

SPOTLIGHT ON...

The IOL Fellowship and Professional Recognition

Written by Glen Probert

In 2024, the Institute for Outdoor Learning approached the Leading Practitioners of the Institute for Outdoor Learning (LPIOLs) to ask for their consideration of the future of the Fellowship of the IOL. With the Fellowship having sat dormant for several years, the question now posed to the LPIOLs was: does the Fellowship of the IOL have a part to play in the future of outdoor learning?

Consultation with the Leading Practitioners of the IOL

Topics of conversation such as these often come through to the LPIOLs and they are invited to contribute or support as they see fit. One of the main strengths of the LPIOL community is that it has both a depth and breadth of experience in relation to outdoor learning and so the group that agreed to broach this question did so with a range of perspectives.

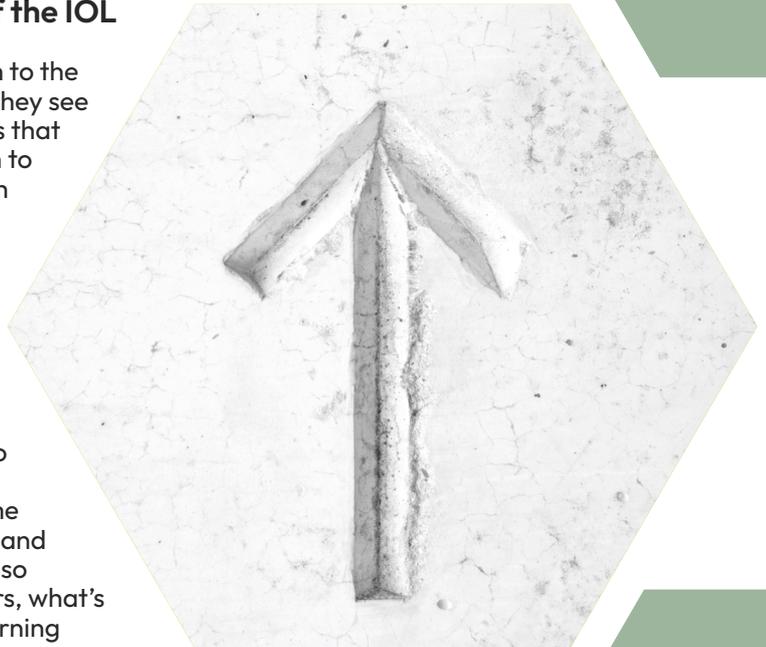
In exploring the concept of a Fellowship across other sectors, it was soon identified that a Fellowship stood better as a meritocratic membership that reflects current activity and contribution, rather than an award that benchmarks a certain level of competency at a point in time. Following this line of investigation, it was determined that the access points to such a Fellowship would need identifiable pathways and benchmarked gateways for members to join, that in some way complimented the existing professional recognition and awards. Of course, an endeavour such as a Fellowship also needs a purpose! Essentially, what's in it for the members, what's in it for the IOL and what's in it for the wider outdoor learning community?

What is the purpose of the Fellowship?

A Fellowship could bring about many benefits for the IOL, IOL members and the outdoor learning sector, including:

- terminology that is also used and understood by other sectors;
- varied paths of accessibility;
- opportunity for progression in professional recognition;
- improved potential for inclusivity, collaboration and impact;
- demonstrable commitment to supporting the development of the outdoor learning sector;
- entitlement to use 'Fellow/Senior Fellow' of the IOL (FIOL or SFIOL) after your name;
- recognition in the IOL Professional Directory as a Fellow (the directory will be reorganised to reflect this).

One of the main challenges our sector faces is to find a common platform for strategic discussion and collaboration that can effectively tackle the risks and opportunities within the sector. A Fellowship, which brings together a variety of perspectives with a similar level of thinking and purpose, could be a great asset to the future of outdoor learning.



Those that have been awarded an IOL Award, at whatever level, will know that it is the process of the award which facilitates development and learning as they are primarily candidate-led with support from mentors and assessors. However, once these awards are completed there is an obvious ‘what now?’ for the candidate. If the right support networks were created, along with further opportunities for engagement, it is more likely that the awards would be more attractive, encourage progression and maintain membership. To this end, it was identified that, although a Fellowship would certainly be of benefit to people operating at/or equivalent to LPIOL level, enabling people to access a Fellowship at various points in their career would also be beneficial.

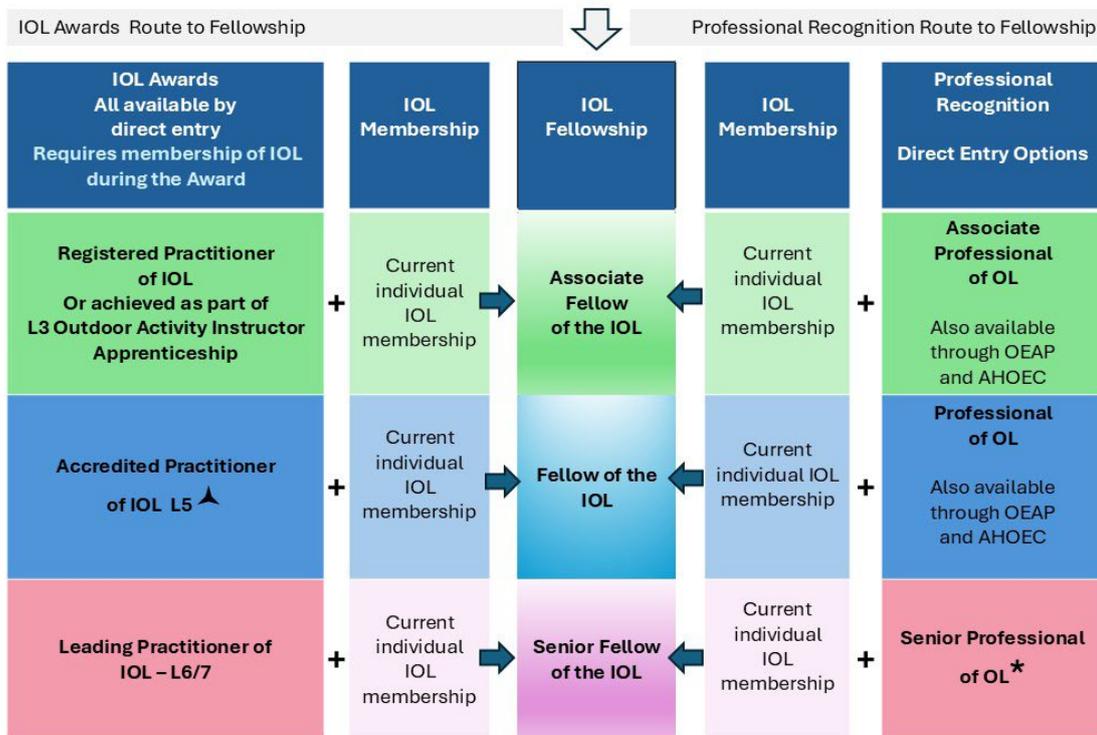
How will people become Fellowship members?

To enable the creation of the Fellowship and ensure its appeal to current and future IOL members, it is important that it supports the pre-existing structures within the IOL, including both the awards and professional recognition pathways. Fundamental to accessing both of these is IOL membership, meaning Fellows will require ongoing membership of the IOL to retain Fellow status.

Current members can access the Registered Practitioner of the IOL (RPIOL) award or, if they feel they already meet similar criteria without requiring the support of the full award, can access the Associate Professional of Outdoor Learning (APL). The Associate Fellow of the IOL will align with both of these levels, providing a platform for both routes to future progression. The associate Professional of the IOL (APIOL) award is currently complimented by the Professional in Outdoor Learning (POL) award, again for those members that are already working at that level.

As the POL is currently available through the IOL, Outdoor Education Advisors Panel (OEAP) and Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC), this becomes the point of identification for professionals across the outdoor learning sector and opens the door to all of them accessing a Fellowship within the IOL.

Accreditation and Professional Recognition Principles



Key actions in 2026

[▲] Map L5 Outdoor Learning Specialist to APIOL.
Identify route to being achieved with the L5 apprenticeship

^{*} Development of the direct entry to Senior Professional which is the equivalent or above the LPIOL standard.

Having the Fellowship aligned with both the APIOL and POL pathways sets a blueprint for progression as well. Again, in other sectors it is common to have differing levels of Fellowship depending on the level of knowledge, skills, behaviour, experience and qualifications. For those operating at a level equivalent to LPIOL, in the current structure there is no recognised pathway to the Senior Fellowship other than through the LPIOL award. To make the Senior Fellowship of the IOL more accessible to a wider range of professionals, it has therefore been necessary to create the Senior Professional in Outdoor Learning – a new pathway that will recognise those members already working across the sector at this higher level with a similar mindset, but who don't want the support or process the LPIOL Award provides to demonstrate this.

Introducing the Senior Professional in Outdoor Learning

The Senior Professional in Outdoor Learning (SPOL) is a new method of professional recognition that will be launched at the same time as the Fellowships. Whilst the POL is currently offered through multiple organisations, the SPOL will only be offered through the IOL initially with a view to opening this up to others once it is established.

The benchmarking for the SPOL will be against that of the LPIOL, albeit without the support, mentoring and development that the journey provides. The aspiration is to have the requirements for the SPOL published by autumn 2025, allowing for the first applicants in 2026. The pathways to APOL and POL remain current and unchanged through this review and whilst recognition as an Associate Fellow and Fellow will be given to all who already meet the access requirements, it is anticipated that most activity will be around the Senior Fellowship in the first instance. The already current LPIOL Community of Practice will transition into the Senior Fellowship and continue with its ongoing engagement and contributions.

For those who are confident that they meet the requirements for SPOL, they will need to be a current member of the IOL and apply to meet with accreditors from within the Senior Fellowship (LPIOL's in the first instance) and, if successful, will gain recognition as a Senior Professional of Outdoor Learning. As long as they keep their IOL membership current, they will be recognised as a Senior Fellow of the IOL and gain access to the Senior Fellowship. Should applicants be deemed not to meet the expected benchmarks at that time, the professional discussion may indicate that a potential way forward would be for them to consider the LPIOL Award and the support and development this process provides.

Looking to the future

The aspiration is that the Fellowships and their supporting pathways will offer a way for a wide range of outdoor professionals to come together, communicate and collaborate in a meaningful and positive way that drives outdoor learning forward to the benefit of all. What this looks like, what challenges and opportunities there may be ahead are unknown – the Fellowship will be what the members want and need it to be and do. But in them we will have a community that has common values and understanding at its roots, as it strives to grow bigger and stronger than ever before Δ