

Outdoor Education – A Critical Senior Subject

Outdoor Education (OE) is a well-established, evidence-based subject with a unique and essential contribution to New Zealand's secondary curriculum. It supports a wide range of national priorities, from improving attendance and wellbeing, to building a future-ready workforce and strengthening New Zealand's economic and cultural identity.

1. Alignment with a Knowledge-Rich Curriculum

OE integrates theory and practice, embedding explicit knowledge-rich content aligned with curriculum objectives, including:

- Safety management and risk assessment
- Leadership theories and teamwork strategies
- Conflict resolution and dynamic decision making
- Emergency response and crisis management
- Environmental understanding and stewardship
- Authentic, real-world application

OE has all the features of a standalone academic subject:

- A distinct body of content and competencies
- Academic pathways at NZ and international universities
- Professional journals, organisations, and curriculum frameworks
- A strong research base

2. Evidence-Based Educational Benefits

Robust research demonstrates OE significantly enhances student engagement, academic achievement, and overall learning outcomes (EOTC Values Proposition, 2024).

- **Attendance & Engagement:** Truancy costs the NZ economy an estimated \$1.4B annually. OE is a proven re-engagement tool, particularly for students disengaged in traditional classrooms.
- **Science of Learning & Movement:** Research shows active, experiential learning improves focus, memory, and performance across all subjects. Students who

move and learn outdoors show gains in attention, reasoning, and problem-solving, directly lifting results in maths, reading, and writing.

- Cognitive & Wellbeing Benefits: Time in nature and movement enhance learning while also strengthening mental and physical health.

3. Holistic Development of Students

OE fosters essential life skills including resilience, teamwork, leadership, cooperation, critical thinking, and problem-solving, all transferable to any career. Many successful professionals credit their OE experiences as foundational to their achievements.

It provides culturally responsive opportunities for ākonga Māori and Pacific learners, embedding Mātauranga Māori principles such as kaitiakitanga.

4. Strategic Intentions & Ministry Goals

OE advances the Ministry of Education's Strategic Intentions (2025–2029), supporting goals around wellbeing, equity, engagement, and active citizenship.

- Strengthens community connections
- Promotes environmental stewardship
- Reinforces citizenship education

5. Economic and Vocational Pathways

Outdoor Education contributes directly to New Zealand's economy and workforce:

- Workforce Readiness: Builds skills demanded in tourism, conservation, defence, trades, and construction.
- Regional Growth: Tourism accounts for 7.5% of GDP and supports 1 in 9 jobs. OE builds the skilled local talent pipeline that sustains regional economies.
- Tertiary Pathways: Pathways into degrees and diplomas are well-established and endorsed by 7 of 8 NZ universities.
- Broader GDP Impact: Including indirect effects, tourism is NZ's second-largest export earner, employing 182,727 directly and supporting 303,420 jobs overall (TIA, 2025).

6. Industry and Sector Support

Outdoor Education enjoys wide endorsement from schools, tertiary institutions, iwi, and industry. Supporters include:

Tourism Industry Aotearoa, Recreation Aotearoa, Outward Bound, YMCA, Mountain Safety Council, SAR, Leave No Trace NZ, PENZ, NZAEE, NZOIA, Hillary Outdoors, MERC, Whenua Iti, Boyle River Outdoor Ed Centre, and more.

Sector leaders recognise OE as vital for workforce development, student engagement, and national identity.

7. Growing Student Demand

OE is already deeply embedded in NZ schools:

- 370 schools reported OE credits for students in 2023 (Toi Mai Workforce Development Council).
- Thousands of students annually take OE, with demand continuing to grow.
- OE is often the subject where students form their strongest peer and teacher relationships, supporting safe, inclusive, and engaging learning.

In Summary

Outdoor Education is an essential pillar of a future-focused education system. It:

- Enhances learning across the curriculum through experiential, movement-based learning
- Keeps students engaged and reduces truancy
- Builds transferable skills valued by all employers
- Supports tertiary pathways and workforce readiness
- Strengthens tourism, conservation, and regional economies
- Embeds environmental guardianship and cultural identity at the heart of education



Outdoor Education is not a “nice-to-have”, it is a cost-effective, evidence-backed subject delivering measurable outcomes across education, employment, and the economy