

DISTANCE EDUCATION

BACKGROUND

In August 2018, the ACT Government released the *Future of Education: An ACT Education Strategy for the next ten years*. Through the Future of Education strategy, one of the first actions under the foundation of 'systems supporting learning' is to review and amend the *Education Act 2004* (the Act), to strengthen equity, student agency, access, and inclusion.

The fifth phase of amendments to the *Education Act 2004* (the Act), which forms the *Education Amendment Bill 2024* (the Bill), relates predominantly to enrolment, participation and attendance provisions as well as clarifying the requirements for distance education in the Act.

Amendments to the Act will ensure that the ACT has legislation that reflects the principles of its education system: providing excellence and equity in education to all ACT children. The purpose of this phase is to ensure that updates relating to enrolments, attendance and participation will keep the Act up to date with the requirements of a modern educational environment, and to ensure that parents/carers and school staff have greater clarity around their obligations.

Amendments to distance education will ensure that the Act has clearly outlined and rigorous requirements for delivering this type of educational program to students in both the government and non-government sectors.

WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Distance education is a method of accessing education where a student is enrolled at a school but does not physically attend or receive instruction in person. Instead, students communicate with teachers and receive instruction through educational programs delivered at a distance, generally by electronic means.

Distance education differs from home education as education is delivered by qualified teachers, while in home education a student's parents or carers are responsible for providing education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE ACT

At present, distance education is only available for students enrolled in an ACT government school as no non-government school registered in the ACT currently offers a distance education program.

The ACT also does not currently maintain its own specialised government distance education program or school. Instead, distance education for ACT students is administered by the Education Directorate's Flexible Education Team with students accessing an educational program provided by the Finigan School of Distance Education, a New South Wales government school located in Queanbeyan. As part of this arrangement, students maintain enrolment with their local ACT government school and receive support to transition to distance education from Flexible Education, while educational instruction and day to day individual student support is provided by the Finigan School. ACT students participating in distance education through the Finigan School access the Australian Curriculum as it is implemented in NSW by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA).

In the ACT, government distance education currently operates as an equity program for students whose individual circumstances prevent them from regularly attending school. Most commonly,

ACT students are enrolled in distance education if they have a medical condition which prevents regular attendance at school, have additional learning and support needs or are vocationally talented.¹ All students accessing distance education must meet ongoing eligibility criteria to secure enrolment and continue to access the program.

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

In its current form, the Act is largely silent on distance education. It provides neither a formal definition of distance education nor explicit requirements for enrolment or delivery of a distance education program in the ACT. There is also no mention of the delivery of distance education by the non-government school sector.

It is proposed to formally define distance education in the Act to clarify its purpose and the role it can play in the ACT education system both now and into the future. To ensure students have access to a high-quality education, it is also proposed to develop standards and requirements for the delivery of distance education. These would apply to both the government and non-government school sectors to ensure consistency across the ACT. For the non-government school sector, it is envisaged that these standards and requirements would complement and align with the existing non-government school registration standards as far as possible to streamline approval processes for those schools seeking to deliver distance education.

Feedback is being sought on the role of distance education in the ACT in the future. In particular, feedback is sought on if distance education across all schooling sectors should be delivered on an equity basis with specific enrolment criteria to ensure consistency?

HOW CAN I HAVE MY SAY?

Your feedback will assist in informing legislative change which strengthens the quality of education and focuses on the safety and wellbeing of children and young people enrolled in government and non-government schools in the ACT.

Input on issues raised in this paper can be provided through a survey response to the questions provided on YourSay or by contacting the Legislation Reform team on the details below.

CONTACT DETAILS

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¹ <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/rural-and-distance-education/distance-education>