

The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario
c/o Natalie Kemp
96 Chaplin Avenue, St. Catharines, ON
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Ms. Déirdre Smith, Manager,
Standards of Practice and Education Unit
Ontario College of Teachers

February 7, 2020.

Dear Ms. Smith,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on behalf of the COEO Board of Directors regarding the 2016 draft guidelines for the Outdoor Experiential Education AQ course. Formed in 1972, the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that promotes safe and high quality outdoor education experiences for people of all ages. It also acts as a professional body for outdoor educators in this province. We currently have approximately 300 members from across the province, have a wide reach on social media a community of 1900 followers on Facebook and 1200 followers on Twitter, and send out a monthly e-newsletter to a 2500 person mailing list.

Some of the ways in which we are able to promote outdoor education in Ontario are:

- Publish the quarterly journal, Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education
- Published two substantial and highly respected research summaries, Dynamic Horizons in 2018 and Reconnecting Children Through Outdoor Education in 2007
- Organize two major conferences a year that provide networking and learning opportunities for outdoor educators at all stages of their career, a fall conference in September and a winter conference in January, as well as the Ontario Wilderness Leadership Symposium—a small conference geared towards emerging professionals
- Support the Canadian Student Outdoor Education Conference (Horwood Conference)

For more detail about our goals and activities, please visit our website www.coeo.org

We have taken the time to carefully review both the 2009 Guidelines and the 2016 draft version. We have attached both documents to this package; you will note particular sections that have been highlighted and commented upon. Our notations with regards to the 2009 Guidelines concern what we regard as very important wording that has been removed from the current draft.

Before proceeding any further, we would also like to acknowledge the College's great care in producing documents that consistently follow a clear template and that are so comprehensive and inclusive. It is no doubt a great challenge to provide guidelines that meet the needs of students, educators, the general public and providers.

Before you consider our particular notations within the two guideline documents, we would like to address two very important and over-arching issues.

1. While we are sympathetic to potential OCT concerns about consistency across the various AQ courses and about sensitivity to the desires of your course providers, COEO urges the OCT to recognize and mandate that this particular course be offered only in a face-to-face or blended format, the latter being a minimum of 30% face-to-face.

Our rationale for this is as follows:

- a) **SAFETY** The outdoors milieu opens up so many more variables with reference to safety and risk management practices, e.g., travel to and from a local outdoors area; pre-checking this area; effective use of parent volunteers; guidelines about picking things up; outdoor allergies. The pathway for OEE AQ participants to appreciate, understand and act upon this is through the course's provision of a variety of direct experiences under the supervision of a highly qualified OEE practitioner. As there are no prerequisites for this AQ course it cannot be assumed that course participants have this knowledge, and as such these experiences must be integral to the OEE AQ course. It is incumbent upon the College to require explicit and due diligence in this matter.
- b) **OUTDOOR and EXPERIENTIAL Learning**: While there are basic similarities to classroom learning, the unique dynamics of outdoor and experiential learning require firsthand experience both within this milieu and with this methodology. Videos portraying such experiences and creative assignments attempting to represent such experiences will not suffice. At a bare minimum, OEE AQ course participants require the common shared experience of 30 percent of instructional time face-to-face in an outdoor setting. Such an opportunity will experientially expose them to the wide variety of activities that fall under this mode of learning and that realize the four central themes of OEE: education for environment, character, wellbeing and curriculum. Such an opportunity at the start of the course will nurture collegial friendships and common shared experiences that will provide fertile ground for the modules, professional discussions and assignments that follow. Such an opportunity will also provide course participants with direct experience of "the teachable moments" that inevitably arise in outdoor learning.

We remain convinced that the fundamental nature of a course called **Outdoor Experiential Education** is that it is indeed outdoors and experiential. These central features should take precedence over all other concerns, including any worries the College might have about setting precedents for other courses, and including the potential concerns of providers who are more interested in maximizing their profits by providing 100% online courses.

2. While this did not end up being in the 2009 document (or 2016 draft), it was very clear to those providing input for the initial 2009 guidelines that the OEE AQ course has a clear purpose: ***to encourage and empower the classroom teacher to take students outdoors regularly and within walking distance of their home schools.*** COEO urges the OCT to prominently include such a statement in the guidelines for the following reasons:

- a) It will inform the focus and direction of the entire course. In the words of famed American author Richard Louv, our children suffer from ***nature deficit disorder***, from a significant lack of exposure to natural places. Research is showing that this shortcoming is having a great variety of negative impacts on students, from a fear of nature to their increasing inability to pay attention and perform with focus in the classroom. Research shows that teachers can effectively counter these deficiencies through guided contact with the local outdoors.
- b) It makes it clear that this course is not intended to qualify teachers to be designated as outdoor educators. This requires a very different set of guidelines and more comprehensive training than is possible in a single AQ course. Those who are hiring teacher candidates should not conclude that the presence of a Schedule C OEE AQ course on one's teaching record represents such qualification, especially in comparison to those who have completed much more significant training through the outstanding OEE programs that teacher candidates can enrol in as part of their B.Ed. experience at Queen's University or Lakehead University.

Thank you again for giving us the opportunity to provide feedback on the current OEE AQ Guidelines draft. We look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,
Natalie Kemp
President, Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario