

Learning through COVID-19

Maximising educational outcomes for Australia's children and young people experiencing disadvantage



Pillar 2 Report Summary:

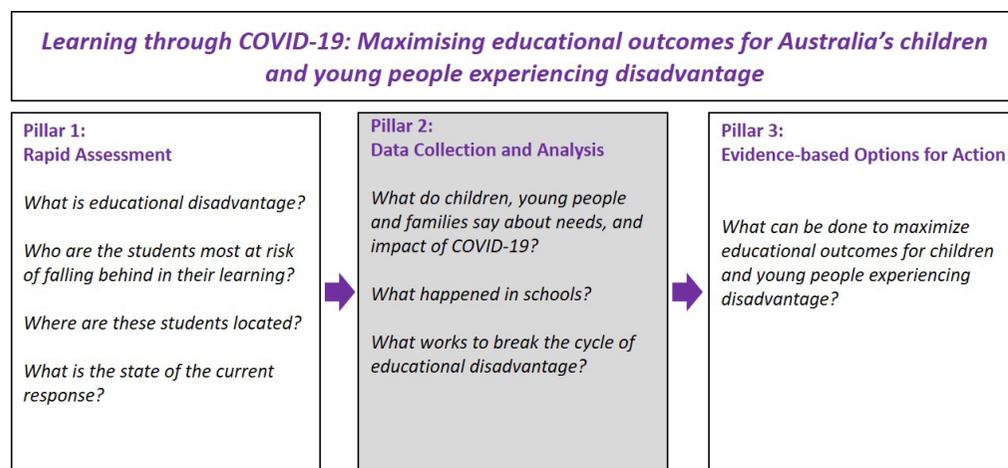
What do children, young people and families say about needs, and impact of COVID-19?

Background

In response to COVID-19, 94% of the world's student population was impacted by transitions to remote learning. COVID-19 has also significantly affected families' health and socio-economic circumstances. Some children and young people already experiencing disadvantaged circumstances may be at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes than they would have been had the pandemic not occurred.

The *Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR)* at the University of Queensland is undertaking a study, funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, to explore the impact on learning through COVID-19. The *Learning through COVID-19* project is an immediate assessment that aims to understand the experience and needs of children and young people already at risk for poorer wellbeing, educational outcomes and future employment, whose risk of educational disadvantage has increased as the result of COVID-19. The project will also provide an evidence-based platform to respond to these students' needs in the recovery from COVID-19.

The *Learning through COVID-19* project is structured across three interrelated stages of work (Pillars 1 to 3) that are designed to inform solutions to address worsening educational disadvantage.



This Report Summary summarises the lived experience of COVID-19 on Australian children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage, its impact on their educational outcomes and engagement with school, and the response to COVID-19 of service providers to inform efforts to reduce educational disadvantage in this context. The findings from Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 will inform priorities for actionable solutions in Pillar 3.

Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID-19

International evidence on the experience of COVID-19 paints a complex picture. Internationally, and in the context of varied, but often extended periods of remote learning, there are concerns about the potential extent of learning loss and that educational achievement gaps by socio-economic status could widen. However, there is currently insufficient evidence of actual learning loss available from the pandemic to inform these projections. In Australia, recent insights point to the impact of the lack of digital access, the challenges of learning from home, lack of social connections, mental health impacts, and uncertainties around future study, training and employment opportunities. The second lockdown in Victoria has brought additional challenges to children, young people and families there, and extended home schooling has brought greater risk of disengagement from school.

Who are the students at risk of poorer educational outcomes?

Learning through COVID-19 focuses on three cohorts of students likely to be most affected by the educational disruption of COVID-19:

- **Cohort 1:** Young children who started school already behind.
- **Cohort 2:** Older students who were already at risk of disengagement, who may not return to school but whose employment prospects have worsened.
- **Cohort 3:** Children and young people who have had contact with the child protection system.

Pillar 2 data sources

The Pillar 2 Report summarises quantitative analyses of Department of Education population and sample data (New South Wales, Tasmania), 39 semi-structured interviews with children, young people and their families in New South Wales, Tasmania, and Queensland (Cohort 1=7, Cohort 2=22, Cohort 3=10), and semi-structured interviews (n=21) and an online survey (n=39) from stakeholders representing non-government organisations providing education and support services for children and young people experiencing disadvantage across Australia. A videoconference-based academic roundtable was held with Australia-based experts in the fields of education and disadvantage. Data collection and analysis were completed between September and November 2020. Information regarding limitations associated with the extremely rapid assessment of the data and analyses are presented in the full Report.

What do the numbers say?

Cohorts 1 and 2 show existing educational disadvantage on all outcome domains (attendance, disciplinary sanctions, student engagement and conditions for learning) before and during COVID-19.

Educational disadvantage on these measures for Cohort 3 cannot be quantified because of a lack of data on non-members of the cohort.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, educational disadvantage in attendance worsened during the pandemic, and in Cohort 2 this was potentially caused by COVID-19.

In Cohort 1, the pandemic also potentially worsened disadvantage related to bullying. This occurred because bullying of non-disadvantaged students declined during COVID-19, while bullying of disadvantaged students persisted.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, disadvantage in participating in school clubs fell during the pandemic.

Among students in Cohort 1, Indigenous students experienced growing disadvantage in positive classroom behaviours and learning effort that was potentially caused by the COVID-19.

Among students in Cohort 2, low SES students experienced worsening disadvantage in attendance and student effort in learning that were potentially caused by the COVID-19.

In Cohort 2, gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the experience of being bullied fell during the pandemic.

What does the interview data tell us?

COVID-19 should be understood as an additional factor exacerbating already highly complex life circumstances among children and young people experiencing disadvantage.

Feelings of anxiety were palpable and children and young people talked of the difficulties of feeling 'stuck' in one location, their loss of social, family and peer connections, and important milestones or events, which impacted on their mental health and wellbeing.

The children and young people interviewed struggled with remote learning, but also learned to adapt during lockdown.

Students at flexi-schools described their schools before COVID-19 as very supportive and that support continued throughout lockdown. It may be that this model of schooling, which was already designed to be flexible and responsive to complex needs, was better placed to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

Multiple sources of support during learning from home and the transition back to

classroom learning were acknowledged, in particular the role of teachers, schools, and parents/carers.

These findings reflect a relatively short lock-down period, and it is acknowledged that the extended lockdown in VIC is likely to amplify the COVID-19 challenges that children and young people face.

What do the stakeholders say?

Stakeholders reported that during lockdown and remote learning, there was increased demand for services among students and families. In response, service providers bolstered outreach to effectively engage with students and families, including those who had been traditionally hard-to-reach. This approach was resource intense and placed a high burden on service provider staff.

Stakeholders thought that online learning was beneficial for students who preferred self-driven and self-paced learning and for students who experienced social anxiety or bullying.

Stakeholders suggested online learning was less effective for students who did not have access to the devices, connectivity and skills required and for those with less supportive home learning environments.

Online learning was also perceived to be less effective for students for whom school was the sole safe place, which they no longer had access to during lockdown.

Stakeholders reflected on students' general sense of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation. The impacts of loss of peer and social connections, changes to household finances and familial dynamics, and fear and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 were noted.

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health was also observed among parents and carers, teachers and school staff, and the staff of service providers.

Social connection and sense of belonging were presented as critical ingredients for keeping students engaged in school.

Impact of COVID-19 on attendance, disciplinary absences, conditions of learning and learning loss

Pillar 1 established that the three cohorts of children and young people were already at risk of poorer educational outcomes, and that their educational disadvantage could potentially worsen as a direct result of COVID-19.

The quantitative analyses of Education Department data suggest that the disadvantage gap in attendance increased during COVID-19 in Cohorts 1 and 2, and that for Cohort 2, the increase was potentially caused by the pandemic. The impact of this growth in attendance gap on educational attainment remains to be seen.

Previous research suggested that if online teaching is available and effective, learning loss could be mitigated. Previous research has also found students learn less when home schooling and have varied levels of engagement with online learning. The students interviewed in the *Learning through COVID-19* project struggled with remote learning, but also learned to adapt during lockdown. Learning loss was described as a multifaceted and dynamic experience. Students and their families talked of feeling unable to keep up, falling behind, and then, in some cases, catching up with learning.

In Cohorts 1 and 2, COVID-19 appears to have closed disadvantage gaps in participation in school clubs, largely by causing club participation to fall for all students in 2020. In interviews, many students were vocal about missing sports. It is likely that this experience was universal, rather than specific to students experiencing disadvantage.

In Cohort 1, the disadvantage gap in bullying increased during the pandemic and the control group analyses suggest the pandemic was potentially responsible. Disadvantage worsened because non-cohort members reported less bullying during the pandemic, while Cohort 1 members did not. Positive benefits of the COVID-19 lockdown were also reported. Some students with sensory needs and mental health challenges suggested home schooling was less stressful than being at school.

Students at flexi-schools described their schools before COVID-19 as very supportive and that support continued throughout lockdown. Flexi-schools are a form of alternative schooling in Australia, which provide schooling for, often marginalised, young people who have struggled in the mainstream schooling system. Flexi-schools are smaller than mainstream schools, and provide intensive, timely and multifaceted support to their students. This model of schooling, which was already designed to be flexible and responsive to students' complex needs, may have been better placed than mainstream schools to adapt to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic.

The supportive roles of parents/carers, teachers and community in mitigating the risk of learning loss should not be underestimated. More broadly, the immediate government response to the transition to home learning across Australian jurisdictions, through the development of online information, tools and resources, provision of funding and

resource support could have helped mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on learning.

In New South Wales and Tasmania, the length of lockdown was possibly too short to have a significant impact on learning. The longer lockdown in Victoria may have a greater impact on students and the differential impact on learning loss across jurisdictions requires monitoring.

Impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and wellbeing

There was little evidence to suggest that COVID-19 was associated with significant growth in disadvantage gaps for student engagement. Members of Cohorts 1 and 2 were less engaged than non-cohort members on all measures of student engagement before the pandemic, but these disadvantage gaps in engagement did not grow more over time for students experiencing COVID-19 disruptions, than for students who did not.

Adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing among children and young people are being reported in Australia and internationally. The adverse impact of COVID-19 on mental health is important in itself, and has implications for student engagement, learning and attainment. Social isolation, lack of social connections and fatigue have all been reported in other research.

Among students interviewed in the *Learning through COVID-19* project, feelings of anxiety were palpable and students talked of the difficulties of feeling 'stuck' in one location, their loss of social, family and peer connections, and important milestones or events, which impacted on their mental health and wellbeing. Stakeholders also reflected on students' more general sense of increased stress, mental ill-health and social isolation. Social connection and sense of belonging were presented as critical ingredients for keeping students engaged in school.

Stakeholders acknowledged pressures placed on families, teachers and schools during home schooling, which were often compounded by digital inequities, but also noted that home schooling presented new opportunities for increased engagement, and flexibility in the future.

These findings mainly reflect the experiences of a relatively short lockdown, and longer lockdowns will potentially have a greater impact on students' mental health and wellbeing, and engagement with school. This in turn could lead to greater learning loss.

Strength and resilience among children and young people experiencing disadvantage

Stakeholders reported that volatile transitions into further education, training or employment might generate a crisis of hopelessness among students. Yet, even with increased uncertainty regarding futures for school leavers, all students interviewed planned to finish school and move on to vocational training or further study. The COVID-19 lockdown also provided them with an opportunity to take stock.

Overall, the children and young people interviews highlight the many challenges that children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage face. For many, COVID-19 was simply the latest challenge impacting already complex life circumstances. The stakeholder consultations paralleled the views of the children and young people, whereby COVID-19 exacerbated, rather than created problems.

Understanding COVID-19 in the context of the ongoing challenges faced by children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage, and their strengths and resilience should be central to the response to the impacts of the pandemic.

Whether these strengths and resilience are specific to children and young people experiencing disadvantage or common to all children and young people is unknown and worthy of further research.

Understanding educational disadvantage during COVID-19

The Pillar 2 Report provides a complex picture of the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic among Australia's children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Moving forward, experiences of educational disadvantage should be considered as occurring along a continuum.

There are students who are newly identified as experiencing disadvantage as a result of COVID-19, students who were already experiencing disadvantage and for whom it is likely to continue and heighten as a result of COVID-19, and students and families who are 'lost to the system', with COVID-19 likely to further diminish opportunities for re-engagement and moving out of long-term educational disadvantage. Responses are needed for all.

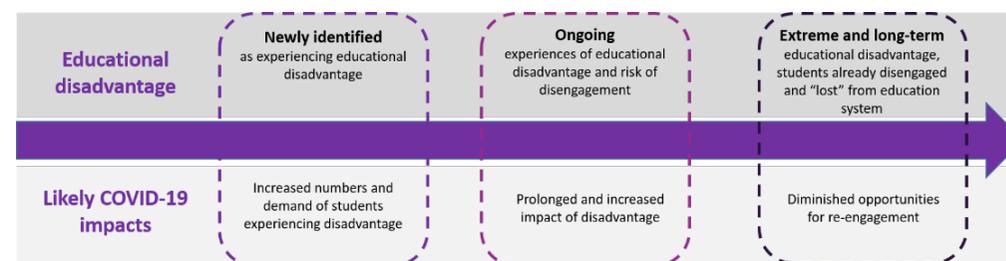
The COVID-19 pandemic disruptions are multifaceted. They are also experienced differently by students and schools, and pandemic responses are implemented and received in variable ways. The responses and solutions are also likely multifaceted and varied in their effectiveness and implementation, and students receive different doses and have different receptiveness. Given these complex and interlinked relationships, the pandemic does not seem to have had a uniform impact on all forms of educational disadvantage, especially in the short term. Unpacking this impact in detail will require ongoing research into how different forms of COVID-19 disruption

interact with the underlying system of educational disadvantage.

Identified gaps

The Pillar 2 Report has strengthened the understanding of the experience of educational disadvantage among Australia's children and young people, but a number of knowledge gaps remain. Recommendations for future research include:

- Longitudinal tracking of student outcomes across multiple samples, which would help to establish whether observed effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have longer-term implications.
- Identification and analysis of other indices of educational outcomes, including student achievement, to provide a richer understanding of the diversity of impacts on learners resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Investigation of the variability in student outcomes across schools and the relationship between student outcomes and school-level strategies to support students during COVID-19.
- Analysis of Victorian Education Department data and other data sets that include children from Victoria to examine the unique impacts of repeated and extended remote learning for students.
- Linkage to post-school destinations surveys, such as the Next Steps (Queensland) or On-track (Victoria), to examine if COVID-19 has affected educational decisions among young people in the short and longer-term.



- Exploration of the mechanisms that may have led to drops in attendance rates of Cohort 1 and 2 students, including ongoing monitoring to ensure that rates return to pre-COVID-19 levels as restrictions are lifted.
- Further exploration of the areas of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural

engagement and how these were affected by COVID-19 to understand what works and for whom.

- Exploration of how students, teachers and schools assess academic performance and the meaning of learning loss in the context of COVID-19.
- Further longitudinal investigation of if, to what extent, and in what ways disadvantaged school leavers' educational and occupational aspirations evolve as the mid-term repercussions of the pandemic become clearer.
- Research on the experience of hope and uncertainty to understand whether this is a general phenomenon or specific to particular cohorts.

What are the emerging areas for action?

Addressing the challenges of educational disadvantage in Australia which have been amplified by COVID-19 requires a systems-based approach. This approach includes appropriate and early interventions, which aim to prevent as well as treat problems, targeted across the life course, and a holistic orientation that addresses more than just the individual student experience. It requires working with students, families, schools and communities to co-develop solutions.

COVID-19 support will need to be ongoing, not short-term, and needs to be accompanied by effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure that evidence-based options for action are grounded in an understanding of, not just what works, but what works, for whom, in what circumstances.

Based on the insights presented in the Pillar 2 Report, and building on the findings from Pillar 1, four priority focused action areas have been identified.

What are the emerging areas for action?

Student mental health, wellbeing and hope

- Early, preventative intervention
- Increased mental health support in schools
- Improved protective factors to prevent mental health issues developing
- Capitalise on student social connections and sense of belonging



The future role of teachers, schools and communities

- Provide adequate resources to support transition back to curriculum-based learning
- Empower students to take control of their learning
- Provide parents with the digital literacy skills and learning strategies
- Recognise the need to be 'nimble', flexible and adaptive

Digital equity

- Support teachers to develop and implement online learning through blended approaches
- Provide support to build parents' and students' digital and technical literacy
- Sustain access to digital devices and connectivity



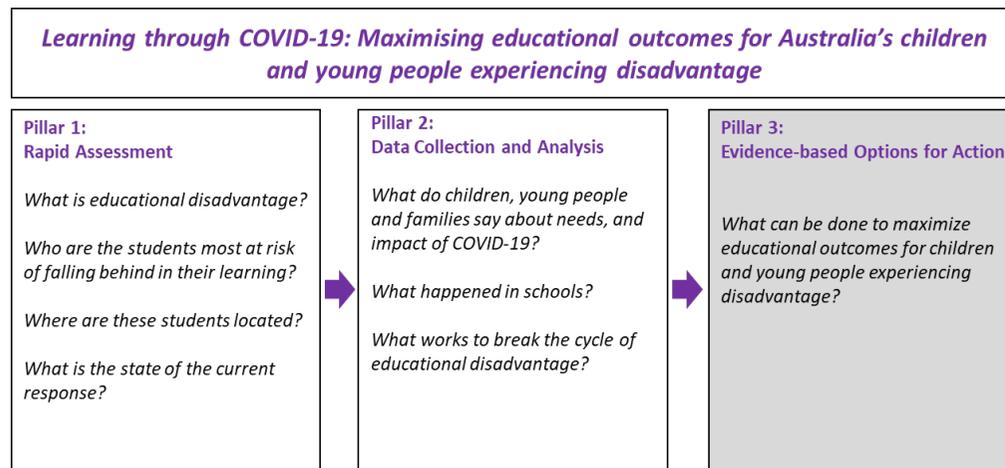
Protections for the most vulnerable students

- Ensure adequate economic provisions are made for people
- Targeted and tailored responses across locations and jurisdictions
- Remain nimble, responsive, and adaptive to individual circumstances
- Stabilise placements and schooling for children at risk and strengthen support networks

Next Steps

The information presented in the Pillar 2 Report highlights the complexity of educational disadvantage among Australia's children and young people, and it has validated, but also challenged, some of the assumptions made about the impact of COVID-19 on educational disadvantage.

The information presented has therefore progressed the understanding of the system of educational disadvantage and the focused areas, which will be taken forward in Pillar 3 to inform evidence-based options for action to maximise educational outcomes for children and young people experiencing disadvantage.





CRICOS Provider 00025B

Institute for Social Science Research

The University of Queensland
Long Pocket Precinct
Level 2, Cycad Building (1018)
80 Meiers Road, Indooroopilly 4068,
Queensland, Australia

+61 7 3346 7471
issr.research@uq.edu.au | issr.uq.edu.au

The Institute of Social Science Research at the University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which UQ operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.