

NZOIA's History

NZOIA had tumultuous beginnings. In the 1980s, there was considerable debate about the need for qualifications at all. Many instructors had separated themselves from the bureaucracy and trappings of the normal workplace, and they resisted any structure being placed on their lives.

There were others committed to the concept of a profession: setting standards we were proud of, a code of ethics, and self-regulating. And so the debates raged into the night in mountain huts and staff quarters.

Then OPC had an unfortunate accident and the victim's family pushed the Ministry of Education to introduce standards for teachers and contractors in the outdoors. Suddenly, there was the threat of government-imposed standards. At this time, I went to work at Plas y Brenin in Wales, a certifying centre for various national organisations. While there, I received a letter from OPC asking if I would develop a set of instructor standards and a qualification scheme in NZ.

I wrote discussion papers, which circulated through the outdoor sector. Peter Dale at the Council for Recreation and Sport was a driver behind this initiative. He believed in self-regulation, and sponsored the development. There were many keen proponents of the ideas such as Mick Hopkinson, John Davidson, Jo Straker, and Ray Button.

The debates intensified. No longer was it simply a matter of should there be certification, but issues arose such as: How will this affect volunteers? What about soft skills? Who'll be the assessors? What will happen to club instruction? I've been doing this for years and now I need someone else tell me I can still do it? And on and on.

I went on a roadshow presenting the ideas, fielding questions, and dodging the flying knives! There was great interest and passion. The final strategy was to form an association. It was decided to write syllabuses for bush, alpine, rock, and kayak instruction and let the association rise or fall on its qualification scheme.

For the inaugural General Meeting of NZOIA in Wellington in 1987, over 130 passionate people were there. I felt sorry for Terry Easthope who chaired the meeting. He wore a lot of animosity but, when the meeting finished, the group had agreed to endorse the constitution and form NZOIA. Terry was the unsung hero.

Unfortunately, NZOIA developed a reputation for being an OPC scheme, and I'm pleased this is now behind us. NZOIA slowly gained acceptance and membership grew. The syllabuses and disciplines evolved, reflecting what industry wanted. Slowly but surely, NZOIA qualifications became the standards for outdoor instruction.

By the mid-1990s, NZOIA was a healthy organisation with sought-after qualifications. In recent years, another growth spurt has occurred. A partnership with Skills Active Industry Training Organisation led to new entry-level standards (Leader qualifications) being introduced in 2009, and an alignment of outdoor qualifications. Access to assessment has been made easier, assessment centres have been established, revalidation of qualifications ensures currency, and there is public access to a database of qualification holders.

- Grant Davidson