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2020 Outdoor Learning Research Hub Survey

Background

The Outdoor Learning (OL) Research Hubs project was launched in 2017¹, responding to *The Blagrove Report*², it is an initiative to co-ordinate engagement between practitioners delivering outdoor learning and researchers and, where possible, to support practitioners in conducting their own research. The project received pilot funding from the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL) and now benefits from support-in-kind. There is currently a network of regionally based OL Research Hubs, with each hub responding to local needs and wants; with further hubs being constituted across the UK.

The measures relating to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on most aspects of outdoor learning, and this survey was developed to consider the priorities for and future direction of the OL Research Hubs, focussing on the benefits, aspirations, functions and priorities for the hub network.

Method

This survey was hosted on the Newcastle University Jisc Online platform. It was designed in partnership with Dr Chris Loynes (University of Cumbria) Central Outdoor Learning Research Coordinator, Professor Heather Prince, NW OL Research Hub Coordinator (University of Cumbria) and Professor Jill Clark, Lucy Tiplady and Dr Eric Fletcher, NE OL Research Hub Co-coordinators (Newcastle University). The survey was reviewed and approved by the Newcastle University, School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences Ethics Committee.

The survey was open between the 17th July and 14th August 2020. A link to the survey was circulated via the existing OL Research Hub network and the Institute for Outdoor Learning communication lists.

Respondents were self-selecting; they were free to select the questions they answered and did not have to answer all survey questions. Only completed surveys are included in this analysis.

Analysis and findings

The survey used a mix of questions where some answers were mutually dependent, such as Likert scale where all answers add up to 100%, and others were independent, such as questions where more than one response could be chosen, i.e. all answers combined can be >100%.

Demographics

37 respondents (Female: n=19 [53%]; Male: n=16 [44%]; Prefer not to say: n=1 [3%]³) completed the survey. Respondents were aged between 18 and 65+, with the highest distribution between 35years and 64years (35-44: 9 [24%]; 45-54: 11 [30%]; 55-64: 7 [20%]). 92% of respondents described themselves as White.

¹ For more information see <https://www.outdoor-learning-research.org/Research/Research-Hub>

² Fiennes, C., Oliver, E., Dickson, K., Escobar, D., Romans, A., & Oliver, S. (2015). *The existing evidence-base about the effectiveness of outdoor learning*. London: Giving Evidence and the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU), UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

³ One respondent did not select an option to this question

Respondents were predominately either OL practitioners or working in Higher education (HE). Twelve respondents (32%) described themselves as a ‘Qualified OL Practitioner’, and 3 (8%) as OL Practitioner-Researchers. 19 (51%) respondents were involved in Higher Education as a researcher (n=10), tutor or lecturer (n=8) and one as a tutor/lecturer and OL Practitioner. One schoolteacher, one tutor/ lecturer in FE and one OL Masters student responded to the survey.

22 respondents (60%) had attended one or more regional OL Research Hub meeting or event; the remaining 15 respondents indicated that they were interested but had not yet been able to attend.

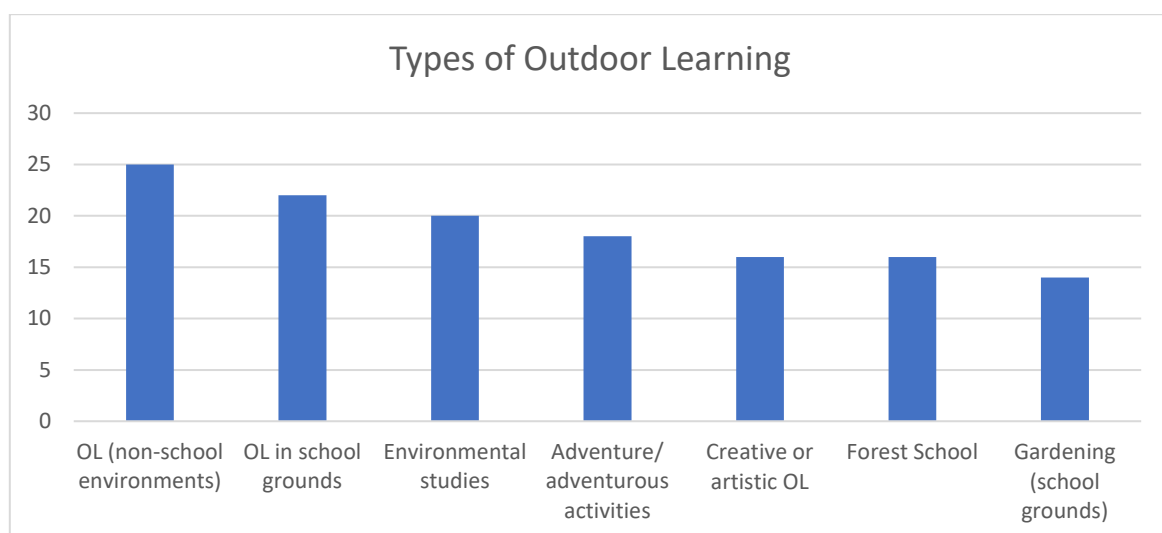
Most respondents were employed or self-employed, as set out below:

Community Interest Company	1
Charity	2
FE College	3 (incl. HE Lecturer in FE and PhD student)
Local Authority	3
School	4
Self-employed	6
University	12

The remaining respondents included: student (n=4); volunteer (n=1); and Honorary Research Fellow (n=1).

Characteristics of Outdoor Learning

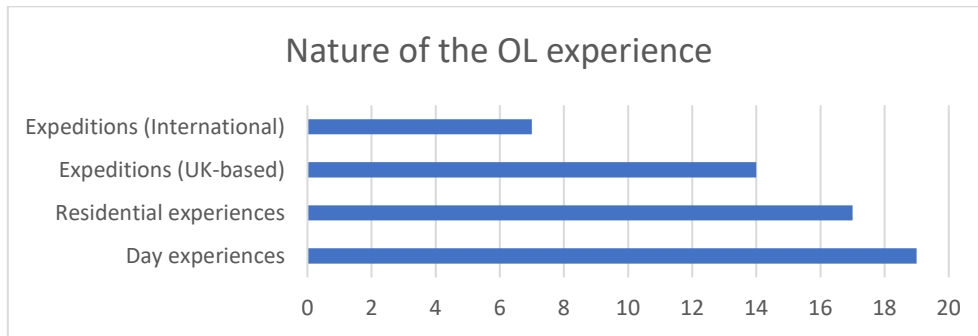
Outdoor learning is diverse and embraces informal and non-formal learning and educational approaches, many involving active participation in activities in the outdoors encompassing ‘a broad range of approaches, foci and methods, such as, but not limited to, experiential learning, adventure education, organised camps, environmental education, outdoor leadership, nature-based sport and wilderness therapy’⁴. For the purposes of this survey, respondents were provided with general descriptions of types for UK outdoor learning provision:



⁴ Humberstone, B., Prince, H. & Henderson, K.A. (Eds.) (2016). *Routledge International Handbook of Outdoor Studies*. Abingdon: Routledge. (p.2)

Other types of outdoor learning included: OL involving animals (e.g., City Farms, Farm School) (n=4); Dinghy or Day Sailing (n=2); Sail Training (n=1); study or research in OL (n=2), and Heritage Learning (n=1).

The nature of outdoor learning ranges from day experiences, residential or expeditions with respondents involved in all of these.



Involvement in OL research

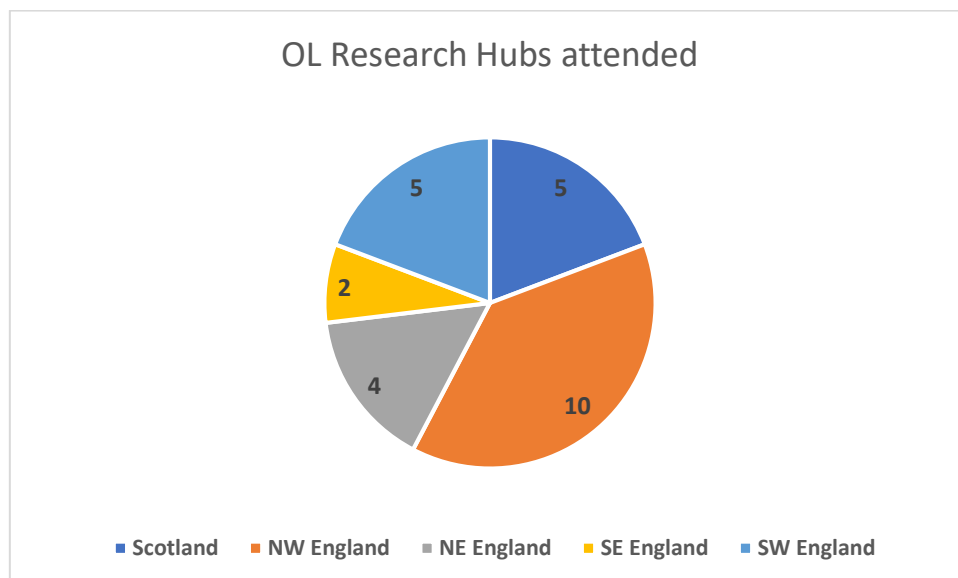
Almost 75% (n=27) of respondents had been involved in some form of practitioner-based OL research – as a practitioner (n=1 [3%]); as part of their own professional development (n=17 [46%]) or as part of the professional development of another (n=9 [24%]).

Involvement in academic-led OL research followed a similar pattern. Respondents had been a participant (n=4 [11%]); a co-researcher (n=6 [16%]); a lead researcher (n=17 [46%]). One respondent had commissioned academic research.

Only seven respondents (19%) had been involved in COVID-19 related research, this included involvement in circulating or responding to surveys related to COVID-19 and two academic studies on the impact of COVID-19.

Outdoor Learning Research Hubs

22 respondents (60%) had attended one or more regional OL Research Hub meeting or event and some had attended more than one hub. The remaining 15 respondents indicated that they were interested but had not yet been able to attend.



The three recently constituted hubs (East Anglia, North Wales and The Midlands) are yet to host a meeting.

Benefits of OL Research Hubs

In response to a free text question, 28 respondents remarked that the benefits of involvement in the OL Research Hub project included capturing evidence of the effectiveness of OL and communicating this internally across the sector and to stakeholders and wider society, and developing a research strategy to support this task by prioritising and resourcing a joined-up approach across the sector. Analysis indicated that:

Practitioners would benefit from:

- Interpretations of and discussions about research
- Developing skills to do and to understand research
- Access to knowledge not always in the public domain
- Networking with and encouragement from researchers
- Normalising research findings as relevant to practice and the confidence to disseminate information in own networks
- Benchmarking best practice
- Online resources

Researchers would benefit from

- Networking to find out what research is taking place
- Knowing the agendas and priorities of stakeholders and key organisations
- Synthesising recent findings
- Networking with practitioners and other stakeholders
- Combining data sets

Aspirations

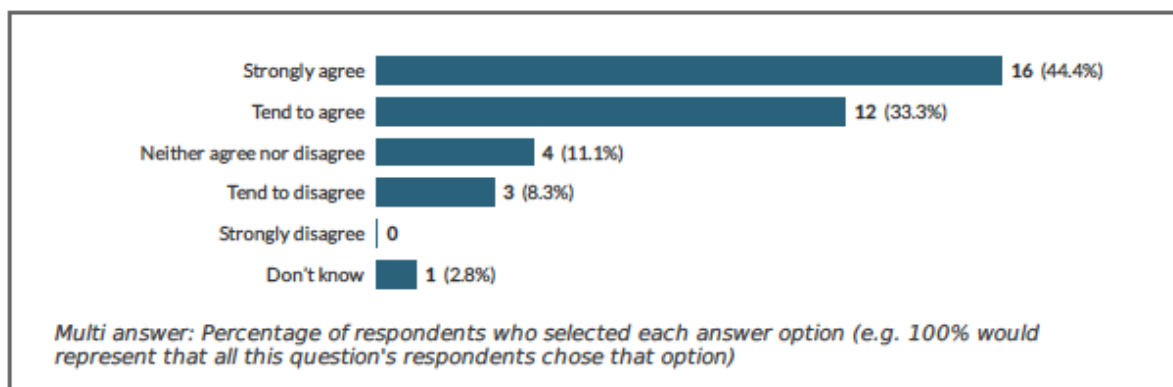
24 respondents suggested aspirations for the hub network, these focussed on three topics.

1. The structure of the network of hubs
 - Hubs in regions not yet reached – Lincolnshire, S. Wales, Leeds
 - Clear lines of communications between practice, research and policy
2. Outputs from the hubs
 - Establishing the efficacy of OL in key curriculum areas or with key populations of children and young people
 - Building relationships between practitioners and researchers
 - Dissemination of research findings in a form that can be communicated to practitioners and HE/FE students
 - Collaborations around grant applications
3. The ways to connect
 - Offer a graffiti wall at meetings to collect issues, priorities, opportunities, etc
 - More time for discussion at meetings
 - More online content on the OL Research Hub webpage (possibility for regional Facebook groups?)

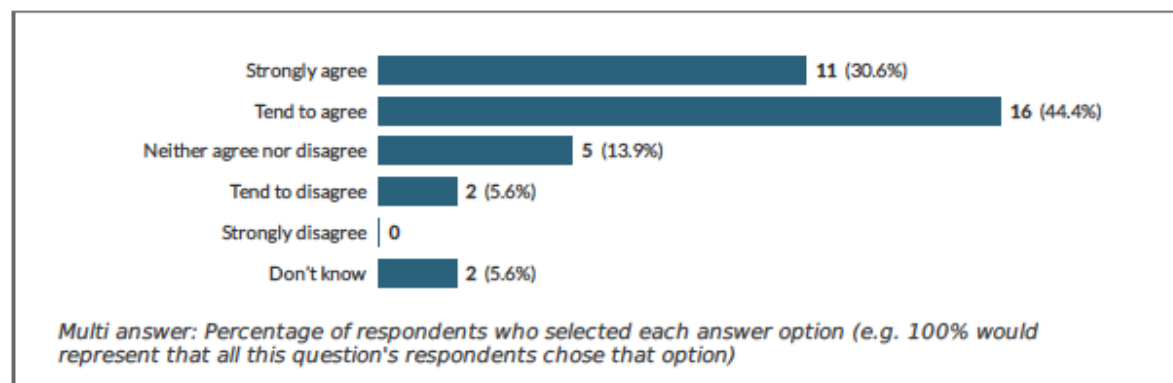
Functions of the OL Research Hubs

Respondents were invited to agree or disagree with several statements; responses indicated that there is support for all the functions that the hubs have been developing and currently offer.

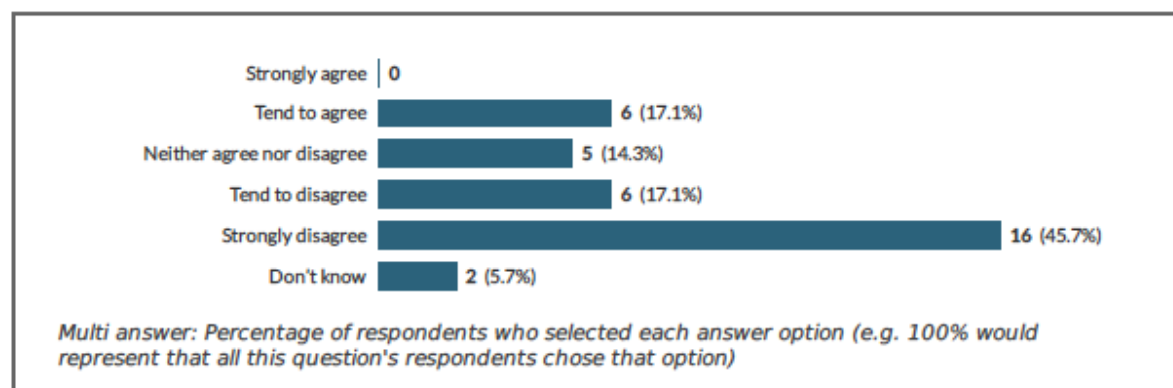
78% (n=28) of respondents agreed (strongly agree or tend to agree) that *The OL Research Hub is seen as the place to discuss the research needs of OL practitioners.*



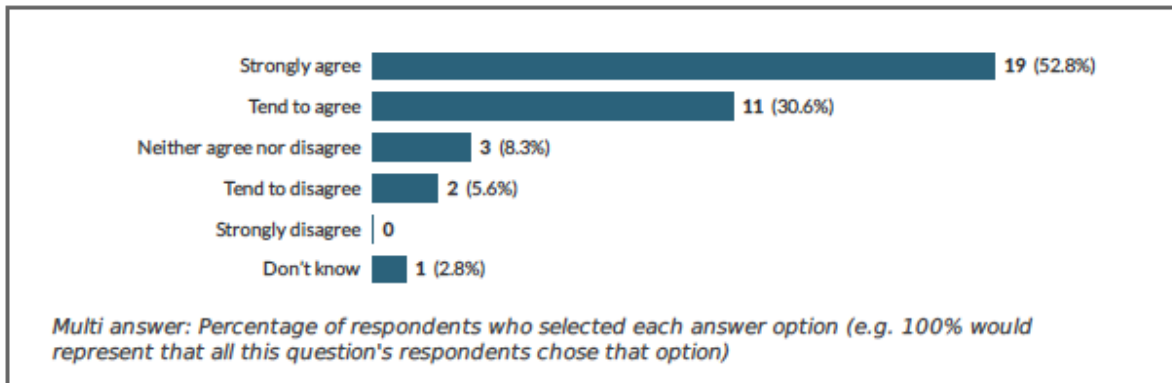
Three quarters of responds agreed (strongly agree or tend to agree) that *The OL Research Hub is the place to discuss the research needs of those who participate in OL.*



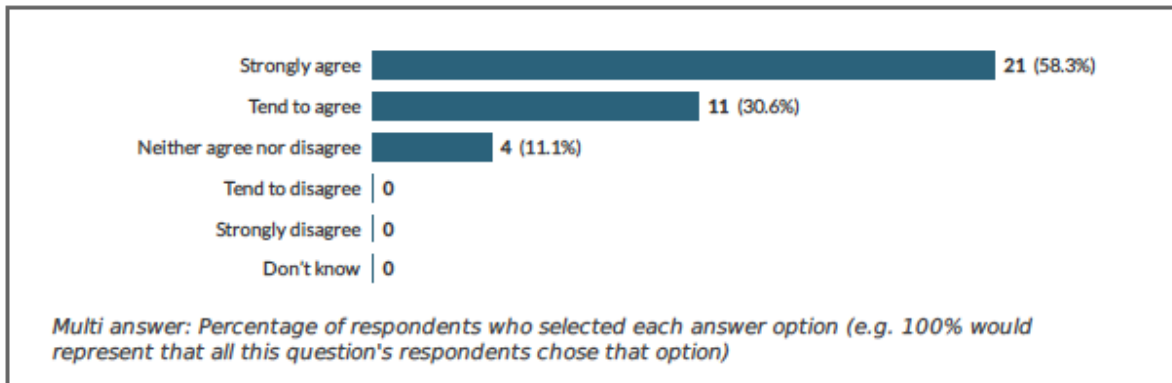
22 respondents (62%) disagreed (strongly disagree or tend to disagree) with the statement: *The OL Research Hub project is of no or limited value to me.* Six respondents (17%) 'tended to agree' with the statement and five (14%) were neutral (neither agree or disagree).



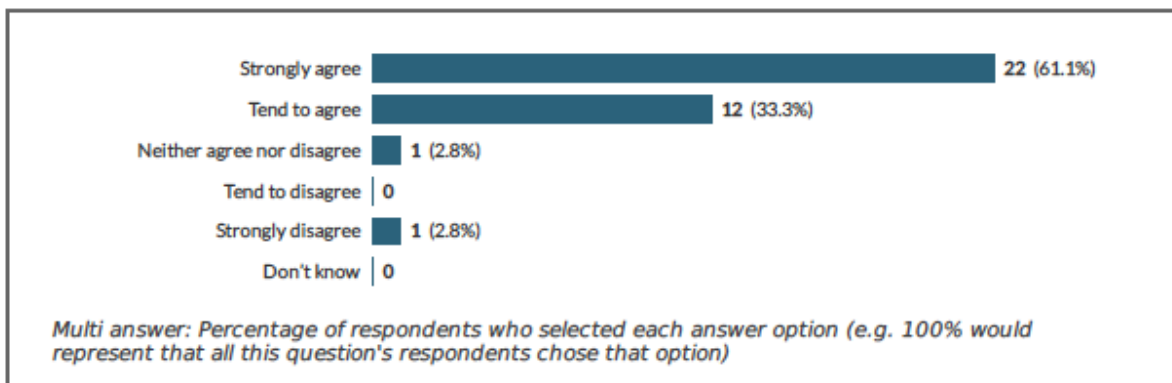
30 (83%) respondents agreed that *The OL Research Hub is a place to meet other practitioners and researchers*.



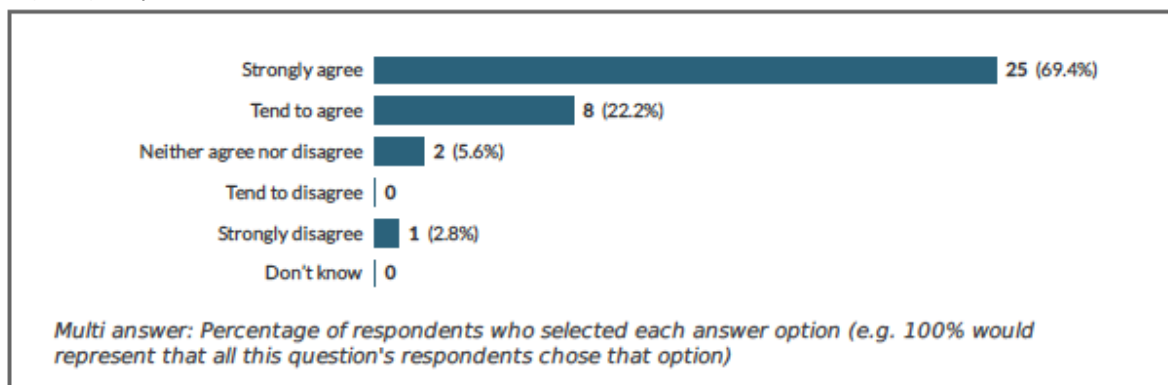
32 (89%) respondents agreed (strongly agreed or tended to agree) that *Research is seen as an important aspect of [their] professional practice and development*.



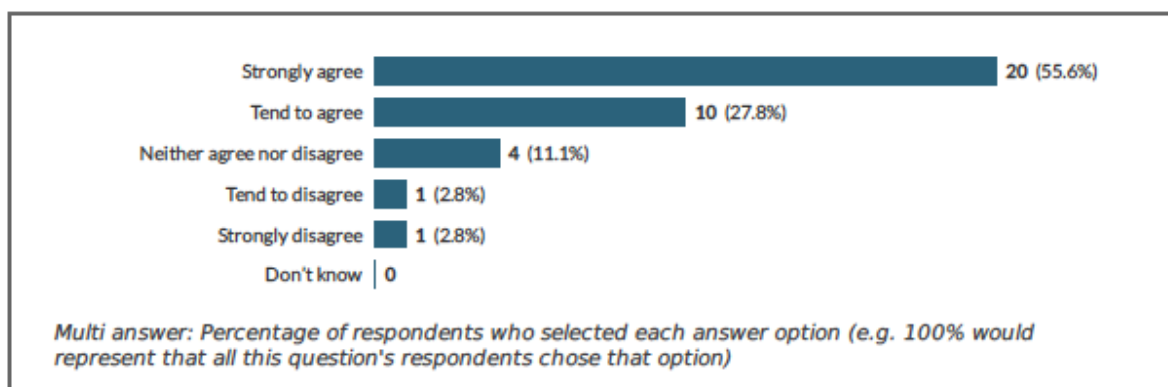
34 respondents (93%) wanted to know more about the impact of outdoor learning.



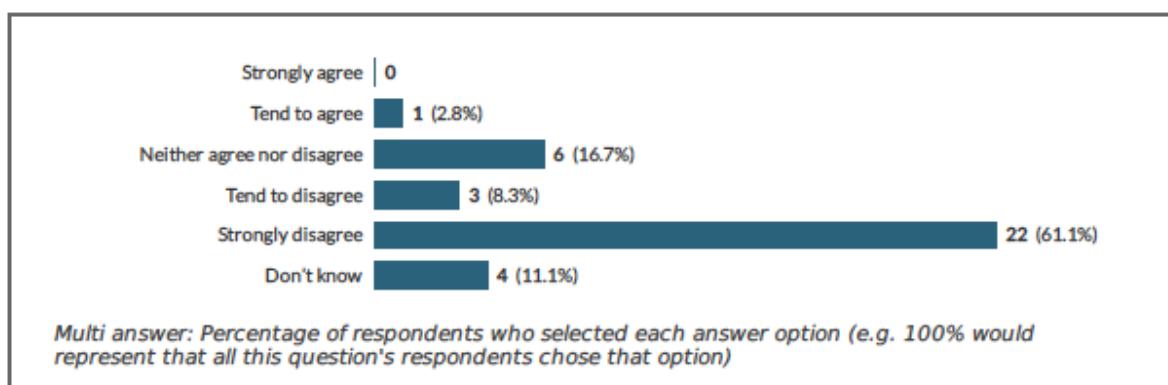
33 (91%) respondents *would like to be involved in research activities.*



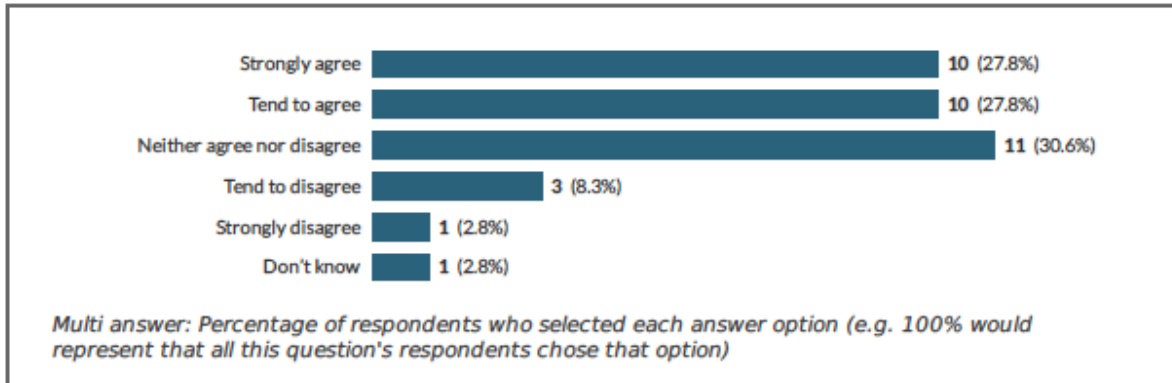
30 (83%) respondents *would like to be able to conduct their own research.*



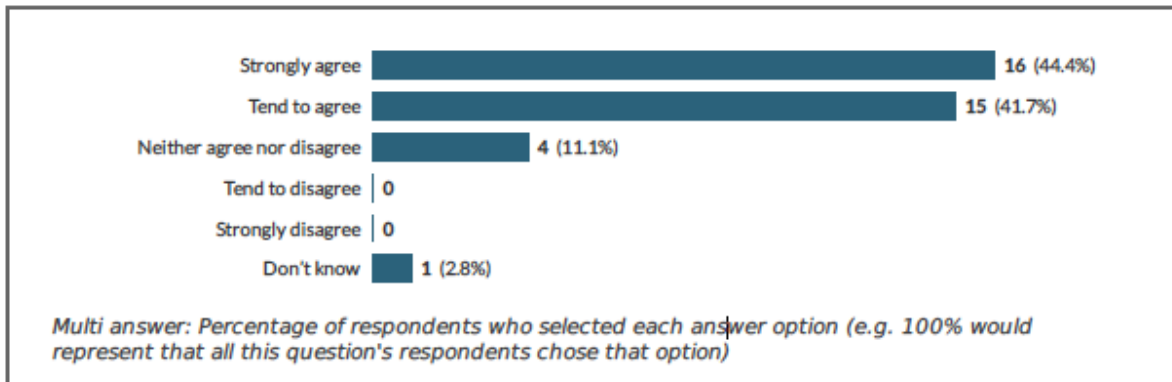
In response to the statement: *I have no need to develop my practice*, 25 (72%) respondents disagreed (strongly disagree or tend to disagree) implying a strong perception that practice needs development.



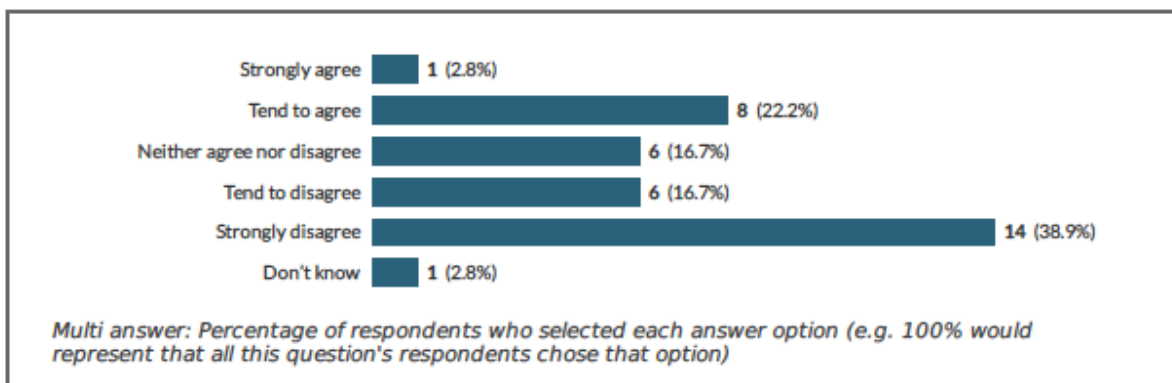
A significant number (n=20 [55%]) of respondents *use research findings in bids for funding OL activities.*



31 (86%) respondents felt that the *OL Research Hubs should be a regional conduit for collaborative national policy.*



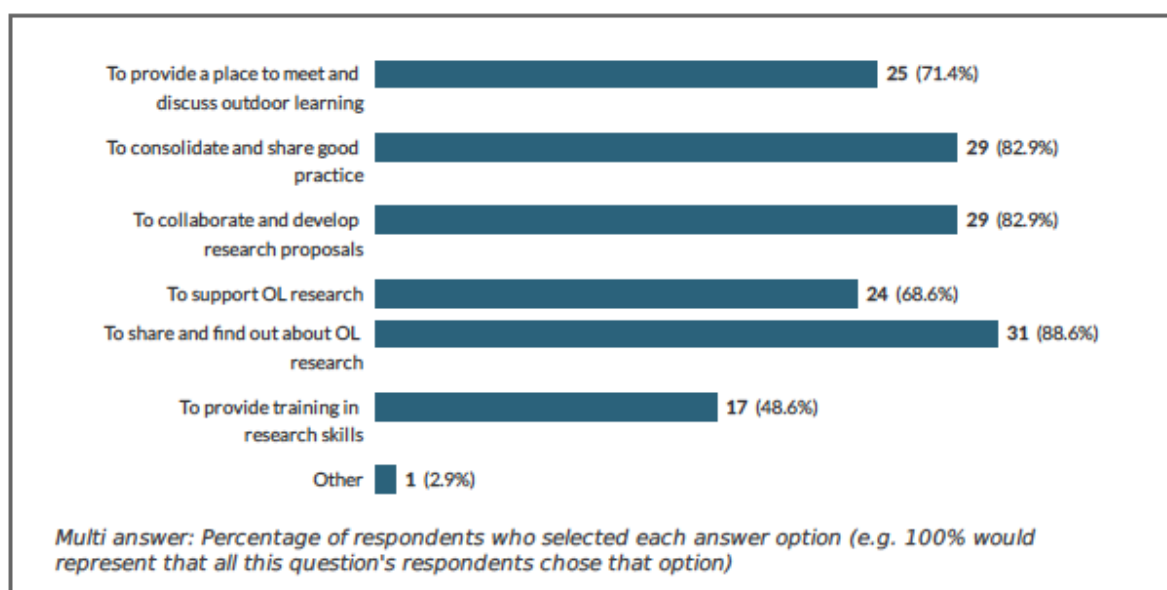
There was a spectrum of views on whether respondents *found it difficult to access information about the benefits of outdoor learning.*



Priorities

There is little to help steer priorities for the way forward as all suggested priorities listed received considerable support from respondents.

What should be the priorities of the OL Research Hubs?



One respondent (adding detail to 'Other') added that skills other than those related to research might also be shared in these fora.

Training

17 (48%) respondents suggested that the OL Research Hubs should provide training in research skills (see above), and proposed a range of topics connected to how to conduct research in the field:

- Approaches for the practitioner-researcher and researcher of practice
- Methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods)
- Creative ways that integrate well with the experiences of young people and pay attention to the voices of young people
- Research ethics
- Dissemination and communicating findings to internal and external stakeholder.

Given some of the comments in previous responses, little was said about how to frame a research question or decide what questions might be most important to ask. Nor was there any comment on how to search or interpret the literature as an aid to developing a study.

Professional experiences during COVID-19

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is subject of many studies across the globe. During 2020 a consortium of UK-based organisations involved in outdoor learning, comprising the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL), Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres (AHOEC), British Activity Providers Association (BAPA), Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel (OEAP) and Forest School Association (FSA), have conducted a series of surveys to investigate the impact for OL practitioners and organisations⁵.

⁵ See <https://www.outdoor-learning.org/Covid-19/Covid-19-Impact-Surveys>

This survey invited respondents to describe their COVID-19 professional experiences in terms of Plus (n=26), Minus (n=26), and Interesting (n=25)⁶. Dealing with each of these in turn:

Respondents considered the following to have been a Plus:

- Time allowed for:
 - opportunities to connect with other practitioners and researchers, to share good practice
 - thinking and developing new community and school initiatives
- new ways of researching, for example, using ZOOM, telephone interviews
- nature connectedness

Selected comments⁷:

There is a positive energy around thinking about using outdoor spaces. Much of the talk forgets about the relationship between learners and places/ the environment. The outcomes are not all for the learner. (R923)

There has been government recognition that outdoor learning could/ should be an important part if pupils returning to school (though this seems to be led by safety of not being indoors rather than cognition of the numerous benefits). (R583)

[...] From online forums and DfE guidance – taking learning outside has gained huge prominence using school grounds [...] (R386)

Respondents considered the following to have been a Minus:

- lack of person-to-person contact
- not being able to practice outdoors resulting in loss of income, personal development stalled
- too much Zoom
- lack of access to the outdoors
- some conflicted messaging about and negative press of people visiting nature during lockdown
- challenge of improvised home-working, e.g., child-care

Selected comments:

No hugs or handshakes, cappuccinos or cuddles. OL is embodied and visceral. (R519)

The tragedy of thousands of young people not experiencing residential and being able to enjoy outdoors and connect with nature. (R719)

People from low socioeconomic backgrounds have had extremely limited access to nature, and there has been a range of negative press about people accessing nature (particularly calling people out as irresponsible for visiting nature spots in lockdown, urban outdoor spaces being too busy for people to feel safe, rural populations feeling uncomfortable/ angry about visitors to nature areas near to their home, and problematic littering. (R583)

Respondents considered the following to have been Interesting:

⁶ See Clark, J., Laing, K., Tiplady, L. & Woolner, P. (2013). *Making Connections: Theory and Practice of Using Visual Methods to Aid Participation in Research*. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University

⁷ Respondent references here have taken the last three digits of the anonymised code allocated at the time they completed the survey.

- the challenges of home schooling/ learning, in some cases leading to a more creative use of the outdoors
- wider appreciation of nature
- motivation for and development of new ideas for research

Selected comments:

There seemed a wider appreciation for nature (including simply access to green spaces as well as bird song, natural beauty, fresh air, etc.) during the early-mid stages of lockdown when transport was reduced but exercise was permitted. (R583)

Connection with people and the planet (R519)

[...] individuals proactively taking a personal, greater interest in research papers and general knowledge and undertaking online courses to develop their new roles. It has highlighted how access to this knowledge is often restricted to academics and professionals through cost or other access barrier. [...] This period has totally changed the way I work and think as a practitioner, educator in HE and researcher, and my intended outcomes in my work within outdoor learning from this point on. (R540)

Changing attitudes at all levels of society to the need for facilitated learning in the outdoors at all levels to promote wellbeing (R232)

During lockdown it was evident in my role that a large number of parents and children were drawn outside. The sharing of 'home learning' activities became increasingly creative out of doors and less digital. (R386)

Concluding comments

The findings from this survey were reported and discussed at a meeting of regional OL Research Hub coordinators (September 2020), and the following inter-related areas were proposed for future development:

Communicating research:

Sharing research findings with practitioners in accessible and relevant ways is a key role of the regional hub meetings. Lockdown has highlighted the possibility of other ways to share knowledge of research and research methods online, e.g., webinars and podcasts, OL Research Hub closed Facebook group.

Facilitating research:

Regional hubs can support (e.g., via networking, collaborative funding, practitioner-researcher training and development) practitioners, providers and user groups develop research that can help develop and argue for effective programmes, i.e. Theories of change, case studies, impact studies, action research.

Collaborating in research:

Regional hubs can support providers, policy makers and communities develop and evaluate relevant, place-based progressive OL that addresses social and environmental issues, and to argue for national policy measures that underpin infrastructure, resources and regulation.

There is value in using research to create a relevant and holistic provision regionally, for example, the value of the repeated Scottish survey of OL provision in schools has given a wealth of data about who is accessing OL and for what purposes. This highlights the need to develop the offer of the OL Research Hubs to work together within the extant policy framework of progressive outdoor experiences for all, environmental and wellbeing impacts and a partial, atomised mixed economy of public, voluntary and private provision.

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