



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH  
The Moray House  
School of Education

# The nature and impact of Gordonstoun School's out-of-classroom learning experiences

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## Executive Summary

This report outlines the rationale, aims, methodology, findings and recommendations from a six-month, multi-methods study. In the study, the nature and impact of Gordonstoun School's out-of-classroom learning experiences was investigated.

Over the course of Gordonstoun's history, countless items of anecdotal evidence have been gathered which attest to the power and influence of its Sail training, Outdoor education, Services, Sports, and after-school Activities. There has not been, however, a comprehensive interrogation of Gordonstoun's 'broader curriculum' conducted by an independent third party. The research explained in this report was commissioned by Gordonstoun to address this gap. The investigation was conducted by The Moray House School of Education from the University of Edinburgh.

Discussions between the research team and Gordonstoun staff highlighted two principal aims for the study. First, to understand current students', Old Gordonstounians', current students' parents' and staffs' perceived outcomes of the non-academic aspects of required school activities, such as Outdoor education, Sail training voyages, Services, and the Arts. Second, to understand the critical elements of these out-of-class experiences and the ways in which they influence the students.

Addressing the above aims involved collecting data through three principal methods. The first was through online surveys of Old Gordonstounians (n=1183) and the parents of current students (n=235). The main findings from the surveys were partly used to inform the themes that were explored through focus group interviews with students (n=100), Old Gordonstounians (n=50), current parents (n=30), and staff (n=22). Ethnographic data were collected through observations and conversations from 10 days spent on site, an analysis of 150 Expedition review sheets, and an examination of 20 student blogs. Rigorous analysis yielded key findings for each of the nine specific pools of data that were generated. These findings, and the relationships between them, were then further scrutinised and ultimately categorised under three principal headings: participant outcomes, critical elements of the experiences, and issues to consider.

When single elements of Gordonstoun's broader curriculum are considered together, it is unquestionable that they provide a powerful mix of novel and challenging experiences that demand high levels of resolve in order to overcome. The enculturated expectation that students will 'give it a go' in the face of adversity, despite initially lacking expertise, appears to be a critical element common to experiences reported as being powerful. Experiences, positions of responsibility, and activities that are perceived to have clear educational, developmental, and societal aims are valued highest by students. On the other hand, those activities seen as fillers to create 'busy time' are not.

Based on these two dominant themes, it is arguable that Sail training and Expeditions, which are key out-of-classroom activities offered by Gordonstoun, are central to achieving the school's aims. Services are also a mainstay, but a blanket endorsement cannot be made, as it is clear that there is a wide variety of Services on offer, which are resourced unequally and valued differently by students. While not a dominant theme, it is important to highlight the positive regard in which both required and optional performing arts are held by students, parents, and Old Gordonstounians. Indeed, they share the same requirement to 'give it a go' in front of supportive classmates that some outdoor education experiences provide.

Conversely, the purpose, content, structure, and time commitment associated with after-school Activity sessions, Sports, and Seamanship all merit critical inquiry. The tension between, and management of, the demanding timetable of non-academic activities, as well as the high expectations of academic attainment and university entrance warrants attention. While presenting students with varied opportunities to take responsibility for oneself and their schoolmates, some senior students interviewed identified a disjuncture between the responsibility they were required to take in some areas and the lack of responsibility afforded them in others.

The above critiques and recommendations should not obscure the vital roles that Gordonstoun's out-of-classroom learning experiences play in achieving its educational, developmental and societal aims. For the most part, the broader curriculum is fit for purpose. However, it is arguable that specific aspects of it are not. Considering the key issues in this report and making revisions would allow for the broader curriculum to be delivered in a more purposeful, coherent and effective manner.





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## Part 1: Introduction, Overview and Context

### *Background and Overview*

This document outlines the principal findings yielded from a multi-methods research study investigating out-of-classroom learning experiences at Gordonstoun School.

The opportunity to tender a commissioned research proposal came about from Simon Beames (Senior lecturer in Outdoor Learning at the University of Edinburgh) being approached by Ibrahim Park (Director of Outdoor Education at Gordonstoun) and later Sabine Richards (Director of Communications at Gordonstoun). Simon visited Gordonstoun School in February 2015. There, he met with students and staff members, along with Sabine, Ibrahim, and Simon Reid, the school principal.

A research proposal was presented to Gordonstoun in June 2015. Gordonstoun approved the work shortly after, and planning for the first phase of data collection soon began.

This report is accompanied by two further items. The first is a document featuring all of the associated appendices. This includes qualitative data and analytical themes, for example. The second item is an electronic folder containing two Excel files with the raw data from the two online surveys.

### *Rationale and aims*

Despite rich anecdotal reports regarding the positive outcomes associated with Gordonstoun's 'broader curriculum', no robust, empirical research has been conducted on this topic.

This project addresses two principal aims:

- a. Understand current students', Old Gordonstounians', parents of current students' and staff members' perceived outcomes of the non-academic aspects of school activities, such as Outdoor education, Sailing, Services, and the Arts.
- b. Understand the critical elements of these out-of-classroom experiences and the ways in which they influence the students.

Addressing these aims involved employing three broad categories of data collection, the first two of which were the dominant sources of data:

1. Surveys (online) with Old Gordonstounians and current parents
2. Focus group interviews with students, Old Gordonstounians, current parents, and staff
3. Ethnography and archival analysis

### *Locating the research*

There are three principal contexts in which this investigation can be located. This scene setting is useful for readers to keep in mind as they consider the findings and their implications for practice.

The first of these contexts is that of educational policy. Although Gordonstoun places a high value on out-of-classroom experiences, there is no UK-wide government policy mandating them. Similarly, although Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence cites outdoor learning as a required part of curricular school life, there is no imperative for schools to have after school activities that sit alongside academic life. Gordonstoun's students follow England's National Curriculum while taking part in extensive out-of-classroom experiences that are part of the 'broader curriculum'.

The second context is that of the academic discourses surrounding outdoor education, personal and social development, character education, service learning, and extra-curricular activities. The literature in this field is wide-ranging, over-lapping, and occasionally contradictory, while some feature inflated claims regarding participant outcomes.

The third context to remain mindful of is the global socio-cultural landscape. This research inquiry has taken place more than 80 years on from Gordonstoun's foundation. Attitudes towards health and safety have changed dramatically; the advent of cyber communications has enabled contact with those outside of school in ways inconceivable to students from decades ago; and the pressure on senior students to achieve high exam results and gain access to prestigious universities continues to rise steadily.

## Part 2: Methodology

### 2.1 Overview

Addressing the study's two principal aims demanded the use of several complementary methods. These methods featured online surveys, focus group interviews, and ethnography.

The two online surveys went live in November 2015, and a first phase report was submitted to Gordonstoun in early February 2016. The ethnography and focus group interviews took place between January and June 2016. The research was conducted by a team of four people.

Along with the study's principal aims, quantitative and qualitative findings from the two online surveys (OGs and current parents) informed the topics that were discussed in all of the focus group interviews. Findings that emerged from the four kinds of focus groups (students, OGs, parents, staff) were then considered in relation to the survey responses that had come before. Observations and informal conversations that were part of the ethnography served to confirm emerging themes from other data sources and, crucially, to highlight themes that had not come to the fore through conventional methods of data collection.

Throughout the data collection process, emerging themes have been used in two ways. First, trends emerging from initial thematic coding in one data source (e.g. student interviews) are used to inform subsequent data collection in that source (i.e. the next student interview). Second, findings yielded by one data source (e.g. staff interviews) have been scrutinised in relation to other data sources (e.g. ethnography). The following table provides another way of capturing the methods of data collection, analysis, and verification. Each of these methods will be explained in detail in the sections that follow.

*Figure 1. Data collection, analysis, verification and location*

Method of Data Collection	Population	Method of Data Analysis (DA)	Method of Data Verification	Location of files
Surveys (Bristol Online Survey)	OGs (1,183) Parents (235)	Quantitative: Descriptive statistics, inferential statistics  Qualitative: Word frequency; targeted ethic themes	Quantitative: Same as DA  Qualitative: Peer review with research team	Two Excel files on memory stick  Appendix A and B
Focus groups (Audio-recorded on site)	Students (100) OGs (50) Parents (30) Staff (22)	Inductive open coding based on unforeseen information that arose during conversations  Deductive coding based on original pre-data collection themes, and themes that emerged from both surveys  All coding done 'on the way' (only salient quotes transcribed)  Code construction took place and emerged throughout the data collection period	Investigator triangulation: sample interviews selected by interviewer and coded by triangulator  Methodological triangulation: between other focus groups and ethnography	All audio files on memory stick  Appendices C to N
Ethnography (Fieldnotes)	General observations and conversations (4 visits / 10 days)	Abductive analysis used more intuitively to consider themes / issues not raised through more formal methods of data collection  Inductive open coding on fieldnotes taken from each visit  Archival analysis of Expedition review sheets, student blogs, student newspapers, marketing brochures	Peer review with research team	Appendices O to Q

## 2.2 Surveys

### *Overview*

This study has taken a mixed methods approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. In such an approach, questionnaire surveys yield quantitative or quantifiable data from a relatively large sample, representative of the population, to provide statistical evidence that characterises the general view of the population on selected questions. At the same time, interviews, focus groups and observations of relatively small sub-samples yield qualitative evidence that might explain trends in the quantitative data and/or expand on these using further selected questions.

The questionnaire for the two online surveys was designed in an iterative way between Gordonstoun staff and University of Edinburgh (UoE) researchers. It therefore addressed the areas of interest of the school and the needs of the researchers to generate data amenable to analysis and interpretation. The questionnaire surveys elicited a response from just over 30 per cent of those OGs and parents contacted. This is typical of such on-line surveys and is considered to be a strong basis for the conclusions presented here. Both surveys were open for three weeks in November 2016.

The survey data were analysed in two ways. First, using Excel and SPSS software, the questions yielding numerical data were analysed for descriptive statistics on trends and inferential statistics for relationships between various parts of the data set. Second, using Nvivo software, the survey returns yielding textual data were analysed for the frequency of key words or themes.

### *Data verification*

The iterative process of questionnaire development ensured its face and content validity. The reliability of a questionnaire is determined using data acquired through its repeated use, or by testing individual factors or constructs within the questionnaire. For our one-off, cross-sectional study without any constructs as such, reliability tests were not possible. Nonetheless, this did not detract from the quality of the questionnaires in the context in which they were utilised.

### *Data analysis*

Numerical data from the survey questionnaires yielded descriptive statistics on the distribution of scores on the 1 to 10 or 1 to 5 scales and mean scores on questions, both for all respondents and for males and females separately. The OG data were also analysed by age group.

Numerical data were analysed for possible correlations between respondents' scores on different questions. For example, we investigated the degree to which respondents returning a high score on the influence of out-of-classroom experiences on personal growth and development also return a high score on their enhancement of academic studies.

Statistical tests were also carried out to discover whether there were statistically significant differences between the scores from particular cohorts of respondents, such as between genders (parents and OGs) or between age groups (OGs).

Detailed results of the data analysis are contained in Appendix B.

## 2.3 Focus Groups

### *Data collection*

Focus group interviews were used to capture the views of students, OGs, parents, and staff. Most focus groups had between two and five people each. This method was chosen as it allowed higher numbers of first-hand, face-to-face perspectives to be heard in a given time period. Furthermore, discussions with small groups of people tend to yield rich findings, as the participants recount and compare stories surrounding similar phenomena.

Students were recruited by the marketing department asking all of the housemasters to arrange for volunteers to speak to the interviewer before and after 'prep' (i.e. homework time). Three focus groups were conducted at the Sports Centre with students volunteering to step out of their activity for a short time. In total, exactly one hundred students were interviewed in 25 focus group meetings. All interviews took place over the course of two visits by the research team. All respondents were 16 years of age or older.

Focus group interviews with OGs and parents of current pupils were employed in order to explore themes arising from the survey data. The initial sample for both groups came from those survey respondents who had indicated that they were happy to be contacted by email to take part in follow-up interviews. Cross-referencing email addresses with the school database, a geographic convenience sample was applied to identify clusters of respondents where it would be possible to arrange face-to-face interviews. All respondents in these areas were contacted with an initial information email explaining the research project and group interview part of the data collection process, and inviting

them to participate in a local session. An interview guide was used to ensure that key topics were covered, but there remained flexibility for the conversation to flow organically according to the respondents.

Forty-eight OGs participated in the focus groups. Thirteen were female and 35 male, with the gender split being fairly equal until the over-60 age categories, which can be explained by the introduction of co-educational provision in 1972. While OGs from all age categories were interviewed, there was a markedly higher response rate from older people, with 73 per cent of respondents aged over 50. This may be because those who experienced earlier years at Gordonstoun are more keen to talk about it, or may simply be because they had more time to commit to the research.

Of the 30 parents we spoke to, 22 were women and eight were men. The fact that the views of fathers are under-represented may be identified as a limitation of this data set, but it should be made clear that emails were sent to the primary email address that the school had on file, in which both parents were invited to participate. The parents that we spoke to had children currently enrolled across Gordonstoun's age range, and several had older children who had spent time at the junior school, before going through the senior school.

It was not part of the original plan to interview staff, and this decision was taken as the study progressed. In all, 22 staff were interviewed through seven focus groups in the following clusters: Drama, Matrons, Housemasters, Activities, Outdoor education, Sail training, heads of Service. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (e.g. we needed to speak to the sail training team and spoke to two of the main crew) and through convenience sampling (e.g. we needed to speak to matrons, and spoke to four who were available and willing to chat with us while we were on campus). All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent from the respondents.

#### *Data analysis*

Data analysis for all four categories of focus group interviews featured open coding that was both deductive and inductive in nature. It was deductive in that certain pre-determined themes (e.g. the nature of the international student community) were intentionally sought. However, inductive themes, not previously highlighted in the original research aims or by the surveys, were allowed to emerge.

Audio recordings of each interview were listened to by the analyst multiple times after the original meeting. Notes were made while listening to these recordings and key quotes were extracted. These data were then considered in relation to notes from other focus groups. This process then yielded master notes for each category of focus group (e.g. parents). During this process, items of interest were aggregated into clusters of themes, which gradually cemented. This iterative process is inherently 'messy' and involves a constant re-assessment of themes and categories of findings, until the analyst is satisfied that their principal themes are a trustworthy reflection of the respondents' views.

#### *Data verification*

Although the above analysis is a time-consuming, rigorous process, further confirmation of the findings was drawn from investigator triangulation. This featured another member of the research team listening to a sample of the interviews, going through their own process of open coding, and comparing findings with the first analyst's findings (which they had not seen prior to listening to the audio themselves).

## **2.4 Ethnography and Archival Analysis**

### *Data Collection*

Ethnographic visits were made to Gordonstoun in order to make general observations of school life, and to provide opportunities for informal conversation with students and staff. Two members of the research team made a total of three visits, in addition to spending time at the school while conducting focus groups with students and staff. This field based method was chosen as it provides a more holistic picture of life at Gordonstoun, therefore giving the research team a fuller insight into the lives of the participants involved in the surveys and focus groups.

Both of the researchers who visited have formal experience of life in residential education settings, through a combination of teaching, leading and living at outdoor pursuit centres, summer camps, schools and universities. While at Gordonstoun, the researchers had opportunities to join in with and observe Chapel, various Services, evening meetings in the boarding houses, interviews for Overseas Services, Expedition preparation sessions, lunch time concerts, performing arts rehearsals, afternoon activities (such as cooking and team sports), meal times in the refectory, and the whole school cross country race.

The ethnographic visits also added a level of personalisation to the study, as it allowed the researchers to simultaneously participate in daily life while also making observations. The visits took place between January and April 2016, and therefore began after the survey findings had been analysed, but before the focus groups for students and staff commenced. This facilitated the development of both deductive and inductive themes, as existing

findings could be explored in more depth, while the researchers were also able to use their observations to develop new themes for further exploration.

Each visit was planned together with the Gordonstoun marketing team in order to ensure breadth of experience, and the researchers spent a total of 10 days living at Gordonstoun. It is worth noting that these visits were small in scale, and it is unlikely that the researchers experienced the fullness of life at Gordonstoun within this time period.

Archival analysis of a small sample of student blogs, Expedition review sheets, student newspapers, and marketing brochures was conducted in order to add detail to observations made by the ethnographers. This method allows an insight into unique and personal notes made by study participants, and has the potential to highlight any themes for further analysis, in addition to contributing to a fuller picture of existing themes.

Twenty students who blogged regularly were selected by Gordonstoun staff and two researchers were given remote access to the school's secure web portal. This selective sample obviously creates a potential bias (in that the most regular bloggers may not be representative of the whole student body). However, this was not considered problematic as it was identified before data analysis. There were sample size and technical challenges associated with examining secure blogs. This limits their usefulness to serving as a means of verifying themes identified by other data sources. The school's IT department limited the amount of personal data visible to researchers, and ensured that any comments by staff and parents were not visible. Researchers could only see what the children had written and how they had tagged blogs over the last academic year.

Roughly one hundred and fifty Expedition review sheets were given to the research team by the department of outdoor education. These anonymous documents were kept in a mixed pile of reports from students in years nine to twelve, and remained on the school campus for analysis.

A small number of student newspapers and marketing brochures were collected from the marketing department, in addition to researchers watching the recent documentary made by ITN about life at Gordonstoun.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis for the ethnographic visits was based on abductive analysis, whereby intuition was used to consider themes and ideas that may not have appeared through more formal methods of data collection. Fieldnotes were made during each ethnographic visit, and transcriptions of these audio recordings were analysed using an inductive, open code.

Analysis of the archival documents was based more around deductive methods, as this happened towards the end of the data collection process. For the student blogs, researchers devised a list of the main themes appearing in the research findings. Codes were created for each theme, for references in both a positive and negative format. In particular, researchers were primed to look for any comments that might contradict current findings.

This involved highlighting recurring themes, and generating questions about areas and issues to be explored further in future visits and focus groups. This process has similarities to focus group data analysis, due to its inherent 'messiness', but played an important role in informing and guiding the researchers in later stages of the data collection.

### *Data Verification*

The rigour of this process was enhanced through the employment of interviewer triangulation. This involved both ethnographers, who visited Gordonstoun on separate occasions, sharing notes with each other and having regular discussions to share and compare observations. Similarly, two researchers read all twenty student blogs, made notes independently, and compared findings in order to verify accuracy.

## **2.5 General Methodological Matters**

There are a number of methodological matters that are concerned with data management, ethics, generalisability of findings, and limitations of the study design.

### *Data management*

All audio and text documents were saved under password-protected files on computers and memory sticks. Any printed data was kept under lock and key.

One master set of data (audio, text, and statistics) will be kept by the research leader in a secure location until 1 September, 2017. At this point, the data will either be destroyed or the research leader may request use of the data for a fixed period of time, in order to undertake further research. All printed data will be securely destroyed by 1 September, 2016. Finally, a memory stick comprising two Excel files with all Survey data will be sent to Gordonstoun by 1 September, 2016.

### *Ethics*

This research follows guidelines outlined by the British Educational Research Association. This study was granted ethical approval from the School of Education of the University of Edinburgh's Research Ethics Committee.

Throughout all aspects of the research process, the researchers went to great lengths to ensure that issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were paid strict attention. This took place in the following ways:

**Online surveys:** Information on confidentiality and anonymity was provided at the beginning of the surveys. Respondents only continued if they agreed.

**Focus group interviews:** Issues of data security, right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity were explained at the start of each focus group interview. Participants were informed that by taking part in the focus group they were giving consent for any information they provided to be used in this study.

Since all of the students were 16 years old or older, parental consent was not sought. This is for four reasons:

1. Article 16 of the BERA guidelines states that 'children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent'. There was no cause to halt data collection because a respondent was in any way vulnerable or did not fully comprehend the circumstances of the research study.
2. The subject matter is not one that focuses on sensitive, overly personal issues. Indeed, the nature of the interviews was commensurate with the kinds of discussions that students are already having as part of normal school activity.
3. Students were interviewed in groups and were at no time alone with the researcher.
4. Through Gordonstoun media (websites, newsletters) parents were informed that this research was taking place, and that their 16- to 18-year-old might be asked to participate in the group interviews. Parents were asked to contact the school if they did not wish their child to take part.

**Ethnography:** Any researcher who was on campus informed staff and students of their identity and purpose. At no point were any covert methods of observation employed. Observations and informal conversations with staff and students were non-threatening and served the singular purpose of confirming findings emerging from other data sources and highlighting any other themes that we may have overlooked.

Expedition review sheets were provided by the outdoor education team and were anonymous. School newspapers and other printed media were accessed via the public domain. The blogs of 20 students were chosen by Gordonstoun's Director of IT Services. Blogs that appeared to be especially thorough were identified and students were notified by email that researchers would be looking at them. All were given a chance to opt out or to clarify any details with the staff.

### *Generalisability*

The degree to which the findings from this study can be generalised to other situations is an important issue. Of course, it is assumed that at a very specific level, Gordonstoun will be able to use these findings to more deliberately shape the out-of-classroom learning experiences that they provide for students. Beyond Gordonstoun, it is entirely supportable that any secondary school – irrespective of location and whether or not it is a boarding school or has an extensive broader curricular programme – would be able to adapt some of the themes highlighted in the concluding section to their own circumstances.

### *Limitations*

All research studies have flaws and, although this particular design was comprehensive, it has several limitations.

The surveys had two principal limitations. First, for OGs, there is a reasonably even gender split up until age 50, after which it is entirely male, due to the introduction of co-ed provision in 1972. Second, the invitation to participate in both surveys was only through email and may have excluded potential respondents who do not receive email communication from Gordonstoun. These limitations also extend to the focus group interviews with OGs and current parents, not least because focus group participants were requested through the online survey.

There were five main limitations with the focus group interviews. First, the staff interviews were not part of the original plan, and were perhaps less well organised than other elements of the data collection. Unfortunately, the sample did not include dining hall and kitchen staff, drivers, maintenance staff, and so other domestic/grounds workers. Second, the focus groups with OGs only took place in the UK and the sample was skewed towards older respondents, with the majority aged over 50. Third, the focus groups with parents of current students only took place in the UK and largely comprised of women. Although half of the parents live in Scotland, this was partially mitigated by including

one online focus group and a one-on-one Skype interview, which reached more dispersed parents living both in the UK and continental Europe. The fourth limitation is that there was not a 50/50 gender split in the student sample: 40 girls and 60 boys were interviewed. Although this could skew some findings, we are satisfied that the themes which emerged were sufficiently saturated. The fifth, more general, limitation is that all focus group participants may have been influenced by the prospect of being interviewed and may have presented more positive or negative views for reasons that can only be known to them.

The ethnographic elements of the data collection perhaps have the greatest limitations. Although two researchers spent a total of 10 days on campus, it is always possible to stay longer, observe more, read more student review sheets, and chat with more people in the dining hall. The student blogs were chosen by a Gordonstoun staff member and probably reflect the thoughts of those students who had taken the time to write more than others. As noted earlier, the ethnography was not the dominant source of data, so the relatively small amount of time spent on campus is not regarded as a significant weakness.

## Part 3: Findings

This section explains the findings from each of the main sources of data collection: Surveys, Focus groups, and Ethnography

### 3.1 Surveys

The first section of the findings concentrates on the online surveys completed by the OGs and the parents of current students.

#### 3.1.1 Survey of Old Gordonstounians

The OGs survey was completed by 1183 people. Findings are categorised into quantitative and qualitative sub-sections.

##### *Quantitative findings from surveys*

A most remarkable 94 per cent of OGs report that out-of-classroom experiences have had a positive influence on their personal growth and development. Of the 1183 surveyed, 81 per cent report that these experiences have had a very positive influence on their personal growth and development. Respondents reported that these experiences 'set you up for real life situations and help you learn a lot about yourself'. One alumnus explained that the broader curriculum:

*Gave me the chance to shine outside the classroom and to believe I could be good at something. I could then transfer this belief to other areas.*

*Another former pupil stated that he believes "these out of classroom experiences to be essential. I see a difference between me and my peers from my previous school. I am motivated to find more from life, to adventure, to challenge myself". He went on to say that he thought it 'unfair that students at other schools won't experience that like I did'.*

Living in an international community was seen by 83 per cent of OGs as having a **positive** influence on their personal growth and development. Living in an international community was reported by 63.7 per cent of OGs as having had a **very positive** influence on their personal growth and development. These scores indicate that on the whole they found living in an international community less influential on their growth and development than the out-of-classroom activities. One alumnus described how he was 'far more confident' than peers at his former school, and that he had learned to 'appreciate different cultures and balance ambition with respect'.

In terms of influence on career, 73.8 per cent of OGs felt that the out-of-classroom experiences were a **positive** influence on their career, with 52 per cent reporting a **very positive** influence. One OG explained that these non-academic experiences had enabled him to 'think outside the box' and given him the confidence 'to make a career for myself that I enjoy doing and therefore am good at'. He went on to state that he 'will give anything a go, as I learnt that generally it enhances ones enjoyment'.

Fifty seven percent of OGs felt that the out-of-classroom activities somewhat or definitely enhanced their academic studies, whereas 43 per cent felt that they did not or that they even detracted from their academics. This was the most contested issue to emerge from the OGs survey findings and revealed very contrasting viewpoints. For example, one person described the out-of-classroom activities as being 'the icing on the cake of interesting and satisfying academia'. Conversely, there were however a number of highly critical responses, which include:

*There was so much to do outside the classroom I rather neglected my academic studies and failed to get into university.*

*School failed me academically. Outdoors was the only classroom of value to me in my career.*

*My overall problem with Gordonstoun's extra-curricular activities was that (in the 1970s) these were at the cost of good academic standards. I failed my A-levels – having entered 3rd Form with highest Common Entrance marks – and failed to get into university. This, in retrospect, has had a seriously negative impact on my career.*

In between the two extremes of the responses are those who have highlighted the importance of learning to manage competing demands for time, which is viewed by some as a life skill in itself:

*Gordonstoun isn't for the faint hearted and there are almost too many extracurricular activities meaning you have to sacrifice some for others but this teaches you how to manage your time effectively and choose what is most valuable to you.*

When broken down by age and gender, the older OGs (all male) felt that out-of-classroom experiences enhanced their academics, while male respondents in the 20- to 29-year-old bracket were more ambivalent about this connection. These mixed findings lie in marked contrast to the 81 per cent of parents of current pupils who felt that the activities had somewhat or definitely enhanced their child's academic studies.

The above quantitative findings from the OGs surveys do not show any strong trends when broken down for age or gender. All ages and both genders feel most positive about the influence of the out-of-classroom activities on their personal growth and development, and less positive in response to other questions. In contrast to the responses from parents, who remarkably were in some cases reluctant to give top scores to their daughters, there is no evidence in the OG data that females score themselves lower than males. In fact, there is a tendency for them to score higher than their male counterparts. This is most noticeable in female alumni in the 20-to 29-year-old cohort, who scored themselves higher than their male counterparts on question 8, which asked about the influence of out-of-classroom activities on career path.

### *Qualitative findings from surveys*

OGs had a much longer list of 'extra' out-of-classroom experiences than did the parents. Some of these included carpentry, electronics, spinning and weaving, mechanics, and fishing. The key features of the out-of-classroom experiences that OGs highlighted as having elicited the positive outcomes in the quantitative findings include: having responsibility (n=180), challenge (130), leadership (92), opportunities for independence (94), Service (77), teamwork (54), self-reliance (46), and new experiences (39).

One alumnus reported that he 'left school with so much confidence and self-esteem and the belief that I could be a leader one day: I'd never felt that before'. Another explained how the out-of-classroom experiences helped with 'fostering an understanding of teamwork and dealing with issues as they arose, as opposed to sorting carefully crafted problems in a classroom setting. Yet another respondent outlined how 'having such a large range of activities in different fields really helped me to find my passions'. The following response captured a widespread sentiment:

*The wide variety of experiences that we were encouraged (and obliged!) to take part in taught me that experiences that may have seemed undesirable, too hard, or uninteresting with hindsight almost always had a very positive and enjoyable aspect to them.*

Further outcomes of out-of-classroom experiences were expanded upon by these quotes from two different alumni:

*My Gordonstoun experiences enabled me to understand that life is not always plain sailing but that it is our ability to bounce back when the going gets tough which is key. There is always a way around problems and tenacity in pursuing positive outcomes is what has enabled me to navigate through any problems I have encountered at work or on a personal level. Sailing, expeditions, positions of responsibility all contributed in one form or another to this can-do attitude.*

*I personally believe that I learned more from sailing home from the Arctic, than I did from studying A level maths. I am currently studying a creative subject, for which my thought processes and people skills are much more important than the grades I got at school. Although I loved the extra-curricular activities I took part in at school (most of the time) I was put under extreme academic pressure, especially throughout year 13, when I was given responsibilities of house captain, captain of peer mentors and captain of Coastguards all at the same time! These leadership roles taught me a lot, and although it didn't feel like it at the time, the levels of stress I was put under really helped to develop me, as I was continually being challenged. There were times that this went too far and my academics suffered significantly, but for my chosen career path and university, in the end my academics didn't matter too much.*

Following on from the quantitative findings, a large number of ways that out-of-classroom experiences (and features of them) influenced career pathways were reported. The comments were not always positive, however, as exemplified in one former pupil who said, 'my abilities were never really focussed at school and therefore my career path has meandered. I have never fulfilled my potential'. Another explained that their 'career had nothing to do with music, Expeditions or Seamanship'. One particularly strong voice stated that:

*I became a scientist who discovers new drugs for serious medical needs. The extracurricular stuff had zero to do with that. Everything I learned that was useful came about in university after high school. And Seamanship was enough to convince me that anything to do with naval life would have been as much fun as dysentery.*

Generally, however, most OGs saw a strong relationship between Gordonstoun life and their career path. One person was more able to 'go with the flow', and another, who owns several restaurants, stated 'I followed my instincts and developed them as I saw fit'. He explained how 'the school teaches you to find your own path and play to your strengths, rather than conform to the beaten path'.

Numerous OGs mentioned how the out-of-classroom experiences helped them develop attributes such as confidence, self-belief, leadership skills, the ability to remain calm, and determination to succeed through adversity. One respondent wrote that these experiences 'gave me the confidence to believe in myself and go on to study the things I was interested in. Also, they taught me about hard work and overcoming challenges, which has greatly influenced my career'.

Another alumnus offered that, 'I think most of my school reports read, "If M... put as much effort into the classroom as he does into outside activities, he would be a model pupil"'. He went on to explain how through the outdoor activities in particular 'I learnt the values, ethics and moral standards which continue to influence my life today'. It appears that some viewed the outdoor aspects of the broader curriculum as embracing a contrasting facilitation approach to the rest of Gordonstoun life. One former student reported that 'it seems that the outdoor activities encompassed a different set of values, much more personal, individualized, flexible and humane'.

The out-of-classroom experiences appear to have afforded certain business skills among some alumni. One respondent reported that:

*I learned to both lead a team and collaborate with others in a way that gets the best out of everyone. I've used that to create and run a successful small business where I now employ 30 people. I also learned how to keep going even when things are tough, which helped me to stay motivated when my business was in its infancy and was hard to run.*

Another response described how 'the classroom taught me one angle of life and learning – everything else made me who I am and gave me the confidence to run my own business'.

A number of people mentioned that their range of extra-curricular experiences was a good talking point at job interviews. One OG described how she got her 'first job in the City partly because being a qualified firewoman was something that made me stand out at interview'.

The actual enjoyment of the out-of-classroom activities did not seem to have any importance when OGs reflected on their time at school:

*There were definitely times when I didn't enjoy some of our out-of-classroom activities – like Seamanship on a cold Tuesday afternoon in November when it was blowing a gale and our jumpers weren't really enough to keep us warm – but at the same time it was being made to do these things and not take the soft route out that is good for children, and me, to be given the discipline to just get on with things – as ultimately it was that continued learning that left us better prepared... for real life where it is not always flat calm.*

Some respondents reported that their career paths were directly influenced by their experiences with Seamanship and the Fire Service. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

*I have been a firefighter for twenty years. I believe that my choice of career stems directly from my experiences in the School Fire Service.*

*Seamanship helped in my early career in the merchant and Royal navies, they also gave me a sense of leadership and the ability to get along with other people.*

*I enjoyed Seamanship at Hopeman and the cruises aboard Sea Spirit, because they were so different to learning in a classroom environment. I joined the Merchant Navy as a result of this.*

Beyond career alone, some people reported gaining a balance between work and play, as Gordonstoun's broader curricular activities had 'combined with other life experiences to make me who I am... settled and happy that I have a good work life balance and not driven by a career or financial goal'. One respondent wrote about a 'love of the outdoors' that had been instilled in them, while another was 'encouraged and pushed past where I thought I could go to explore the wilds of nature; in huge stormy seas in little cutters and dangling off cliffs in Mountain Rescue'.

The open-ended comments also revealed how Gordonstoun had introduced them to volunteering and charity work, which they still do. For example, one alumnus explained how 'Service commitments at Gordonstoun have ensured that I have always tried to give something back to the communities I have lived in', while another explained how participation in the Services had influenced their 'overall approach to basic day to day life mainly in regard to helping others and doing good, whether that be carrying an old ladies suitcase up steps, volunteering time to charity or just generally trying to be a helpful, beneficial person'.

From the open-ended questions, Expeditions were cited as being the most powerful and enduring out-of-classroom learning experiences (just over 200 people). Services, Sail Training Voyage (STV), Mountain Rescue, Fire and Community engagement all had more than 50 mentions. Overseas service projects were also cited.

Of the out-of-classroom activities on offer, sports and music were both mentioned more than 100 times as having the least powerful and enduring effect on OGs. Services, Seamanship and drama are each mentioned about 70 times as having the least powerful and enduring effect. Around 70 people answered 'none' for this question, which suggests that they found all of the extra-curricular activities to be of roughly equal benefit.

The questionnaire invited respondents to comment on the School motto 'plus est en vous' and 297 reported that it had influenced them. More than 150 specifically discuss the motto in a positive light, such as 'this motto helped me, then and today, reach for more'. Over 140 people expanded on their response, by saying that 'it is always worth trying' and 'there is always more scope to push yourself'. One OG reflected back to 1957, when 'there was no gym except the great outdoors'. For him, 'the whole experience of Gordonstoun was a rounded and challenging time... I was never an academic so perhaps the training plan and the physical side helped develop me for the future'. Another respondent spoke of the enduring influence of the School and its motto in this way:

*Since leaving school I have faced multiple challenges and a great deal of adversity. Each time I almost surprise myself that there is "more in me" and how I am able to overcome what is in front of me. Ranging from the mountains of Afghanistan to the offices of a financial institution these words have always inspired me to keep on pushing.*

In terms of the free responses in the last question, as expected, there is a wide range of differing views. Students who graduated from Gordonstoun some while ago mention less supervision, have largely (but not exclusively) positive views of the morning run, and refer to how schooling during the post-war years was quite different (e.g. few international students, less emphasis on health and safety, no girls). It is clear that much has changed in non-academic life over the years, but this is probably a reflection of wider socio-cultural trends. Two notable changes to Gordonstoun school life that appear to have emerged more recently are the pastoral system, which seems to have been more recently enhanced, and the increased importance placed on, and support given to, academic achievement.

#### **Old Gordonstounians' Survey: Principal findings**

- Out-of-classroom learning experiences have had an overwhelmingly positive influence on personal growth and development.
- The international community had a positive influence on personal growth and development.
- Expeditions were the most powerful and enduring out-of-classroom learning experiences.
- Out-of-classroom learning experiences have generally had a positive influence on careers.
- The key features of out-of-classroom learning experiences are responsibility, challenge, opportunities to lead others, opportunities for independence, service to others.
- The balance between out-of-classroom activities and academic studies is arguably the most contentious issue.

#### **3.1.2 Survey of Parents of Current Pupils**

The survey was completed by 235 parents of current students, which, as with the OGs sample, represents about one third of those contacted. Naturally, the available pool of parents of current students is much smaller than that of the OGs.

##### *Quantitative findings from surveys*

In a manner highly similar to the OGs surveys, 95 per cent of parents report that out-of-classroom experiences have had a **positive** influence on their child's personal growth and development. A **very positive** effect was reported by 86 per cent.

Personal and social development is a rather vague and all-compassing term, but parents referred to its nuanced manifestations with passages such as, 'My child is proud of his achievements and it has increased his confidence. He has developed a strong volunteer ethos, is motivated and welcomes challenge'. Another parent stated that 'it has made him aware of the differences he can make to this world. He has deepened his true being'.

A particularly illustrative comment expressed a number of outcomes:

*He is now able to take part in team activities and is accepted in the group no matter how good (or bad) he is. He has learnt to fight for things that he believes in and to go outside of his comfort level to achieve his full potential. He is also praised for his exceptional activities but also told where he needs to improve on others. These activities give the children a feeling of belonging and being accepted. They can then accept themselves for who they are knowing that everyone can do something, be it in or outside the school curriculum.*

Parents also reported astonishingly high scores on the influence of living in an international community on their child's personal growth and development. Ninety-five percent of parents reported a **positive** effect, while 84 per cent reported a **very positive** effect. One respondent stated 'I firmly believe that meeting people from different walks of life, different backgrounds (pupils) and different disabilities (Romania trip) has exposed my son to a broader experience of 'real life''. Although there are more than 40 nationalities represented at Gordonstoun, one child's parent remarked that it was not as international as she would have liked. Although some parents value out-of-classroom experiences more than living in an international community, an almost equal number value the opposite. It is clear that almost all parents value both features of Gordonstoun life.

In contrast to data from OGs and the students, parents generally feel that the broader curriculum positively adds to academic life. Eighty-one percent of parents feel that the out-of-classroom experiences somewhat or definitely enhance their child's academic studies. As reported by some OGs and a small number of students, the competing demands on time 'teaches them to manage their time effectively so everything gets done'.

When scores for gender throughout the parents' surveys are compared, there is a very obvious tendency for parents to be more cautious about giving a top score for their daughters, as opposed to their sons. Here, a top score means how highly parents viewed their child as being influenced by the elements of Gordonstoun life in question. This could mean that some parents view Gordonstoun's out-of-classroom experiences as having a greater influence on boys than girls. It is difficult to draw any concrete conclusion from this rather fascinating finding.

### **Qualitative findings from surveys**

The most commonly reported manifestations of the growth and development of respondents' children are: increased self-esteem and self-confidence (n=135); increased independence (71); interpersonal skills (55); and welcoming new challenges (37). Although the meaning of the term 'confidence' used by parents may be derived more from popular culture than psychology, it was used frequently. Examples of this include:

*After just 6 weeks at Gordonstoun and the above mentioned activities, our son appeared more confident and motivated.*

*He is more confident and has developed new interests. He is more outgoing and open to new ideas. His academic skills and grades have improved beyond all recognition since he joined the junior school first.*

*He has developed self-reliance and confidence, knows how to work in a team easily, and is able to get along with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. He is also happy and confident to take responsibility when needed.*

*It is helping his level of maturity and confidence. It is also helping him to understand the importance of being part of a team and also understanding good leadership skills.*

*Thomas has grown in independence, self-belief and confidence immeasurably compared with his time before Gordonstoun.*

While these are remarkable endorsements of Gordonstoun's approach to schooling, it is also interesting to note that many of the more illustrative quotes emerging from the parents' surveys on this topic referred to boys. There were comments from girls' parents, however, such as:

*Having no choice but to go on expedition, she was surprised by how much she enjoyed it. She discovered that there was not as much to be afraid of as she thought, and this has really increased her confidence. She is also learning a great deal of patience through helping with the 'kiddy swimming'; she doesn't really enjoy it, I think, but she gets a lot of satisfaction from doing it and from feeling that she's making a contribution. The sense of community in her boarding house has also helped hugely with her self-confidence.*

The parent of another girl explained how 'the team games have led to her learning to work with others and finding that her contribution is valued by others. That assurance and validation by others has allowed her to feel confidence in herself, I believe'. Being challenged regularly seems to be quite important in eliciting these outcomes. According to one respondent, 'being exposed to unusual situations on a fairly regular basis renders them normal, and that enables the confidence to emerge'. Negotiating these challenges 'makes them a strong all-rounder', says one parent, and 'encourages their social skills and makes them realise they are good at lots of things and anything is possible. It opens their eyes to lots of possibilities, not just passing exams'.

The most prevalent of the reported features of out-of-classroom experiences that have led to the above outcomes include those requiring an element of team-work and responsibility for others, those that provided 'real' challenge, and those that introduced students to new experiences. Parents highlighted the importance of 'genuine challenges

that are real not manufactured. These activities demonstrate that the school trusts him and has faith in his abilities'. Another parent wrote:

*I think that they are given the opportunities to challenge themselves, succeed in the completion of these challenges and have the confidence to take more challenges on. They have extreme experiences with their cohorts and older / younger pupils – giving and getting support to/from them.*

Parents generally viewed the broader curriculum as 'an integral part of Gordonstoun culture', which creates 'a unique atmosphere of endeavour, tolerance and internationalism' and helps students 'learn more how to share and live in a community.

Overnight Expeditions, Services (particularly Community and Fire), Seamanship, and team sports are the most commonly cited activities that parents feel have had the most powerful and enduring effect on their child. One parent elaborated on the importance of the broader curriculum:

*They are a huge part of the reason she enjoys school. She struggles with much of the academic work, so the activities and sense of teamwork and community really help her to integrate and to feel she has something to offer. This in turn makes her more determined to do better with her academic work, to keep up with her peers.*

A number of parents highlighted the enduring effects of the Ocean Spirit voyage and Overseas service projects, while others cited Seamanship and Expeditions. The data indicate that few would disagree with their fellow parent's view that, on some of the outdoor activities, 'some of the weather conditions have been horrendous and yet they have to soldier on no matter what and they seem to learn that it's imperative to work as a team'.

Other parents find it difficult to isolate one or two elements of Gordonstoun's broader curriculum that are particularly powerful, and speculate that 'it's the sum of all the activities' and 'they have all had a positive impact in one way or another'.

Parents indicated that sports had the least influence on their child. However, they reported that not one activity had a limiting influence on their child.

Remarkably, in two related questions, some parents highlighted STV and Seamanship as having the least amount of influence on their child, while others saw them as having a particularly powerful effect. On the negative side, one parent reported that 'some of the activities are considered a bit 2nd rate or boring'. For instance, the Seamanship activity does not seem to be overly respected or overly enjoyed. While on the positive side, STV was seen as particularly influential as their daughter 'still talks about it'.

### **Academic/broader curriculum balance**

As reported in the quantitative section, the vast majority of parents feel that the broader curriculum enhances their child's academic performance. The open-ended comments shed more light on parents' beliefs that 'academics could be considered another activity at Gordonstoun', where 'experiencing success in non-classroom based activities gives the confidence to strive to do well in the classroom'.

There are also parents who believe that the broader curriculum detracts academic achievement. One respondent explained:

*I think the academic side could be better organised so that the teachers who are teaching and planning the academic subjects are not also having to plan the expeditions and activities, because they are stretched too thin and then what is presented to the students for academic subjects is often rushed or ill prepared. If that were the case then the enjoyment part of the activities would then enhance the academic side. Academic success is not a strength at Gordonstoun at present.*

This tension between the broader curriculum and academic attainment largely centres around the amount of time and energy required to do both well. Some parents believe that these demands reduce opportunities to procrastinate, while others believe the 'schedule is often just too crammed' and takes away from the time that both pupils and staff can spend on preparing for lessons.

Parents appear to be generally accepting of the balance between attention paid to the broader curriculum and academic study. Balance seems to be the operative word, as one parent explained that for her child, 'the discipline of the activities seems to translate to her academic study as she has a physical and mental balance in her activities'. Another parent outlined how the out-of-classroom activities 'go a long way towards unleashing and testing a wide range of abilities that a classroom situation simply cannot'. The response continued that 'challenging activities and classroom learning need to go hand in glove and, if anything, Gordonstoun needs to be a bit more prudent vis-a-vis the teaching standards'. Yet another response viewed the out-of-classroom aspects of Gordonstoun life as crucial

to their child's academic success, where 'if he did not have these extra activities he would disengage more from the "boring bits"':

On this very contentious issue, one might conclude that the high amount of attention concurrently paid to academic achievement and participation in a wide range of broader curriculum activities is as much part of Gordonstoun's unique strength as it is its weakness.

#### **Parents' Survey: Principal findings**

- Out-of-classroom learning experiences are seen to have an overwhelmingly positive influence on personal growth and development.
- The international community is seen to have an overwhelmingly positive influence on personal growth and development.
- Most parents feel that out-of-classroom experiences enhance their child's academic studies.
- Parents report seeing in their child increased self-esteem and self-confidence, independence, interpersonal skills, and being open to new challenges.
- Parents report that the most powerful / enduring effect on children come from Expeditions, Services (especially Community and Fire, and Overseas projects), Seamanship, and team sports.

## **3.2 Focus Groups**

This section explains the findings from focus groups with students, OGs, parents, and staff.

### **3.2.1 Focus Groups with Students**

In total, 40 girls and 60 boys aged 16 and over were interviewed. Eight major themes emerged from the student focus groups, as did several minor ones.

#### *Trying new things and 'getting on with it'*

The vast majority of students are very positive about the out-of-classroom learning experiences that form such a dominant part of their lives at Gordonstoun. There was widespread agreement that a key feature of Gordonstoun's broader curriculum seemed to expose students to as many novel activities as possible. Students knew that they would not necessarily enjoy or excel at the various required activities, and recognised that this was an integral part of the school's ethos:

*What Gordonstoun does is it throws a wide net so each person can pick what they really enjoy... I couldn't say that anything is a waste of time, because to someone it will be the best part of their day.*

One 16-year-old remarked that 'it's introducing something to someone who doesn't know that they'll like it yet', while another commented that 'it's all about trying as much as you can and finding your niche'. The broad range of experiences and activities on offer is highly valued – particularly when students find an interest in a previously untried activity that they can then pursue in great depth. A particularly insightful comment highlighted how, 'Gordonstoun isn't a great school if you excel at one particular thing... you really get a good taste of a broad variety of things that happen'.

Related to trying new activities that might not be enjoyed was a theme that encompasses an expectation that students will 'get on with it', even if they have little expertise, find it hard, risk being embarrassed, and have limited direction. One boy commented that 'there is sort of a Gordonstoun feel to it that is reflected in every aspect of school life – whether you're staff or a pupil: you get on and do it'.

Trying a wide range of new activities, with a diverse group of people, with the expectation that one will 'give it a go' appears to yield positive outcomes. These are very difficult for the young people to precisely articulate, but they are very evident. Tellingly, one boy reported that the out-of-classroom learning experiences 'make you a better a person... I know that in year nine, compared to year 12, I'm so different. I don't think it would have been like that if I'd been at any other school'. Another explained how 'the school made us who we are – especially the ones who have been here for years. It became our home – a very significant influence'.

This rather vague, but dominant theme is perhaps best reflected through this comment from a year 13 student:

*They throw you in and you've got to fight your way through it, but along the way you develop as a person and you meet people from all over the world.*

These out-of-classroom experiences seem to push participants in ways they have never been pushed before. 'It shows you your limits', reported one 16-year-old girl, 'especially for teenagers growing up – it shows you what you can do, which is an important life lesson'.

### **International community**

There was not one student who claimed that they did not value the richness and diversity of Gordonstoun's international community. Some short quotes illustrate this point:

*The amount of people I know from different countries is ridiculous.*

*There is a huge amount of diversity – it's from all backgrounds as well*

*No one really pays attention to it if you're foreign. It's like 'so what?', most people here are foreign.*

*I think it's (the int'l community) very important... everyone mixes and makes friends...*

Although there is overwhelming positive regard for the international mix of students, there were frequent reports of what some viewed as unhealthy cliques developing. It was felt that people were willing to mix in general, but that Chinese, Russian and German students tended to stick together with those of their own nationality. An exemplary quote captures this feeling:

*There's a Russian clique, a German clique and a Chinese clique. You don't really mix with them... They make it difficult to enter their bubble.*

Cliques aside, students saw the value of internationalism and how it pervades the out-of-classroom experiences. One girl explained how they are

*meant to change your personality and to make you open, not only to new stuff, but... open to meet people, new cultures, societies – maybe even religions – and to see them in a different light and to actually make friends and connect with those people.*

The Houses were also seen as central 'sites' of building the international community. House life appears to be a much more mixed social space than meal times, for example. Other students in the focus group all nodded their heads in agreement when one stated: 'Where you come from, your background – it doesn't matter. Especially in house – it's like a family, a brotherhood.'

### **Academics/out-of-classroom activities tension**

This theme concerning the perceived tension between academic achievement and the out-of-classroom activities is easily the most contentious and has the most varied student responses.

Most students feel that the demands of the various out of classroom experience are heavy, but possible to manage if they are well-organised and disciplined. Students reported that 'it can get quite busy, but you have to balance it out' and that 'it's about juggling'. Another explained how 'it makes you understand what you want to do and how to manage doing that while also doing all the other things you want to do, as well as your subjects – keeping that balance'. It appears that this 'balancing' can have a positive outcome, as 'it teaches you to use your time preciously'.

There is a smaller, but significant number of students who find the after-school activities a poor use of time that could be used for academic pursuits. No one resented time away for STV and Expeditions, but many felt that the after-school activities should be optional, because they were being 'forced to do an hour of random activities every day that mean nothing'. One girl strongly resented some of the activities, stating that 'if I don't do well on my A levels, I'll just be so angry' and that 'while we've developed as people from the outdoor stuff, I think we would have liked more assistance and help with getting the grades to get to the next step'. Similarly, one boy was very frustrated, stating 'we don't have time to study, review or prep because of the extra-curricular stuff. It's a bit hard to balance'.

There were some positive comments about the mandatory activities, in that if they did not exist, it is highly likely that people would complement their academic class time exclusively with independent study or by simply sitting around; neither of these were deemed to be desirable.

One of the more balanced critical comments suggested that:

*There could be a little bit more emphasis on the academics... We love all the outdoor stuff, but at the same time, in this day and age, you have to have the grades if you want to get a job, if you want to go to uni...*

In a way not dissimilar to reports from current parents, one student was adamant that 'the benefits of the extra-curricular far outweigh the losses to your academics'. It would seem that few students would argue against this sentiment, but it is unquestionable that some students feel that the demands on their time from the broader curriculum are having a negative impact on their academic achievement.

### **Sailing Training Voyage (STV) and Expeditions**

According to students, the STV and Expeditions are the most impactful of all aspects of their non-academic lives. These multi-day journeys are viewed as highly valuable experiences, especially for building teamwork, resilience, perseverance and responsibility. Students joining Gordonstoun in year 12 found STV and Expeditions especially helpful with making friends.

Despite almost every respondent expressing the importance of these challenging experiences, many explained that they did not usually look forward to them or necessarily enjoy them at the time. The impact of these journeys was undeniable, as one student explained that 'being on a boat in the middle of the ocean with people you might not get along with really pushes you to your limits'.

Students regarded the purpose of STV in particular, as 'teaching you to get on with people that you wouldn't normally get on with, in a stressed environment'.

One year 13 girl recounted how on Expeditions,

*You realise that you need to be able to cope by yourself cause you're in the middle of nowhere and you need to rely on each other. It's a time when you can't be falling out and you need to think practically about it all... being out in the open and so vulnerable, it teaches you to work as a team. I love exped – I've been on so many!*

A number of students pointed to the hardship experienced on STV and how this had made them more able to face future challenges in other domains. One 17-year-old boy stated, 'you come out of it thinking "I've just managed to get through that – I think I can get through other stuff". I'm much more confident because of it'.

One unexpected, minor finding was that some students highlighted how much they enjoyed having a break from technology while on Expeditions and STV.

### **Seamanship and after-school activities**

Seamanship and after-school activities were commonly cited as being the least popular of the required non-academic experiences. Seamanship was viewed by many as being 'quite irrelevant'. This was especially the case when 'some people go on STV and then go on Seamanship, which doesn't make any sense at all. Seamanship should be before STV'.

As noted above, in the theme on academics versus activities, there are very mixed views on the after-school activities. Some students think the choice is wonderful, whereas others think the choice is poor, and there are some that think it is all pointless.

### **Services**

Discussions on the Wednesday Services were among the most fascinating for the interviewers. Respondents generally regard Services as worthwhile, but there is strong evidence suggesting that greater values are attached to Service options which are perceived to have a high degree of authenticity and purpose and which can be used later in life.

Examples of the importance of authenticity shone through in comments about the Fire Service, which, despite being a volunteer unit of the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, is currently not allowed to go out on public call-outs. This was a huge disappointment for students, as it altered the 'realness' of the experience.

Interestingly, the Fire Service was not viewed especially positively by those not in it. Many resented what they saw as disproportionately high amounts of status and resourcing afforded to this Service and its student volunteers. One student stated that this was 'because of marketing'. He went on to say how 'everyone looks at the Fire Service when they come here on an open day – no one looks at our little Conservation'.

The importance of perceived purpose is reflected in one boy's comment that 'Community is good because they actually do something (for other people). But what do we do in Conservation? Sometimes there is no meaning behind what we do'. Conservation was referred to by some respondents as a 'skive' Service that did not demand any particular skill, time commitment, or engagement. This can be contrasted with the Tech Service, which appears to have the highest time demands of all the Services and which is respected by all. There appears to be a widespread feeling that the Services have greatly contrasting purposes, tangible outcomes, and status.

Services, such as the Pool Lifeguard Service, which provide students with external qualifications that can be used to gain employment, are also highly valued. Although this is an example of Service being used for instrumental gain, it was regarded as an obvious positive feature. The variety of Services was also noted, as 'each Service is quite different – it's very much a personal choice... if you think you're a people person, you might do Community; you could do first aid, which is more health-based, or you could do a Rescue Service...'

Despite some of the negative points above, it is undeniable that all students feel that the concept of 'doing service' is noble and worthwhile. This sentiment was captured by a year 11 boy who stated 'they are teaching you that throughout the rest of your life you should consider helping others – that it should be a normal thing for you'.

### *Optional Activities*

Four principal types of optional activities were raised by students. They were the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DoE), Overseas service projects, sports teams, and the performing arts. Since they are optional, they were not spoken about as much, but they help to form a more rounded understanding of out-of-classroom experiences.

The DoE Award is regarded as something that 'looks good on your CV', 'isn't that much extra work', but which takes 'a lot of extra time'.

Overseas service projects in Romania, Ethiopia and Thailand are seen as featuring highly worthwhile and enjoyable initiatives, despite the time and effort needed to raise enough funds to undertake the trips. Students reported that Overseas Service is generally oversubscribed and access is highly competitive. Similarly, positive comments were made about attending the international Round Square Conference for students, although this event is not directly related to Service.

Being on a sports team had more negative comments than expected. All of these comments had to do with excessive time demands. It was explained to us that those on representative sports teams were often exhausted by having to take part in the required after-school activities as well as team training. One athlete commented: 'I really like the sports, but I think that if you're on a team you should get less sport during the week, cause your matches take-up all your weekend and during the week you miss days of school and fall behind with your work'.

Those on sports teams were more critical of the large amounts of time required to travel to fixtures in other parts of the country. A year 12 boy shared that, 'It wouldn't be as bad if we didn't have to travel for sports. We have to go everywhere for matches... We have to sit on buses for like five hours'.

Music and drama productions were given effusive praise, both by those involved and by spectators. On a side note, students also referred to the compulsory dance and drama they took in their junior years at Gordonstoun. Their descriptions seemed remarkably analogous to more popular comments about Outdoor education and STV, which required students to 'step outside their comfort zone', try new things, and risk humiliation due to being a non-expert. Of course, when the activity is novel for most people in the group – as they so often are in outdoor adventure education and the performing arts – getting it wrong is normal and 'giving it a go' is often the best strategy, as there is usually more than one 'right' way to do things.

The drama and music productions also involve countless students working in support roles, such as making costumes, constructing sets, and handling the audio and lighting. One senior boy remarked that over one week, 'we did thirty hours of rehearsals. It's almost a full time job on top of school, and all the other activities!'. As with the extra travel time associated with sports fixtures, those involved in the production of these serious extra-curricular shows seemed exhausted by the amount of time required after-school, in the evenings, and on weekends. What is clear though, is that there is a wide variety of optional pursuits in which students can take part and develop their skills and experience. Apart from the sports and performing arts mentioned already, students also mentioned film-making, painting, and playing pop music.

### *Positions of responsibility*

A defining feature of school life is that there are many and varied formal positions of responsibility. In a way not entirely dissimilar to discussions we had on Services, the students' positions of responsibility vary not only in their nature, but also in terms of status and perceived value. Although we expected students to discuss the responsibilities they took for others while on Expeditions and STV, a fair number of focus groups discussed the positions of responsibility that exist as part of daily school life. These include everything from waking people up in the morning to taking visitors on school tours.

One 18-year-old girl reported that 'everyone gets a bit of experience for being responsible for something. Some captaincies are big and some are not'. Another voice stated that 'everyone's given the chance to see if they're a leader and build those kinds of skills'.

As noted above, there appears to be a huge variance on the importance and usefulness of various leadership positions. Many are perceived as tokenistic and not providing proper opportunities for practicing leadership, which can in turn de-value the status associated with having a leadership role. Colour Bearers were seen as 'essentially about supervising and monitoring', whereas house captains are 'an excellent leadership role to have', as are sports captains.

Some students resented being given punishments by their peers. Older boys, in particular, mentioned feeling patronised by fellow students telling them to put away their tray in the dining hall, as they would have done this

anyway. A group of year 13 girls felt that they did not have a voice on school life matters, as the 'staff only listen to CBs'.

All of the above notwithstanding, there was a consensus that, generally speaking, taking-on domestic responsibilities and leadership roles was 'right' and good. Students saw the importance in growing-up and becoming independent of their parents, as this was necessary 'to get you ready to go out into the real world'.

The topic of responsibility was extended by some students into discussions of trust. There were a small number of year 13 students who strongly felt that they were not given sufficient trust and autonomy in their own time. As 18-year-olds, they found it paradoxical that the school held independence and responsibility in high regard, yet they were afforded few opportunities to leave campus unsupervised – whether it be to go to the shops or to go camping. As with some of the minor items below, this finding is perhaps outwith the remit of the study, but was felt to be noteworthy.

#### **Minor themes**

A number of less dominant items were raised by a minority of students and are mentioned here. Two of these items that stood out the most have to do with interpersonal competence and morning Chapel.

In terms of overall outcomes that Gordonstoun life elicits, some students mentioned a certain interpersonal ease that they had gained. Gordonstoun students 'know how to talk to people and interact with people in quite a friendly way... People really come out of their shells'. It seemed clear that students had gained a lot from spending time with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. 'It makes you comfortable talking with other people', one student reported, 'and more open and friendly'. Of course, this outcome cannot be attributed directly to out-of-classroom experiences.

Interestingly, the interviewers did not raise the topic of Chapel, but a few focus group participants did and were rather disparaging of it. While those who spoke about Chapel were in favour of a regular morning assembly, a number of voices suggested having Chapel services with religious content being limited to 'once or twice a week'. These same students felt that some of the religious and moral lessons were somewhat repetitive.

The interviewers were surprised at how little students spoke about the role that staff plays in school life. Academic staff were occasionally mentioned, and not always in positive terms. Staff involved in any kind of non-academic pastoral care, however, were referred to in very positive terms. Indeed, there seemed to be a tacit sentiment that housemasters, assistant housemasters, and matrons play a hugely central role in the well-being of their charges. One senior girl stated that 'Matron holds everything together', while her friend nodded in agreement and said, 'Matron is life; she does everything right'.

#### **Focus groups with students: Principal findings**

- Two key features of Gordonstoun's out-of-classroom experiences have to do with 'trying lots of new things' and 'getting on with it'.
- Two principal outcomes of out-of-classroom experiences relate to a) students gaining a certain perseverance from having endured STVs and Expeditions, which can then be applied in other parts of their lives, and b) students gaining interpersonal skills that can help them with relationships with schoolmates and later in life.
- Balancing students' desires to excel academically while having to participate in a busy schedule of broader curricular activities is the most contentious issue raised by students.
- The most powerful out-of-classroom experiences are STV and Expeditions.
- The least valued out-of-classroom experiences are after-school activities, Seamanship, and sports.
- The Services with most impact are those perceived as having 'real purpose' and which offer an external qualification.
- Having a wide range of positions of responsibility in all facets of Gordonstoun life is seen as being highly important, as long as those positions are not tokenistic.

### **3.2.2 Focus Groups with Old Gordonstounians**

Fifty OGs were interviewed, with 45 contributing through focus group meetings that took place across the UK and five through individual Skype or telephone interviews. Six principal themes were identified.

#### **Individualised experiences and student centred learning**

For many OGs, it was difficult to isolate the component parts of what comes across as a holistic, but very individualised experience. Most OG respondents felt that while at school, they were able to find a particular activity

or role that they could succeed in or contribute to, which led to a culture accepting of achievement. It is clear that the breadth and scope of opportunities available was central to facilitating this, as was the encouragement and guidance of staff who know the pupils across a number of different contexts. Staff members' belief in pupils' capability and their openness to new approaches can provide pupils with a sense of personal agency, which seems to endure into adulthood.

Various forms of this attitude were mentioned in the focus groups, which, when considered with some of the other themes below, seem to have developed confidence in uncertain situations. One OG commented how one must 'never start a conversation with "No, but..."'. Say "Yes, yes I can do that", and just muddle through'.

Older OGs also highlighted how academic or music teaching was often individualised and extended out of class time on a one-on-one basis, in order to further develop enthusiasm or aptitude in certain areas. This was very influential for some participants, who developed strong relationships, which will be explored further below.

While extraordinary experiences (such as STVs) and being pushed to try new things were central to OGs, the importance of tapping into and nurturing existing enthusiasms was emphasised by many respondents. Several mentioned specifically that they had prior involvement with what became influential out-of-classroom experiences or values from family life. One respondent characterised this as the 'amplification of aptitudes that pupils had prior to going to Gordonstoun'. This corresponds with the fact that many families seem to have chosen Gordonstoun explicitly because the school ethos aligned with their own.

Several respondents made an explicit link between the opportunity to find something that you are good at and enjoy doing, and career or community service choice in later life:

*I understand that you're allowed to do what you love. I don't have to be something that I don't want to be.*

*What Gordonstoun showed me is that you can choose something that is relevant to you and use your personal likes and skills to do voluntary work in a way that's also enjoyable to you.*

However, it was also acknowledged by OGs that the multiple interrelated factors (including those outwith the school setting) that contribute to a positive experience for many people also meant that the approach did not suit everyone, and perhaps favoured more motivated pupils.

### **Opportunities for responsibility and the expectation of competence**

In addition to allowing pupils to take responsibility for their own out-of-classroom learning, OGs highlighted how the breadth of opportunity also creates multiple opportunities for pupils to assume roles with responsibility for others. Expectations of the competence and capability of young people, fostered primarily by staff, the teaching and learning approaches employed in out-of-classroom experiences and the social structures within the school have had positive impacts on OGs' personal growth and development. As will be outlined in more detail below, many respondents linked this kind of opportunity with experiential learning based around decision-making, which generated confidence in later life.

In relation to organised out-of-classroom experiences, Service and Seamanship provided the most regular examples of this type of learning, while learning arising out of Expeditions seemed to be mainly focused on decision-making. To many OGs, Service experiences provided an opportunity to be 'part of the adult world', and those who held leadership roles felt lifted by being responsible for the day-to-day operation of certain Services and co-ordinating large teams of students (e.g. Captain of Community Service). Older respondents gave particularly vivid accounts of 'real world' experiences mediated through Service which had left lasting impacts, such as time spent with the Manchester Fire Brigade in areas of severe social deprivation, travelling through Ulster on a British Army lorry in 1966, and being involved in Mountain Rescue searches. These OGs recalled the sum of all of this being 'a growing up experience', where 'you were a fireman, on the machine. It was sort of maturation, but without you being involved in it'. Authenticity was a recurrent theme, as confirmed by another participant who recounted that 'Mountain Rescue was the real deal, because we did get called out... it was real life'.

Over the years, the authenticity of 'need' for certain types of Service work can be observed to have changed, but this is not necessarily noticed or considered important by pupils at the time, and the Services still provide vehicles for meaningful learning closely related to the adult world. Some respondents did mention, however, how fixed the decisions were around Service choice, with no flexibility to change. They indicated that if they had been able to, they would have changed Service. The Services were generally viewed in a very positive light, with OG commenting that he still went looking for opportunities 'to contribute usefully and unpatronisingly to the great problems of the modern world that these experiences inspired me to seek'.

Former pupils also regularly identified Seamanship and STVs as settings where they were trusted with responsibility beyond what they felt would have been expected of their peers in other educational settings. Multiple respondents

mentioned the same experience of being at the helm of a yacht alone on night watch, and suddenly realising that 'nobody else was there... you had to do it'. Effective facilitation of this by staff is clearly essential, as one respondent noted:

*We felt as if we were doing everything, but I'm sure we were closely supervised, but it wasn't so sort of visible... I never really thought about what the teachers and staff were setting us to do.*

Alongside opportunities to make decisions without fear of failure, the faith placed in pupils' competence by staff seems to be a significant factor in building pupil self-confidence, which was an outcome widely cited in the focus groups:

*I came out the other end stronger, both mentally and physically, so having been tested, you know that actually you are capable of more than you previously thought you were capable of.*

*I was suddenly in charge of this whole system, and it was great confidence-building... because I was given the responsibility that I didn't expect.*

Less dynamic, but equally meaningful experiences were the result of in-school responsibilities, and nearly all participants discussed roles that they, as individuals, had within the school community. These have clearly evolved over time, and several people made comments like, 'there was a captain for everything', and 'everyone was probably a captain of something at some time', but this does not seem to have impacted on the value of clearly defined roles such as Assistant of Guests, House Helper, and so on, where communication, people management and collaboration skills are learned. Insightful appointment to posts of responsibility was also described as an effective way to bring out untapped potential. One OG remembered a time when a staff member gave a student a new role and it 'changed that boy overnight'.

For older respondents, these key concepts of competency, independence and responsibility are closely aligned with the 'trust system' (including unsupervised, solitary 'walking punishments') and 'training plan'. These were cited as central to their school experience and for developing 'self-trust' and trust in others. Many older OGs were disappointed to hear that students no longer have individualised daily training plans and that the trust system upon which these depended seems to have become less explicit in the school ethos. For these OGs, the fact that they were trusted by staff to be accountable for their own actions and punishments was formative in developing in self-discipline which lasted into adult life.

#### ***Opportunities to make wrong decisions: leadership and learning through experience***

While pupils were trusted to be competent, it should be noted that many respondents framed a lot of their out-of-classroom experiences in the context of feeling 'thrown in at the deep end'. Discussing this, there was generally agreement that pupils were regularly exposed to decision-making situations, and many of the examples came from Expedition experiences. Older respondents in particular characterised these skills as being learned 'very much on the spot', and the statement, 'What little I learned of leadership skills was really by default, like getting it wrong three times before I got it right kind of thing', seems to sum up aspects of learning through direct experience.

There is evidence indicating that these environments were orchestrated to allow wrong decisions to be made without perceived failure, but little in the way of careful facilitation by staff beyond them ensuring basic technical competency (e.g. navigation). Several respondents linked their experiences of learning to make decisions without unrealistic fear of the consequences with their approach to business. One OG explained that 'Gordonstoun doesn't develop risk-taking in people, but it develops the ability to make decisions based on what they can and can't do and how they can do it – to make a strategic decision'.

#### ***Impelled into experience – benefits of compulsory out-of-classroom experiences***

There was near unanimous endorsement in the OG focus groups of the importance of compulsory out-of-classroom experiences – in particular STV and Expeditions – as a key component of the Gordonstoun experience. Compulsory sport also creates unexpected opportunities for success. The value of being impelled into experiences, which often push pupils beyond what they have previously done, was widely acknowledged, and the universal nature of certain out-of-classroom experiences supports the egalitarian culture of the school discussed below.

*The expeditions, I didn't love, but I love that I've done them.*

While there were mixed feelings about Seamanship at Hopeman Harbour, STV stands out as a prime example of an out-of-classroom experience in which not all respondents would have chosen to participate, but which created extraordinary experiences and have left lasting impacts for many. As one OG commented, it was 'just one week out of two years, but I think it had a big impact on all of us'. The intense experience of sharing such a small space and working as a team towards a common goal in challenging situations seems to be significantly enhanced by the mixed selection of crews from across the houses and years. This has the potential to create stronger teams, and

foster a certain feeling of *communitas* as part of the shared liminal experience of a sea voyage. Several respondents explicitly mentioned the bonds and camaraderie fostered through experiencing adversity with peers.

### *The interplay between academic and out of classroom learning*

Unsurprisingly, views on the balance of out-of-classroom experiences and academic work and achievement varied, with many older respondents feeling that the school lacked academic rigour. This led to the perception that they were not actively pushed to achieve in the classroom in the same way as in out-of-classroom experiences, and that this approach favoured academically motivated students. Even more recently, participants were aware of the fact that they could perhaps have achieved more academically elsewhere, but valued the broader skills fostered by out-of-classroom experiences over lower exam results. One OG commented that,

*It was (and is) an extraordinary school, and what I may have lost in an academic grade or two is more than compensated for in the experiences and life lessons I learned at such an impressionable time in my life.*

Some participants (especially more recent graduates) felt that they were always very busy. This busy-ness was also discussed in several focus groups in a positive light, with strong time management skills, responsibility for your own timetable and immersion in the experience being highlighted as outcomes. Linked to this, several respondents identified the breadth of their experiences as important in securing early career employment:

*I don't think my academic education either benefitted or was made any worse by going to Gordonstoun – I think it probably would have been about the same had I gone to the very good local sixth form where we were, but I think it was all the other stuff that made the difference.*

*I don't think I would have got my first job without my Gordonstoun experience, because I think it gave me the breadth to get through interviews and early career stages.*

In fact, most negative impacts in relation to academic achievement seemed to be more related to limited choice in academic subjects at A and AS level and a notable lack of career guidance in the 1950s and 1960s. Regardless of this, the majority of OG respondents did seem to have gone on to participate in some form of Higher Education, although this may not be representative of their peers.

The fact that the same staff were involved in delivering both academic teaching and out-of-classroom experiences was regularly mentioned as being valuable in several ways. Old Gordonstounians felt that the depth of staff-student relationships was increased 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-classroom experiences and how high quality, 'rounded' staff were drawn to the School by opportunities to be involved in extra-curricular opportunities. One OG described what this could look like in practice:

*You can be woken up in the morning by your housemaster, then you're suddenly in one of his lessons, and then you're in an after school activity, you know, being coached at rugby, then you're on the climbing wall in the evening... you can see someone then you're on expedition with them at the weekend – you can see the same member of staff in lots of different guises, and you get to know them in lots of different ways.*

In addition to the role that teaching staff play in linking the academic and out of classroom learning, staff across the school enhance pupils' experience by modelling aspects of the school ethos and learning outcomes. The implicit learning which results from this may be linked to the experiential learning mentioned above, with leadership and decision-making skills being modelled rather than taught. Staff were reported to come from a broad variety of backgrounds, and were often strong characters who left lasting impressions. Older respondents also reflected on how young many staff members were in the post-war period, which may have reinforced this aspect, while perhaps compromising academic experiences.

### *Student community*

It should be clear from the points outlined above that out-of-classroom learning does not take place solely in formalised, bounded settings, but is holistic, individualised and dependent on breadth of experience. This breadth was also observed by OGs to be manifest in the student community, which was strongly characterised as socially and internationally diverse (although perhaps to a lesser degree in the 1960s), but egalitarian. In addition to international pupils, scholarship students were identified as an important part of this mix, right back to the days of the Navigation School and the Buckie Scholarships. The nature of this diversity is apparently normalised within the school culture, which led pupils to accept others as individuals, and is an attitude that has been sustained into later life for many OG respondents. The majority of participants mentioned the ability to 'get on with people from anywhere in the world' (or something very similar) as a Gordonstoun trait, and linked this to interacting through school life with a wide variety of both young people and adults. These alumni explained that 'people are people, whoever they are, wherever they're from' and that 'everyone was treated the same.'

Equilibrium seems to be maintained by social structures, such as in-house roles and the Colour-bearer system. These structures seem to function through a generative process of role-modelling. Furthermore, attitudes within the student body also helped to achieve balance in the student community, with nearly all participants noting that they observed very little bullying at the school. In addition to this and the aspects noted above (everyone excelling in something and compulsory out-of-classroom experiences), the physical location and environment of the school were described as 'social levellers'. According to the female OGs interviewed, equality seems to also have extended to gender from the outset of co-educational schooling, as they all felt that they were treated in the same way as male peers, far more so than after leaving the school.

It was noted that the process for electing Colour-bearers has evolved over time, with staff becoming increasingly involved. Many older respondents felt that the fact that Colour-bearers were elected solely by their peers was central to the meaning of the role. Old Gordonstounians who had held positions of responsibility, such as Guardian, felt accountable for maintaining Hahn's philosophy of there being 'no gods, no kingpins – the captain of rugby was just someone else'.

#### Focus groups with Old Gordonstounians: Principal Findings

- OGs valued the breadth of out-of-classroom opportunities, as it facilitates an individualised experience.
- Being 'thrown in at the deep end' and expected to 'get on' with things at a reasonable level (sometimes without much prior input) was a common experience and one critical to eliciting many of the reported outcomes.
- OGs have mixed feelings about the value of Seamanship.
- Expeditions and STVs are perceived by many OGs as important, extraordinary experiences which they might not have chosen to take part in. The mixed selection of crews on STVs was important to many, as it requires strong new relationships to be constructed.
- OGs feel that having opportunities to take responsibility (for self and others) in out-of-classroom experiences was an important factor in their personal development, leading to increased confidence and independence.
- In the past, there was not such a significant tension between academic learning and out-of-classroom experiences, but this was because the emphasis was on out-of-classroom experiences. Older respondents felt that they were not pushed to the same degree in the classroom.
- The school community and out-of-classroom experiences seem to have a social levelling effect – most former students reported that everyone felt equally accepted and valued, regardless of background or nationality.

#### 3.2.3 Focus Groups with Parents of Current Pupils

Between the months of March and July 2016, 30 parents of current students were interviewed. Twenty-five participated in group meetings across the UK, four contributed through an online video discussion, and two parents were interviewed individually over Skype. The data yielded six principal findings.

##### *Out-of-classroom experiences facilitate individualised learning and a sense of achievement, which develop self-confidence*

Parents reported that through the breadth of experience available in out-of-classroom experiences, the school finds something for everyone to be good at and makes sure that they feel that they are good at it. The breadth of experience also means that students realise that they cannot be good at everything. Finding a space or activity in which one can be successful seems to be central to developing a generalised self-confidence and self-efficacy, which can be applied to other contexts. One parent characterised this as follows:

*They are very very good at finding what one child is good at, and when they find what that child is good at, they pile it on and give them the responsibility with it and they encourage them with it, and it becomes that child's forte – it's what they bloom in.*

Parents believed that this success in one area spills over into other areas of the student experience. However, this was often characterised in such terms as 'confidence without arrogance', and it seems that some students are 'reined in', while others are encouraged to develop 'a degree of confidence – but not overblown confidence'. This appears to be the outcome of a holistic process that is specific to individual students. 'It's not any one thing', explained one parent, 'it's a collection of learning experiences, and every student is going to look different'. Another focus group participant explained how:

*He's the sort of child who would easily be missed in another school because he's never going to be any trouble to anyone... and Gordonstoun have actually noticed that that's worthy and made him proud of being that person, rather than only valuing those who want to shout about leading from the front.*

According to parents, the value of pushing students out of their comfort zones was also a key element in developing confidence, which will be explored further. However, it is important to note that this is confidence rooted in genuine, direct experiences in a broad range of contexts. In addition to this direct experience, it would appear from our conversations with parents and OGs that reflection and feedback processes play a more significant part in current students' learning than in the past.

Of course, this volume and breadth of activities also means that it is hard to isolate individual components of them, and not all students necessarily benefit from or enjoy particular out-of-classroom experiences to the same degree. This was acknowledged in many of the group interviews, even though most parents related the positive experiences of their own children. Parents felt strongly that in relation to experience of out-of-classroom activity, individual student character is a more important factor than gender, and expected both boys and girls to engage to the same degree and find the same benefits in out-of-classroom experiences. The importance of these experiences as a complement to academic study was highlighted by one parent who commented that 'When you're not very good academically, it's not actually that cool in the classroom, but if you can be cool doing other things, suddenly your confidence is obviously hugely affected by that'.

### **Staff play an important role in facilitating this student-centred approach**

Parents felt that staff know the students as rounded individuals, who are 'paid attention to in a very full way'. Comments were generally very positive regarding the quality of relationships and the flow of communication between parents, their children and Gordonstoun staff – all of which serve to support the student at the centre of learning and teaching in out-of-classroom experiences and academic classes.

While it may seem obvious, parents are aware that relationships with staff from across the school (from personal tutors to refectory staff and cleaners) are an important part of their children's experience. Parents felt that interactions with staff in different contexts (for example working with the same teacher in a classroom setting and out-of-classroom experiences) builds strong relationships, while simultaneously allowing staff to know the students well. It is also important for students to see staff as rounded individuals who embody the School's ethos:

*The interaction with the teachers is completely different outside the classroom, and they have a lot of different ways of working with the students. They might not be doing well in maths, but then they might go and play squash with the same guy, or they might find they're on an exped or something with them, and I really have valued that... They just have different conversations and I think that feeds into quite a good working relationship.*

The overwhelming impression from parents was that staff are open, emotionally intelligent and approachable. Further, staff-student relationships, which were characterised as 'much stronger' than at other fee-paying schools, are central to making the integrated approach mentioned above a caring, individualised experience. Parents felt that House Masters in particular were 'very good at getting their [childs'] feelings out of them'. From the comments related to the distinct culture of the school community (explored further below), it would appear that students learn and apply the emotional literacy modelled by staff to their own relationships.

### **Developing confidence based on direct experience and being pushed out of your 'comfort zone'**

The compulsory nature of certain out-of-classroom experiences was valued by nearly all parents; first, as a core manifestation of the school ethos and expectations; second, as a 'levelling' force; third, for creating spaces for powerful relationships; and fourth, as a context for learning teamwork and leadership skills. In the interviews, parents shared lots of examples of how compulsory out-of-classroom experiences (particularly Expeditions and STVs) push students out of their comfort zones. Much of the personal growth and development observed by parents comes from students achieving things that they did not think were achievable, in activities they might not have chosen to take part in. For example, one parent said of her daughter:

*If she had been asked if she wanted to go on a boat for four or five days, she would have probably said, 'Oh no, I don't think I'd like that,' but afterwards there was a sense of achievement... overcoming fears of things that she didn't think she would enjoy doing.*

One other parent identified her son's first STV as a highly positive experience and a turning point in developing his confidence, but remembered how reluctant and upset he was before going. This parent's point suggests that in order for students to be open to transformative experiences, they have to be exposed to them in the first place, and, in this instance, staff deliberately placed the boy in a leadership role in which he thrived. The parent stressed: 'It's got to be compulsory. He would not have gone that day'. Another speculated that 'I think what they leave with is a genuine self-confidence that with everything that's been thrown at them, they have a genuine feeling that there's nothing they can't do'.

The compulsory out-of-classroom experiences also seem to act as a social leveller, and formalise what is expected of all students. Parents valued the fact that all students have to do certain things, not only because it allows everyone to experience the same breadth of activities, but also for the role that it plays in establishing the egalitarian aspects and distinct norms of the school community, which in turn allow students to emerge as individuals. This egalitarian ethos is illustrated in the following three comments:

*The benefit that my child has had out of this is that they all do it, whereas, in a lot of the schools near us, everything seems to be elitist.*

*Because they're all doing it there's no stigma attached – they all look crazy in their yellow sailing suit.*

*Nobody's judging you on these things, and you know, everyone's doing it, so it's not different.*

As well as being 'formally' impelled into challenging situations, many parents spoke of the 'expectations' of participation and capability placed on students by the School culture. Various parents commented that 'there is an expectation that we did it, you'll do it, the next generation will do it...'; that 'everybody has to be accountable'; that 'it's a school thing... it's expected'; and that 'she's so used to being expected to do it, getting out on the hill, whatever it is'.

The above cultural norms may seem rather intangible, but can be linked to a key finding from the focus groups with OGs: after learning basic skills in a certain setting, staff expect students use them in a trustworthy and responsible manner. The Gordonstoun belief seems to be that young people who are treated like adults are more likely to act like adults. Students are also expected to engage socially with a wide range of adults, and both parents of current pupils and OGs linked this with an increased 'social confidence':

*I could put him in any room of strangers... in a social circumstance and he will talk to older people. He won't stand with his peers, he'll go and get on with it... go and sit with them and talk to them. You're made to mix with other people.*

In particular, STVs and Expeditions were seen by parents as important for developing team-working skills and a variety of relationships in different contexts. House Expeditions early in the academic year were seen to create strong intra-house relationships with peers and staff, while the mix of crews on STVs allows for new inter-house/class/gender friendships to be built. The intensity of liminal experiences like STVs, where students find themselves in extraordinary settings with others, appears to create particularly strong interpersonal bonds, which then pay dividends in other contexts. Parents recounted the positive impacts of being 'sent off with a whole load of people who you've not really met before', with one stating that 'the bond that they have having been away is incredible – it stays with them'.

The other key aspect of compulsory STVs and Expeditions that parents regularly commented on (which also came up in the OG focus groups) was the opportunity for students to take on leadership roles. Some parents recounted examples of their children being encouraged into leadership roles by staff during out-of-classroom experiences (e.g. taking charge of a watch on STV or a cutter during Seamanship), which then led to them feeling good about their contribution to the team. One parent recalled her daughter coming home after a Seamanship course and saying, "I had to help lead it – no one else apart from this other boy knew what to do", and she said it gave her so much satisfaction that they were doing it.'

It appears that staff carefully and caringly target students who they think may benefit from being put in a manageable position of leadership.

### ***Student and staff expectations are central to constructing and maintaining the School's ethos***

Parents characterised the student body as self-regulating, with its own distinct norms. This seems to work well, and parents valued how it enables access to activities and encourages achievement. For example, it is seen as socially acceptable for boys to participate in drama, dance and craft activities, which parents contrasted with other educational institutions.

One parent reflected on the contrast with boys at her daughters' previous state school, saying that at Gordonstoun, boys were 'not frightened of acting and singing and dancing in public, because it's normal', while in another interview, two parents discussed how their two 14-year-old sons had each done a term of dance and quilt-making. They went on to say that at other independent schools, their sons would not have done this for 'fear of being pressed upon and teased'.

Yet another interviewee commented that 'boys would have absolutely never put themselves in that position to be ridiculed, to be dancing... here it's just accepted as normal that you will be involved in all these creative arts'. The fact that 'everyone is doing it' and 'it's normal' appears to go a long way to making students feel more comfortable, but the staff also play an important role in the way they support students who are exploring new ways of physically expressing themselves. Similar comments were made about drama and music – many of which shared common features with outdoor adventure activities. One mother explained how her son 'was put in situations that I don't think

he would have had the choice to have done previously'. As with adventurous activities, dance and drama were required courses (at least in junior school), unfamiliar to most students, often met with trepidation, yet facilitated in an encouraging social environment.

Although this research focused on out-of-classroom experiences, required dancing and drama courses in years 9 and 10 and further optional performing arts opportunities (e.g. the musicals, plays, and bands) emerged as a non-dominant, but widespread theme across all focus group interviews.

As well as acknowledging the value of being comfortable engaging in diverse activities, parents mentioned that the student culture is accepting and encouraging of achievement (both academic and non-academic), which has the knock on effect of increasing student effort. In one interview this was characterised as 'a culture among the kids that they want to do well, whatever they're doing', where 'they all think it's cool to try hard and do as well as you can'. Some parents felt that the semi-remote location and physical environment was a contributing factor to creating a cohesive community, as 'they have to make a life within the campus.'

In addition to the expectations placed on students in compulsory out-of-classroom experiences, they are given roles and expected to participate in their learning and the school community as full members. One parent summed up the success of this approach by stating,

*They seem to expect a lot of the kids, and therefore they get it, rather than starting with low expectations...  
The young people surprise themselves by meeting those expectations.*

This finding is well represented in the interview and application processes involved in some Services and Overseas projects and conferences. Indeed, parents valued the way that this prepares students for the adult world, as students are treated 'like adults really, throughout the school'. While (similarly to OG respondents) most parents acknowledged that there was 'a captain for everything,' they still valued the fact that their children were expected to take on roles of responsibility within the school.

Nearly all parents felt that Houses had distinct cultures, which were very important to the student experience. One parent said that their son feels that 'they're like one big family in the house, because they're all like brothers'. In addition to the role that House Expeditions early in the term play in 'setting the tone' and building relationships, several focus groups agreed that the House Master or Mistress' role was central. Role-modelling by both staff and older students seems to play a big part in developing these smaller self-regulating social spaces.

Some parents (of girls in particular) identified how this appears to have a very positive effect on body image and mental health, and again contrasted this with other educational settings that they had experience with. This notion was characterised as 'a very healthy feel' and 'a healthier, sportier, more outdoorsy feel to the school', which parents felt comes from children 'looking after each other' and 'because the priority is not necessarily on self; it's on community'. This theme was also represented in conversations around the egalitarian and supportive nature of the student community, which parents felt was particularly evident in out-of-classroom experiences. Students appear to value humility, treat each other as equals, look out for each other and develop empathy with others through being put in situations in which everyone is struggling to cope. One parent explained that 'they definitely think of others.... It's just a given. It's part of what they are here', while another stated that 'looking after each other comes into all of these aspects'.

The international aspect of the student community is important for parents because it normalises internationalism and diversity and there is a perception that it will be beneficial in terms of networking and career opportunities in the future – although this does not seem to have been particularly true for older former pupils. Parents see organised out-of-classroom experiences as a particularly important space for the foundations of these friendship networks to be built. Many parents identified the mix of student backgrounds (and the role that scholarships play in creating this) as a unique selling point of the school, which contrasts particularly with local state school provision and some other fee-paying schools, and related how their children go on to look for international experiences in further study. Several parents mentioned that the risk of disrupted classroom learning due to exchange student turnover may be a potential downside of the school's internationalism strategy.

***Parents are generally willing to compromise academic achievement for the perceived benefits of the broad curriculum, but still have high expectations***

Academic qualifications are important to parents, but many are aware that there may be a compromise between academic achievement and the broader curriculum and value breadth of experience over detriments to academic achievement – up to a point.

In the group interviews, some parents were fairly unequivocal about this, with several statements like 'grades definitely would be better if they went to a normal school – no question in my mind' and 'we expect that she will probably drop a rung [in terms of grades], but we still expect her to go to [the same type of] university.' On the

whole, the impression we got from speaking with parents was that they would rather their child was happy, active and well-rounded than unhappy and getting straight As. Most parents acknowledged that they had chosen Gordonstoun specifically for the benefits of the broader curriculum, with some specifically praising the non-selective nature of the school, but there were several who had high expectations, and felt that the school should still be able to deliver very high standards in both. One parent stated, 'the bottom line for me is, I'm paying a lot of money: I have to have both. I have to have that rounded outcome, but I also have to have that minimum set of grades being achieved'.

While this was at the blunt end of a spectrum of views on the balance between academic and out-of-class learning experiences, several parents commented on how they felt subject choice at A-level was not necessarily as broad as that of the broader curriculum. One parent remarked that 'they've got a yacht, but they can't do psychology', while others indicated that their children would choose more academic work over compulsory out-of-classroom experiences if possible.

Although there are risks and challenges associated with this tension, several parents pointed out that Gordonstoun provides them with an efficient way of packaging up the experience that they would want to provide their children, regardless of whatever form of education they were in. It should also be noted that many parents who have been involved with the School over longer periods of time observed that the academic provision, and the balance across the curriculum seems to have improved greatly over recent years.

Most parents acknowledge that it is hard for the school and students to balance academic work and the array of out-of-classroom experiences, and understand the challenges that the School faces in this regard. Perhaps linked to the high expectations identified above, some parents felt that there is a risk of students being stretched too thinly. This was particularly relevant to 6th Form students in relation to team sports and other optional out-of-classroom experiences, where they may be performing at a higher level in several disciplines, such as sports and the performing arts. Nearly all felt that their children were very busy and were tired a lot of the time (although this was not necessarily a negative thing), and some parents identified stress as an issue for older students. Two parents who live more locally, commented that they had felt the need to take their children home for the weekend when they were 'completely overwhelmed'.

The other main challenge identified by parents was related to team sports and travel. Some parents feel that the breadth of other opportunities available, the travel time involved, and the size of the school mean that school sports teams do not always compete at the same high level as the other private schools they are up against. Although it can be difficult to be on the losing end in sports, one parent noted that when teams lose, 'they're always encouraged to look upon it as a learning experience'. There was also evidence to support this point in the language used by students in their personal blogs. Still, several parents felt that the time committed to travelling to sports fixtures could be better used, especially when distant away fixtures were arranged on consecutive weekends.

While sport was very important to some parents, on the whole, the opportunities to take part in extraordinary activities seemed to be valued over the chance to specialise in one specific sporting area. On this topic, one parent remarked, 'I would rather that my son sailed all the way nearly to St Kilda and back again in a gale force nine than he won a rugby match'.

#### **Focus groups with parents: Principal Findings**

- The broad range of out-of-classroom experiences facilitates individualised learning and sense of achievement, which develops a generalised self-confidence that can be applied to different contexts.
- Staff from across the school are seen as approachable, open and caring and play a crucial role in bringing the best out of students in individualised ways.
- Staff see students in different contexts, so they know them as rounded people, and are able to model behavior which exemplifies the School's ethos.
- Students are treated like adults, and expected to behave like adults.
- Parents appreciate opportunities for their children to engage in music, drama, dance, and other creative activities.
- Most parents are generally willing to compromise academic achievement for the perceived benefits of the broad curriculum, but still have high expectations.
- Out-of-classroom experiences have a levelling effect, both socially (everyone has equitable experience) and personally (humility/arrogance).
- Some parents are concerned over the amount of time spent travelling for team sport fixtures and the impact this has on students.

### 3.2.4 Focus Groups with Staff

Five main themes emerged from the focus group interviews with twenty-two staff members. Those interviewed included academic, pastoral, and 'activity' staff, such as those in the outdoor education department and the sailing crew.

#### *The dominant staff ethos is characterised by high levels of commitment, energy, and passion*

All of the staff members interviewed agreed that there is something unique and special about Gordonstoun. Staff agreed that working at Gordonstoun is a 'lifestyle, not a job' and also suggested that it is hard to really appreciate what life at Gordonstoun is like until you have experienced it.

There was also widespread agreement among the staff that they share a commitment to the Gordonstoun ethos. One staff member remarked that 'if a member of staff can't buy into that ethos, this becomes an unpleasant and challenging environment'.

Staff have a remarkably deep passion for, and commitment to, the students, which manifests itself in two main ways. First, staff seem prepared to try many of the same activities as the students. As one teacher exclaimed, 'if we don't commit to doing the same as the students, how can we expect them to respect us?'

The sailing crew in particular, spoke very positively about the importance of school-based staff participating in the same activities as students. One of them recounted how 'last year the pastoral staff came on the journey to bring the boat from Inverness to Plockton. This was really valuable for giving them insight into what the kids go through. It would be great if more staff could do it, but it would be hard to fit this in!'

The second way staff demonstrate commitment to their students is by accepting the extensive amount of time and energy required by their roles. One teacher explained how staff will last if they 'embrace the whole', but 'if they are unable to accept that, and understand that your life is pulled in all directions and beyond, you don't last'.

All of the staff agreed that working at Gordonstoun is a lifestyle, rather than a job, and that most go above and beyond what they are contractually required to do. By all accounts, staff run activities with passion and enthusiasm, and have a strong belief in what they are doing.

While there is a strong shared belief in the school ethos, most of the school-based staff seemed to find it difficult to articulate extensively what these unique Gordonstounian facilitation strategies are. One staff member reported that 'we do what we do, and we're expected to uphold the ethos, but we've never been told to do that'.

#### *Staff and students benefit from working with each other in different contexts*

One of the key features of how teaching at Gordonstoun is different to other schools is that staff work with students in a range of different contexts. It was explained that 'the fact that you work with them in different environments gives you a fairly rich picture of their personality'. Working with students in a range of areas also creates opportunities to make links between different activities. The outdoor education staff agreed that they often build the School ethos and academic curriculum into the adventures they facilitate. One instructor outlined how,

*We can bring the curriculum into what we're doing, which is perhaps not the norm [in other outdoor education settings]. I try and link it to a lot of what they're doing in school life. I also use the school background in terms of adventure, and building resilience and making them independent.*

Interestingly, outdoor education staff noted that they often notice students using the school motto while on Expedition. For example, 'there's been a few times, when I've been out on exped and the kids are finding it hard, and they use the motto. From that point of view, that's definitely them thinking that everyone has been through this so we can deal with the adversity of it'.

It was widely agreed that teachers earn respect from students by committing to participating in the same activities. For example, it was felt that by working with the same students both in the classroom and on an expedition, trust, respect and an understanding of each other's perspectives can be built. The outdoor education staff in particular noted the benefit of being able to interact with the same students over a number of years, as they feel it allows for deeper development of students' practical skills and positive attitudes to outdoor challenges, while building trust between staff and students.

Staff agreed unanimously that the fact that Gordonstoun is a boarding school allows them to know their students a lot better, and therefore makes it easier to have empathy when going between pastoral and academic roles. In keeping with observations made during the ethnography visits, staff acknowledged their gentler approach to interacting with their students. One academic staff member explained how when teaching, 'I'm always aware that they're boarders, and they are away from home. In other schools I would be harder on them than I am here. Some of them are away from home for the first time, and they are quite fragile'. Another staff member commented that 'we

have the capacity, because they are here as boarders, to develop stronger relationships and with more students. Because they are here 24/7, you have that opportunity'.

While the boarding school element is, of course, not unique to Gordonstoun, it is likely that the breadth of activities on offer for students and staff to participate in together is wider than at other schools. Notwithstanding the diverse ways in which staff and students interact, there is a consensus among teachers that the academic teaching methods themselves do not differ greatly from those in other schools.

Indeed, some staff felt that it was 'almost luck' that Gordonstoun has such unique features and that people work together successfully. As noted above, there was widespread agreement that staff are 'just trusted' and expected to uphold the Gordonstoun ethos, despite never having been formally told to do so. Although staff are not given an induction, or a physical handbook stating 'this is the Gordonstoun way', they are each assigned a mentor when they begin in their role at the school. It seems likely that this mentor system significantly contributes to the sense that there is what was described as a 'living, breathing, handbook' for staff.

### *The staff community*

All staff who discussed the staffroom spoke of it in a positive light. This was a finding that we were not expecting. When compared to other schools, it may be less common that staff from all departments at Gordonstoun share one big staffroom, and all have their break at the same time. As one teacher reported, 'everybody makes a really big effort to go to the staffroom at break time, and that's a really big deal for creating community'. Another interview participant remarked that 'this school has a staff common room which is overflowing at breaks. Everyone tries to get down there, and that's huge! I have friends in other schools, and the lack of community if you don't have that central hub is astonishing'.

There was also some discussion of how spending time daily with other inspirational educators was a great motivator for staff to continue to develop and grow. 'You see how dedicated the staff in other departments are', noted one teacher, 'and you want to emulate that in your own area'.

School-based staff were in agreement that there was great benefit in working with colleagues who had different expertise. This opportunity seems to be particularly prevalent during the Services. One staff member explained that 'I work with a scientist, a music teacher and a media teacher. People from areas of the curriculum that I would never have time to interact with. Everyone comes from their own angles, and all of the parts make a whole'.

In contrast to this positivity about the staffroom and working together, there was some feeling from pastoral staff that the School's staff community could be more integrated. Indeed, the matrons felt that they had no link with the teaching staff and that 'we're part of a house team, but we're not part of the school team'.

Outdoor education staff had a slightly different view, however, and seemed to be more integrated – although not completely. They said that although they often chatted with academic staff, they rarely ran sessions jointly with them. That said, the outdoor education team clarified that they can and do 'refer to the other staff to get them to help you get on track with linking our sessions to other parts of school life'.

The STV crew were perhaps the least integrated staff members interviewed who deliver broader curricula to students. These staff members do not appear to get to know, or spend time with, others based on campus. Nonetheless, these instructors highlighted the importance of school-based staff joining the crew and students for STV.

### *Students are afforded highly individualised and quasi-parental pastoral care*

That most staff feel part of a wider educational community that operates with deep passion, energy and commitment is likely linked with views that students are treated as individuals. The pastoral staff, in particular, emphasised their approach of caring for each student like a parent treats their child. One interviewee emphasised how the 'the pastoral team work together. So we do work as a team in that way. But we don't do it specifically a certain way, we do it for whatever helps the students'. The individualised care provided by the staff was summed up by a matron, who explained that the matron's role 'is like being a parent. All children are different and all parents are different'.

The staff focus groups yielded an over-riding sense of there being a strong, but intangible Gordonstoun 'way' of working with young people. This approach appears to be passed on through modelling, mentoring and sharing through dialogue, in order to provide the best possible 'Gordonstoun experience' for students.

### Focus Groups with Staff: Principal Findings

- The dominant staff ethos is characterised by the depth of time, energy, and passion that they give to students – working at Gordonstoun is a way of life.
- The unwritten facilitation culture or 'Gordonstoun way' exists, but is very difficult to articulate.
- Staff and students see one another in different contexts, and this is beneficial for both.
- The staff culture benefits from collaboratively working with specialists in other curricular areas and from the community created by the staffroom.
- Some of the pastoral team feel less connected to and integrated with the staff community.
- Students are afforded highly individualised and quasi-parental pastoral care.

## 3.3 Ethnography

Three principal methods were used to examine relatively minor sources of data: Expedition Review Sheets, student blogs and general observations, including informal discussion on site.

### 3.3.1 Expedition Review Sheets

Roughly one hundred and fifty Expedition Review Sheets were looked at, but they did not provide any substantive overall findings. This is primarily because the responses were inconsistent and seemed to have little to do with transferable skills and reflection on personal development. However, some interesting, minor observations were made, and some of these reinforce findings from other areas of the data collection.

#### *Practical improvements for future Expeditions*

The most common learning points highlighted by the year nine cohort refer to practical measures that will improve future Expeditions. For example, students have clearly experienced natural consequences, and make note to pack more food, or bring fewer heavy items with them next time. Thus, action points relate more to the weight of equipment and rucksacks than to the development of interpersonal skills.

It was apparent that by the time students are in year twelve, they are more likely to report that they know some relevant skills. Again, the skills mentioned were predominantly practical, with a number of students mentioning that they 'needed to be reminded of map reading skills', for example.

However, there was great inconsistency in terms of the extent of completion of each form, which leads to the question of how valuable this exercise is.

The focus of the questions in the year 10 review sheets seemed to be more on finding out about the student's previous Expedition experience. The value of asking for this information is not entirely clear as it asks for minimal information and the review sheets are filled in very inconsistently. It would be interesting to know if these are the only way in which staff gather information about prior experience, and how the responses influence the input given while preparing for Expedition, but this is not necessarily within the scope of this research.

#### *Working as a team, and 'just getting on with it'*

A number of year nine students did make reference to the importance of working as a team and helping others, which is an important part of the Gordonstoun ethos. Additionally, some students refer to the necessity to be determined, and to 'just get on with it', even in the face of adversity. One student commented that these activities helped him / her to 'toughen up'.

#### *Timing conflict between Expedition preparation sessions and academic classes*

There are comments from a number of year twelve students who felt well prepared as a result of the Expedition training sessions. Interestingly, though, some year twelve students mention missing preparation sessions due to other commitments. This is consistent with findings from other data collection methods, where it appears that there is some tension between academic requirements and other activities.

### 3.3.2 Student Blogs

As the study progressed, we asked to look at a sample of blogs, which students use to record achievements, action plans and weekly activities and share them with their tutors and parents. As this was an additional data source, and the data was not as rich as initially anticipated, a small sample of twenty blogs (7 girls and 13 boys) was examined by two researchers, using both deductive and inductive analysis to verify key themes from other data sources. Data were verified through investigator triangulation between the two researchers.

The way that students use their blogs varies greatly, with some writing much more than others, but generally they are used fairly instrumentally as a way of recording achievement (i.e. credit slips, participation in extra-curricular activities, grades in class). The range of activities documented is impressive, but the limited depth of reflection meant that this analysis was more useful for identifying new minor themes from the student perspective, rather than the intended purpose of verifying major themes from other data sources.

### **Academic/Out-of-classroom learning Balance**

One pre-determined area of inquiry which we could pick out in the blog data was the balance between academic and out-of-classroom experiences. It is clear from the sample of blogs that students value both out-of-classroom and academic learning, and they are encouraged to reflect on both. Students seem to particularly value commendations and 'House brews' as rewards in both. There were little data which linked specifically to the balance between academic and out-of-classroom learning, but some students did record some of the challenges of having such a busy schedule:

*I also managed to do my personal practice, which is a daily struggle simply finding time!!!*

*Back in the hostel I worked on my Chemistry prep together with a girl in my year (yes, we brought our Chemistry books on an expedition) while Miss Laing was solving Maths questions.*

*My Tuesdays have become a logistical nightmare, as I have Rugby, have to leave after 30 minutes in order to get to the Rockband, have to leave there also early to get to the Chamber Orchestra. 4.30... until 5.30.*

*I had a violin lesson with Miss Reynolds after Sustainability group, and felt breathless without any break today.*

Equally, some students do seem to be aware of needing to manage this balance, with one student's action plan including a goal to 'keep a healthy balance with my academic and creative life,' while others reflected positively on how they managed their time over the term. From the small sample it would appear that this again demonstrates how individualised student experience is – students at risk of overload would appear to be those performing at a high level in multiple activities. From the blog data, those heavily involved in music come across as particularly busy.

### **Clinics**

The students in the blogs that we looked at seemed to make use of clinics to access 'one-to-one help outside of class time,' which older OGs discussed as an important (although less formalised) aspect of their learning in the focus group interviews. One current student also wrote about how she used clinics to manage the balance between out-of-classroom experiences and class-work: 'As I missed a couple of lessons because of that [Seamanship], I went to Chemistry clinics on Monday and Tuesday evening to catch up with work.'

### **Action Plans/documenting progression**

Students' termly action plans seem well put together and cover a range of academic and non-academic outcomes in a way that embodies the school ethos. Many of the blogs that we looked at showed progression over time and that goals were often achieved, which suggests that students set themselves up for success by setting appropriate targets. There was also evidence of longer term strategic thinking in goals and activity choice in relation to career or tertiary education plans, particularly in senior students' blogs.

### **Positive language/examples of growth mindset**

While these blogs are obviously written for a specific audience (parents and tutors), the consistently positive and development-focussed nature of the language across the sample was striking. This exemplifies characteristics of a 'growth mind-set' (where success is dependent on effort rather than pre-determined qualities), which was evident in both reflection on individual action plans/performance and on team sport activities. This is clearly (although not explicitly) linked to the school's ethos and motto. Examples included phrases like:

*'Next time will be better'*

*'I have to keep going and I will achieve my plans'*

*'I tried my best to look on the bright side when it came to my challenges last term and that worked well for me.'*

*'I will do this by participating a lot... trying hard...'*

*'...by putting a similar amount of effort into training as I did for Squash'*

*'We unfortunately lost but it was one of the best games we have played'*

*'I didn't play very well and my drop shots were quite bad and I lost 3-0, however I still enjoyed it'.*

*'This is the second match that we have lost this school year, however, it can help us work on our weaknesses and improve as a team.'*

*'Yesterday we had inter-house hockey, we lost both our matches, however, we've been proud to represent our house in this competition.'*

Student *effort* is also praised in credit slips issued by staff, and students seem to see a link between personal effort and success. While the sample is too small to draw definitive conclusions (and this topic is outwith the purpose of this study), further research into the language used by staff to praise students and its effects on their mindset, and the student 'buy-in' to these processes could be illuminating.

#### **Other minor themes:**

##### **Sport and participation in the 'adult world'**

- We found evidence of participation in the 'adult world' outside the school, such as playing against adult teams in local and national leagues. Experiences like these, primarily in Sports and Services, were mentioned by former pupils as formative which led to increased confidence in social settings.

##### **Visiting speakers, particularly OGs**

- Several students (mainly seniors) took opportunities to listen to OGs (and other visiting speakers) talk at events, and valued being able to have direct conversations with them about specific career options. From the tone of the blogs, it would appear that OGs are perceived as influential role models.

### **3.3.3 Observations and Informal Discussions**

Two members of the research team made three ethnography visits to Gordonstoun between January and April 2016, in addition to spending time on the campus while conducting focus groups with current students. Six main themes emerged, helping to inform the process of generating questions for the focus groups with students and staff.

#### ***Student community seems inclusive, caring and not overly cliquy***

The ethnographers found the social environment at Gordonstoun to be warm and welcoming, and all of the students they interacted with were polite and engaged. Anecdotal stories from a few staff members highlighted that they felt the caring ethos at Gordonstoun is different to their experience of teaching in other boarding schools. These staff felt that daily Chapel played a significant role in helping to create a sense of belonging and community within the school.

In contrast to initial expectations, the ethnographers found the student body to be generally very inclusive, and there was little evidence of cliques or a broader judgemental atmosphere. This caring attitude seemed to extend into all areas, including the whole school cross-country race. While one researcher took part in this event, it was clear that even in a competitive setting students were encouraging and supportive to one another. Those who were not running in the race lined the course to offer what seemed to be genuine support, while those taking part could be heard checking in with their peers, and offering to slow the pace if someone was struggling.

The researchers ate all of their meals in the refectory with the staff and students. The calm atmosphere was noted at every meal, and of particular interest was that even with very little staff presence at breakfast, students behaved in a courteous, respectful manner to each other and the Service staff. While queuing for one meal, a student accidentally got some baked beans on the spoon for the adjacent dish of potatoes. Instead of ignoring this and moving on, he made a special effort to find a paper towel, and clean the spoon for the next person. This small gesture exemplified the general sense that the consideration students have for others is genuine.

#### ***Responsibility***

The ethnographers also observed and met students who held a variety of roles of responsibility. Older students were seen organising and corralling their peers for dance company rehearsals, Colour Bearers were overseeing the clean-up at the end of meals, and the Captain of Lost Property appealed to the student body for help in locating a lost blue folder. Clearly, responsibility is given to the students, and these observations raised questions about how it is assigned, and whether all roles are equally effective and respected by the students.

#### ***Living in boarding houses promotes a sense of caring and family***

One researcher was invited to visit a boarding house one evening, to join their evening meeting, as well as spend time talking to the students in their 'home' environment. The relaxed and friendly atmosphere was notable from as soon as she arrived, and the boys really did seem to behave as a family, sitting with arms over each other's shoulders and mixing easily between year groups and nationalities.

On another occasion, we witnessed a group of boys who had made a special effort to return to their house in order to help matron move a piano she had purchased. The boys seemed genuinely pleased to be able to help and there was a strong sense of family. This sense of family appears to be further facilitated by 'House Brews' and other House social events, which bring students together with their matrons, housemasters, and assistant housemasters. These

social events appear to be highly valued by students and staff alike, both as a time for reflecting on school life and as a way of tightening bonds between residents.

### *Some students in Community Service are disengaged*

During the ethnographic visits, some time was spent observing and talking with students participating in the Fire, Life-guarding, Mountain Rescue, Tech Team, Sustainability, and various Community Services. The Community Services were wide ranging, from weekly play afternoons for the children of teaching staff, to peer mentoring, and working with members of the local community.

One of the Community Service sessions that particularly stood out was 'Adult Enable', which is an evening activity session for a group of learning disabled adults from the local community. It was clear from speaking with the organisation's leader that the adults highly value these weekly sessions. The organiser went on to state that they were 'always asking me when we are coming back' during breaks such as the Christmas holidays.

Some of the Gordonstoun students at this session seemed disengaged, however, and only showed limited involvement in the activity. In informal discussions with one of the researchers, these students were not able to explain the Services selection process and said that they did not know why they were doing this Service. While this disengagement was not found in other Services observed, students did make reference to the fact that Community Service is sometimes thought of as a 'skive service' for those who do not want to spend as much time on it each week.

Also of interest was a lack of enthusiasm from some of the students doing Conservation as a Community Service. An afternoon was spent planting trees with a group of boys, mainly Russian international students, who appeared to be following instructions rather than using their own initiative and enthusiasm. This lack of deep engagement may possibly be attributed to these students joining the school later and having less choice of Service options. It may also be because this Service is perceived to be less helpful on a CV for university entrance or employment.

There were, of course, students who spoke very positively of their chosen Service. The students running games for the teachers' children as part of their Service mostly talked about gaining valuable experience that was related to their intended career paths. Similarly, we spoke at length with students from the Tech Team, who are very proud of the work they do. They clearly play an integral role in the running of many school events, including daily Chapel.

The researchers were left feeling that there was much scope to more deeply interrogate students' views on the Services. This theme was targeted in the student focus groups.

### *Staff are understanding and supportive of students who feel overwhelmed by work*

Observations of staff/student interaction suggested that there were respectful relationships between them. For example, if a student was late for an activity, staff would quietly acknowledge their arrival and follow up with them at a point that did not bring unnecessary attention to this or disrupt the session.

The researchers had a number of informal conversations with staff, both during meal times and when visiting activities during the school day. The staff members seemed proud of the students they work with, and went to great lengths to emphasise their understanding of the pressures placed on students by the demanding timetable. As noted earlier, this tension between academics and the broader curriculum was a dominant topic in student focus groups, in particular.

It seems to be a genuine show of support and solidarity that some staff members are prepared to try everything they ask of the students. During an early visit, one researcher came across a member of staff who was practicing an operatic solo that he intended to perform at Chapel. He said that he felt terrified by the prospect, but that he believed it was important to understand how the students feel in such situations. This echoes sentiments expressed during the staff focus groups.

### *Students seem to have a 'just get on with it' attitude*

One does not need to spend much time at Gordonstoun to understand just how full the students' days are. Chapel begins at 8:15am, and the last activity ends at around 10pm. In between this, students are likely to have attended class all morning, played a sport, served their community, practiced a musical instrument, and completed their prep (aka homework). However tiring this might sound, there is a positive and energy-filled atmosphere, where the students do very much display an attitude of 'just getting on with things'. For example, the students who provide a Life Guarding Service for the community swimming club have a tradition of running from the pool to their dorms in swimsuits, regardless of the weather. One boy cheerfully commented that 'it just saves time' and nobody seemed to be making a fuss about it.

Linked to this sub-theme of time management was how optional weekend activities seemed fairly undersubscribed. For example, one researcher had dinner one Monday night with three students who had just returned from a winter mountaineering weekend. This seemed like a small uptake, and they also explained that sometimes these trips are unable to proceed if they are undersubscribed or when people drop out at the last minute.

Of course, the two ethnographers cannot have possibly seen all facets of student life – far from it. The fieldnotes collected from 10 days spent on campus served as points of comparison with themes emerging from other data sources and for highlighting topics that could be further explored in the four types of focus groups.

#### **Ethnography: Principal findings**

- Students seem to have a 'just get on with it' attitude.
- Living in boarding houses promotes a sense of caring and family.
- The student community seems inclusive, caring and not overly cliquey.
- Some students find it hard to balance the demands of the broad curriculum at times, while they also clearly enjoy being very busy.
- Staff are understanding and supportive of students who feel overwhelmed by work, and for some students, academic clinics play a role in balancing out the time commitments of out-of-class activities.
- Students and staff use positive, development-focused language which demonstrates a belief that effort and perseverance leads to success.
- Some students in Community Service are disengaged.
- There were no substantial findings in the Expedition Review Sheets, but minor themes emerged regarding practical learning, the necessity of working as a team, and some timing conflicts.

## Part 4: Summary of Findings and Issues for Consideration

This final section of the report outlines the summary of principal findings, along with considerations for practice. Arriving at these key overall findings involved pooling themes from each data source and then considering which features stood-out as particularly dominant and worthy of note. The key findings presented below are not necessarily derived from the most frequently cited units of data, but have been borne from a period of data analysis that has lasted more than six months.

Each member of the research team has done their own analysis of specific sources of data, these data have been verified with co-researchers, and, finally, these key themes have been cemented through a process of intense and rigorous debate within the research team.

### *Student Outcomes*

There are four major student outcomes that can be directly linked to Gordonstoun's 'broader curriculum'. First, it is undisputable that out-of classroom learning experiences at Gordonstoun School have a powerful and enduring influence on students' personal growth. Second, students learn to manage the competing time and stress demands presented by a wide range of compulsory non-academic activities. Third, through these challenges, students learn to 'just get on with it' and become accustomed to 'giving it a go'. And fourth, students develop a personal confidence and resilience through participation in out-of-classroom experiences, from which they are then able to draw on when facing new challenges – both at Gordonstoun and beyond.

On a slightly less dominant level and in ways that cannot be entirely attributable to out-of-classroom learning experiences, three interpersonal outcomes emerged. First, there were two kinds of 'social levelling' that were apparent: those coming from low and high socio-economic statuses are valued on more equal terms at Gordonstoun. There is also some evidence that gregarious individuals are 'reined in', and shyer people are coaxed out of their shells. Furthermore, it is clear that students develop a certain 'interpersonal ease' while at Gordonstoun, in that they feel more comfortable speaking to people they have never met and who might come from a different background.

### *Key facilitating features*

There are seven specific features of out-of-classroom learning experiences at Gordonstoun that elicit the above student outcomes.

First, multi-day journeys such as Expeditions and STVs are the most powerful elements of Gordonstoun's broader curriculum. Second, the international mix of students is generally very highly valued. Third, the breadth of compulsory out-of-classroom experiences is of critical importance; students must try everything, even though they may not want to or suspect that they will not like it. This is related to the subsequent uptake of a variety of optional activity pathways that students can follow (e.g. drama, DoE Award).

The fourth critical element identified is that since many aspects of the broader curriculum are run by academic staff, students and staff interact in multiple contexts. This in turn seems to build strong relationships between them. Fifth, many activities feature students being presented with challenging and unfamiliar situations, and being expected to progress without high levels of direction (but not necessarily without support).

The sixth and seventh elements relate to all aspects of Gordonstoun life and are not exclusive to out-of-classroom learning. Of these, the first highlights the importance of providing students with opportunities to take responsibility for themselves and others through formal roles, such as captaincies, and through broader curriculum participation, such as setting up the technological equipment for Chapel. The other general aspect of school life is that staff of all kinds (e.g. matrons, teachers, coaches, house masters) are very caring and approachable; they are highly attuned to individual student needs.

### *Issues for consideration*

Six issues for consideration emerged from the data, with student focus group interviews being the dominant source. First, senior students resent the limited levels of independence and autonomy that they experience. There do not appear to be proportionate increases in student autonomy as they get older. Students feel that this lies in contrast to the trust and responsibility afforded to them in many other aspects of school life.

Second, a high proportion of year 13 students are concerned that their academic achievement will be compromised by the School's perceived benefits of the broader curriculum. Interestingly, most students would not want a reduction in STV and Expeditions, whereas they would, for example, like to do fewer required after-school Activities. Although it is possible to miss an after-school Activity session during a particularly heavy academic patch, the expectation of high achievement for current students appears to be much greater than it was for most OGs. Although parents share this concern, all interviewed accepted that the benefits of the broader curriculum outweighed any associated academic detriment.

As indicated by the wide range of data from OG surveys and student focus groups, the high amount of attention concurrently paid to academic achievement and participation in a wide range of broader curriculum activities can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Gordonstoun's unique ethos, which places a high importance on its broader curriculum as well as academic achievement, can be seen as a strength and as a weakness. This tension requires careful management.

Third, despite valuing the diverse mix of international students, quite a number of student voices reluctantly raised concerns about insular Russian, German, and Chinese social cliques. It was felt that they 'stuck together' wherever possible. It was also felt that although the international community represents a range of countries, it is not especially diverse in terms of socio-economic status.

The fourth issue centres on two areas to which students attach little value. Of these, the first is that a notably high proportion of interviewed students regard the after-school Activities as not being particularly meaningful. Some acknowledge that it keeps them busy and away from temptations of the 'screen', while others are rather ambivalent in their feelings. Seamanship also stands out as an area in which students have little positive to report. At its best, Seamanship is regarded as a good way of getting to know people in their House. At its worst, it was seen as a romantic link to Gordonstoun's past that was poor use of time and had little in the way of enduring and relevant learning and development to offer. A number of strong voices highlighted how it was rendered even less relevant when it took place after the STV. As with the tokenistic positions of responsibility noted earlier, activities perceived as a 'filler' or tokenistic are generally poorly regarded.

Related to the above discussion on pursuits that are valued, is the fifth issue, which surrounds the Services. Some Services are seen as 'skives' in that they demand little in the way of commitment and effort. Other Services are perceived as having limited 'real world' purpose. A repeated example of the latter is the Fire Service, where a Health & Safety policy currently under review, means that Gordonstoun students are not permitted to attend public call-outs. These examples aside, there is certainly a palpable perception that the Services are highly unequal in their societal purpose and financial resourcing.

The final major issue to report is the travel time associated with sports teams who are travelling to fixtures in far away locations (e.g. Edinburgh). This concern of excessive time being extracted from an already demanding schedule was echoed by interviewed parents, and appears to be exacerbated by occasional heavy losses to more sport-driven schools.

### *Overall impressions*

When single elements of Gordonstoun's broader curriculum are considered together, it is unquestionable that they provide a powerful mix of novel and challenging experiences that demand high levels of resolve in order to overcome. The enculturated expectation that students will 'give it a go' in the face of adversity, and despite initially lacking expertise, appears to be a critical element common to experiences reported as being especially powerful. Experiences, positions of responsibility, and activities that are perceived to have obvious educational, developmental, and societal aims are valued highest by students.

Based on these two dominant themes, it is undeniable that STVs and Expeditions are central to achieving Gordonstoun's aims. Services are also important, but a blanket endorsement cannot be made, as it is clear that there is a wide variety of Services on offer, which are resourced unequally and valued differently by students. While not a dominant theme, it is important to highlight the positive regard in which both required and optional performing arts are held by students, parents, and OGs. Indeed, they share the same requirement to 'give it a go' in front of supportive classmates that some outdoor education experiences provide.

Conversely, the purpose, content, structure, and time commitment associated with after-school Activity sessions, Sports, and Seamanship all merit critical inquiry. The tension between, and management of, the demanding timetable of non-academic activities and the high expectations of academic attainment and university entrance demands need to be addressed in a very careful and thorough manner. While presenting students with varied opportunities to take responsibility for oneself and others, some dominant senior students interviewed identified a disjuncture between the responsibility they were required to take in some areas and the lack of responsibility afforded them in others.

The above critiques and recommendations should not obscure the vital roles that Gordonstoun's out-of-classroom learning experiences play in achieving its educational, developmental and societal aims. For the most part, the broader curriculum is fit for purpose. However, it is arguable that specific aspects of it are not. Considering the key issues in this report and making revisions to the broader curriculum, would allow it be delivered in a more purposeful, coherent and effective manner.

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