



# **Education through Covid-19 school closures in Australia:** lessons learned from online educational delivery

Written by Tim Waley and Tes



## Foreword

We serve Independent, Catholic, and Christian primary and secondary schools Australia-wide and beyond, working collaboratively to help manage the increasing demand for highly qualified and passionate teachers.



The research and findings in this paper were conducted with the help of Tim Waley.

Tim has more than 30 years of experience as a Principal in Australia, the Middle East, and Asia. He has served as President of Independent Schools Tasmania, ISA board member, and member of AHISA as well as serving in a variety of capacities on state education bodies in Tasmania. Tim joins Tes to share his experience with fellow school leaders and provide support for schools with important decisions on attracting and empowering staff.



In 2020, teachers across the globe adjusted to a new way of educating due to Covid-19 lockdowns. Australian teachers and schools adapted quickly to administer online learning practices (with the exemption of teachers and schools in the Northern Territory). With so many changes to education delivery happening at once, it is important to look at what can be learned from the experience.

- How does distance learning impact teacher and student wellbeing?
- How was student performance impacted in the online classroom?
- How can online learning impact the future of education?

To answer these questions, we reached out to Australian teachers to gather their feedback through a 22 question survey. We posed a series of questions on how distance learning impacted teacher wellbeing, work-life balance, role satisfaction, educational delivery, and student performance.

- ♦ 62% indicated working from home has increased levels of stress and anxiety\*
- ♦ 84% indicated their workload has increased since moving to online learning, with 63% stating the increase has been significant\*
- ♦ 83% agree online learning is enabling students to take ownership of their learning journey\*
- ♦ 71% believe aspects of online learning can improve educational delivery\*

## Industry insights

Following our survey, we consulted Australian school leaders, and an education consultant (and winner of the 2019 Australian Teacher of the Year Award), to understand their learnings of school procedures through the crisis, and how they plan to support staff and students moving forward.

The experts interviewed work in a cross-section of schools: non-denominational independent, Catholic and government. The schools were selected from different locations across the country, of which two were from metropolitan areas and one located regionally.

## Meet our experts



**Paul Teys**  
37 years' experience

Extensive leadership experience in independent schools, including 14+ years as Principal and CEO of a thriving regional independent school.



**Noel Jenkinson**  
33 years' experience

Extensive experience in five Catholic schools as Head of Department, Curriculum Coordinator, and for the last 18 years as Deputy Principal.



**Tony Vallance**  
12 years' experience

Australian Education Awards Teacher of the Year (2019), Victorian Excellence in Education Awards Finalist (2018), STEAM Teacher and Educational Consultant for Building Better Brains Australia.



## Support for Teachers

We asked teachers to share how well supported they felt through the transition to online learning, and what kind of support was most useful.

The high majority of teachers polled indicated that their school had offered high levels of support in the transition to online delivery. 49% agreed that their school had supported their transition to online teaching with another 18% strongly agreeing. 25% disagreed and only 7% strongly so.

Our data suggests leadership teams focused on regular communication, positive messaging, and setting clear expectations that nurtured higher sentiments of support and confidence, with lower levels of anxiety among teachers.

### Key points:

- Teachers provided with the following reported higher levels of support:
- Provision of professional development opportunities to support the transition especially focused on technology and online delivery
- More staff collaboration in sharing resources, ideas and lesson plans
- Counselling options and provision for staff (whether online or over the phone) to support them in managing stress and anxiety
- Regular communication from the senior leadership team and among staff to minimise feelings of isolation

## Expert Insights

*"Following our experience of online learning our priorities have been adjusted. We are having more meaningful discussions with teachers based on a number of observations, including student behavior whether learning from school or at home. We took on feedback from teachers regardless of how positive or negative it was and identified that many struggled with the move to online learning. What we found most important was explicit, steady instruction from the leadership team about our response and approaches."*

**Paul Teys**

*"We focused on clarity of expectations and structures right from the outset – keeping things simple and common – while allowing flexibility within that for the early adopters and those more comfortable in the new environment; even as simple as following the standard normal bell times every day. We leveraged existing structures such as teaching team meetings instead of faculty meetings, sharing lesson plans or outlines on common unit pages for each subject, and providing common structures to lessons within a year level team. This strategy simplified, clarified, and bought consistency to the use of our LMS for online delivery."*

**Noel Jenkinson**

*"Moving forward into onsite teaching, leadership teams can support their school environments by maintaining support and wellbeing initiatives for teachers and student cohorts. Schools that take an agile approach towards expectations, communication, and staff wellbeing, may enjoy lower levels of stress and anxiety among staff. Through these challenging times, supporting staff wellbeing can only benefit students in the long run."*

**Tony Vallance**

## Our view

During the unprecedented changes caused by Covid-19, schools were put in a high-pressure situation to adapt rapidly. A clear message from our respondents is that communicative, empathetic, and supportive leadership teams helped school staff manage changes more readily.

Comments made by educators in our survey indicated their confidence and capacity to manage the challenges caused by Covid-19 were enhanced when communication from leaders was clear, frequent, and positive.

From these responses, we can confidently say open communication, counselling options, collaboration, and professional development will help support a smooth return to classroom teaching over the coming months.

## Workload and wellbeing

We asked teachers to tell us how their workload was impacted when they moved from classroom teaching to online learning, and what factors of their role caused those changes.

The majority of teachers polled (84%) agreed that the transition from the classroom to online teaching increased their workload, with 63% stating the increase was significant. 63% of teachers agreed that since working from home stress and anxiety increasingly affected their work.

The reasons identified for creating the additional work were: not having enough time to prepare online learning lessons, inexperience with technology applications, and additional steps required to mark and return assignments. Additionally, multiple respondents stated it is unreasonable to run the same length and number of classes online, as scheduled in school timetables. A number reported their working hours increased, extending further into the evenings and weekends than would normally be necessary to keep up with their workload, and that this hindered their sense of wellbeing.

### Key points:

- Creating online resources and/or not having team members who can share their resources for the same year levels was reported to increase workloads
- Additional time is required to adjust classroom lesson plans to cater for online lesson challenges
- IT training on school platforms can support teacher wellbeing and save time spent troubleshooting
- Simplifying online platforms for school, teacher and leadership communication can ease confusion and frustration among staff

## Expert Insights

*"Technology requirements will likely be embedded in responsibilities in the future to safeguard for the future. The ability to operate in this space, utilizing our platforms will be a critical requirement and something we will look for as we move forward in hiring."*

**Paul Teys**

*"We are back at school but significant change has occurred and staff want to maintain the positive developments such as greater collaboration and sharing. We plan to continue the centralised sharing of detailed learning and teaching plans, not just overviews as before; and a willingness to move to increased use of online submission, and online real-time correction and feedback, has been noticeable. There is a readiness to implement previously undreamt of practices, such as the creation and submission of some major senior maths assessments online. We are moving to fully online parent-teacher interviews and information nights very shortly. Expectations will continue to rise, and opportunities for productive change will continue to present themselves. Enhanced requirements and expectations of teachers in the online space will be written in more formally in the future."*

**Noel Jenkinson**

*"I have seen schools weather the online learning storm well if they already had a universal platform in place. I recommend a less is more approach to help to deal with teacher stress and anxiety. That is, a clearly communicated approach from leadership about realistic expectations, scaffolded support, and mentoring for staff struggling with technology. As relationships are key in everything a teacher does, the focus needs to be on open communication, clear expectations, and support for all staff."*

**Tony Vallance**

## Our View

It's not surprising that the majority of teachers surveyed felt the pressures of an increased workload while adjusting to a significantly new teaching model. A notable increase in levels of stress and anxiety experienced as a result of working from home negatively impacts teacher wellbeing, highlighting a need for leadership teams to provide space and time to adjust.

Much of the commentary we received mentioned a need for better resourcing. This may be a time to look at how schools can support teachers with access to free resources that are re-usable, and how improving technology literacy among staff can support a better work-life balance over the long term. While schools can assist, teachers need to accept responsibility for continuing their professional learning and ensuring their knowledge, skills, and capacities are developed to appropriate levels so as to ensure efficient online delivery.

Like all new and challenging situations, time allows for reflection and adjustments. Expectations require moderation, common sense, and patience. Time provides the opportunity to share experiences, learn from colleagues, build resources, and develop more confident approaches to future disruptions. The responsible guidance from leadership teams supports the growth, capacity, and performance of teachers. The key imperative now is that there be an ongoing focus on continuing to develop professional approaches and efficiencies in order to better prepare for another such occurrence in the future.

## Student engagement

We asked teachers how they perceived student engagement was impacted while learning from home, and how online learning helped or hindered student performance.

Teacher's expressed online learning had in a sense, flipped the classroom model; where students took on more responsibility for their learning. Our data shows 68% of teachers surveyed believe online delivery helped students take greater ownership of their learning journey, with comments stating it encouraged some to become better problem solvers, more resilient, and better organised.

However, 80% agreed that keeping students motivated and engaged was a challenge with online delivery. Some teachers acknowledged that practical lessons presented more serious challenges for them online, especially in the upper years. Additionally, the digital divide created problems for students who did not have access to a computer or the internet.

### Key points:

- Students become better able to self-pace their learning and appeared to be less distracted compared to the normal classroom setting
- Introverted students interacted more with teachers through online delivery
- IT literacy has improved for both teachers and students (with appropriate access to technology)
- Assessing student engagement levels is more challenging through online delivery

*"What's most important is understanding what kids can manage. Some students were in dire straits trying to keep up. Support for online learning as a viable platform brings into question the fundamental view of schools and their purpose. It is more than content-based learning; school is where students learn about themselves, including how they learn and how to adapt. Any consideration about online learning as a viable alternative needs to be mindful of the benefit of a school."*

### Paul Teys

*"Some students thrived and many of these were more attentive during real-time instruction than normal. Many others just got by but quite a number fell by the wayside. The long-term effects remain unclear and problems are arising with those who fell significantly behind and are unsure or unable to catch up, especially in senior year levels. Anxiety is present and high."*

*It is clear students need to be at school and in a community for the majority of the time. We hope to grow their enhanced independence. Noticeably, quieter students thrived with the ability to connect and share with far less fear of ridicule or simply being pushed out of the conversation by those louder students seeking the center of attention."*

### Noel Jenkinson

*"The online learning situation has enabled many students to increase their levels of self-efficacy in their learning. How can we support them to grow even further? I believe schools need to be open to support online learning periodically for students that identify a strong need for it. Some students thrive in an online learning environment and show more confidence, output, and creativity. Taking their independence by funneling them immediately back into a teacher-led, classroom environment without the option to integrate and build on their new-found confidence would be a mistake. As educators, we can enable students to grow their often newfound independent learning skills. Cross Subject Area (STEAM/STEM) and Project-Based Learning Units enable students to have more voice and choice in their learning. This in turn builds student confidence which may help to boost some student's newly acquired confidence from their time with schooling online."*

### Tony Vallance



## Our view

The common goal among teachers and leaders is to develop students to become resilient problem solvers in the classroom, and for life beyond schooling. Understandably, such a sudden change in educational delivery will impact students differently, but there was a strong indication from our survey that a significant number of teachers noted their students' positive growth as more independent learners and problem solvers.

The improvement in these areas could be credited to the students' increased capacity to take responsibility for organizing their learning. The online experience may offer more opportunities for students to engage collaboratively and ask questions without fear of peer criticism. It also provides more freedom for students to work at their own pace, to review recorded lessons, and to self-manage their needs and deadlines, as will be a pre-requisite in post-secondary undertakings.

We don't believe either the online or classroom model will ever fully cover all bases, or suit each individual perfectly, so there is room to support students through a mixture of both methodologies. Whether that means lessons are recorded for later viewing, students will likely have the opportunity to learn online when not able to be present. Communication between students and teachers could be more frequently submitted online. The concept of absence potentially negatively impacting student learning will change as content will likely become available online for students to access when and where they need to. These are distinctly possibly and viable options to support students in the future.

## Improvements to teaching methodology from online learning

We asked teachers for their opinions as to whether lessons learned through online delivery could improve mainstream learning and how.

71% of teachers surveyed agreed aspects of online learning can improve educational delivery, with 84% agreeing that online learning offered new ways for creating learning opportunities. Some teachers commented that the online model provides the opportunity to improve technical skills and capacities, which will benefit secondary students preparing for university. Additionally, teachers reported they were finding creative ways to improve their lesson plans and delivery in preparation for their return to the classroom.

A number of respondents mentioned online delivery gave students and teachers the opportunity to be more collaborative in their knowledge and resource sharing. However, the technological divide was again mentioned as a problem for supporting students without access to a computer or internet connection.

### Key points:

- Online delivery is supporting teachers and students to become more technology literate
- Teachers are more capable of creating online resources that can be repurposed
- Secondary students are better prepared for university situations, where they will be taking more courses online and uploading assignments onto a digital portal
- Students without access to a computer or internet fall through the cracks in an online delivery model

*"Online learning brought a fundamentally different view of schools and the purpose of school. Holistic teaching is most important. Holistic education takes on a whole new definition. Our interest lies in how a child can learn from home as much as in schools in regards to wellbeing, and learning accessibility for example."*

**Paul Teys**

*"Online delivery has led to a greater understanding and confidence in how flipped learning can work. There is also a greater willingness to try things. There are higher levels of trust in the students' ability to be independent. The future will have more blended learning, recorded instruction, shared real-time resources, greater online sharing of resources, and use of experts from a team to deliver specific areas of a course."*

**Noel Jenkinson**

*"Teaching is one of the most creative careers in the world and the advent of online learning has once more brought our creativity to the forefront of teaching and learning. We have been freed from the hemmed-in confines of a textbook and allowed to contextualise our learning designs around the needs and capacities of our students, often with very positive results. This includes catering to students without the benefit of internet connectivity or access to appropriate hardware for online learning as offline learning packs were sent out by the thousands Australia-wide, most of which contained highly engaging content. My wish is to see teachers continue to take educational risks by creating new and student-led learning experiences with the full support of their leadership teams."*

**Tony Vallance**

## **Our view**

It is clear technology literacy and effective platform access is a key driver in positive, productive, and effective online learning outcomes. Unfortunately for many, a lack of hardware, internet connectivity, and time to learn how to use and apply technology created challenges for both teachers and students.

The challenges of ensuring adequate access to efficient technology is not an issue that can be addressed by educators alone. It raises important questions for governments to address in providing better opportunities and support for students and teachers, especially in schools where socio-economic conditions impact their capacity to access online learning initiatives.

Educators demonstrated their resourcefulness through Covid-19 lockdowns to become more technology literate and effective in creating engaging and enjoyable online experiences for their students. These efforts, especially among senior levels, seem to have provided continuity of delivery through uninterrupted lesson delivery and in turn better prepare students for tertiary education.

Additionally, teachers were able to establish and develop their own portfolio of resources that are transferable or interchangeable between the classroom and online settings, and that will better prepare them for similar situations in the future. The rapidly developed resourcefulness and creativity teachers demonstrated in such a short period of preparation time deserves applause. Their capacity, in the vast majority of cases, to adjust to their new learning approach and the resilience they demonstrated in simply "getting on with the job" is admirable. This feature can be further developed as schools and teachers continue to develop skills and understandings that will enhance future outcomes for all involved.

## Conclusions

Our survey shows that teachers report managing a larger workload and experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety while delivering online learning. Many respondents identified working both online and in the classroom, dealing with technology challenges and deficiencies, and managing student engagement as key influences leading to workload and stress increases.

Fortunately, the majority of teachers polled expressed satisfaction with the support their schools provided during the transition. Teachers who 'strongly agreed' that their school 'sufficiently supported them in their transition to teaching online' reported having regular school staff meetings, social video calls, and the offer of free counseling to manage stress. Those who didn't agree expressed they felt they weren't receiving enough communication from their school, and that they required more digital resources. Across the board, most teachers expressed the desire for more time to prepare adequately for online teaching in order to modify their approaches, lesson plans, and expectations along with catering for their own lifestyle adjustments.

However, the majority of teachers surveyed agreed online learning presents an opportunity to improve educational delivery. Most agreed that online delivery offered students opportunities to take more responsibility for their educational journey, noting that students could better pace their studies and this gave them the ability to access recorded lessons at any point that matched their needs. This also assisted and was beneficial for revision purposes.

Many respondents commented that certain students who normally fly under the radar flourished in the online learning environment; while others who typically were less motivated or demonstrated poor attention in the classroom setting, suffered through the online experience.

From this feedback, it appears schools and their staff will be better placed as a result of this experience for delivering new and enhanced models of teaching in the future.

## Survey demographics

We collected 435 responses from teachers across Australia from 7 – 12 May 2020. The majority of teachers who responded taught in New South Wales, Queensland, and Victoria, representing approximately 85% of those who completed the survey.

Secondary teachers represented 75% of survey respondents, and primary teachers represented the remaining 25%.

Approximately 58% taught in Government schools, 27% in the Independent sector, and 16% in Catholic schools.

Of all teachers surveyed, 30% indicated having 20+ years' experience teaching, with approximately 14-18% of respondents having 0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and 16-20 years of teaching experience.

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