



perspective

What works?

If you have any interface with public services you will have noticed the recent emphasis on identifying and sharing 'what works'. Quite right, you might say. The reality is that until fairly recently and for many areas of public service that involve our outdoor learning community, the investment to truly evaluate impact has been limited. I'm encouraged that this position is starting to change. Don't be put off by the term 'public service', this movement to improve impact evaluation is not limited to publicly funded services. This increased focus on generating an evidence base for impactful practices is stretching across established and evolving elements of outdoor learning. For those not familiar with this activity there are a number of organisations, some in their early days, that are leading the work. If you work with schools you will probably have come across the Education Endowment Foundation and their toolkit that identifies practices to accelerate learning. Those working with a wider range of early years may also have come across the Early Intervention Foundation. More recent entrants to this work are The Centre for Ageing Better, The What Works Centre for Wellbeing and the Centre for Youth Impact. The Institute is exploring with the latter the best way to share its work with outdoor learning practitioners.

The Centre for Ageing Better is setting up as I write this and is focused on challenging some 20th Century attitudes towards the older members of the population. From an outdoor learning perspective this is very welcome. There is very real potential for the more mature members of our community of practice to enrich what we do and who we are. Expect to see more from the Institute in this area.

Too often I have found my heart sinking when asked by an interested party from outside the outdoor learning world, *'.... so tell me what is outdoor learning and what does it do?'* Some manage to stick with me as I paint a richly diverse picture of practices but most start to mentally retreat when I begin to describe impact. For those with genuine curiosity around impact, possibly because they are looking to invest in or utilise outdoor learning to meet a specific need, the picture can become quite faint and inconsistent. Though some organisations have made significant efforts to measure and share the impact of their practices and others are seeking to do so, the reality is that it is difficult to clearly see the evidence base. This is especially so for someone outside the sector looking in.

Thanks to some investment by the Blagrave Trust I am optimistic that the current evidence base for outdoor learning will become clearer. The Institute is leading an initiative to produce a report for the sector and those interested in engaging with it. We are looking to provide a guide to practice in our outdoor learning world with clarity on the existence of impact evaluation in different areas of practice and some indication of the quality of the evidence generated. If you are interested in this work you should contact me at the IOL office. ■

by Andy Robinson, IOL CEO