

Research proposal: Msc. Outdoor Education

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Title: Graduate Perspectives of National Governing Body Awards in Degree Programmes

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Rationale

Fifteen years ago there were few degrees for people wanting to work in the outdoors and they were generally focused towards teaching. (Humberstone & Mannerings, 2004). There has been a marked growth in outdoor courses in higher education, for example, UCAS, the UK degree programme organisation, listed 188 courses that use the words outdoors or adventure (Hardy 2004) and a search of programmes recently lists 99 courses with 'outdoor' in their title (6th April 2005).

The above quote on the OUTRES (Outdoor Research) discussion list promoted over twenty, sometimes quite heated, responses with a variety of opinions, chiefly from academics. Tom left the course he was attending not long after this and, to date, has not completed. He went to work to focus on National Governing Body Awards, although it is unlikely this resulted solely from the replies he received via OUTRES.

Degree courses in the outdoors do not have National Governing Body Awards (NGB's) integral to their curriculum. Debate in this area (see Hardy 2003) is entering a further phase as the Accredited Practitioner of the Institute of Outdoor Learning scheme develops (see Harris 2005). The issue is also on outdoor forum discussion lists (Hardy 2003, Harris 2005) where NGB's are central to debate. With an increase in outdoor related degrees by higher education institutions (HEI's) employers are asking questions regarding the employability of students. This is illustrated in a quotation from Mark Fawcett who works for World Challenge Expeditions:

"If a degree course meant that students were able to add the higher education experience to the acquisition of NGB qualifications it would be worth doing. But if they know about the principles of outdoor education without the NGBs - they are going to struggle. It's like having a French degree - you have to be able to speak French."

(in Revell, 2000)

This opinion is the essence of the argument with conventional wisdom seeing NGB's as the essential part of the employment process in outdoor centres. The quote above assumes students will struggle without NGB's; have they however been an issue for graduates with an outdoor degree?

The researcher's interest stems from curriculum design and content in Foundation Degrees. David Blunkett (Education Secretary 1997- 2002) introduced these in February 2000 with the intention to,

... help education providers supply the labour market with the high-quality graduates needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills.. (DfES, 2005)

If education providers are to supply the labour market, the debate of NGB's from HEI's will be important. This study will explore the issues and provide evidence from graduates of an outdoor degree.

Chapter one

The first chapter will be an introduction giving the background to the research and a rationale for the study; this will include a brief history and development of outdoor degrees and NGB's in the UK. More recent developments in higher education and government policy in the outdoor sector will frame the relevance of this area and provide the necessary background for the reader. The introduction will serve as a guide for the rest of the dissertation outlining the contents.

Chapter two

Chapter two will be a review of literature. The argument examines the incorporation of vocational work and experience into academic programmes. It will explore the purpose of degrees at a philosophical level and draw on classical work as well as more contemporary writers such as Foucault (1974), Eraut (1994) and Carr (2003). The review will define terms and give reference to the study and consider changes in outdoor education definition (Adkins & Simmons 2003) in recent years and terms more recently used such as professionalism and industry (Allin, 2004). This will frame the relevance of the NGB's in degrees debate and make up the first section of the literature review.

From this broad platform the second section of the review will search out other areas of higher education that involve vocational learning and training. Examples include sport, medicine and veterinary science. Parallels may also be drawn with nursing, known for developments in experiential learning and Problem Based Learning (Benner, 1984), where there have been calls for assessment of clinical performance to contribute to academic qualifications that incorporate professional awards. (Redfern et al, 2002). There are also practical elements involved in the performing arts where arguably an element of talent and skill is required. Drawing on work such as the Report on the Reform of the National Council for Drama Training (NCDT 2003), other areas of higher education where National Governing Bodies and professional qualifications are important, such as the above, will be considered.

The third section of the review will focus on the development and history of NGB qualifications and legislation pertaining to outdoor centres. This will give a background to the current importance of NGB's in employment exemplified by recent job advert placed by the Trewern Outdoor Education Centre:

‘.for field studies, a geography degree is needed, and for Outdoor Education a minimum of three NGBs.’

(Trewern Outdoor Education Centre)

The employers emphasis in outdoor education is clearly on NGB's rather than academic ability.

The review will shift to outdoor courses in HE and draw together debate from the first section on education and professionalism and apply this specifically to the outdoors. Finally the review will ask where higher education in the outdoors is placed in relation to other areas of higher education provision such as those reviewed in the second section and take the specifics of the argument to a wider conceptual level. It is the aim of the literature review to funnel the study and generate specific questions re vocational aspects and professional awards within academic programmes.

In looking at the research conducted into outdoor degrees, there is little that is immediate. Barnes (2002) has considered their role and gives some opinion on content (Barnes 2004). Consideration will

also be given to Hodgson and Sharp (2004) who examine the strategies students employ for gaining NGB's in a degree programme.

Chapter Three

This will outline the research design and methodology. The investigation will be a survey which is an appropriate method of inquiry for making inferences about a large number of people. (Marshall and Rossman 1999:130). The focus of the inquiry is graduate perspectives of NGB's in a degree programme. As this is ambiguous the process of literature review will generate more specific questions and focus the primary objective of the inquiry. For a survey the general purpose must be translated into a specific aim (Cohen et al, 2000:172). Example research questions include:

- *What areas are graduates employed in?*
- *What NGB's are students graduating with?*
- *What is the most frequently occurring NGB amongst graduates?*
- *Do graduates believe there should be aspects of competence-based assessment in line with NGB's as part of their degree?*
- *What areas of employment are graduates in who have no NGB's.*

It would be beyond the scope of this study to survey all graduates of outdoor programmes and for reasons of access the sample will be graduates of a Bsc. Outdoor Education from the University of Edinburgh. The primary form of data collection will be a postal questionnaire which is seen as the best form of survey in an educational inquiry (Cohen et al, 2000:262).

To provide deeper meaning to the data interviews will be conducted to '*move away from seeing human subjects as simply manipulable and data as somehow external to individuals*' (Cohen 2000:267). The sample of interviewees will be dependant on the nature of responses and their individual consent. They will explore unexpected results and go deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reason for responding as they do. (Kerlinger in Cohen 2000:268).

One of the main concerns of this approach is the potential poor response rate of the postal questionnaire.

Chapter four

This will detail the results. Questionnaires will be edited and responses to pre-coded questions entered into a computer statistical programme such as SPSS. For open questions a coding frame will be devised and, depending on response rates, entries made to a computer package such as Nvivo.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. They will be used to support the above data using quotations to bring the results to life and add to the discussion.

Chapter five

The chapter will discuss the results and findings in relation to the literature reviewed. Specifically discussion will examine:

Graduate areas of employment: To understand what graduates are now involved in and develop a broader picture. The argument outlined by employers (see Fawcett in Revel 2000) is that outdoor degrees do not train graduates for the practice in the outdoors. Is this a spurious argument? Are graduates finding employment within the fields degree courses are designed for and employers are wanting HEI's to pay for NGB courses they should be providing?

NGB's students are graduating with: The discussion would balance findings against comments re graduates of outdoor degrees are going to struggle without NGB's. (Fawcett in Revell 2000)

Employment opportunities for graduates with no NGB's: According to Hodgsen & Sharp (2000) students who graduates with a range of NGB's have a greater chance of employment. This study will test this hypothesis and the discussion will surround the relationship between NGB's and employment of graduates.

The most frequently occurring NGB: To obtain an NGB candidates are required to show a valid first aid certificate. The research may show this to be the award most graduates have suggesting this a curriculum area that is overlooked by degree courses?

Competence based assessment as part of a degree: This will discuss graduate perspective on this contentious issue in the outdoors. It will consider the review of literature from areas of work such as nursing to develop argument surrounding competence based assessment in outdoor degrees.

Chapter six

This will consist of the conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Area of interest

As the researcher I have a personal interest in this area. I am responsible for a Foundation Degree in outdoor education and also involved in the administering, training and assessment of NGB's. I have a vested interest in both these areas: Through part time work at a university and part time work at a National Centre. This gives me access to a wide variety of people who are involved in policy relating to this topic both in education and within the national governing body organisations. The methodology will critique my position, as the researcher, within this study.

Timetable

Time is one of the greatest constraints in this study:

May	Primary review of literature and design research
Early June	Continue review of literature Design, pilot and post questionnaire
Late June	Collect respondents Send reminders Collect more respondents
July	Data reduction analysis and writing up. Submit first draft
August	Corrections and amendments
September	Panic

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