

THE OUTWARD BOUND TRUST AND UK INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS - 2023

THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND THE IMPACT AN OUTWARD BOUND
COURSE CAN HAVE ON THEM.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outward Bound work with **approximately 350 schools per year and around 10% of them are independent (fee paying) schools**. Typically, independent schools choose to visit Outward Bound in the summer months, the main reasons are to be in keeping with the curriculum and other school trips that are on offer. However, several of them are now choosing to come on courses in the winter months, giving them **more time to embed the learning** that happens at Outward Bound upon return to school, and to **build on the student/teacher relationships** that developed whilst on a residential plus the chance to **increase the resilience of the young people even more so during adverse weather conditions**.

Outward Bound have recently undertake this piece of research to **understand the lives of young people from independent schools**, the challenges they face and the effect an Outward Bound course can have on their lives.

As part of our research, we reviewed a sample of end of course feedback from four independent schools who participated in an Outward Bound course in Summer 2023 and interviewed three staff members from independent schools who participated in an Outward Bound course with their school.

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ATTEND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN THE UK?

We know that for the young people in the UK, **their confidence, resilience and aspirations are continuing to be challenged** against a global backdrop of uncertainty, inequality and imbalance. The past three years of missed opportunity, disruption and insecurity to young people's lives as result of the Covid-19 pandemic remain as scars on their social and emotional development and behaviours.¹ Young people studying at independent schools are no exception and face a **different set of challenges**. **Academic pressures** often start during their time at prep school, where their journey to exams such as the 11+ begin. Many of the young people have **long school days** followed by **extra tutoring after school** to help with exam preparation.

Like all young people in the UK, there were several missed developmental years during the pandemic and even though online learning was available for some, this was not the case for all. The **impact on the young people's social skills** is still apparent today, as well as **rising mental health problems**, particularly **increased anxiety**.

The **current cost of living crisis**² is affecting families all over the UK. Several independent schools we work with have commented on the **financial struggles** for some their students and their parents. **Many independent schools offer bursaries and scholarships**, with 10% of students at Edinburgh Academy receiving financial assistance and excluding the school's bursar, no staff member or pupil know who these students are. With **tuition fee's rising**, some **parents are unable to afford both the school fees and extracurricular activities** such as holidays and school trips.

ATTITUDES TO OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL COMMUNITY

It is worth noting that **academics is generally prioritised above all else** by the parents of students from independent schools. One of the visiting staff members interviewed described many parents at the school place a low value on **outdoor education** with their focus being on academic achievement.

Researching and speaking with staff from independent schools, has provided an insight and better understanding of the lives of this cohort of young people. The following sections discuss **three key areas of challenge** that these young people are facing:

THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE:

- **Anxiety and fear of failure**

All School staff interviewed commented on the **increased anxiety** of the young people. This manifests in several ways including **worries about failing exams, not being deemed 'good enough'** by both themselves and others and being **without their mobile devices**.

These anxieties were also sometimes exasperated by an Outward Bound course, with many **reluctant to be pushed out of their "comfortable, cushioned environments"**. The staff also spoke about how their pupils often **picked up on their parent's anxieties** about them going on a residential course (especially regarding not being able to have daily contact with their children) and that this affected how the young people viewed the course. One staff member also commented on the **increased fear the young people had of going outside**.

When asked how young people are coping in the world we currently live in, Jenny Isherwood from Edinburgh Academy painted an image of what life is like for the young people she works with.

"Education is a complex community of people! Regardless of whether fees are paid - we are all facing the same challenges when it comes to pupils having anxieties about their futures. Often this is around exam results, which reflect one part of a student's character but is certainly not the whole picture.

Education is about preparing a person for the life that they will lead and help them make choices that are good for them and for society. I think the adventurous environment helps us to have those conversations with young people, helping them join the dots with the rest of their lives and start to empower them.

When we take those same young people into the outdoors, and we offer them a different choice and a different way of being. Then, we take that choice that they've made, and we bring it back into the classroom and say, "You're the same person!" As a school we talk about Outward bound as our "satellite campus" which helps pupils to make the connections and helps teachers to use the mountainside to classroom philosophy."

Jenny Isherwood, Director of Adventure and Character Education at Edinburgh Academy.

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- **Social skills**

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers have expressed concerns that young people are behind where they would be expected to be socially in terms of their maturity. **Lack of independence** was a key theme, with many of the young people **not taking agency within their own lives** and needing lots of **reassurance** and **reiteration** when given a task (at both school and at Outward Bound)

Many of the young people are also happy in their “bubbles” and **smaller comfort zones**. This has meant social interaction with their peers often has a more negative outcome; they are **less patient** with one another, **less likely to listen** to others and can be very sensitive. One staff member commented on the young people’s **reluctance to take accountability and responsibility** when things go wrong and are **quick to blame others** – they struggle to work as a team.

- **Academic pressures**

There is a pressure to do well in exams starts early in life for young people from independent schools. With the high level of focus on their studies, hobbies and social activities that can contribute to becoming well-rounded and resilient³ people can **take a secondary importance**.

The pressure to not fail their exams, contributes to the high anxiety amongst the young people, often **feeling that they are not good enough** if they do not do as well as expected. The staff members all agreed that this **pressure stems from their parents**. Whilst many parents are greatly invested in their children’s lives, **rising parental expectations** and criticism are linked to an **increase in perfectionism** among university students, which can have damaging mental health consequences, according to new research from the LSE and York St John University⁴.

“My concern is that students’ insecurities about failure are being fed by the system because the system can sometimes give them the impression that grades matter more than character.”

Jenny Isherwood, Director of Adventure and Character Education at Edinburgh Academy.

[Dr Thomas Curran](#), Assistant Professor of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE and lead researcher, said: “Perfectionism contributes to many psychological conditions, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and eating disorders.”

The extent to which young people can cope with these pressures and challenges varies. school staff commented on the reluctance of young people to try new things in case they fail. When pupils who are willing to give things a go, do not succeed on the first try, **failure can often be taken very badly**. For many, Outward Bound is a safe environment in which young people can learn about the facing their fear of failure and establish a positive association with challenge.

“This is the place where the young people can learn to cope with their fear of failure – failing at a task whilst at Outward Bound, is the first piece of success they have, and we help them understand that. It’s also a time to realise that exams aren’t the be all and end all, that setbacks are ok and it’s the build back that is important.”

Teacher (name withheld) from an independent school who attended a course with students in 2023.

THE OPPORTUNITIES:

Whilst there is no doubt that all young people face challenges and pressures, **young people from independent schools generally have exposure to a wide range of life-enriching opportunities and experiences. Access to a variety of extracurricular activities** which help build life skills and raises aspirations, **smaller classrooms** which have been shown to support learning together with **family wealth** means increased opportunity to progress into top universities and secure well-paid careers.

External research has also found that private school children are **tougher, more controlled, committed and confident** than their state-educated peers.

The study⁵, which was commissioned by the Independent Schools Council (ISC), involved 9,000 pupils of all ages in 58 schools in England and Scotland, and measured four categories: control, commitment, challenge and confidence.

The findings demonstrated that privately-educated students scored better than their state-educated counterparts, due to “the breadth of the curriculum, wide-ranging activities outside the classroom and excellent pastoral care”, says Julie Robinson, General Secretary of ISC.

She added that an independent school education helps to “**create resilient and worldly young men and women who are ready for further study and work in adult life.**”

In the report, privately-educated students were given an overall score of 4.26 for “mental toughness”, while state-school children received a score of 3.94¹. The results also showed that private school children have good attainment, wellbeing and behaviour, and are more resilient, better at dealing with setbacks and more open to learning.

Mark Mortimer, Headmaster of Warminster School in Wiltshire, whose pupils took part in the study, said: “Of course, exam results matter, but not as much as the qualities that allow pupils to leave school able to thrive, both professionally and personally, in the fluid, ever-changing and let-go world of the 21st century.”⁶

¹ The study employed the 4 Cs Mental Toughness Model and framework and the associated valid and reliable psychometric measure MTQ48.

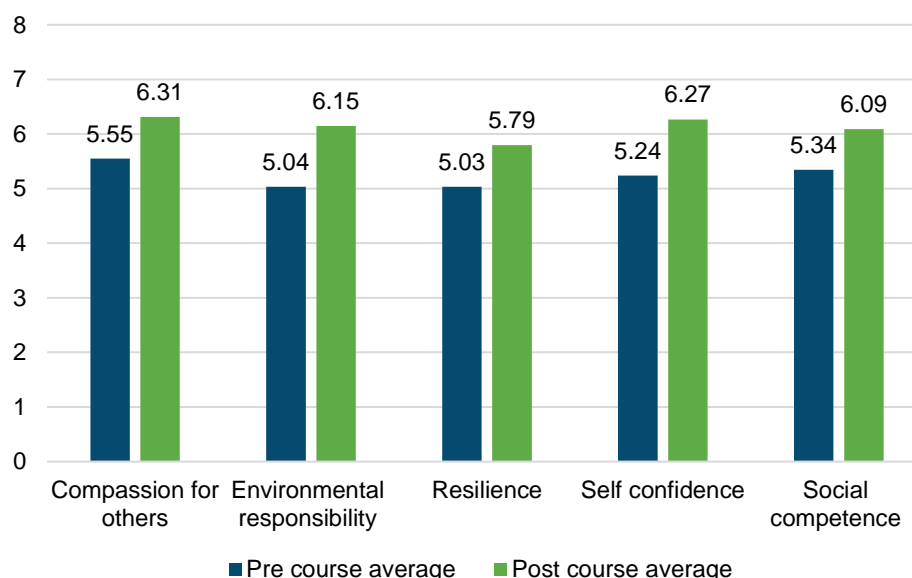
THE IMPACT OF AN OUTWARD BOUND COURSE

In June 2023, a cross section of young people from four independent schools who completed a 5-day residential course with Outward Bound were surveyed. A retrospective pre- and post-course survey format was used² where the young people were asked to rate their confidence levels in a range of skills both before and after their course.

OUTCOME MEASURES AND DEFINITIONS

Outcome	Definition
Self Confidence	<i>Self-perceived belief in one's ability to be successful</i>
Resilience	<i>Self-perceived ability to bounce back from and adjust to adversity and challenges</i>
Social Competence	<i>Self-perceived ability in social interactions</i>
Compassion for others	<i>Self-perceived ability to sense the emotions and needs of others and the motivation and initiative to act</i>
Environmental Responsibility	<i>Awareness of connection to nature and sense of consciousness and stewardship for the natural world</i>

Out of 102 students **83%** of young people **reported an increase in all outcome areas** following their Outward Bound residential. *Participant scores were indicated on an 8-point scale where 1 = False, not like me and 8 = True, like me:*



² The Outward Bound Outcome Survey (OBOS) was developed by Outward Bound International (OBI) to provide a relatively simple and consistent way for Outward Bound (OB) schools around the world to measure the extent to which the core personal and social development objectives are being achieved.

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The difference between their pre and post average scores were calculated to indicate changes that had happened during the course in terms of their social and emotional skill development. The average percentage of participants reporting an increased score in each outcome area is also calculated.

The difference in the participants' average scores showed improvements across all five outcome areas and the largest differences were seen in the areas of **Environmental Responsibility** and **Self Confidence** (92% and 88% respectively) - a difference in scores of over +1 for both outcome areas (on an 8-point scale).

Average scores	Compassion for others	Environmental Responsibility	Resilience	Self Confidence	Social Competence
Before course	5.55	5.04	5.03	5.24	5.34
After course	6.31	6.15	5.79	6.27	6.09
Difference	+0.76	+1.11	+0.76	+1.03	+0.75
% reporting increased scores	81%	92%	83%	88%	72%

Further analysis was then carried out, looking into differences in outcomes for different genders (male=66 and female=35), ages (12-13 and 14-15) and per individual school (n=4). Analysis found no differences in the pre-course and post-course average scores for any outcome areas between any of these demographics.

The young people shared what they thought was the **most valuable thing they learned** on their Outward Bound course. Here is a selection of their responses:

- *That I am not alone, how to talk to others and that social situations aren't something to fear.*
- *I can do a lot more than I realised and that fear is just a mentality. You can get past it if you want to, and it can only make you stronger.*
- *That you have to do things to make things happen. Don't be a passenger. If you sit around all day, nothing will happen – you have to work for rewards.*
- *How important friends and teamwork are.*
- *Gorge walking, hiking and canoeing taught me to always get back up and persevere.*
- *That if you feel you are going to give up, stay confident and fight through because the rewards are very pleasing.*
- *By going out and completing tasks as a team, that are more difficult than normal life, I have learnt the power of teamwork and communication.*
- *How to be patient and to respect people for their differences. I have formed deep connections with the people in my group too.*
- *Taking part in the expedition I learnt that I am capable of a lot more things than I thought I was.*

THE IMPACT ON AN OUTWARD BOUND COURSE FOR VISITING STAFF MEMBERS:

Jenny Isherwood, Director of Adventure and Character Education at Edinburgh Academy, explained in detail the **benefits of coming to Outward Bound for the visiting staff as well as the pupils**. Jenny has been bringing the school to Outward Bound Loch Eil for many years as a compulsory trip for all students. Jenny spoke about how when the trips first started, she struggled to get teachers to attend the courses but now the positive outcomes of Outward Bound have been seen at the school, there is a waiting list for teachers to join as visiting staff.

Jenny described the benefits for the teachers – both in **their relationships with the students** and for their own **professional developments** in terms of student engagement and motivation techniques from the instructors to personal development, particularly in terms of their own comfort zones, understanding how they react in different, challenging circumstances and the personal value they place on the environment and the outdoors.

“Staff can often see the week as a personal challenge. It’s not just about the kids, it’s for all of us. This idea of being connected to nature and being connected to your own challenge, building a toolkit of skills and experiences that will help you in future events...”What can you control and influence in this situation” is often asked by an instructor - this is a technique which can be used in every part of life beyond the week on Outward Bound!

You’re going to learn from the instructors. Outdoor instructors are really mindset management experts managing to get young people to find meaning in hiking up a hill in the rain even when they don’t want to. They do something, and it’s a special, secret little sauce. A piece of magic. And then teachers can catch that. So, if you think about character education, character education is caught, taught and sought, then, it can be caught on Outward Bound by the visiting staff as much as the pupils... They catch it from the instructors. They catch it from the history of the Trust, from the stories of adventure that come out of it. They’re part of something that is really cool and different, and they go home with a story to tell. The kids go on a residential, and they get to see teachers in different contexts. Being in a gorge with a group of kids, you’re in the same situation and you’re clearly uncomfortable with it, there’s a shared experience of that discomfort and having to deal with it - a stretch zone experience! Walking in the rain or frost, maybe just camping with a beautiful sunset, there are certain moments... Nature is far more powerful than, I suppose, we give it credit for. Having those moments of awesome wonder, the kids kind of go, “Wow,” and a teacher becomes part of that landscape.”

Jenny Isherwood, Director of Adventure and Character Education at Edinburgh Academy.

A 2016 report about the benefits of outdoor adventure experiences for the Alumni of Independent School Gordonstoun, supports the idea that having **staff involved in both academic teaching and out-of-classroom experiences is valuable**⁷. Old Gordonstounians felt that staff-student relationships were deepened because they were built up over time and through different contexts. Nearly all focus groups spoke of the high amount of time and energy that teachers put into out-of-

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classroom experiences and how high quality, 'rounded' staff from a broad variety of backgrounds were drawn to the school by opportunities to be involved in extracurricular opportunities.

Once they have been on the course, all the teachers we spoke with agree that the **shared experience improves teacher/pupil relationships**. This has encouraged one school to move their trip from summer to March, to give them more time to embed the learning and build on the relationships made on the course before the young people move up a school year or to different schools.

“The teachers want to come to Outward Bound, they see it as an opportunity for their own CPD, where they can watch trained professionals conduct powerful outdoor learning, picking up skills they can take back and implement in their own classrooms.”

Teacher (name withheld) from an independent school who attended a course with students in 2023.

A NOTE ON WINTER RESIDENTIALS

Whilst historically, independent schools tend to come on an Outward Bound course in the Spring/Summer months, we are seeing increasing numbers opting for an Autumn/Winter course. The main driver of this, being the increased time within the school year to **embed the learning and transfer the skills learnt at Outward Bound back in the classroom**. Some teachers have commented that when they go on an end of year residential, they are unable to see the long-term benefits because the young people move to other year groups. Other factors for moving to a winter course, includes increased opportunity to **build resilience of the young people** due to the challenging, adverse weather conditions.

An excerpt from a Winter residential case study also describes the experience of attending a course in the Winter months⁸;

“I see outdoor education with The Outward Bound Trust as a way of allowing people to grow and develop social skills by taking part in real adventure. We say to our students that if you have the courage and fortitude to face the fierce weather conditions and sleep out in a snow hole high on the Cairngorm plateau, a job interview or writing a personal statement isn't going to phase you! The learning during the winter course is real and powerful. The students return walking a little taller. They have discovered that they are capable of doing more than they perhaps at first believed, and most importantly they feel empowered to seek new learning and growth, for their future lives and adventures.”

Chris Lucas, Head of Outdoor Learning, Newquay Tretherras¹

You can read more about the benefits of a winter residential course [here](#)⁹.

CONCLUSION

Following the survey responses from the young people and testimonials from the visiting staff members from independent schools, we can conclude that **an Outward Bound residential has many benefits for both this group of students and their teachers**. Skills learnt both during activities and the residential experience at Outward Bound help tackle the challenges the young people are facing in their daily lives. For example, whilst building a raft together on the lake shore, the young people **learn to listen and trust their peers**, improving social skills. During a tough hike in adverse weather conditions, young people's **resilience develops**, helping them understand how to **manage their worries and anxieties**. Whilst attempting the high wall or Jacob's ladder, the young people begin to understand how **reviewing previous failed attempts can lead to success** and learn how to **control and manage their emotions**.

“The feedback is always positive because we love Outward Bound and what you do.

We always come with very high expectations because we know what Outward Bound are capable of and yet every year, we get to tick the box that says Outward Bound has exceeded our expectations. You're continually working for the benefit of the of the young people and that's really, really lovely to see.

Our staff are blown away by the fact that whilst they are at an outdoor centre, they're still facing daily questions about what's going to be best for the young people in front of the instructor and how they can individually benefit them. There's genuine learning there as well which is phenomenal.”

Alex Addie-Weir Outdoor Learning Coordinator at George Heriot's School

“The Outward Bound course is amazing. It is. The staff are outstanding, the centre is beautiful. Everything is perfect. I couldn't change it. I'm a huge fan, and I think what you do is... it is transforming lives and it is worth the investment.”

Jenny Isherwood, Director of Adventure and Character Education at Edinburgh Academy.

“We love coming to Outward Bound. Even when they (move) into Year six and the previous cohort who have just left, they always talk about their time at Ullswater. The impression that's left on the children is really strong.

And it's not just the activities and things, but also, building in the values that the children can gain and recognising that at the end of year 5 going into year six, that failing something is not the end of the world. They have a good number of years ahead where they can continue progressing and there will have successes and failures – it's really important that the children know that.”

Teacher (name withheld) from an independent school who attended a course with students in 2023.

REFERENCES

¹ [Outward Bound funder report 2023](#)

² [Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2023 | News and views \(princes-trust.org.uk\)](#)

³ [Resilience in Children, Resilience Factors and Examples \(parentingforbrain.com\)](#)

⁴ [Rising Parental Expectations Linked to Perfectionism \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)

⁵ [Soft Skills and Mental Toughness Research, 2017 - ISC](#)

⁶ [Private School Children Are Tougher Than State-educated Pupils | Independent School Parent](#)

⁷ [Alumni perspectives on a boarding school outdoor education programme — University of Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

⁸ [Case Study Winter Skills Newquay School.indd \(outwardbound.org.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Winter residential Benefits - Learning Away](#)