



European Education Area Strategic Framework

Working Group on Schools: *Learning for Sustainability*

Outdoor education: benefits, challenges and good practice
Key messages



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1. Introduction

Outdoor education refers to experiential learning¹ activities that take place in outdoor settings, ranging from short outdoor lessons to multi-day residential programmes. Outdoor education offers a **powerful pedagogical approach** that situates and connects learners with nature while cultivating essential life skills and sustainability competences (Tilbury, 2025). By integrating outdoor education with sustainability objectives, educators can create meaningful opportunities for experiential learning that **develop both individual capabilities and collective responsibility** for the shared environment.

As Europe navigates the green and digital transitions, outdoor education stands out as a key strategy for supporting citizens to **learn to value and protect natural resources** while also building learners' **independence, resilience and well-being**.

Slovenia's longstanding national commitment to outdoor education, developed over decades, demonstrates how **systematic investment in outdoor education** can benefit all students while **advancing basic skills** and sustainability goals. This document captures the key messages and insights from the Peer Learning Activity held by the [Working Group on Learning for Sustainability](#) in Slovenia in June, 2025. It highlights lessons for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to scale up effective outdoor education practices across Europe.

2. Outdoor education and its benefits

- ***A spectrum of engagement — from nature as a setting to nature as a teacher:*** Outdoor education can range from simple uses of nature as a backdrop to fully transformative experiences that reshape how learners engage with the world. Depending on how the outdoor education experience is designed, it can either enhance existing learning formats, or transform the learning processes altogether, positioning **nature not just as a setting, but as a powerful co-educator**. Quality pedagogy and strong teacher leadership is needed to maximise the value of outdoor education.
- ***Nurturing holistic development through contact with nature:*** Outdoor education supports learners' growth across cognitive, emotional, social and physical domains. It boosts **motivation, deepens learning** and enhances **educational outcomes**, all while building **confidence, resilience, and emotional intelligence**. Nature-based experiences promote **mental health**, reduce stress, anxiety and depression while improving focus, attention and emotional regulation. **Physical health** benefits include increased activity levels and enhanced motor development contributing to more active lifestyles.
- ***Balancing digital immersion with real-world experience:*** In an increasingly technology-driven world, outdoor education provides essential **balance and well-being**. It offers rich sensory experiences that digital platforms cannot replicate, stimulating **empathy, collaboration, and cognitive development** through real-life

¹ Learners learn through direct, hands-on experiences that link theory to practice.

interactions with the natural world. At the same time, outdoor education also has the potential to provide learners with high-quality education through digital tools and citizen science.

- **Improving relationships and social competences:** Outdoor education helps build stronger **peer relationships** and improves **group dynamics**. In these informal contexts, students perceive their teachers as more relatable. This **breakdown of formal barriers** enhances **trust** and fosters **deeper connections**.
- Students (14-15 years of age) who participated in outdoor education activities with the WG members in Slovenia during the PLA, supported these benefits. Students especially appreciated the opportunity to learn practical and survival skills, strengthen team work, and build stronger bonds with their peers and teachers. They were also impressed by the teachers at the centres, who played a key role in making the experience engaging.

3. Linking outdoor education with sustainability

- **Developing emotional connection and care for nature:** Experience and emotions are critical precursors to care; learners are more likely to act for the environment when they feel part of it (Jucker & von Au, 2022). Outdoor education strengthens this bond and lays the foundation for lifelong stewardship towards the planet. Positive outdoor education experiences early in life can be particularly influential in nurturing values of care and connection to nature.
- **Building sustainability mindsets through real-world learning:** Both outdoor education and learning for sustainability can promote democratic learning processes, encouraging shared decision-making and cultivating the values and skills of active, engaged citizenship. In combination, outdoor education provides a powerful context to apply sustainability knowledge and competences in practice.

4. Policy support to address the challenges

4.1 National infrastructure and outdoor education centres

- **Recognising outdoor education as a public good:** Investing in outdoor education is investing in a collective future. Access to nature-based education² should not depend on geography or income. Policymakers can enshrine outdoor education facilities as public goods, placing them within national education policy and legal frameworks.

In **Slovenia**, for example, **the State owns and maintains outdoor education centres** – many repurposed from former defence infrastructure. According to the Basic School Act, the school implements part of the compulsory curriculum and other activities in the

² Learners engage actively with the natural environment, materials and themes (often outdoors) to develop environmental stewardship.

School in Nature programme. The programme is an organised form of educational work that takes place for 3 or more days outside the school premises. For students who do not attend **School in Nature**, the school organises comparable activities during this time. Each school should organise outdoor education camps *at least* twice during the nine years of basic schooling. One stay is co-financed by the Ministry of Education.

- **Ensuring quality and access through systemic provision:** In some EU Member States, outdoor education is either operated by NGOs with limited funding, or as an optional add-on for learners. For instance, in Denmark and Germany there's more decentralisation and school autonomy and focus on extra-curricular activities and scouts. In order to maximise the effect of outdoor education, a comprehensive and well-funded approach is needed that **aligns all parts of the education system** while **centralising and mainstreaming expertise** for quality assurance and continuous improvements. Long-term funding, for instance through **national education funds**, is critical for the sustainability of these initiatives.

A good example of a **coordinated, system-wide approach** is **Slovenia's School in Nature**, ensuring that every learner benefits from meaningful outdoor education. The programme provides all students with the opportunity to spend 3 or more days outside the school premises. The programme can be managed by the public institution Centre for School and Outdoor Education (Center šolskih in obšolskih dejavnosti – CŠOD), which operates **a national network of 25 residential facilities**, often in natural and cultural heritage areas. The centres offer 1,600 beds and employ 350 staff, including qualified teachers in science, geography, sports and outdoor environmental education. This **centralised yet geographically distributed model** enables consistent quality standards while maintaining local relevance and accessibility. CŠOD also plays a key role in **generating and sharing knowledge** on best practices in outdoor education. While primarily used by schools, the centres are also open to families, youth and other groups during weekends and holidays, thereby playing a role as **community learning hubs**.

4.2 Curriculum integration and programme design

- **Mainstreaming outdoor education through curriculum alignment:** Embedding outdoor education within the national curriculum is key to scaling its benefits. By explicitly linking outdoor activities to learning outcomes, subjects, and pedagogies, policymakers can support teachers in making outdoor education a transformative part of education. Member States can connect outdoor education outcomes to national competence frameworks and formal recognition and validation systems. This ensures that non-formal learning gained outside traditional classrooms is properly documented and credited within lifelong learning records.

In Slovenia, the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are integrated** into outdoor education programmes, reinforcing the link between local experiences and global challenges. The 2022–2025 curriculum reform introduced 'common goals' including systems thinking and sustainability across subjects, facilitating cross-disciplinary outdoor education. Besides, **CŠOD's outdoor education programme also fosters**

curriculum alignment spanning natural and social sciences and sports. The programme is **curriculum-based** and designed for **3-day or more residential experiences**, with options from kindergarten through secondary levels, ensuring age-appropriate progressions.

- **Ensuring equity through universal access, participation and targeted support:** To achieve inclusive participation, outdoor education should be part of the standard education offer, with targeted measures to support learners with additional needs (e.g., staff training in inclusive outdoor pedagogy, accessible routes at outdoor centres, adapted equipment, sensory-inclusive design, targeted subsidies). Outdoor settings provide valuable opportunities to create inclusive programmes for learners with cognitive, physical or social-emotional differences. Finally, there should be **formal mechanisms** in place **for all learners to participate** and have a voice in the design, delivery and evaluation of outdoor education programmes.

Slovenia's model **combines state funding and parental contributions, with subsidies** for low-income families and targeted programmes for marginalised groups. For example, Roma children benefit from tailored outreach, including outdoor kindergartens and role models from within their communities.

4.3 Teacher education and professional development

- **Quality pedagogy matters more than location in outdoor education:** Simply being outdoors is not enough – the focus must be on what you do outdoors. This requires strong didactics, structured programmes, trained educators, equitable access, and integration with curriculum goals. Teachers do not need to be skilled in the outdoors to do outdoor education, but they need to **apply high-quality teaching outdoors**. Besides, teachers do not need to spend a full day or week outside with students – one hour a day can also have a positive impact. Estonia, for example, has a '[Schools in Motion](#)' initiative whereby students spend one hour outside during the school day.

In Belgium, [MOS Flanders](#) (part of the Sustainable Education Hub of Flanders) has developed an '**outdoor teaching compass**' used to coach and train teachers on teaching outdoors. The focus is on (i) giving teachers the confidence to **start small and move their activities outdoors** and (ii) quality outdoor education, including active, learner-centred pedagogies. The model draws inspiration from the [SAMR model](#), which is commonly used to describe stages of ICT integration in education. In a similar way, the outdoor teaching compass helps teachers progress from simple steps towards more transformative practices that redesign learning experiences.

- **Teacher agency and preparedness:** Many educators feel unprepared to lead outdoor education due to **limited exposure** during teacher education, **limited professional experience** and **a lack of confidence** in natural settings. The challenge extends beyond pedagogical skills to include **safety concerns and risk management**. Policymakers can embed outdoor pedagogy in teacher training, providing accessible continuing professional development, establishing peer mentoring networks, and implementing co-teaching models where experienced outdoor educators work alongside classroom teachers.

- **Meeting new inclusion challenges:** Post-pandemic, new challenges include students with **mental health issues** uncomfortable in group settings and **risk averse parents** who question the safety of outdoor education. These challenges place additional demands on teachers, who require a supportive culture, adequate resources, and structural backing to effectively deliver outdoor education. To navigate these complexities, educators must develop **nuanced approaches** that balance safety, student autonomy, and academic goals.
- **Collaborative and cross-sectoral partnership models that maximise expertise:** Cross-sectoral partnerships are critical in liaising support mechanisms between schools, youth services, parks/forestry authorities, health services and social services to co-design programmes and finance shared infrastructure. These practices can also strengthen teacher agency and preparedness. Slovenia's co-teaching model, pairing classroom teachers with outdoor education specialists, demonstrates an effective way to combine pedagogical and subject expertise. With high staff-to-student ratios and tailored support for special needs, Slovenia shows how teacher capacity can be scaled rapidly through structured professional development and collaborative delivery.

5. Relevant resources

5.1 Background materials

- *Learning in the Outdoors: Opportunities, innovations and school policy considerations* (Tilbury, 2025 - forthcoming).
- Jucker & von Au (2022). *High-quality outdoor learning: Evidence-based education outside the classroom for children, teachers and society* (p. 386). Springer Nature.
- **Academic articles and book chapters** have explored outdoor education through trends, quality criteria, cross-disciplinarity and pedagogical innovations:
 - [The Changing World of Outdoor Learning in Europe](#)
 - [High-Quality Outdoor Learning: Evidence-based Education Outside the Classroom for Children, Teachers and Society](#)
 - [Cross-disciplinary teaching: A Pedagogical Model to Support Teachers in the Development of Implementation of Outdoor Learning Opportunities](#)
 - [A Pedagogy of Outdoor Learning in the Primary School – Insights for Outdoor Educators in Ireland](#)
 - [Teacher Development through Co-Teaching Outdoor Science and Environmental Education Across the Elementary-Middle School Transition](#)

5.2 Good practice initiatives, networks and resources

- UNESCO's work on outdoor education is primarily embedded within its Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) programmes. A recent [UNESCO implementation](#)

[guide](#) showcases how UNESCO sites such as biosphere reserves, natural world heritage sites and global geoparks can serve as excellent outdoor spaces and learning hubs for sustainability.

- [The European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning \(EOE Network\)](#) is a professional network specialising in **connecting outdoor education practitioners, academics, youth workers, and educators** across the continent. The organisation facilitates knowledge exchange through publications (e.g., [Urban Nature: Inclusive Learning Through Youth Work and School Work](#)), annual conferences, working groups such as the [Outdoor Education Centres Network](#), and a master's degree in [Transcultural European Outdoor Studies](#).
- [ELaDiNa](#) is an EU-funded Erasmus+ project that specialises in developing and promoting language skills for children aged 3-7 through nature-based educational experiences. The consortium, led by Slovenia's CŠOD and supported by partners from Sweden and Germany, has developed a range of [resources](#): a model for early language development in nature, a training programme, and theoretical and practical handbooks.
- [MOS Flanders](#) specialises in sustainable learning environments with a focus on outdoor education and green playgrounds. The organisation, together with the Flemish government, provinces, and educational institutions, has developed a practical guide on "[Classrooms without Walls](#)", coordinates an annual [Outdoor Lesson Day](#) that has engaged over 25,000 students and [supports 366 greening projects](#) throughout Flanders and Brussels in converting concrete playgrounds into vibrant natural spaces.
- [Adventurous Play and Outdoor Learning \(APOLE\)](#) is an EU-funded Erasmus+ project that specialises in promoting risky and adventurous play as integral components of primary education. The project found that outdoor play, especially risky play, boosts children's emotional resilience and overall health and enhances well-being, happiness, and readiness to learn. Outdoor experiences also help build pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours — critical for sustainability. The project develops and gathers [resources](#) and a [toolbox](#) of training materials for primary school teachers and assistants on how to integrate outdoor education activities, while embedding the necessary competences into teacher training curricula at universities.
- [Učilnica za življenje \(Classroom for Life\)](#) is a Slovenian project funded by the European Climate Initiative (EUKI) that helps educators shift from conventional teaching approaches to facilitation of learning for climate and sustainability. The project provides [resources](#) such as multi-day teacher training programmes, teaching manuals, and learning scenarios for primary and secondary schools. The monograph [Classroom for Life](#) summarises the theoretical and practical pedagogical approaches.

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