



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS  
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

# Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Submission by  
the Independent Schools Council of  
Australia (ISCA)

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| About ISCA .....   | 3  |
| Introduction .....   | 4  |
| Background .....   | 4  |
| School closures and move to online learning .....              | 4  |
| Boarding schools .....   | 6  |
| Indigenous students from remote communities and ABSTUDY .....  | 6  |
| Copyright.....   | 7  |
| NBN Co .....   | 7  |
| Financial impacts of the pandemic on Independent schools ..... | 7  |
| JobKeeper .....  | 8  |
| Financial measures to assist Independent schools.....          | 9  |
| Early release of July funding .....                            | 9  |
| School Hygiene Assistance Funding .....                        | 10 |
| Early Childhood Education .....                                | 10 |
| International Education .....                                  | 12 |
| Long term impacts of the pandemic on Independent schools ..... | 13 |
| Impact on students .....                                       | 13 |
| Conclusion.....  | 14 |

## About ISCA

ISCA is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,148 schools and almost 632,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISCA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools have been Australia's fastest growing school sector over the last decade, with the latest figure of a 2.5 per cent growth in full time equivalent enrolments being the sector's highest since 2008. In 2019, Independent school enrolment growth was recorded across all fee levels, with the strongest growth in low fee (below \$5,000 per annum) Independent schools.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.

Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the Independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas, special schools for students with disability and boarding schools to educate children from regional and remote areas. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practise an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

## Introduction

The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 covering

- a. the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- b. any related matters.

Independent schools serve a broad range of students and communities, reflecting the diversity of Australian society, and have a long-standing commitment to supporting quality education for students across Australia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique and unprecedented set of challenges for all aspects of life for all Australians, including schooling.

## Background

The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was confirmed on 25 January 2020. From February travel bans were imposed on China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy. The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. On 20 March 2020 Australian borders were closed to non-residents.

The National Cabinet, comprising the Australian Government and State and Territory premiers and chief ministers, was formed on 13 March 2020. At successive weekly meetings, the National Cabinet has broadly agreed actions to be taken by the Australian Government and the states and territories in relation to the pandemic.

The Australian Government and the National Cabinet have been advised in relation to the pandemic and appropriate health measures by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC). The AHPPC comprises the Chief Medical Officer of the Australian Government, the Chief Health Officers of the State and Territory Governments, nominated health disaster officials and other experts.

On 21 March 2020 social distancing was introduced along with the closure of non-essential services by state and territory governments. At that time the Prime Minister stated that he would like the schools to remain open, but parents could keep children at home if they wished to.

On 29 March, the National Cabinet agreed to stricter limits to apply from midnight on 30 March including strong guidance to all Australians to stay home unless for necessary shopping, health care, exercise, and work and study that couldn't be done remotely. It was left to individual states and territories to implement and enforce these guidelines.

While the focus of this submission is the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, discussion of this is not possible without referencing the advice and decisions of the AHPPC, the National Cabinet and the state and territory governments.

## School closures and move to online learning

One of the more confusing aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic response has been the mixed messages and conflicting advice from state and territory governments and the Australian

Government on who should be attending school and who should be learning from home, particularly with respect to understandings about who are:

- Essential workers
- Vulnerable students
- Vulnerable staff.

Non-government schools exist in a complex regulatory environment. They are registered as schools by state and territory education authorities and must abide by all relevant state and territory legislation as well as national legislation. As the recipients of Australian Government funding, non-government schools also have to meet all the requirements of the *Australian Education Act 2013* to meet the on-going conditions for funding.

The confusion became apparent around the time of the National Cabinet meeting on 22 March 2020 when several states; NSW, Victoria and the ACT had already announced their intention to essentially close schools while noting that they would be accessible to those who needed them, for example the families of essential workers.

After the National Cabinet meeting, the Prime Minister was clear that schools would stay open saying that *“it is still the case, and...the evidence is that the incidents of the coronavirus amongst younger people is far lower than it is for the rest of the population. And so the health risk to children is less, is our advice, than to other parts of the population. It is also still the fact that if there were widespread school closures across the country, then that would seriously impact and disrupt the health workforce that is needed to save lives. And so that is a paramount consideration also of the National Cabinet.”*<sup>1</sup>

As the pandemic worsened, state and territory health advice resulted in an increased shift to on-line learning in schools. While the length and extent of on-line learning differed greatly from state to state, the move to online learning across Australia had wide-ranging impacts and implications for all Independent schools. These range from reporting requirements to staffing and include:

- Initial confusion about appropriate attendance recording
- Parents wishing to withdraw their child from school during the period of learning from home
- Legal aspects of a school meeting the requirements of enrolment contracts with parents
- Duty of care arrangements (students and staff)
- Delivery of online support that ensured appropriate understanding of child protection arrangements (to protect both staff and students)
- Working from home arrangements, including insurance cover.

Independent schools have been managing this widely varied set of issues and concerns without systemic support, such as that available to government schools.

As the pandemic progressed, tensions between the Australian Government Minister and some state and territory governments in relation to schooling became apparent. In late April 2020, the Australian Government Minister for Education imposed a funding condition on non-government

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-australian-parliament-house-act-22march>

schools under the *Australian Education Act 2013* which required schools to provide a physical learning environment from the commencement of Term 2, 2020. This was perceived as reinforcing the Australian Government position that schools had to remain open.

On 24 April 2020 the AHPPC released advice on reducing the potential risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. This advice noted “the relatively low risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools”.<sup>2</sup> On the same day the National Cabinet provided advice that social distancing was not required in schools agreeing that “the 1.5 metre social distancing requirement and four square metre rule for venues was “not appropriate and not required” for schools.”<sup>3</sup> With the easing of the pandemic and changes to health advice in the states and territories, Australia should shortly be in the position of all states and territories having completely returned to classroom learning.

Having messages that are unclear and at times apparently contradictory, particularly between the Australian Government and state and territory governments, has required Independent schools to manage their individual situations and to respond to highly complex situations with a great deal of flexibility and speed.

### Boarding schools

There were significant difficulties with respect to boarding arrangements and health directives at the state and territory level with different advice being provided by different jurisdictions with different requirements. Some states allowed boarding schools to remain open with specific conditions and others required all boarding schools to close.

Another issue is that of out-of-state boarding students and the need for them to cross borders border to enable school attendance. This also applies to school staff. With schools resuming classroom learning and as students return to boarding schools, some state borders remain closed, potentially preventing students and / or staff from returning to their schools.

### Indigenous students from remote communities and ABSTUDY

The Independent sector is the largest provider of boarding facilities to Indigenous students. There was significant concern about the ongoing viability of several Independent boarding schools which solely serve the needs of Indigenous students from remote communities. In some states boarding schools were completely closed on health grounds due to transmission concerns and at the same time all Indigenous students went back to their communities either due to school closures or to return before the communities were closed to protect vulnerable populations.

The Department of Social Services quickly made positive changes to ABSTUDY payments to support Indigenous students and boarding schools in Term 2. Under the new temporary arrangements, boarding students who qualified for ABSTUDY or Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) boarding payments in Term 1 will continue to qualify for payments in Term 2, provided they maintain their Term 1 boarding arrangements. This was welcomed by the Independent sector.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-advice-on-reducing-the-potential-risk-of-covid-19-transmission-in-schools-24-april-2020>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/updated-advice-social-distancing-school>

## Copyright

With the move to on-line learning for large numbers of Australian students, the issues of intellectual property and copyright were of significant area of concern for schools. ISCA and NCEC wrote to the Australian Government at the end of March outlining the non-government school sector's concerns.

In early May the Australian Government Ministers for Education and Communications wrote back to ISCA and NCEC noting that the National Copyright Unit had developed guidelines to help teachers use copyright content effectively and minimise potential harm to copyright owners and that these guidelines have received in principle agreement for the collecting societies.

The letter also noted that notwithstanding the in-principle agreement to the guidelines, that schools remain at risk of technical breaches under the *Copyright Act 1968* and that the Australian Government Minister for Communications would write to collecting societies to ask for 'forbearance' during the pandemic.

The need for schools to be able to deliver remote and online learning more flexibly was also noted and the Ministers gave an undertaking to seek further legislative change as soon as possible.

## NBN Co

In early April 2020, the Australian Government Minister for Communications wrote to ISCA seeking assistance in identifying and communicating with families of students who do not have access to the National Broadband Network (NBN) at home. There was a concern expressed at the ability of children to learn online if they did not have an adequate internet connection at their home.

NBN Co engaged with Retail Service Providers (RSPs) and with the education sector to develop initiatives to support the connection of these students. This included access options for remote communities and the schools servicing students in those communities. On 17 April the Australian Government Ministers for Finance and Communications announced \$150 million in relief to internet providers so that they could assist Australian families and businesses. Of those funds, \$50 million was specifically allocated to assist low-income households with school-aged children.

## Financial impacts of the pandemic on Independent schools

As a result of school closures and the associated economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Independent schools are facing two major financial challenges:

- The level of fee remission individual schools are providing to assist struggling families and keep children enrolled at school, and
- A possible downturn in enrolments which has the potential to affect schools' long-term financial viability.

Many Independent schools are already reporting large increases in the amount of fee remission being requested by families in Independent schools and the same is true of the Catholic sector.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6766095/catholic-school-families-seek-fee-relief-under-strain-of-covid-19-crisis/>

ISCA and the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools have repeatedly raised these concerns with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) and the Australian Government Minister for Education. A large part of the sector's concern centred around the fact that it did not seem likely that many schools would be eligible for JobKeeper and that for many schools, assistance did not appear to be forthcoming.

With respect to school staff there have been limited provisions (other than JobSeeker) for:

- Casual teachers with no contracts, no holiday work and little prospects of options
- Teachers who are less digitally able who struggled to go online
- Teachers with medical conditions who would have been compromised by working at school
- School Ancillary staff – sports coaches, music tutors, bus drivers, canteen staff etc who lost jobs or were stood down as there was no work for them, however, many may not fit within the JobKeeper criteria.

### JobKeeper

The main financial assistance program provided by the Australian Government has also possibly been the largest source of confusion for Independent schools. The sector is aware however that a normal process of stakeholder consultation, which would normally take six to eighteen months prior to implementation, was not possible given the required speed of implementation.

As noted above, initially it seemed highly unlikely that many Independent schools would be eligible for the JobKeeper payment given the threshold requirement of a 30 per cent reduction in turnover. There was a brief moment when it seemed that non-government schools might be eligible for the reduced threshold of 15 per cent for charities registered with Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (which nearly all non-government schools are) but it was quickly clarified that this did not apply to universities or non-government schools.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most significant issues to date have been:

- Lack of clarity with respect to “one in, all in” requirement with employees
- Lack of clarity with respect to apportioning income (particularly fees and grants)
- Lack of clarity around the use of accrual or cash-based accounting e.g. billing practices in schools and invoicing parents in advance either yearly or at the beginning of each term for the full amount of tuition and other fees rather than the net cash amount that will be received.

A number of these issues were finally clarified for the sector in an ATO webinar for the sector on 7 May 2020, a month after the program was announced and the day before the employer requirement to have paid all employees a minimum of \$1,500 per fortnight.

The JobKeeper program has required, and continues to require, adjustments as issues are raised.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/Fact\\_sheet\\_supporting\\_businesses\\_0.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/Fact_sheet_supporting_businesses_0.pdf)

## Financial measures to assist Independent schools

### Early release of July funding

Non-government schools receive their funding from the Australian Government in three payments each year: January, July, and October. Following repeated representations from the Independent sector about the financial impact of COVID-19 on schools, on 28 April the Australian Government Minister for Education announced that the July payment could be brought forward to either a May or June payment.

This was on the basis that “current expert health advice is that attendance at a school campus for education represents a very low risk to students, and that education is best delivered by professional teachers to students in the classroom.”<sup>6</sup>

In order to access the early payment, schools had to give an undertaking that they would be open in Term 2 and that they had a plan to have at least 50 per cent of students return to face-to-face teaching by 1 June 2020. This was extremely problematic for a number of Independent schools in states and territories where the current health advice from state authorities was for students to continue to engage in on-line learning and there were no plans as yet for the re-opening of schools. Schools were initially given 2 days to respond and this was extended to 3 days.

As Independent Schools Victoria noted in their media release of 29 April 2020,

*Schools now have just two days to decide if they are able to provide a safe workplace for their teachers and a safe learning environment for their students, in circumstances where they are all under incredible strain and many are under financial pressure,’ she said.*

*‘If they resume on-site education, they will be rewarded with financial support. If not, that support will be withheld.*

*‘Independent schools are being used as a wedge in a policy disagreement between the Federal and Victorian governments. This is unfair and entirely inappropriate when what’s at stake is the health of children and their teachers.*

*‘The students and teachers at Independent schools are being pitted against their government counterparts.*

*‘ISV has consistently recommended to its Member Schools that they follow the advice of the Victorian Government, based in turn on the advice of Victoria’s Chief Health Officer.*

*‘While not mandatory for Independent schools, this advice is that schools should provide remote and flexible learning for the majority of their students, while providing onsite learning for those who have no alternative.’<sup>7</sup>*

There was no forewarning or consultation of the condition that the Australian Government put on the advance payments. As a result of the condition, many schools did not apply for the early

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<sup>6</sup> <https://schools.education.gov.au/schoolshub/help/files/factsheet.return.to.classroom.based.learning>

<sup>7</sup> <https://is.vic.edu.au/media-release/independent-schools-placed-under-unfair-political-pressure/>

payment even though they may have benefitted, because they were fearful of contravening the health advice of their state or territory health department.

### School Hygiene Assistance Funding

On 14 May 2020 it was announced that \$10 million of Special Circumstances funding was being made available to non-government schools through the *School Hygiene Assistance Fund* for the 2019-20 financial year. The funding is to support non-government schools that planned to have 50 per cent of their students back in the classroom by 1 June 2020 by assisting with hygiene costs such as soap, hand sanitiser, classroom cleaning supplies and additional cleaning services.

Schools which had expressed an intention to be open in term 2 but were not able to commit to having at least 50 per cent of students returned to face to face learning by 1 June 2020 were offered the opportunity to do so in order to receive the funding under the *School Hygiene Assistance Fund*.

Schools which had not responded to the offer of the early release of the July payment and had not definitively indicated that they would be open in Term 2 were told that they could be found in breach of Section 78 of the *Australian Education Act 2013*, which could result in schools having any further payments delayed until compliance was confirmed. It also meant that they would not be considered for assistance under the *School Hygiene Assistance Fund*.

While the cleaning costs associated with normal school operations going ahead during the pandemic have been recognised for sometime as a significant impost on schools and any assistance from the Australian Government is welcome, to have differential arrangements and eligibility requirements in place for different groups of schools is unnecessary.

### Early Childhood Education

It is estimated that across Australia, the Independent sector educates and cares for over 25,000 children aged from 3 months to five years of age and employs over 8,000 early childhood educators. It became clear early in the pandemic response that Early Childhood Education providers were struggling as children were withdrawn from the system. In addition to raising these issues with DESE, ISCA wrote to the Australian Government Minister for Education outlining the sector's concerns. Below is an extract from that submission.

*Under normal circumstances the provision of long day care services in ELC's operated by independent schools is supported by a combination of fees paid by parents together with the Australian Government's Childcare Subsidy Scheme, which is capped at \$119 per day.*

*In the early weeks of the COVID19 pandemic, the independent sector reported a significant decrease in children's attendance at their respective ELC's and the withdrawal of enrolments as parents and/or guardians were being stood down from their own employment. The Government's initial response to increase the allowable number of days of absence by a child from a service was of benefit to some ELC's but not all, as this was based on the total number of enrolments which were already decreasing.*

*The introduction of the Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package (ECECRP) by the Australian Government on 2 April 2020 was, in conjunction with the JobKeeper scheme, designed to support the ECEC sector. The Department of Employment, Skills and Education*

*(DESE) acknowledged that the combination of both the ECECRP and JobKeeper scheme was to be considered as a joint payment to support the ongoing costs of running and early childhood service providing long day care.*

*The Modern Awards covering staff in the independent sector do not, under most circumstances, enable independent schools operating ELCs to stand down staff in their ELC, even though the number of children attending the centre would warrant this, and hence these staff are not eligible for the JobKeeper scheme (even if the school as a whole is eligible) yet schools are still required to pay all their salaries. Consequently, in contrast to the impact of these support schemes on a stand-alone ECEC service, which would be entitled to access both schemes, the nett result for ELCs run by independent schools has been financially disastrous. In fact, the financial impact on ELCs run by the independent sector is so significant that it is threatening the future viability of entire schools.*

*The loss of revenue being experienced by ELCs run by independent schools results from three areas:*

- A decrease in enrolments due to the economic consequences on parents/guardians' financial circumstances due to the pandemic*
- The Australian Government's ECECRP which provides only 50% of the previous subsidy level to independent schools and a general inability for ELCs to access the JobKeeper scheme for their staff*
- The introduction of the ECECRP precludes ELCs from charging parents and/or guardians additional gap fees (as would normally be the case in some if not many services).*

*Taken together, the economic impact of this on ELCs run by independent schools and ultimately on the schools themselves is enormous. Unlike schools, where fees are usually collected on a termly basis and government grants (both Commonwealth and State) are based yearly (although paid in instalments) long day care income is based on weekly attendance figures and hence the impact of a decrease in enrolments has an immediate impact. Consequently, many ELCs have quickly become not financially viable and are having such a significant impact on the financial position of the entire school that their Governing Bodies, mindful of their responsibilities under the Corporations Act 2001, are likely to see no option but to close many ELCs with the resultant loss in available ECEC places for the community. This will also have a significant impact of the ability of the economy to recover following the pandemic as there will be a shortage of early education and childcare places.*

At the time of provision of ISCA's submission to the Australian Government Minister for Education, there was an announcement on 30 April 2020 that non-government schools would have their payments automatically increased. Following the Australian Government's decision to expand the Exceptional Circumstance Supplementary Payment to support early childhood education and care services that are not eligible for the JobKeeper Payment, services associated with non-government schools have now received a separate payment to cover the period from 6 April 2020. Going

forward, these payments will be included with the regular weekly Exceptional Circumstance Supplementary Payment.

## International Education

School communities benefit significantly from internationalisation of schooling and from the social and economic contributions of overseas students. In 2019 there were over 7,600 overseas students enrolled in Independent schools in Australia.

In 2020, as with other sectors, COVID-19 has substantially impacted overseas student enrolments and international programs in Independent schools. Some schools have reported 50% and more of their overseas students have either not been able to start the school year or have returned home. Schools with study tour programs have reported cancellations for 2020 and are not expecting confirmations for 2021 until there is certainty about border entry.

While impacts have varied according to individual school contexts, many schools are attempting to support student who remain offshore via online learning until they are able to return to Australia to resume their studies face to face. For how long they can continue to do this is uncertain.

Overall, Independent schools with international education programs are supportive of the Australian Government's response to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and minimise impacts on local communities. However, there are many ways in which the Australian Government's response has impacted on international education programs in individual schools, and schools look to governments to support the recovery of programs as soon as possible.

The following have been identified by schools as positive aspects or outcomes of the Australian Government's responses to COVID-19:

- Taking action to prevent the spread of the virus (closing the borders, locking down geographical areas, flattening the curve) has protected the community and will position Australia a safe destination when our borders re-open
- Regulatory flexibility – for example, relaxation of some rules around student visas
- Stakeholders have been kept informed in frequent updates via various means of communication (despite sources of information not always being consistent)
- The need for intense communications with stakeholders and greater use of technology to support online learning has been a learning process for schools. This in turn has increased school capacity to connect with families and support students.

Schools perceive negative outcomes of the Government's response to COVID-19 to be across a range of areas. These include:

- Border security measures; short notice of border closures and flight cancellations has meant some students were not able to meet travel deadlines and schools have found it difficult to organise for vulnerable students under 18 years to safely travel home; the process for exemptions to the Australian Government's travel ban for Years 11 and 12 students from China was complex and impractical, and depended on agreement of states and territories
- Reputational damage to Australia; the delay in processing of student visas means that students are in limbo and schools are concerned about reputational risk if these visas are

subsequently denied; there has been no indication for international students when borders might reopen to allow them to resume their commence studies and some students are now looking at other options

- Impact on school programs and staff; uncertainty about how to respond flexibly whilst remaining compliant with regulatory obligations; students who are in Australia feel vulnerable and isolated; schools are supporting overseas students to continue their learning onshore as well as offshore which has meant a significant increase in workload for staff; if the borders remain closed.

While acknowledging the on-going work of DESE, the Department of Home Affairs, Australian Border Force, Austrade and other bodies, if disruptions to overseas students' studies are not addressed as quickly as possible, schools anticipate the following consequences:

- Inability of students to complete school studies, impacting on pathways to tertiary studies
- Students may choose Foundation studies over Senior Secondary studies
- Significant loss of revenue from long term student enrolments and short-term study programs and increased unemployment in the sector
- Significant reputational damage to Australia as a study destination of choice.

The failure of the Australian Government to implement any meaningful measures to assist the welfare of overseas students has also been the source of significant concern to the international education sector and is perceived to be a significant danger to Australia's reputation when compared to the assistance provided to overseas students by of our main competitor countries.

### Long term impacts of the pandemic on Independent schools

It is not yet clear what the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be on Independent schools. ISCA and the AISs are working with the Australian Government to continue to monitor the financial health of individual schools. There are a number of factors that have impacted on Independent schools and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

- Most Independent schools are providing significantly increased fee relief to families
- There are reports of cancelled enrolments
- A significant number of international students remain offshore and it is likely that overseas student numbers will decline in 2021 if borders do not reopen.

The pandemic also comes at a time when the non-government sector is facing a significant change in Australian Government funding with the introduction of the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) and the financial future of some schools is already in doubt.

While some Independent schools have been able to access some government assistance measures, it is entirely possible that the next 6 months to 2 years will see a number of Independent schools experiencing significant financial distress.

### Impact on students

In terms of the students being educated at Independent schools there are concerns for some cohorts of students adversely affected by school closures and the move to on-line learning. These include students who:

- Have specific needs that require special assistance
- Do not have access to internet or technology at home
- Live in remote communities
- Normally attend a boarding school and are unable to access the return to face-to-face learning offered to day students
- Highly disadvantaged and disengaged youth including students impacted by domestic violence, abuse or living in out of home care etc
- Indigenous boarding school who returned to community may be unable to return to school due to restrictions around boarding schools and state border closures.

The expectation that parents who are working full-time from home also have the time capacity to adequately involve themselves in their children/s learning from home was also somewhat unrealistic and the definition of “essential workers” does not appear to cater for the majority of parents.

## Conclusion

There is a general acknowledgement that many of the measures put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Australian Government were, by necessity, done in haste and without any of the usual processes that would normally accompany the development of national measures of such scale. In relation to Australian Government policy affecting Independent schools, the sector has found that while some issues have taken some time to be addressed, eventually they have generally been addressed in what is clearly an extraordinarily difficult public policy environment.

However, the existence of tension between the Australian Government and State and Territory governments, that was often exacerbated by media reports, resulted in confusion for representative bodies, school boards, principals, teachers, parents and students. This, in turn, wasted time for many as they sought clarification.

Information was being put out by Departments of Education and Departments of Health at both levels of government and across multiple jurisdictions, the Prime Minister’s office, Premiers’ offices, Treasurers’ offices, The National Cabinet, the AHPPC and so on. One ‘source of truth’ would have been significantly easier for the Australian public to deal with. The existence of the National Cabinet provided the potential for alignment and consistency of message. The reality was somewhat different.

It seems clear that the Australian Government was heavily invested in all schools remaining open in order for as many workers as possible to continue to engage in the economy. However, constitutionally school education is the responsibility of State and Territory governments and each of those governments was dealing with different presentations of the pandemic resulting in differing approaches to the provision schooling. This led to an extremely complex and confusing patchwork of requirements on schools at a range of levels which is still in the process of being resolved.

It also led to a perception that Independent schools were being used a means for the Australian Government to attempt to gain leverage over state and territory governments to keep schools open, while putting some Independent schools in an extremely difficult position with regard to the advice and direction of government in their own state or territory.

Better integration of decision-making between States and Territory governments and the Australian Government in relation to schooling but also across a range of other areas, including border control, would have significantly reduced the confusion experienced by not only Independent schools, but also the students who attend them and the families of those students.