

National 'soft skills' training: Investigating soft skill training in the outdoor recreation sector

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Introduction

At the centre of the best outdoor experiences is a person; a leader who facilitates the individuals, group and environment in such a way that makes positive and lasting impressions on participants. The skills and abilities facilitators bring to these encounters are diverse yet require that they are adept at emotional perception, management and processing as well as interpersonal connection and communication. The performance and embodiment of 'emotion work' is central to everyday fulfillment of outdoor leader roles. However, emotion work is largely invisible and thus lacks acknowledgement and training in outdoor education/certification programs nationally. VET and university programs present a variety of foci and emphasis on 'soft skills'. Even then, what is meant by soft skills is ambiguous and rarely articulates the personal/emotional investment required in delivering meaningful participant experiences. Hence, a better understanding of what 'soft skills' are required by and taught to outdoor leaders is necessary in improving outcomes for participants and leaders in organised outdoor recreations. A clear set of interpersonal, communication and emotion work skills should be taught to outdoor leaders in order that they are able to deliver meaningful connections between outdoor experiences, nature, and positive relationships with others.

Project outcomes

This research project will conduct a comprehensive assessment of 'soft skills' training available in Outdoor Recreation tertiary education across Australia. The findings from this research will enhance the capacity of government and the outdoor sector to make decisions about the future allocation of resources, influence future policy, improve current practice and develop alternative programs to increase participation in outdoor activity. The research will then identify gaps between what is available through training programs and challenges/issues reported by outdoor recreation facilitators and operators regarding interpersonal facilitation and emotion work skills. This project presents a significant opportunity to gain a 'snap shot' of the current state and quality of 'soft' skill training available within Australia with recommendations and implications for the training and education of outdoor facilitators in the future.

Project contributors

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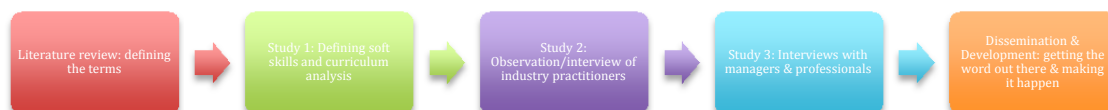
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Overview of Research Plan

The broader research plan, in which this study is considered the 1st, entails three studies. Each study contributes to a fuller, deeper and richer understanding of the expectations and proficiencies required of facilitator in regards to that which is commonly termed 'soft skills' in the outdoor industry. The intention of this broader study is to be able to develop actionable outcomes and strategies to address the deficiency in 'soft skill' training and education.



Study 1

The first phase will analyse training content related to 'soft skills' and emotion work. The study will consider TAFE/ VET and university materials focused on the interpersonal and emotion work skills taught in Outdoor Recreation courses across Australia. This is a textual analysis and would aim to include outdoor recreation university courses/degrees and select TAFE Diploma/Cert IV courses (substantial quota sampling).

Study 2

The second phase will entail participant observation of diversely qualified outdoor facilitators to assess what 'soft skills' are being utilised or are required in the everyday aspects of outdoor experience delivery. This phase will highlight what skills are being used but may not be recognised by the facilitators who use them due to their assumed or invisible nature (i.e., emotion work). These skills may not otherwise be recognised or discussed in self-reporting data collection techniques like interviews.

This Phase would be best paired with a 'debrief' interview in which outdoor facilitators (ranging in age, experience and training) will be interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of how well their training prepared them for their employment roles and how aware they are of the interpersonal skills they utilise on a daily basis. This interview will be focused on understanding what soft skills facilitators see themselves using in their roles.

Study 3

Phase 3 would look to interview (individually or in groups), employers and managers of outdoor recreation facilitators in order to identify what skills they view are necessary to the successful and meaningful facilitation. This interview phase will also be interested in understanding what skills or training is missing and/or necessary for future employees' success. This may be an opportunity for funding partners to gain/contribute to a better understanding of what 'soft skills' within their organisation and in the broader industry.

Literature Review: What are soft skills?

This literature review aims to present an understanding of what is meant by the term 'soft skills'.

Soft skills: what other people are saying

The term 'soft skills' has existed within the business world, educational settings and curriculum development for some time (Evensen, 1999). Increasingly employers are emphasising the need for graduates to be equipped with 'soft skills' that will enable them to be effective within the workplace (Mitchel et al., 2010; Robles 2012,). Klaus (2010), for example, indicated that long term employment success was 75% attributable to soft skills. Yet what is meant by the term soft skills, how are they acquired, and to what skills and attributes does it describe?

Robles (2012, p. 457) argues that soft skills refer to 'traits, attitudes and behaviours' and are 'intangible, nontechnical, personality specific skills that determine one's strength as a leader facilitator, mediator and negotiator'. Schulz (2008, p. 146) describes soft skills within the parameters of 'personal qualities' and interpersonal skills. Sometime ago Goleman (1995) defined soft skills as 'emotional intelligence'. Bailley and Lene (2013) also included emotional skills within their definition of soft skills, along with behaviour, psychological and relational skills. Relational skills, such as being able to communicate effectively as well as an ability to interact with others with empathy and enthusiasm also suggest "emotional qualities" of soft skills (Bailley & Lene, 2013, p. 81). Kim, Erdem, Byun, Jeong (2011) also tap into skills at a personal level suggesting that soft skills incorporate ethics, tolerance, amiability and responsibility. These "intrapersonal qualities" such as "one's ability to manage oneself" are also linked with interpersonal abilities such as "how one handles one's interactions with others" (Laker & Powell, 2011, p. 113). Importantly, Boyatzis (2001) argues, social intelligence can be taught and acquired over time through experience.

Laker and Powell (2011) argue that making a clear distinction between soft skills and hard skills is critically important because soft skills require different training methods to those employed when training for hard skills. Merriam and Leahy's (2005) suggest that the transfer of soft skills to the workplace is often difficult to achieve. Developing these skills requires practice, investment and habituation (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Lake and Powell (2011), likewise, highlight the paucity of research in relation to how this transfer occurs. Adding to the challenge of soft skills training and/or transfer processes are assumptions by employers that soft skills are innate (Bailly & Lene, 2013). These assumptions can often lead employers to leave the task of developing these skills to the employee (Bailly & Lene, 2013). Further, many of the skills identified as 'soft' are not easy to accredit in formal training (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen and Watt, 2003). In addition the 'outcomes' of soft skills training are often intangible, difficult to quantify and the results not immediately apparent (Onisk, 2011). Holtom and Bowen (2007) argue, how to assess and teach soft skills still presents a range of challenges.

Schulz (2008) asserts people can be taught a range of emotional and social abilities through embedding soft skills within the curricula context of teaching hard skills. Crosbie (2005) proposes that kinaesthetic, or active learning, is an effective training method for acquiring new knowledge such soft skills.

Soft Skills in Outdoor Recreation /Education: what are we saying?

Shooter, Sibthorpe and Paisley (2009), argue that soft skills are difficult to define in relation to the skills required for outdoor leadership. Shooter, Sibthorpe and Paisley (2009) state that there is a need within the outdoor education industry for clarification about what is conveyed when attempting to categorise soft skills and hard skills.

Priest and Gass (2005) drew on Swidersji's (1987) three category approach (hard, soft and conceptual skills) to create a category of metaskills. They offer a necessary link between hard and soft skills and provides a useful way of conceptualising how soft and hard sets of skills may work together (Priest and Gass, 2005). What still remains uncertain is if it is necessary to categorise skills between soft and hard skills. Shooter, Sibthorpe and Paisley (2009), also question attempts to place skills in hierarchal models, arguing that to do so overlooks the context specific nature of different programs. Of greater concern is that these types of models tend to overvalue one skill set at the expense of others. To counter these issues, and overcome the contentiousness of hard and soft skills, Shooter, Sibthorpe and Paisley (2009) propose that the skills be referred to as technical and interpersonal skills. They also suggest a 'program perspective model' that takes into account the uniqueness of a program's mission and philosophy. It emphasises the strengths and abilities of an outdoor leader, and how they might draw on difference strengths for a particular program (Shooter Sibthorpe and Paisley, 2009). To link technical and interpersonal skills together, they draw on Priest and Gass's (2005) concept of metaskills but reframe the relationship of skills through the concept of "judgement and decision-making" (Shooter, Sibthorpe & Paisley, 2009, p.9). Shooter Sibthorpe and Paisley (2009, p. 9) suggest that "judgement and decision making" serve "as a mediator between a leader's understanding and ability regarding the specific course components and her or his ability to implement technical and interpersonal skills with the greatest effect on course outcomes."

Some criticism of current soft skills discourses in the outdoors

We would like to raise and address, by offering alternative ways of considering and articulating, the following criticisms of current soft skill discourses in outdoor recreation;

- The dichotomy of hard versus soft skills and the hierarchical modelling that privileges one over another (Shooter, Sibthorpe and Paisley, 2009)
- The gendered assumptions that equate 'soft' skills with feminine attributes and 'hard' skills with masculine traits (Shooter, Sibthorpe & Paisley, 2009; Fullagar & Hailstone, 1996; Lyon, 1998)
- The use of the word 'skill' to represent a collection of attributes, capacities and understandings. For example, Bailly and Lene (2013) use characteristics,

Muir (2004) attitudes and behaviours (2004), Perrault (2004) attributes, James and James (2004) abilities and talents.

- An assumption, often within the field, that 'soft skills' cannot be taught/trained and consequently cannot be evaluated (Schulz, 2008; Crosbie, 2005)

Rethinking 'soft skills' in the outdoors

This study proposes to extend current industry thinking, like scholars such as Barrett (2005), Brookes (2003; 2004), Humberstone (2000, 2011; 2012), Lynch and Moore (2004), Zink (2004; 2010) and Zink and Burrows (2010; 2006), through critical, alternative and post-modern approaches to outdoor leadership. This study also aims to articulate the interpersonal, communication and emotional skills perceived as necessary for outdoor leaders as they deliver the benefits widely attributed to participation in outdoor experiences.

Study 1: Deficiencies of soft skills training in Australia

The performance of 'soft skills' is central to everyday fulfillment of outdoor leader roles. However, soft skills are largely invisible and thus lack adequate training in outdoor education/certification programs nationally. A number of state and national reports¹ have identified the lack of and need for extended outdoor leader training programs. With a significant demand for employable outdoor leaders, it is essential to examine what training programs are being offered across Australia and to identify training deficiencies, particularly soft skills.

Aims

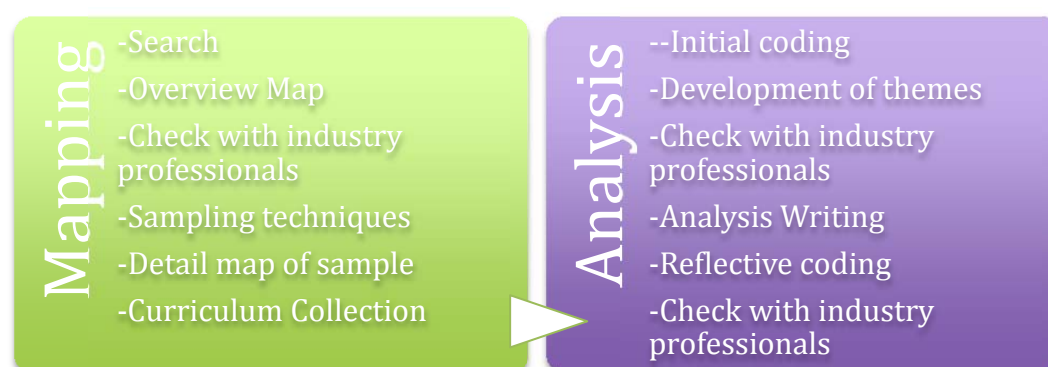
The aim of this study is to analyse and report on the current offering of HE and VET education 'soft skills' training for outdoor leaders.

Outcomes

This project presents a significant opportunity to gain a 'snap shot' of the current state and quality of 'soft' skill training available within Australia with recommendations and implications for the training and education of outdoor facilitators in the future.

Project overview

This study will map what training options are available for outdoor leadership across Australia followed with a content analysis of course curriculum that offer training content related to 'soft skills' and emotion work. The study will consider TAFE/ VET and university materials focused on the social and emotional skills taught in outdoor recreation university courses and VET (Diploma, Cert IV and Cert III) courses. This research aims to illustrate what attributes of soft skills are promoted and/or prioritized for future outdoor leaders.



¹ SD5 Strategic Directions for the Western Australian Sport and Recreation Industry (2011). FutureNow: creative and leisure industries Training council. Sport, Recreation and Racing Industries Workforce Development Plan (2014). Skills Alliance. Queensland Fitness, Sport and Recreation Industry Skills and Workforce Development Report 2012-30213. Service skills Australia. Environmental Scan 2015: sport, fitness and recreation.

Methods

This qualitative study draws on grounded theory to perform a content analysis of HE and VET courses in outdoor recreation. Grounded theory methods, originally penned by Glaser & Strauss (1968) “consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Due to the “usefulness” and “explanatory power,” many researchers employ grounded theory methods to “control their research process and to increase the analytic power of their work” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 6).

We have utilised purposive sampling (Malhorta, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2004) to choose HE and VET courses that discussed words that the literature suggested were key components to ‘soft skills’. These included; communication, leadership, facilitation, ethics, judgement, reflection, group dynamics, emotional and/or social intelligence. According to training.gov.au and myskills websites there are approximately 107 VET registered providers (RTOs). This is currently being checked, confirmed, and mapped (March 2017). Additionally, we have identified 9 universities that offer outdoor recreation units and/or courses. The tables below illustrate which courses were selected for analysis.

Outdoor Recreation VET/TAFE Training Package (2013)

Training Level	No. of courses available	No. of Core Units	No. of Electives that refer to soft skills
Cert 3	50 RTO (training.gov.au) 45 (myskills)	12 + 12 electives	6
Cert 4	42 RTO (training.gov.au) 40 (myskills)	15 + 16 electives	9
Diploma	20 RTO (training.gov.au) 17 (myskills)	18 + 15 electives	11

We have analysed all core units and any elective units that appear to contain language or content that could be identified as soft skills.

University courses (& units in soft skills) in facilitated outdoor experiences (recreation and education)

The following universities have been included in this study because they offered courses in outdoor leadership (even if this did not constitute an outdoor recreation degree);

- La Trobe University
- Australian Catholic University (ACU)
- University of Notre Dame
- Federation University Australia
- University of South Australia
- Edith Cowan University
- Charles Sturt
- Monash University
- Southern Cross University

These universities have been de-identified below.

University	Courses	Subjects
(U1)	Bachelor of Physical Activity and Health Science	6 courses
U2	Bachelor of Applied Science Outdoor Recreation and Ecotourism	5 courses
U3	Bachelor of Sport, Recreation and Event Management	1 course
U4	Bachelor of Outdoor and Environmental Education Bachelor of Health and Physical Education / Bachelor of Outdoor and Environmental Education Graduate Certificate in Outdoor and Environmental Education Graduate Diploma of Outdoor and Environmental Education	7 courses
U5	Bachelor of Outdoor Education Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation Education Bachelor of Physical, Health and Outdoor Education	5 courses
U6		12 courses
U7	Bachelor of Environmental Science/Bachelor of Marine Science and Management Bachelor of Environmental Science Bachelor of Forest Science and Management	1 course
U8	Bachelor of Outdoor Recreation Bachelor of Sport and Recreation Management	7 courses
U9	Bachelor of Business - Sport and Recreation Management	3 courses

The course content was analysed manually for themes and discursive practices. Thematic analysis draws on the tradition of grounded theory and suggests a method for organizing and interpreting data using coding (Charmaz, 2006). As Charmaz suggests, “coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations” (2006, p.43). Coding labels data according to the meaning expressed in the text and follows by grouping these according to like concepts or themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richardson & St.Pierre, 2008). Rather than simply taking the frequency at which a concept or theme occurred, however, we analysed the texts in relation to the language and metaphors that give meaning to emotional and embodied experiences (Iedema & Wodak, 1999; Symon & Cassell, 2012). This is how we approach our discursive analysis. We also began to describe “the properties and dimensions” of these categories and the rich relationships around

the themes and discourses considered (Charmaz 2006, p.60; Strauss and Corbin 1994).

Preliminary Findings

The following table demonstrates an overview of preliminary findings. That is, the data from the university content analysis could be grouped thematically around communication, leadership, facilitation, professionalism, and personal development. The VET content analysis (to date) suggests that the higher order themes are the same as HE yet the sub-themes show some differences. The following table shows an overview of findings so far. More detail is provided in the appendices.

University	VET
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Skills ○ Managing risk ○ Group dynamics ○ Reflective practices • Facilitation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Group dynamics ○ Teaching and learning ○ Reflective practices • Professionalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Philosophy / Values / ethics ○ Programming /evaluation/ critique ○ Judgement of safety/risk ○ Care for the environment ○ Reflection • Personal Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interpersonal skills ○ Intrapersonal skills ○ Reflection/ self-development ○ Emotional intelligence ○ Inclusive Practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Verbal ○ Non-verbal • Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Leadership ○ Risk management • Facilitation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Group dynamics ○ Teaching/ skill development ○ Teamwork ○ Planning • Professionalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Risk/ responsibility ○ Consideration for difference ○ Environmental care ○ Philosophy / Values / ethics ○ Program implementation ○ Reflection • Personal Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interpersonal skills ○ Intrapersonal skills ○ Emotional intelligence ○ Self-evaluation ○ Problem solving <p>The Cert III analysis is yet to be included.</p>

The preliminary findings suggest that there are five core themes across university and VET courses; communication, leadership, facilitation, professionalism and personal development. How each of these prioritized and taught can range drastically between universities and VET courses yet they point to similar skills and capacities surrounding interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities. These findings, while requiring more

analysis, suggest that (at least in theory) outdoor leaders, particularly in university courses, are being offered many positive opportunities to develop much needed soft skills.

Concluding remarks

We are looking forward to delving deeper into further analysis and are encouraged by the kinds of soft skills that are reported as being offered through HE and VET outdoor courses. In the final stages of this study, we would like to gain access to course outlines that are not publically available for the university courses listed given how much more substantial these would be for this analysis. Further, the second study initially proposed to follow this study, becomes that much more significant. This study proposes to investigate the realities of training by doing field observations of newly graduated facilitators and collecting interview data from experienced outdoor leaders and managers regarding the soft skills that are used and lacking in the industry.

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