

RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT

Beating Lockdown Blues: Students pass the Covid test

Glenn Fahey



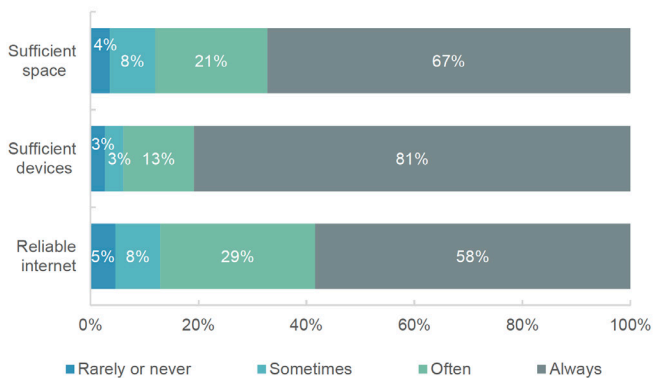
- The duration and extent of disruption from home-based learning and wider coronavirus restrictions measures varied greatly across Australia through 2020–21, with students hardest hit in Victoria and NSW.
- Compared to the OECD averages, most Australian schools were closed for a shorter period than in North American school systems, but longer than much of Europe, New Zealand, and Japan.
- Education policy and practice during the pandemic faced uncertainty that seeded a range of assumptions — some of which have proven true, while others have not.
- Policymakers and educators must base education policy decisions on evidence as we come out of the pandemic.
- There has been special concern for potentially heightened stress levels of school leavers, including fears that achievement and test performance may be negatively impacted. Widely accessible special consideration programmes have been urged for the purpose of accommodating, in particular, university admission. However, the evidence shows these are not necessary.

Assumptions	What the evidence shows
Disadvantaged students will suffer educationally from a digital divide.	There's little evidence that disadvantaged students were disproportionately impacted in accessing home-based learning supports.
Students will suffer from a significant learning loss.	There's mixed evidence of the scale and scope of learning loss.
Disadvantaged students will be disproportionately impacted in learning outcomes.	There's no clear relationship between students' demographics and their reported achievement during home-based learning.
The mental health impact on students will negatively affect their educational outcomes. Elevated stress levels for school leavers means students should be entitled to special consideration and ATAR adjustments.	There's no significant relationship between students' reported achievement and their mental and social health, after accounting for students' coping ability. Students with higher coping levels report higher achievement, and vice versa. Hence, there is no need for special exam consideration and ATAR adjustments.
Significant additional resourcing is required to address learning losses, especially those of disadvantaged students.	Rather than significant additional resourcing, better investment of existing funding to improve teaching practice would be most effective.

While some students lacked access to home-based learning supports, disadvantaged students weren't disproportionately affected

- Policymakers and researchers were understandably concerned about potential inequity in access to home-based learning supports. Accordingly, policymakers effectively rallied to provide supports to students in need.
- Nonetheless, some students did report a lack of supports available to them during home-based learning:
 - Around 13% of students reported at least sometimes having an unreliable internet connection.
 - Around 6% reported at least sometimes not having sufficient electronic devices.
 - Around 12% reported at least sometimes not having sufficient space for their needs.

Students' experience of risk factors during home-based learning.

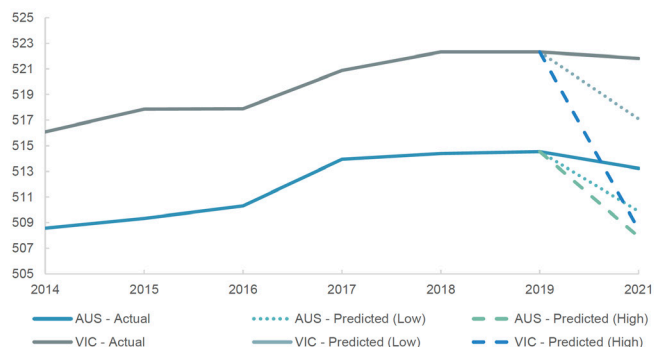


- However, the data doesn't show that disadvantaged students disproportionately suffered from a digital divide. There is no observed correlation between virtually any socio-educational disadvantage factors and the likelihood of reporting an unreliable internet connection, having insufficient access to electronic devices, or having insufficient space for needs. This is likely attributable to the role played by policymakers and educators.

There is mixed evidence of the scale and scope of educational impact from home-based learning

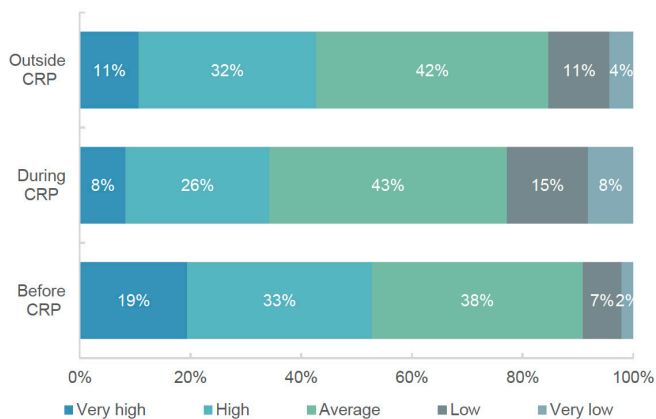
- Many researchers understandably predicted significant learning impacts due to the educational disruption of 2020 and 2021.
- While negative impacts were seen in other countries, Australian data to date — including preliminary 2021 NAPLAN results — have suggested no significant difference in student achievement, compared to pre-pandemic outcomes.
- If Australian students had suffered similarly slow progress as observed in a review of overseas studies, the average Australian student would be the equivalent to 6.6 weeks behind in reading and numeracy — and as much as 19.4 weeks behind in Victoria.

NAPLAN student achievement trends (reading and numeracy), predicted and actual, Australia and Victoria.



23% of students say their achievement was low or very low during home-based learning. Among the same cohort of students, just 9% were previously identified as being relatively low achievers. However, students who self-reported very low achievement during home-based learning were already achieving well behind the average student — around 2.1 years behind in numeracy and 1.8 years behind in reading.

Self-reported level of achievement in schools, during and after home-based learning.



- Most students changed the time they spent on their studies during home-based learning — 22% increasing it, and 47% decreasing it.
- After accounting for a range of academic, non-academic, and demographic factors, several drivers explain how students rate their achievement during home-based learning:
 - Their level of engagement in regular in-school classes.
 - Their ability to focus during home-based learning.
 - Their level of motivation to study during home-based learning.
 - Their ability to cope during home-based learning.
 - The time spent studying during home-based learning, particularly between students who increased and decreased time studying.

There's no clear relationship between students' demographics and their reported achievement during home-based learning

- There is little consistent correlation between demographic factors and reported achievement during home-based learning.
- Parents' school completion overall is weakly but positively correlated with students' reported achievement. After accounting for other factors, this is mostly explained by the differences reported between students whose parents who completed Year 12, compared to those that completed to Year 10 or less.
- Students in inner regional locations report higher achievement, after accounting for all other factors, than metropolitan students.

While students have suffered adverse social and mental health, it's their ability to cope, not their level of suffering, that is related to their achievement

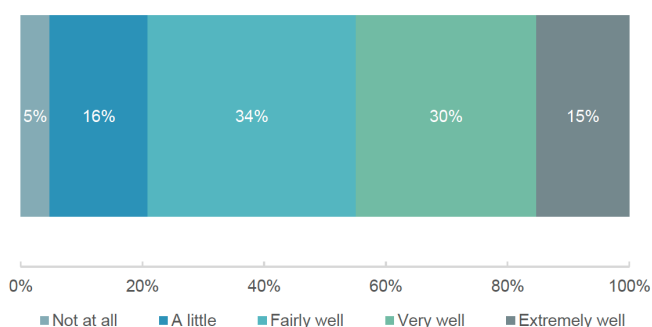
- In common with overseas data, research shows Australian school-aged children have suffered considerable mental and social distress during the home-based learning period.
- 48% of respondents aged 16-17 recorded being at high or very high risk of psychological distress. That is around 2.5 times higher than recorded in a survey of similar aged Australians in 2017-18.
- While there is a consistent negative correlation between students' perceptions of their achievement and adverse psycho-social factors, there is no significant statistical relationship after accounting for other factors, including students' coping levels during home-based learning.
- The majority of students coped fairly, very, or extremely well during the coronavirus restrictions period and home-based learning. However, 20% either coped only a little or not at all.
- Students who reported not being able to cope at all also reported much lower achievement, while those with higher coping levels reported higher achievement.

- Despite concerns about students' elevated stress levels, particularly in the Year 12 cohort, study-related stress was lower during home-based learning than it was when students returned to school. There was also no correlation between students' stress levels and their reported achievement.
- There is some evidence that adverse mental health outcomes of students can rebound relatively quickly when students return to face-to-face schooling. However, it appears that some negative social outcomes are slower to rebound without intervention.

Rather than significant additional resourcing, better investment of existing funding to improve teaching practice would be most effective

- Based on students' reported achievement in this research, the proportion of students that may require remedial support — due to a change in their progress during home-based learning — may be much smaller than initially feared.
- Remedial attention could be justified for at least 6%, and as many as 14% of students.
- Small group tutoring programmes — as have been implemented and expanded in NSW and Victoria — are justified policy interventions as a relatively cost-effective remedy. However, there is reason to believe current programmes, particularly in NSW, are not well targeted.
- Alternative approaches — such as extending the school day or offering a summer school programme — have some potential to provide catch-up learning, but are expensive and difficult to implement. However, one potential benefit of summer school as a policy option could be to help address students' social needs.
- The most cost-effective approach for policymakers would be to invest in promoting improvements to the quality of teaching more generally.

Students' reported level of coping during the coronavirus restrictions period.



Summary of key catch-up approaches available to policymakers.

Approach	Expected additional learning progress	Cost
Small group tutoring	Around 4 months for primary school students over the course of a year, and around 2 months for secondary school students. Around 4 months on average for literacy and around 3 months for mathematics.	Low (unless group sizes become very small or one-to-one)
Summer school	3 months for literacy and 2 months for maths. Use of intensive teaching strategies increases learning growth to around 5 months.	Moderate
Extending school hours	Around 3 months for primary school students and around 2 months for secondary school students	Moderate
Phonics	Around 5 months over the course of a year for primary and secondary school students. Around 4 months when carried out by teachers' assistants, compared to classroom teachers.	Very low

Implications for policymakers

- Some degree of policy intervention — particularly in NSW and Victoria — is justified as a precautionary principle.
- However, policymakers must be clearer in distinguishing temporary, Covid catch-up responses from wider, potentially permanent, remedial efforts to address pre-existing achievement gaps from before the pandemic. Conflating these purposes may produce suboptimal outcomes.
- Screening students who have potentially fallen behind during home-based learning may not be straightforward. The strongest predictors of students' reported achievement are not their prior achievement or demographic factors, but factors that are specific to home-based learning, and thus less clearly observable by educators. Namely, screening for students who may need additional assistance should be based on observations of students' engagement, their ability to focus, their motivation to study, their time commitment to study, and their coping levels as clues to which students may require intervention. If indicators of past achievement and socio-educational disadvantage are used alone, this could fail to identify the right students.
- Small group tutoring is an appropriate and cost-effective approach for providing additional assistance to students. Currently implemented programmes could be better targeted and could be better designed to make them suitable as a longer term policy intervention.
- A summer school may offer both academic and social benefits to students who need it, but it could be costly, difficult to staff, and require careful design in order to be effective.
- Mental health concerns for students are validated, but the best approach to address these is to ensure children remain in regular schooling, rather than rely on costly interventions.
- As with many other public policy measures being implemented in the wake of the pandemic, there is a risk that programmes could become white elephants. In particular, additional Covid catch-up funding is on top of already high and increasing resourcing levels.
- Concerns for the stress levels of school-leaving students during home-based learning may be unfounded. This questions the justifications currently provided for offering special consideration for students undertaking their HSC/VCE, particularly in terms of ATAR adjustments.

Author

Glenn Fahey is education research fellow and author of several CIS research papers. His most recent Research Reports are *Mind the Gap: Understanding the Indigenous education gap and how to close it* and *Dollars and Sense: Time for Smart Reform of Australian School Funding*. He is a former consultant in education governance at the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.