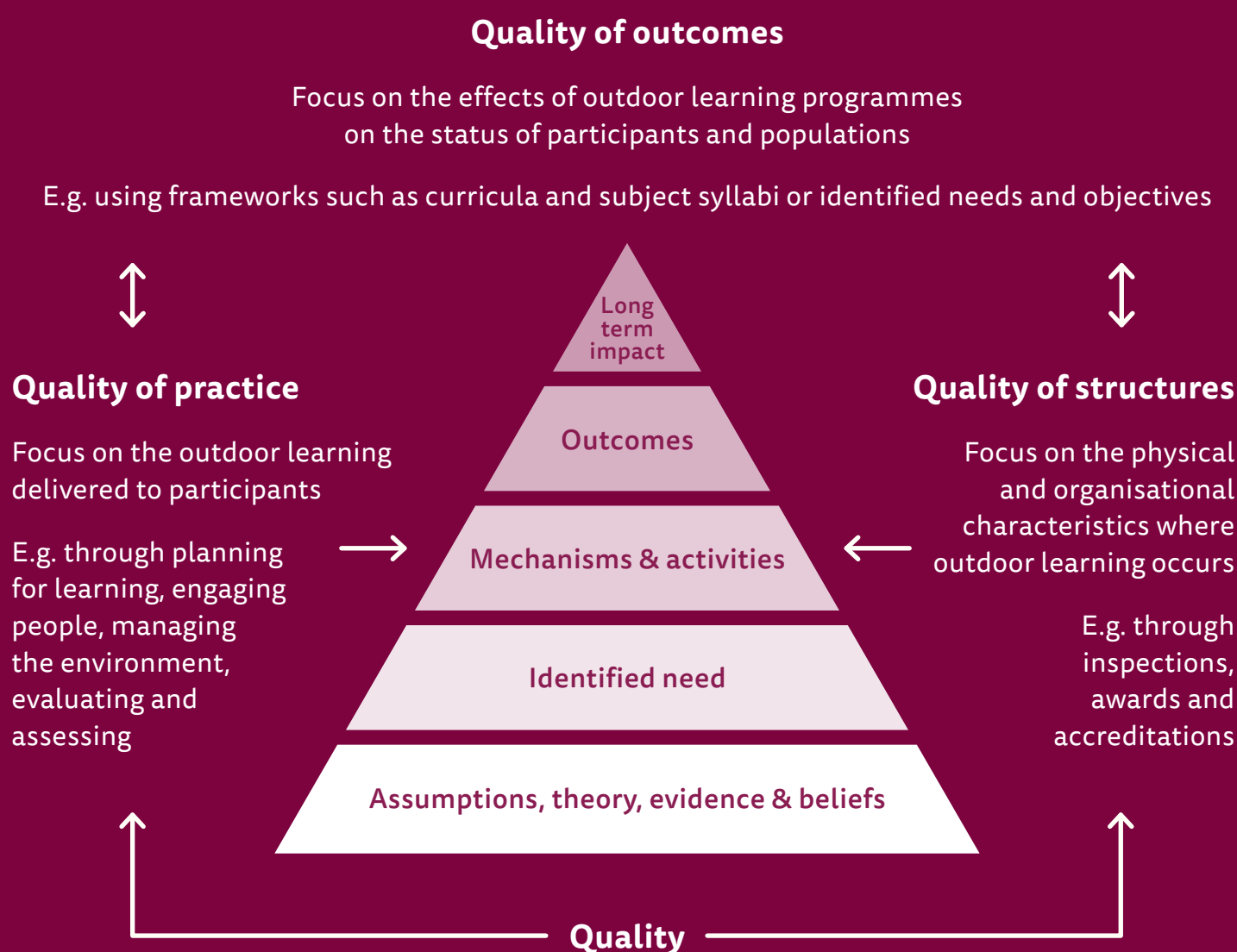


Figure 1. A conceptual model for understanding quality in outdoor learning (after Harvey, 2023)¹

See also:

- 2.1 Underpinning structures
- 2.2 Safety management and safeguarding
- 2.3 Equity diversity inclusion and belonging
- 2.4 Developing relationships
- 2.5 Outdoor learning the environment and sustainable practice
- 2.6 Theory of change
- 2.7 Continuity and progression
- 3.0 High quality outdoor learning in practice
- 4.0 Outcomes of outdoor learning

References

- 1 Harvey, D. (2024) *Assessing Quality in Outdoor Learning. Horizons* (104) pp.28-30.

