

# How Australia's best prepared school learnt from the SARS outbreak

EdHQ



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Victoria's Nossal High School was likely better prepared than any other school in Australia for the coronavirus pandemic.



Stuart Fankhauser oversees Nossal High School's digital delivery days program.

Prompted by a professional development talk on the SARS outbreak of the early 2000s, the selective entry public school began running five 'digital deliver days' per year in 2015.

Under the program, teachers deliver lessons online and students are encouraged to study from home. Although the school remains open to those who need it, the overwhelming majority of students have taken to home learning.

Nossal High School's Director of Innovation and Digital Development, Stuart Fankhauser, told EducationHQ that many students wish the digital delivery days were held more often.

"When we get feedback from the kids, they always say that one or two every week [would be better], or every fortnight.

"I'm not sure what their feedback's gonna be after the last month or so, that might have changed a little bit," Fankhauser said, laughing.

Although the program was set up mainly to prepare students for university, Fankhauser said that emergency management was also a consideration.

"The actual reasons for us were quite pedagogical, but in the back of our minds, as I say, we also had that as a backup mechanism in case something was to happen.

"I was always thinking that it would be something more like a prolonged public transport outage, or maybe a heatwave or something like that.

"Down here towards Melbourne, we can get those weeks of 40-degree temperatures that stuff everything up. So I thought maybe something like that will happen where we need to employ this in an emergency management situation."

Fankhauser said that the early days of the program were a technological nightmare, with most video conferencing software not designed to meet the huge demands of a school environment.

“We were crashing every server possible when it came to online learning, because every licence that we undertook always had an expectation that no more than 15 per cent of your users would ever use it at the same time,” he said.

“So we had a bit of a reputation for breaking lots of online services, because suddenly 1000 concurrent users would jump on when they're expecting, you know, 100 or 150.

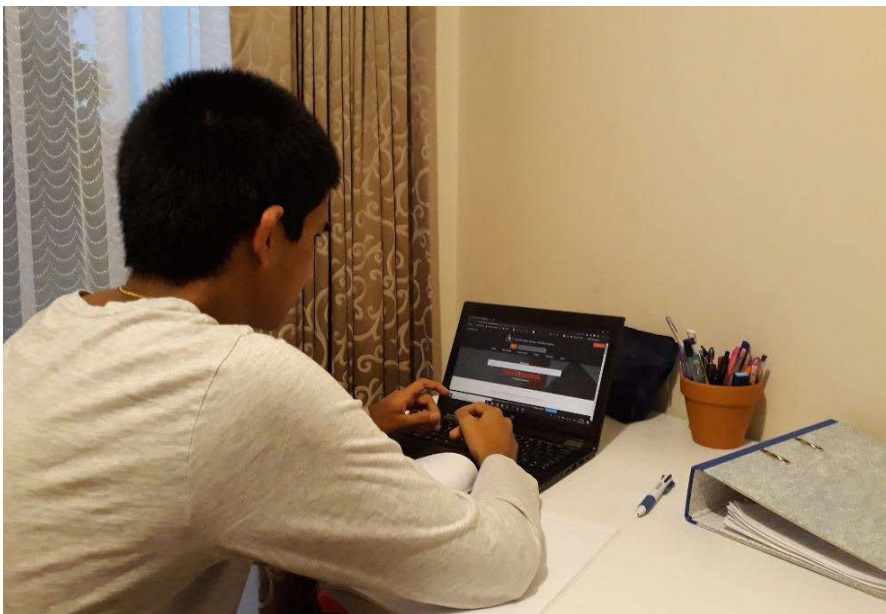
“We learnt a lot over those early years and I think that put us in a fairly comfortable position, where we were able to transition very smoothly over the last couple of weeks and at the end of Term 1 to move into the online world.”

Microsoft Teams was released two years after Nossal High began running digital delivery days, and the program proved to be a godsend for the school.

“You're able to structure an environment in a way that you want to structure the environment, including just the whole Teams architecture. How you want to set that whole environment up, that's entirely open to you as an institution and can suit your needs,” Fankhauser said.

“So we spent a lot of time whiteboarding, we did weeks and weeks of whiteboarding all the different ways we wanted to structure Teams and all the different channels we wanted to have inside Teams, before we actually committed to the environment that we wanted to create...

“The way that it's just so open and available to your interpretation is what makes it really powerful for us.”



A Nossal High School student learning from home.

Running lessons online has had huge benefits for both students and teachers, Fankhauser said.

“[The students] were really keen to experience some learning in an online platform and they appreciated that there were genuine differences between face-to-face teaching and online learning and how their obligations as a learner change.

“And on the other side, the teachers were keeping up high levels of skills in using some pretty advanced tech in terms of the teaching process, and they were keeping them fresh every year because the technology was changing. Over the last six years, what's gone on is incredible.”

Having the flexibility to move teaching online has also had strategic benefits for Nossal High.

“We're a school that operates from Years 9 to 12. All our Year 11 and 12 students do the GAT, for example, and we want the school absolutely quiet that day.

“So what we do is we put the Year 9s and 10s on a digital delivery event and keep them at home and we have the Year 11 and 12s continue as normal and they complete the GAT. And so that makes things like that much [easier] to achieve.”

With teachers typically only running five digital delivery days a year, Fankhauser acknowledged that there were challenges in adapting to a full-time online environment.

“We realised what was going to happen was going to happen for the long-term, [so] we reframed and rethought about how we would do online learning,” he said.

“We have realised that the five events a year are quite unique, in that they were one-off experiences and teachers would do a bit of [extra] preparation ... to make sure the lessons were a bit special.

“We can't afford to do that on a day to day basis in the current environment, because teachers would just exhaust themselves and we don't want that to happen. We want them to be able to sustain themselves for a long period of time...

“So just stepping it back and not trying to set the world on fire with every lesson is something we've actually had to ask the staff to do, because the staff felt like they were super ready for this and we just didn't want them to fall over after a couple of weeks, because we might be in this for the long haul.”