

Home Sweet Home: Clarifying the Differences Between Home Schooling, Distance Education and Learning- at-Home during COVID-19 Lockdowns

DR TERRY HARDING



Home schooling, distance education and the recent COVID-19 government-mandated learning-at-home phenomenon each require students to learn from home. Because each is situated in the same home setting, there has been confusion among educators and journalists about the names and practices of these three different pedagogies (Barry, 2020; Bruner, 2021; 9News Staff, 2021). This article provides a description of the backgrounds, definitions, and educational practices characteristic of the different models of state-approved learning from the family home for school children in Australia. It briefly addresses the models of (1) home schooling, (2) distance education and (3) the state-mandated learning-at-home requirements for school children during the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

1. Home Schooling

Home Schooling - Background

Whilst family-based education has been a common practice for millennia, the modern home schooling movement has emerged as a significant minority participant on the educational landscape of developed countries, including Australia, over the last forty years (Harding, 2014c, 2022).

Home Schooling – A Description

Home schooling is the educational practice where the parents of a child take the full responsibility to provide the formal education for their child. They do not enrol their child in a school for his or her formal education. The child's parents are responsible to provide all aspects of the education for their child and thus are responsible for the child's learning.

Home schooling is also known as home education in Australia. Various government jurisdictions use either term in their official documents, and home educators in all states and territories also use either term. Table 1 lists the different nomenclature for home schooling as officially recognised by each state and territory.

STATE / TERRITORY	HOME SCHOOLING
Australian Capital Territory	Home Education
New South Wales	Home Schooling
Northern Territory	Home Education
Queensland	Home Education
South Australia	Home Education
Tasmania	Home Education
Victoria	Home Education
Western Australia	Home Schooling

Table 1. Nomenclature for Home Schooling by State and Territory

Key characteristics of home schooling are:

- Home schooling parents voluntarily take on the responsibility for the education of their children.
- The parents select the form of pedagogy that they will employ for their children.
- The parents impart and implement their preferred value system and educational philosophy for their children's education.
- The parents select and pay for the curriculum for their children's education.
- The teaching and learning occur in and around the family's home, their locality and the wider community.
- One parent must be available to facilitate the education.
- The family is characteristically a single-income family.
- The time frame for learning is flexible and is determined by the family.
- The family's lifestyle forms an important part of the curriculum.
- Conversation is an important part of the curriculum.

Home Schooling Pedagogy

An important pedagogical feature of any form of education is the curriculum to be used. The English word curriculum is taken directly from the Latin word "curriculum", which means a course *to run*. Thus, an educational curriculum is an educational course along which the student will "*run*" during that formal education. There are three different types of curriculum approaches which home schoolers use in facilitating their family's pedagogical format. They are a structured approach, an eclectic approach or a natural learning approach.

1. The structured curriculum approach is where parents purchase a whole curriculum resource that has been written by professional curriculum writers. These resources include the usual academic subjects and courses. This resource forms part, but not all of the family's home schooling curriculum, as there are many significant informal aspects to the child's learning experience.
2. An eclectic approach to home school curriculum is where parents purchase different curriculum resources from various suppliers to create their own curriculum suited to their child's needs. Again, these resources are not the sole content of the family's home schooling curriculum, as informal pedagogical practices contribute significantly to the child's learning experience.
3. A natural learning approach, also known as unschooling, is where the child's interests determine the type of curriculum to be followed and parents facilitate the child's education according to those interests. It comprises both child-directed learning experiences and other informal learning experiences.

Unlike traditional schooling, all three home schooling approaches present families with the time and flexibility that enables parents to encourage the individual interests, personal development, social development, and character formation of their child on an ongoing, full-time basis. All three rely on the lifestyle of the family, and especially conversations, as a vital part of the unstructured aspect of their home schooling (Harding, 2011).

Registration of Home Schooled Students

The educational authorities of each Australian state and territory require home schooled children to be registered as a home schooled student. The requirements for registration vary significantly across all jurisdictions. Whilst a significant cohort of families comply with this requirement, research has demonstrated that there is a non-quantifiable number of home schooled children who are not registered (HEAQ, 2019).

What Home Schooling is Not

Home schooling is neither distance education nor state-mandated learning-at-home.

In home schooling, the parents are responsible for their child's learning, and the students are required to be registered with their state or territory educational authority. Home schooled students are not enrolled in a school and are not supported by either state or federal funding. Essentially, home schooling is not distance education because the child is not enrolled in a school and the parents are responsible for their child's learning. Similarly, because home schooled students are not associated with or enrolled in a school, they cannot be considered to be part of the state-mandated learning-at-home practices extant during COVID-19 lockdown conditions.

2. Distance Education

Distance Education - Background

Bell (1990) observed that there has always been distance between the source of knowledge and the learner, whether it is the distance between a teacher and pupil in a classroom, an author and a reader or between a TV production and viewer. The difference is the medium through which learning takes place, as knowledge passes across distances between people. Bell (1990) noted that formal distance education is composed of several elements. They are "a desire to learn; the existence of someone, or some organisation, able and willing to teach; the availability of materials which have been prepared for this teaching and learning; the means of delivery of such materials; the assessment, guidance and encouragement of the learner; and a quantifiable method of measuring achievement as the learning progresses" (Bell, 1990, p196).

Distance education has been established in Australia in the government school sector since before World War I. However, non-

government distance education (NGDE) only recently emerged onto the Australian educational landscape, at the end of the 20th century, when four non-government schools provided full time education for their enrolled school-aged students, by distance education. Commonwealth funding of NGDE was formalised by the education minister The Hon. David Kemp at the turn of this century (Kemp, 2000), however, the underfunding of NGDE when compared with the funding of government schools of distance education, has been an ongoing contested issue (Harding, 2012ab&c, 2013, 2014a&b, 2017).

Currently, there are government schools of distance education in all states and territories and there are non-government schools of distance education in the states of New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia (Perilla, 2020). These educational institutions provide either full time or part time distance education for their enrolled students. With common access to modern communication technologies, technology-assisted distance education makes synchronous and asynchronous interactivity between teacher and learner possible, enabling pedagogic discourse between the two, in many geographically distributed classrooms across Australia (Buckingham, 2017; Harding 2012a).

Distance Education – A Description

Distance education is a method of education where there is significant distance between teacher and student. Distance education is conducted by a school that has been registered by the state or territory educational authority to provide distance education. In the non-government sector, the registration requirements for a school to provide distance education are above and beyond the normal registration requirements of the brick and mortar school. These schools must meet extra requirements which are specific to the provision of distance education.

The school is responsible for the education of its enrolled distance education students. What distinguishes distance education from traditional on-campus schooling is that distance education students participate in the school's educational program whilst usually located away from the school campus. The principal site of learning is usually the student's home (Harding, 2012a).

Various Australian states' education acts define the key features of distance education.

These are listed below.

- a. Distance education is provided by a registered school (*Education Act 1990* (NSW), 47(1)(k); *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Qld), Schedule 4, Dictionary; *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* (Vic) 2.1.3(b); *Education Act 2016* (Tas.), 174(f),104(1)).
- b. Distance education is education provided to school-aged children where the students and teachers are not regularly in the presence of each other but communicate with each other by writing, print, electronic or like means. (*Education Act 1990* (NSW), 3 Definitions (1); *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Qld), Schedule 4, Dictionary; *Education Act 1994* (Tas), 5).
- c. Attendance or participation for a child enrolled in a school of distance education is taken to mean that the child completes and returns the assigned work for the school's educational program. (*Education Act 1990* (NSW), 23(2)(b); *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006* (Qld), 177(2)(a), 234 (3) (a); *School Education Act 1999* (WA), 11j.(1) (b)(ii)).

Various government jurisdictions use two different terms in their official documents to name distance education. However, different providers of distance education choose to self-identify by various names such as distance learning, School of the Air, online learning, eSchool and Virtual School. Table 2 lists the different nomenclature for distance education as officially recognised by each state and territory.

STATE / TERRITORY	DISTANCE EDUCATION
Australian Capital Territory	Distance Education
New South Wales	Distance Education
Northern Territory	Distance Education
Queensland	Distance Education
South Australia	External Education
Tasmania	Tasmanian eSchool
Victoria	Virtual Learning
Western Australia	Distance Education

Table 2. Nomenclature for Distance Education by State and Territory

Key characteristics of distance education are:

- The school must be registered by the state or territory educational authority to provide distance education.
- The requirements of registration include the school providing curriculum, policies and governance specific to the provision of distance education.
- Schools providing distance education are funded by state and Commonwealth governments on a student-per-capita basis. This level of funding differs to that of students enrolled in traditional brick and mortar schools.
- Distance education students are enrolled as part of the school that is providing their distance education.
- The curriculum that the school provides must align with the state or territory's syllabus requirements.
- The school must comply with all state and territory requirements to provide distance education.
- The distance education timetable prescribes school-directed time frames for the students. It refers to school days, weeks, terms, and years, as well as due dates for the return of completed work.
- The students have access to the school's teachers, resources, and activities.
- Distance education parents voluntarily take on the responsibility as supervising home tutors to work with the school that provides the educational curriculum.
- The parents pay for all or part of the curriculum.
- There are significant differences between the policies and funding arrangements of government schools of distance education and non-government distance education.
- One parent must be available to supervise the curriculum provided by the school.
- The family is characteristically a single income family.
- The teaching and learning usually occurs in and around the family home.
- The students must reside in the state where the school is located.



What Distance Education is Not

Distance education is not home schooling. In distance education the children are enrolled in a school that is specifically registered by state and territory governments to provide distance education. Even though the child learns at home, the child must use the school's curriculum and must adhere to the school's daily, weekly, term and annual time frames. The child has access to the school's teachers and resources. The fundamental difference between distance education and home schooling is that in distance education the school and thus *ipso facto*, the Minister for Education, is responsible for the child's learning, whereas in home schooling, the parents are responsible for the child's learning. Table 3 (Harding, 2014) further clarifies the many distinctions between home schooling and distance education.

Pedagogy

The school provides the distance education student with its curriculum, the school's "course to run". This curriculum complies with the syllabus requirements of the relevant state or territory. Students can access the school's teachers, resources, and activities. Academic work is to be done in accord with the requirements of the school and within the given time frames of the school year.

Distance education has distinct educational features when compared to traditional schooling. These include a different form of presentation of curriculum materials, curriculum design and lesson presentation. Different processes of curriculum mapping, student tracking, online support for the teacher and student, electronic communication, and Internet links to outside curriculum sources are also necessary features of distance education (Bennett, Agostinho, Lockyer & Harper, 2010; McFarlane, 2011; Russell and Russell, 1999). Russell and Russell (1999) described the ICT dimension of distance education as "a cognitive space accessed by computer, which allows users in educational contexts to interact with texts, avatars and virtual reality" (p.8).

HOME SCHOOLING	DISTANCE EDUCATION
Parent is responsible for child's learning	School is responsible for child's learning
Child is registered with a state body	Child is enrolled in a school that is registered
Some are not registered with the state	All are enrolled in the school
No government funding	Funded by governments
Usually no access to registered teachers	Access to their school's teachers
Parents select curriculum resources	School selects curriculum resources
May or may not follow State and Australian Curriculum requirements	Follows State and Australian Curriculum requirements
Own time frame	Follows school time schedules
Provides own resources	Access to their school's resources
Provides own extra-curricular or social activities	Access to their school's extra-curricular or social activities
Typically no or low fees	School fees apply
No access to school-linked social security benefits	Access to school-linked social security benefits

Table 3. A Comparison of Features between Home Schooling and Distance Education (Harding, 2014, p. 23)

It is also important to note that distance education is not the same as the state-mandated learning-at-home educational practice that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Students who are educated via distance education are enrolled in a school that is registered to provide distance education. Unlike the disrupted learning-at-home student cohort, distance education students enjoy their normal educational contact with their school and their regular, carefully constructed *course to run*. By way of contrast, the COVID-19 learning-at-home students experienced an unusual, temporary learning experience and they expected to return to their brick and mortar campus when lockdown restrictions were lifted.

3. State Mandated Learning-At-Home

State-mandated "Learning-at-Home" - Background

During the recent COVID-19 lockdowns, traditional brick and mortar schools were required by the state to provide for their students learning-at-home pedagogies (also known as remote learning), as part of their educational practice. This was a temporary, emergency arrangement where students who were enrolled in brick and mortar schools were prohibited from entering their school. Instead, they were required to remain at home and continue their school-based learning from home unless they were exempted from doing so. This new, nationwide educational activity is an ad hoc, educational hybrid of traditional brick and mortar schooling practiced in the family home.

Pedagogy

This cohort of regular school students were prohibited from physically attending their schools. They were required to learn at home via the school's emergency educational provision. The school was required to provide a makeshift, temporary, ad hoc pedagogical mode that was foreign to the school's normal, authorised, standard curriculum and pedagogical practice. Teachers had to develop lessons in new formats at short notice, under pressure, knowing all along that these students would soon return to their brick and mortar campus. The look and feel of these lesson formats varied from the simplicity of sending home worksheets and textbooks, through to more complex synchronous and asynchronous online lessons.

Constraints to this learning process included the on-again, off-again sequencing of the mandated requirements; the ability, preparedness, and willingness of parents to participate in the learning-at-home pedagogies; the availability of parents to supervise the process; the availability of ICT services in the family home; parent wellbeing; child wellbeing and the willingness of the child to cooperate (Baxter & Evans-Whipp, 2022; Baker, 2021; Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022).

Unlike home schooling and distance education parents, these parents did not voluntarily seek to have their children at home during school hours and their regular employment hours. Many parents found it challenging to either supervise their children or to make arrangements to have their children supervised by others during normal school hours because they were often also required to continue full time work. This is distinct from the typical home school and distance education single-income families who have made a lifestyle choice conducive to their educational choices.

Unlike the disrupted learning-at-home student cohort, distance education students enjoy their normal educational contact with their school and their regular, carefully constructed course to run.





What State-mandated Learning-at-Home is Not

The state-mandated learning-at-home educational practice is neither home schooling, nor is it distance education. Australia's state and territory educational authorities did not require the parents of these students to register their children for home schooling. Further, the nation's schools which were forced into this pedagogy did not go through the rigorous process of becoming equipped and qualified to provide distance education for their students. Thus, these schools were not registered to provide distance education. This learning-at-home educational practice is neither *bona fide* home schooling, nor is it *bona fide* distance education. Sydney University lecturer in education, Dr. Nikki Brunker (2021) commented on the problem of confusing the idea of the mandated learning-at-home practice with the practice of home schooling, stating:

"We are confusing the terminology. Using the term 'home schooling' to describe schooling during lockdown is disrespectful to both teachers and home schoolers."

In contrast to the learning-at-home paradigm, home school and distance education parents voluntarily embrace their chosen form of education. They are well-prepared for and well equipped with the necessary resources for their children's education. Both home schooling and distance education are specifically legislatively supported, whereas the COVID-19 schooling measures were not.

Government-mandated learning-at-home was imposed compulsorily upon the nation's schools and parents, both of which were largely unprepared for this sudden change to the nation's schooling process. Given that the students were not registered for home schooling and the schools were not registered to provide distance education, it is hard to say what this makeshift, temporary form of schooling delivered in terms of quality learning to the nation's school students.

Conclusion

The three pedagogies of home schooling, distance education and state-mandated learning-at-home share a common learning context, that of the family home with parents as facilitators or supervisors of learning. Because the family home was the main pedagogical site and the parents were mostly supervising their own children, confusion about these pedagogies has arisen among the uninitiated as Brunker (2021) highlighted. Nonetheless, all three are distinct as to who is responsible for the child's learning and how this is achieved. This paper has contributed to that necessary clarification to the confusion of nomenclatures and pedagogies and the important distinction between home schooling, distance education and state-mandated learning-at-home.

References

- Baker, J. (2021). The 'impossible' juggle: Parents spent 14 hours a week on home learning. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October, 2021. <https://www.smh.com.au/education/the-impossible-juggle-parents-spent-14-hours-a-week-on-home-learning-20211012-p58zdz.html>
- Barry, C. (2020). How to survive home schooling your kids. *RACV*, 4 August, 2020. <https://www.racv.com.au/royalauto/lifestyle-home/home-school-remote-learning-tips.html>
- Baxter, J., & Evans-Whipp, T. (2022). *Child wellbeing during the COVID pandemic: Parental concerns* (Families in Australia Survey report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Bell, J. (1990). Distance education from correspondence course to CD-ROM and beyond. *Educational Media International*, 27(4), 196-198.
- Bennett, S., Agostino, S., Lockyer, L., & Harper, B. (2010). Learning Design. 30th Anniversary Volume: Special issue of *Distance Education*, 30(2), 175-287.
- Brunker, N. (2021). Schooling in lockdown isn't home schooling – but we can learn from the real thing. *The Conversation*. July 29, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/schooling-in-lockdown-isnt-home-schooling-but-we-can-learn-from-the-real-thing-165004>
- Buckingham, J. (2017). Virtual schooling in Australia: From "School of the Air" to "Distance Education". In *The Wiley Handbook of School Choice*, Robert A. Fox & Nina K. Buchman (Eds.), 17 March, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119082361.ch30>
- Harding, T.J.A. (2011). *A study of parents' conceptions of their roles as home educators of their children*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland.
- Harding, T. (2011). *Why parents choose non-government distance education in New South Wales: A research report submitted to the New South Wales Minister for Education, the Hon Adrian Piccoli*. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2012a). *A description of non-government distance education in Australia: A submission presented to the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth*. August 2012. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2012b). Non-government distance education funding: The need for equity in Australian schooling. *Distance Education*, 33(2), 271-278. August 2012. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2012c). *A comparison of non-government distance education recurrent funding, with the funding of other forms of schooling in Australia: A Submission presented to the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth*. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2013). *A Submission presented to the House Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012*. March 2013. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2014a). *The inequity of the Commonwealth's legislated underfunding of non-government distance education: A submission presented to the Senate Select Committee on School Funding*. March 2014. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2014b). *A submission to the NSW Minister for Education regarding: The funding of non-government distance education students*. July 2014. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2014c). *A submission to the Select Committee on Home Schooling Inquiry into Home Schooling*. August 2014. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, T. (2017). *The underfunding of non-government distance education students in Australia: A Comparative Snapshot*. June 2017. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.
- Harding, (2022). *Home schooling: An introduction*. Australian Christian Home Schooling: Brisbane, Australia.
- HEAQ. (2019). *The experience of home education in Queensland*. Brisbane: Home Education Australia – Queensland.
- Kemp, D. (2000). Second reading speech, *States Grants (Primary and Secondary Assistance) Act 2000*. http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/2000-09-06/toc_pdf/6801.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22r1128%20%20second%20reading%20kemp,%20dr%20david,%20mp%22 Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.
- McFarlane, D.A., (2011). A comparison of organisational structure and pedagogical approach: Online versus face-to-face. *The Journal of Educators Online*, 8(1), 1-43.
- McPhee, S. (2020). School closures confusion explained. *Kidspot*, 23 March, 2020. <https://www.kidspot.com.au/school/primary/real-life/school-closures-confusion-explained/news-story/9300f677e390b164f88dc58d2ca93a98>
- New South Wales Government, (2022). *Education Act 1990*. Retrieved 18 November, 2022, from: <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/whole/html/inforce/current/act-1990-008>
- Perilla, K., (2020). Distance education in Australia: A list of all providers per state. 11 June, 2020. Retrieved 23 November, 2022, from: <https://nolimitsactive.com/distance-education-in-australia-a-list-of-all-providers-per-state/>
- Queensland Government (2022). *Education (General Provisions) Act 2006*. Retrieved 11 November 2022, from: <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2006-039>
- Russell, G. & Russell, N. (1999). Cyberspace and school education. *Westminster Studies in Education*, 22, 7-17.
- Tasmanian Government, (2022). *Education Act 2016*. Retrieved 18 November 2022, from: <https://www.legislation.tas.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2016-051>
- Van Bergen, P., Daniel, E. "I miss seeing the kids!": Australian teachers' changing roles, preferences, and positive and negative experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Educational Researcher*. (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00565-w>
- Victorian Education Department, (2022). *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*. Retrieved 18 November, 2022, from: <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/education-and-training-reform-act-2006/096>
- 9News Staff, (2021). Home schooling in Greater Sydney to continue for two more weeks. *9News*, Jul 14, 2021. <https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-nsw-update-home-learning-to-continue-for-school-students/3cb46fac-731e-494c-940c-1add77e5486a>



Dr Terry Harding

Terry Harding has a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma in Education from the University of Sydney; a Diploma in Christian Doctrine and Practice from Emmaus Bible School; a Masters degree in Education and a PhD in Education from the Queensland University of Technology and a Diploma in Counselling from Australian Institute of Family Counselling. Terry has taught in Christian Schools for 15 years. He has been a principal of 5 Christian schools and has managed both Christian homeschooling and distance education.