



## Tracing More Than a Century of Distance Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand Schools: From Correspondence to Virtual Networks

**Michael Barbour**, Touro University California  
**Derek Wenmoth**, FutureMakers

### Abstract

This invited article provides a comprehensive overview of the history and development of distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand's school sector over the past century. It begins with a discussion of creating a common language to describe distance learning. The article then transitions to its main focus on the history of distance learning—tracing the evolution from The Correspondence School's establishment in 1922 to serve rural students, through technological advancements that include radio, television, and online learning. Key milestones are highlighted, such as the formation of early e-learning clusters, the Virtual Learning Network, and urban-based “school loops”. The transformation of The Correspondence School into Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu and its adoption of digital technologies are discussed. The article also covers government initiatives, consultations, and legislative changes aimed at supporting and regulating distance learning, including the short-lived concept of Communities of Online Learning. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on distance learning is addressed. Throughout, the article emphasises ongoing challenges of sustainability, equity, and quality in distance education, as well as continuing efforts to adapt to technological changes and meet diverse student needs in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system.

**Keywords:** distance learning; school sector; compulsory sector; virtual learning

### Introduction

We can trace the use of distance learning in the school sector in Aotearoa New Zealand back to the creation of The Correspondence School in the early 1900s. The development of virtual learning programmes began by the late 1990s and early 2000s. A complex system of virtual learning network e-learning clusters developed over the last three decades—at one point this included more than 20 individual programmes. Additionally, in 2000 the government created three regional health schools to support students who were prevented from attending their usual school by health-related challenges. Each of these health schools partners with Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura, formerly The Correspondence School) and provides their own distance programming. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic saw the mass closure of schools during successive periods of lockdown throughout the country, resulting in bricks-and-mortar schools resorting to implementing emergency remote learning practices. Several private online programmes and schools have been established in the post-pandemic context. Each of these entities has a different legal framework that governs their operations and, depending on the nature of the entity, they have varying levels of public reporting.

This history of distance learning in the compulsory sector has been documented in a variety of sources. For example, Woods (2022) provided a detailed narrative of the first 100 years of The Correspondence School/Te Kura. In a similar fashion, Wenmoth (2019) documented the early history—focusing mainly on the first decade—of the Virtual Learning Network (VLN). Most research studies into distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand’s school sector have provided some coverage of its history (Alexander-Bennett, 2016; Barbour & Bennett, 2013; Barbour et al., 2016; Barbour & Siko, 2020; Bennett & Barbour, 2012; Powell & Barbour, 2011; Pratt & Pullar, 2013; Roberts, 2009, 2010; Tolosa et al., 2017; Whalley & Barbour, 2020). However, there has not been a detailed account of how all forms of distance learning in the school sector have developed over the past 100 years.

One of the reasons for this disjointed presentation of the history is that the literature—in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere—has used a variety of terms, from “distance learning” to “virtual learning” to “online learning” to “e-learning” to describe education for which the student and teacher are geographically or temporally distant from one another (Barbour, 2019). As Barbour (2020) has lamented, two of the five main issues hindering research progression in the field were (1) confusing and overlapping terminology, and (2) the lack of historical perspective (e.g., correspondence education, educational radio, instructional television, online/virtual learning as separate and distinct areas of study with nothing to be learned from the previous distance modality). This article aims to address both of these issues.

We begin by providing structure and nomenclature to describe and discuss distance learning in the Aotearoa New Zealand school sector. Our goal is to provide a common set of terms based on both the specific Aotearoa New Zealand context and the broader literature in the field. We continue with a detailed history of the major milestones for all modalities of distance learning in the Aotearoa New Zealand school sector, with a focus on the development of the current system. This discussion of the history is a revised and expanded version of the “History of Distance Learning in New Zealand” section of Barbour and Wenmoth (2024), which was published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 license. We conclude with an exploration of where further work should be done: the ongoing challenges of sustainability, equity, and quality.

## The development of a common nomenclature

The report, *Tuia Te Hononga Tāngata, Tuia Te Hononga Ao: Taking the Pulse of Distance Learning in Aotearoa New Zealand*, outlined a series of consistent terms to describe distance learning in the Aotearoa New Zealand school sector. To start, the Education and Training Act 2020 refers to distance schools (Government of New Zealand, 2020), providing a legislative rationale for using the term “distance learning” to refer to all modalities of education where the student and teacher are geographically separated from one another (as opposed to online learning, virtual learning, e-learning, or some other variant).

The Ministry of Education, through a variety of policy documents and contracted works, has used the term “organisation” to refer to entities such as the New Zealand Principals’ Federation, Special Education New Zealand, and the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand. Similarly, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) uses the term “organisation” to refer to any entity that offers NZQA programmes (this does apply to some distance learning entities but is also limiting with respect to the full range of programmes that these entities provide). During the discussions about the introduction, and eventual repeal, of the Communities of Online Learning (CoOL) the term “provider” was used to describe both public (e.g., Te Kura and the Virtual Learning Network [VLN]) and private entities that provided or brokered distance learning opportunities (Government of New Zealand, 2017; 2018; Ministry of Education, 2018; 2019).

In an effort to further clarify the nomenclature relating to distance learning in the schools sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, an examination of the landscape revealed that there were two types of distance learning providers and the following taxonomy was developed.

**Table 1** Classification of distance learning entities

School	Public	Distance school
		Special institution
		State school
		Tertiary institution
	Private	
Programme	Non-profit	
	For profit	

The first type of provider was defined as schools within the Education and Training Act 2020. The only type of school specifically described in the legislation to provide distance learning is a “distance school” (Government of New Zealand, 2020). However, other types of public and private schools also provide distance learning. For example, in Schedule 2 of the Education and Training Act 2020 there are nine “special institutions” that are known to provide distance learning. Similarly, there is at least one bricks-and-mortar “state school” (or regular public school) that is known to provide distance learning (although there is likely to be more activity of this nature that is currently unknown to this study). Although there are none at present (as referenced below), some “tertiary institutions” have provided distance learning to students in the school sector. Finally, the most common providers of distance learning—at least numerically—are “private schools”, which are schools registered under section 214 of the Education and Training Act 2020 (which allows them to charge tuition for enrolment, among other things).

The second type of provider is not referenced in the legislation. Within the broader literature in the field, providers that do not have Ministry or Department of Education school identification codes are often labelled as “programmes” (e.g., the Michigan Virtual School in the United States or the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in Canada). One of the main distinctions between a school and a programme is that programmes do not have school identification codes, so they are unable to grant credits, provide transcripts, and perform other formal functions available to schools. Within the Aotearoa New Zealand context and the broader field as a whole, programmes are operationalised in many different ways. In some instances, programmes offer distance learning courses directly, whereas in other instances the programme brokers distance learning offerings from individual providers (or some combination of both options). In some cases, programmes employ teachers directly; in other cases the teachers may be seconded to the programme, or the programme could coordinate teachers employed by other entities. The one thing most programmes have in common is a central administration that oversees the activities of the programme. Additionally, most programmes have a specific identity—both internal and within the constituencies that the programme serves. Finally, Barbour and Wenmoth (2024) labelled programmes as either non-profit (i.e., those programmes established as charitable trusts) or for profit (i.e., those programmes that were set up as private enterprises).

## History of distance learning

Aotearoa New Zealand has a long history of distance education in the schooling sector. It has been driven primarily by the need to address issues of access to educational opportunities for all learners. Some learners in rural and remote parts of the country did not have daily access to physical schools—this issue led to the establishment of The Correspondence School in 1922 (Rumble, 1989). During its first year of operation, The Correspondence School served approximately 100 primary students and “all the lessons and letters to students [were] initially written by hand by the school’s first teacher, Miss Janet Mackenzie” (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, n.d., ¶ 1). Enrolments were initially limited to 500; however, that cap was lifted in 1927 (Bewley, 1996). By 1928, the school had grown to 720 primary students and the first group of secondary students was admitted with an initial cohort of 50 (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, n.d.). The 1930s saw the roll of The Correspondence School grow to approximately 2000 students (Woods, 2022).

The 1930s also saw the introduction of educational radio broadcasts as a part of the school’s delivery model. The use of educational radio was important during World War II and, in particular, during the polio epidemic of 1948 (Barbour, 2022). In the following decades The Correspondence School began to serve a broader range of students.

For example:

By the 1970s, the New Zealand Correspondence School had adopted a similar delivery pattern (Tate, 1994). It catered for primary aged students and both full and part-time secondary aged students who attended small rural high schools. It also used radio broadcasts, and the telephone as well as the mail system for communications (Dakin, 1973). (Higgins, 1998, p. 25)

In 1981 The Correspondence School began to pilot instructional television. In the following decade the use of educational radio ended, and the use of instructional television ceased in the early 2000s. In fact, it was not until the modality of distance learning began to shift to a virtual learning format that the history of distance learning and the history of The Correspondence School began to diverge; that is, until then the history of The Correspondence School **was** the history of distance learning in the school sector. (For a more complete history see *Going the Distance: 100 Years of Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu – The Correspondence School* [Woods, 2022]).

## Gradual shift from distance to virtual

The groundwork that identified the need for what was to become the current state of virtual learning was undertaken in 1992. The trigger was the release of the Consultel Report to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, titled *The Use of Telecommunications Technologies for the Enhancement of Educational Services* (Buckrell et al., 1992). The impetus for this report came from the “Education for Enterprise” conference, held in February 1992, where Prime Minister Jim Bolger stated he wanted to explore further how telecommunications might be put to better use for the development of interactive learning systems for application in a wide variety of educational and training settings (Wenmoth, 1996). According to the report, the key problems to be solved in the context of the education system were equity and cost. Equity because not all Aotearoa New Zealanders have adequate access to education and training, and cost because the cost of traditional education and training is such that it is difficult to quickly increase numbers at the post-compulsory level and to enhance opportunities in the compulsory (i.e., schooling) sector.

Note that the Consultel report was commissioned before the advent of the World Wide Web, at a time when the major technological breakthrough offering greater online speed was the integrated

services digital network (ISDN). As Stevens and Tate (1994) reported, the specific technologies that the Consultel report suggested were worth exploring for distance learning included teleconferencing, television, and computer-mediated communications. This technological reality was evident in the solutions considered in the report and its recommendations, including:

- changes to funding mechanisms that would give distance and open learning providers access to appropriate technology
- further scoping work to be undertaken and the establishment of a working group to understand the extent of need in the context
- providing targeted support for the three technologies:
  - broadcasting (radio, TV, and video recording)
  - teleconferencing (exploiting benefits of ISDN) including telephone, voice mode, private networks, early audio and video conferencing
  - computer-mediated communications—such as email, access to online databases, online submission of assignments.

About this time many rural area schools (particularly at senior secondary level) were challenged to provide a wide range of curricular opportunities. These challenges led seven area schools in the Canterbury region to create the Canterbury Area Schools Association Technology project (CASAtech).

By the beginning of the 1994 school year these seven area schools were linked with an audio-graphics system. Each school allocated a teacher to teach one course. Students from any of the seven schools could then enrol in that course (Wenmoth, 1996). The audio-graphics technology allowed the schools to be linked online and for the courses to be distributed among the participating schools. In 1996, three secondary schools joined CASAtech and the project was re-visioned as the Canterbury Technology Schools Project (CANTAtech) (Campbell, 2004). There were several other initiatives established around the same time as the CASAtech initiative. For example, the linking of Stratford High School to Taranaki Polytechnic (Stevens, 1994), the North Shore Schools Net and the South Auckland Schools Net (Selby et al., 2005), and the Top of the South Island technology project (TOSItech) (Coburn et al., 1995; Stevens, 1995), to name a few. Regardless of the presence of virtual learning, each of these pioneering initiatives provided guidance for the distance and virtual learning that would follow. Interestingly, in her detailed case study of these initiatives, Langley (2003) reported on a student who remarked that CANTAtech offered “subjects to students in isolated schools with more contact with their teacher and class than The Correspondence School” (p. 45). This sentiment would underscore the development of future, often overlapping, distance learning initiatives.

### **A new technological era: Video conferencing**

The early 2000s saw the introduction of video conferencing as a platform for connecting these schools and clusters—replacing the audio-graphics technologies that had been used by The Correspondence School and in projects like CANTAtech and TOSItech. This particular advancement in technology spurred the creation of the e-Section within The Correspondence School (Wenmoth, 2005). The e-Section was a separate unit charged with establishing models of practice to leverage the synchronous and asynchronous affordances of the online environment, and to introduce and establish virtual learning systems and practices across the wider school. This work was initially funded by the Ministry of Education (Wagner & Jaquiere, 2006), and it enabled The Correspondence School to be among the first in the schooling sector to experiment with online delivery and video conferencing in the early 2000s (Roberts, 2009). These video conferencing experiments and the earlier networking of rural schools (as seen with the earlier audio-graphics initiatives like CANTAtech and TOSItech) signalled the emergence of virtual learning in Aotearoa New Zealand (Stevens, 1995).

The first use of this video conferencing technology in a formal virtual learning or e-learning cluster setting began in 2000 with the establishment of the Kaupapa Ara Whakawhiti Mātauranga (KAWM) cluster (Roberts, 2009). The KAWM project encompassed a number of school improvement initiatives funded by the Ministry of Education. It was described as being:

. . . focused on using [ICT] to strengthen curriculum delivery and broaden options for Maori learners in schools, including boarding schools . . . [and addressed] the shortage of Maori-medium subject specialist teachers at the secondary level through the provision of 'expert teachers' to provide lessons via video conferencing across a number of Wharekura sites. (Stevens & Moffatt, 2003, p. 131)

The KAWM project eventually included five separate clusters (Waiti, 2005), involving more than 20 schools from Kaitaia to Invercargill (Roberts, 2009). Two of these clusters were provided with video conferencing equipment and ISDN lines (where available) to enable them to connect with each other and share courses for learners. The other clusters were focused more on strengthening the internal use of their ICT infrastructure and developing teacher capability.

The following year (2001) FarNet began as one of four pilot projects funded under the Digital Opportunities Programme (DigiOps) (Stevens & Moffatt, 2003). Initially the FarNet e-learning cluster had a community of 10 area and secondary schools in Northland (Barbour & Bennett, 2013; Bennett & Barbour, 2012). The original purpose of FarNet was to create a virtual professional development community that used a dedicated website to foster the learning communities (Rivers & Rivers, 2004). One of the benefits of this project was that it allowed the participating schools to obtain the necessary hardware and software, and to grow the teaching faculty's expertise, so they could leverage these tools for later use in distance education (Parr & Ward, 2005). The cluster was not primarily developed for the purpose of delivering distance education. In fact, it wasn't until it entered its second phase of development—following the completion of the project outlined under the DigiOps funding—that FarNet schools began to offer distance education. This was a common trend among some of the early e-learning clusters, many of which were also created under a variety of national funding programmes (Powell & Barbour, 2012).

Similarly, in 2002 the OtagoNet e-learning cluster was established by the Community Trust of Otago as a partnership among seven schools to create a learning community for teachers (Treadwell, 2010). OtagoNet's vision was "to create a broadband VLN linking the Otago Secondary and Area Schools, to strengthen existing relationships and collaboration of these rural and geographically dispersed schools" (Pullar & Brennan, 2008, p. 9). Subsequently, Lai and Pratt (2009) described OtagoNet as a small cluster of nine rural schools, with rolls of 10 to 275 high school students, in a region that has an average of 15 people/kilometre<sup>2</sup>. The OtagoNet cluster approached the e-Section for help in providing courses they weren't able to provide locally. Initially six courses were provided by The Correspondence School. These, combined with the nine provided by schools in the cluster, enabled all of the learners in the OtagoNet cluster in their final 2 years of school to access all of their first-choice subject options in that year.

Other clusters came on board in the years that followed (e.g., CoroNet in the Coromandel region and WelCom in the Wairarapa region). By 2009 it was reported that the VLN represented approximately 20 individual e-learning clusters (Compton et al., 2009), including the establishment of the VLN Primary in 2009—the first and only cluster that focused on the delivery of virtual learning at primary school level (Whalley & Barbour, 2020). These clusters brokered over 160 online courses and related professional and organisational development (Bolstad & Lin, 2009), representing 1401 student enrolments from 252 schools, in 212 different courses, taught by 154 distance or e-teachers (Roberts, 2009). Additionally, several tertiary

institutions had also begun to provide courses for secondary students through the VLN brokerage site (e.g., Matua Raki, NatColl, NorthTec, Otago Polytechnic, Telford Rural Polytechnic, Waikato Institute of Technology, etc.).

From these initial initiatives, and in partnership with the Ministry of Education, a decision was made to formally organise the existing e-learning clusters into a larger, national effort known as the VLN (Wenmoth, 2011). The VLN was designed to provide a brokerage service (on behalf of the Ministry of Education) where participating clusters could advertise the courses they were offering and make them available to schools in other regions (Roberts, 2010). In addition to the brokering of services, in 2002 The Correspondence School and the Ministry of Education facilitated the development of the *Learning Communities Online Handbook* to assist schools in the formation of e-learning clusters (Ministry of Education, 2011), which was later updated in 2012. These documents gave those interested in forming new clusters (or leading existing clusters) a matrix to guide their development through the phases from initial conception to implementation.

### The emergence of urban “school loops”

For decades, distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand focused on serving students in schools in rural jurisdictions, but while the VLN was developing, the turn of the millennium also witnessed a change in this geographic focus. The roll-out of fibre networks across Aotearoa New Zealand saw increased activity among urban schools that were keen to take advantage of the opportunities provided by this connectivity. In 2007 five regions were allocated funding from the Broadband Initiative Fund to enable them to implement a regional broadband trial. Educators from each region formed an alliance to ensure that the schools’ needs were a primary focus of each region’s activity. This small group of the original urban loops formed the Super Loop Group to provide an informal connection between educators in each of the five regions as a means of exchanging ideas and experiences. The Super Loop Group met at infrequent intervals to formulate a coordinated and strategic approach to shared themes or issues, and has developed position papers to help inform Ministry of Education thinking and briefing papers. The Super Loop established itself as a representative group of mostly urban schools in 12 regions, and included representation from the VLN-C, all of whom were pioneering and/or planning the collaborative development and use of the Ultra-Fast Broadband in Schools (UFBiS) networks that were being rolled out by the government before the end of 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The number of urban loops grew over this time. In his report, Zwimpfer (2010) described the development of these urban-based loops—such as the Nelson Loop, the Wellington Loop, the North Shore Education Access Loop, and the Greater Christchurch Schools Network (GCSN)—as being designed to provide schools with reliable, high-speed internet access through a fibre-based loop. Most of these “loops” were coordinated by committees or trusts acting on behalf of the local schools to provide technical advice and support for schools connecting to the fibre network. These groups also provided guidance and support for a range of educational programmes and initiatives to drive the uptake and use of the fibre once connected. Many of these loops engaged in some level of connection with the VLN schools as they looked for ways to expand their students’ learning opportunities. Some, such as the Wellington Loop and GCSN, became active in promoting a localised sharing of subject expertise among schools within their region in much the same way as the VLN schools had been doing.

In 2012, in one of the only examples of an urban distance learning programme within the VLN-Community (VLN-C), a group of schools in the Auckland area came together to form the HarbourNet e-learning cluster (Barbour & Siko, 2020). However, the origins of this cluster can be traced back a year, when Orewa College affiliated with the FarNet VLN cluster and Ormiston

Senior College joined the OtagoNet VLN cluster with the intention of becoming members of these networks to acquire practical knowledge. Both schools intended to become virtual learning environments and gain insights into the functioning of two well-established e-learning clusters. The following year, Orewa College took on the role of the managing school for a HarbourNet e-learning cluster that included a total of 13 member schools. Notably, Ormiston Senior College maintained its membership with OtagoNet for several more years. Beyond HarbourNet, the only other reference to an e-learning cluster operating in an urban environment was DunedinNet around 2009 (Roberts, 2010).

### **Growth and a search for sustainability**

Many have argued that various information communications technology (ICT) strategies put in place by the Ministry of Education have accounted for the growth in the effective use of ICT to support learning and teaching (Bolton, 2008; Cowie et al., 2008; Dewstow & Wright, 2005; Sahin & Ham, 2010; Wright, 2010); while others have argued that the funding programmes that accompanied these strategies, and other policy documents, have created a framework to encourage the growth of the VLN e-learning clusters and the use of virtual learning (Powell & Barbour, 2011).

One such example was funding provided by the Ministry of Education in 2007 for the provision of 18 administrative salary units to support the leadership of the e-learning clusters (these positions were known as ePrincipals). These ePrincipals were to lead the e-learning clusters, to build relationships with other clusters, and to move the clusters towards a sustainable model of development over the 2008 and 2009 school years (Roberts, 2009). Roberts (2010) described the specific tasks of the ePrincipal as:

- developing and refining policy and procedure for the delivery of online learning
- sharing best practice
- providing professional learning opportunities for teachers
- developing student support networks and structures
- setting up programmes such as Scholarship Mentoring, and Gifted and Talented programmes
- identifying areas for innovation
- supporting research
- exploring opportunities to include the wider community
- supporting new schools and clusters as they join the VLN. (p. 148)

In an examination of the leadership of e-learning clusters, Stevens (2011) found that the responsibilities of the ePrincipal were open to individual interpretation. Further, Barbour's (2011) evaluation of the sustainability and maturity of Aotearoa New Zealand's e-learning clusters, concluded that "based upon the current responsibilities assumed by the ePrincipals, the Ministry of Education is justified to not provide funding for approximately 15 ePrincipals. The business case simply does not exist" (p. 41).

The fact that the ePrincipal model was based on the provision of "one-off" funding provided directly from the government, with no mechanism for funds from individual schools or clusters, combined with a lack of a coherent view of the role of the ePrincipal, contributed to funding for this initiative not being continued after the 2009 school year. Even after the end of the external funding for the ePrincipals, in a study of educational leadership in two of the VLN e-learning clusters, Stevens (2011) found that the role of ePrincipal was "complex, [relied] heavily on goodwill and collaboration, and [occurred] in a challenging environment" (vi). Stevens underscored the unsystematic nature of the role by recommending that "eLearning clusters' management committees should also review their leadership roles, with a view to developing



greater responsibilities for instructional leadership, particularly by adopting a much more strategic approach to improving student learning” (p. 112). This recommendation was consistent with Barbour’s (2011) guidance that the role of the ePrincipal become more defined.

However, even with the struggle to remain financially sustainable, there was significant growth in enrolments throughout most clusters (Barbour, 2011; Roberts, 2009, 2010). With this growth came the need to establish more sustainable models of support and development into the future. In April 2010, the VLN-C was officially constituted to formalise and extend cooperation between the individual e-learning clusters (Wenmoth, 2011). This initiative was supported by the Ministry of Education within its ICT professional development (ICTPD) budget as a way to enable a greater degree of collaboration, support, and sharing of ideas among group members.

At the same time some rationalisation began to occur within the VLN. For example, the former CANTatech and AorakiNet e-learning clusters merged to form the CantaNet e-learning cluster. Further, new funding initiatives to explore the potential of blended learning encouraged the development of super clusters, such as the cooperation of 30 schools from the CantaNet and WestNet clusters to form the Southern Central Divide ICTPD cluster (Parkes et al., 2011). This rationalisation continued over the next decade—in some cases due to a lack of enrolments and resources (e.g., TaraNet in the Taranaki region), in other cases out of a desire for cooperation (e.g., the merger of CantaNet, WestNet, and OtagoNet into NetNZ [Lai, 2017]) and, in one case, an externally forced effort (e.g., the merger of the VLN Primary with the Online Learning Community to form Kōtuiti Ako | VLN Aotearoa [Barbour & Wenmoth, 2024]).

### **The re-development of The Correspondence School**

The new millennium also saw The Correspondence School continue to experiment with the provision of distance learning through new technologies. Following on from their use of educational radio, instructional television, and video conferencing, the 2000s saw The Correspondence School begin to explore the provision of online education, establishing seamless integration of digital systems to manage the creation of course content for online provision as well as the systems and processes for engaging with learners and their learning online. At present, the asynchronous course content is facilitated through an online learning environment known as My Te Kura<sup>1</sup> (a Desire2learn Brightspace learning management system) (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2024). The Correspondence School teachers and developers are responsible for the creation of online course content and the curation of online resources housed in the learning management system. In addition to their online course content and the use of My Te Kura for asynchronous instruction, the school also expanded their use of other digital technologies, resources, and interactive tools for students. For example, The Correspondence School introduced a range of web-based video conferencing tools to enable more synchronous engagement with learners.

The changes at The Correspondence School weren’t only about the technology. The school rebranded and officially became known as Te Kura in 2015, reflecting its commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and to provide education beyond more traditional correspondence methods. Te Kura also pursued a greater emphasis on personalised learning approaches for their instructional model, allowing students to learn at their own pace and according to their individual needs and interests. A range of support services, including counselling and academic support, were integrated in their service delivery to provide holistic assistance to students. In 2019 Te Kura secured government support to establish a Big Picture Learning programme to support learners who are at risk of disengaging from education. Te Kura’s version of Big Picture

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.tekura.school.nz/learn-with-us/learn-with-us/online-learning/> for more information about the My Te Kura environment, including the opportunity to login and view sample asynchronous course content.

provides a distinctive Aotearoa New Zealand flavour to the core Big Picture model by focusing on engagement of ākonga in learning that is relevant and captures their interests and passions. The combination of authentic, blended, and online learning provides a highly personalised and flexible learning environment.

### Seasons of consultation

While these traditional and virtual providers of distance learning were experiencing growth and seeking sustainability, the Government of New Zealand was engaged in numerous consultative processes to better understand and inform the practice of distance and virtual learning that had been developing over the previous two decades. It began with the Ministry of Education-funded *e-Learning and Implications for New Zealand Schools: A Literature Review* (Wright, 2010). This study examined the international literature relating to e-learning from 2005 to 2009, and the lessons that could be learned for the Aotearoa New Zealand context. The Ministry of Education followed this literature review by funding the *Primary and Secondary e-Learning: Examining the Process of Achieving Maturity* report (Barbour, 2011), which investigated “the development of virtual learning . . ., specifically the obstacles that e-learning clusters of schools face or have faced in their journey to sustainability and maturity through the lens of the Learning Communities Online Handbook” (p. iv). While other providers of distance learning were referenced, the Primary and Secondary e-Learning report largely focused on VLN e-learning clusters and its recommendations focused solely on ways in which those providers could become sustainable within the existing regulatory framework.

About the same time, the VLN-C commissioned Wenmoth (2011) to provide a business case for these virtual learning providers by examining the future organisational and legal structure of a sustainable VLN-C. Wenmoth provided the VLN-C with three possible options: (1) establish the VLN as a business unit within the Ministry of Education, (2) establish the VLN-C Trust as an independent business unit (company), or (3) establish the VLN Trust as a professional organisation. He made a strong recommendation for the second option. Two years later, CORE Education funded *Virtual Learning as an Impetus for Educational Change: Charting a Way Forward for Learning in New Zealand* (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2013), which examined the recommendations outlined by Barbour (2011) and Wenmoth (2011) in an effort to consolidate the guidance that was being suggested for the future of virtual learning providers in Aotearoa New Zealand. This CORE Education report recommended that a single, national body be responsible for providing and supporting asynchronous and synchronous tools for virtual learning, developing and maintaining a repository of online course content that was available to users free of charge, and providing brokerage services for users who wished to provide excess capacity to—or collaborate with—others.

In addition to the reports funded by the Ministry of Education, the Parliamentary Education and Science Committee was engaged in their own *Inquiry into 21st Century Learning Environments and Digital Literacy* (New Zealand Parliament, 2012). The purpose of the inquiry was described as:

. . . to investigate and to make recommendations on the best structures, tools, and communities, in both rural and urban New Zealand, for enabling students and educators to attain the knowledge and skills, such as digital literacy, that the 21st century demands of us all. (p. 9)

The inquiry included a total of 48 recommendations—most of which would have tangentially supported the provision of distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, there were recommendations that focused on how to provide access to innovative learning opportunities within and outside the bricks-and-mortar school building through device distribution and connectivity (with several recommendations focusing on the newly created Crown-owned

company, Network for Learning [N4L]). Recommendations focused on professional development for teachers' digital literacy to enable effective access to Māori and Pasifika content on digital platforms. However, only one recommendation focused solely on the provision of distance learning.

The Education and Science Committee makes the following recommendations to the Government . . . that it, in consultation with the education sector, consider whether there needs to be any policy changes to take into account potential workload changes as a result of online learning. (p. 5)

This recommendation was included in a section of the report that detailed the challenges teachers faced with their current levels of knowledge, skills, and aptitudes relating to their use of digital tools for teaching, and how there was a need for greater initial training and professional development to address this gap.

Interestingly, the only material reference to any of the specific distance learning providers in the report was related to the N4L, where the authors wrote:

Submitters suggested the Network for Learning should also enable teachers to share material easily through the Virtual Learning Network, and incentivise sharing by providing tools for developing and sustaining virtual communities of practice. (p. 36)

As one might expect based on reading this quote, the recommendations in this section of the report all focused on the N4L as a possible conduit for providing increased and centralised access to both unlimited, high-speed internet and the digital tools that could be used to deliver learning content and opportunities.

## The search for a path forward

Despite these virtual learning networks and local “loops” operating for more than two decades, and multiple consultative processes, there was no real change to the legislative framework or funding mechanisms until 2017. Then the *Education (Update) Amendment Act* introduced the concept of CoOLs, which aimed to provide a framework for accredited online learning providers to operate within the education system (Government of New Zealand, 2017). The introduction of CoOLs coincided with a broader shift in the education landscape—students were given the option to enrol at or with accredited online learning providers instead of attending traditional bricks-and-mortar schools. Some of the key provisions of the proposed legislation included:

- Accreditation Requirements: The Act outlined the accreditation requirements for online learning providers, ensuring that CoOLs would meet certain standards to deliver education online.
- Regulation of CoOLs: It provided a regulatory framework for the operation of CoOLs within the Aotearoa New Zealand education system, including governance, funding, and accountability measures.
- Enrolment Criteria: The Act specified the enrolment criteria for students in CoOLs, addressing aspects such as age, eligibility, and the process for transitioning to and from traditional schools.
- Quality Assurance: The Act established mechanisms for quality assurance and monitoring of CoOLs to maintain the standard of education delivered through online platforms.
- Partnerships with Schools: The Act allowed for partnerships between CoOLs and schools, enabling collaboration and support for students engaging in online learning.

These provisions aimed to ensure that CoOLs operate within a regulated framework, maintain educational quality, and provide viable alternatives for students seeking online learning opportunities.

Based on the submissions made to the Education and Science Committee, critics argued that CoOLs could lead to a fragmented education system, and that students might miss out on the social interaction and holistic learning experience provided by traditional schools (Government of New Zealand, 2017). There were also concerns about the quality and accountability of online learning providers, and many raised fears about the potential of for-profit providers being able to establish CoOLs—pointing to the United States and the poor performance of students in these corporate-operated, full-time virtual schools (Pratt & Williamson-Leadley, 2017). Interestingly, according to documents obtained by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association/Te Wehengarua (PPTA) through an Official Information Act (OIA) request, the initial options included:

- removing minor regulatory barriers to increase autonomy of correspondence education
- enabling correspondence educators to become “schools of choice”
- enabling mainstream schools to carry out correspondence education functions
- a fourth option that the OIA deemed to be outside the scope of the PPTA’s original inquiry. (PPTA, 2016, p. 2)

A subsequent document had narrowed these options to two.

1. amend the Act to make it more permissive as to who could be a distance education provider
2. amend the Act to make it clear that a school can be both a distance education provider and a face-to-face school. (p. 4)

Although this portion of the release was not dated, these options appear to have been presented in the very early stages of the development of the legislation (i.e., prior to March 2016). It wasn’t until June 2016 that it was proposed that the option should be “establishes an accreditation regime that enables any corporate entity—including schools, tertiary providers and private operators—that meets accreditation criteria to be an accredited provider of online learning to school-aged students” (p. 39). All three versions of these options for distance learning were generally described in the documents as a way to “open up the market”.

Despite the objections, the Bill received Royal Assent on May 5, 2017 and the CoOLs were set to come into effect at the end of 2019. However, 2017 saw the electoral defeat of the National Party, which was replaced with a coalition government formed by the Labour Party, the Green Party, and the New Zealand First Party. One of the first things that the new Labour-led coalition Government decided to do was to direct the Ministry of Education to engage Cognition Education to address the following research question:

What lessons can be drawn from existing online providers about teaching and learning in online environments and what conditions are necessary to support student progression and achievement?

Four main areas related to online distance education were examined, with a range of sub-questions addressed under each. The main areas were:

1. The differences between online and face-to-face teaching and learning
2. The delivery of pastoral care, guidance and support in an online context

3. Required dispositions and competencies of online students.
4. The development of online learning content and materials.  
(Blewden et al., 2018, p. 1)

The *On-line Distance Education Research Final Report* was released in February 2018. Although Cognition Education engaged in a document and literature review, conducted an online survey, and undertook interviews with key stakeholders and students, the report itself was largely disappointing.

Unfortunately, the authors lacked familiarity with the field and its rich history, and the focus of the report—and the recommendations offered—were primarily based on international experiences or perspectives from those only tangentially involved in the practice of distance and virtual learning. Additionally, the content of the report focused almost solely on the actual delivery of distance learning, and was largely silent on the legislative changes that had been enacted and were under consideration. For example, there was much content on the practice of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, pedagogical strategies on how to engage students, structural procedures to support students locally, and the need for teachers' professional development in online practice. However, there was no real discussion of the issues of how distance learning should be funded, the provision of resources to support distance learning providers, or regulatory changes that might allow distance learning to become more mainstream in the school sector.

Shortly after the release of the Cognition Education report, the review of distance learning in New Zealand was folded into the larger review by Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, which was appointed in April 2018. The taskforce was tasked with reviewing:

... the provision of compulsory schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a focus on achieving a system that promotes equity and excellence for all children and young people. This includes giving active expression to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the ability of the governance, management and administration of the schooling system to respond to education needs in the future. (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, p. 8)

As might be expected, given this broad focus, the vast majority of the report and its recommendations focused on issues that affected the full school sector rather than the approximately 4% of students engaged in distance learning (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2024).

In fact, there were minimal references to distance learning in the 148-page final report. It was acknowledged that:

Area schools, which are often located in rural areas, cater for students from Years 1–13. However, in most cases area schools find it hard to provide curriculum breadth and quality in the senior schooling years, due to their relatively small rolls in this stage of schooling. As a result they often rely on Te Kura and the Virtual Learning Network (VLN) community for support. (p. 61)

Additionally, in a section entitled "There are opportunities for more learning to be supported through digital technology," the taskforce wrote:

The Virtual Learning Network (VLN) already contributes to enriched schooling provision for students and teachers/kaiako in small and isolated schools. The VLN contributes to both primary and secondary schools where curriculum coverage and NCEA subject choice may otherwise be severely compromised.

Given the investments planned in digital infrastructure via the Network for Learning (which is working to provide all schools with Government funded internet access), the VLN and Te

Kura both have great potential to support and facilitate innovation in online curriculum content, learning, pedagogy and assessment. (p. 64)

The taskforce indicated:

Our recommendations aim to achieve equity by focusing on achieving two main things:

- Firstly, more active planning and management of the schooling provision available in an area. This management would be based on a network approach rather than individual schools being treated separately. This would also allow for future-focused planning, *which will be increasingly needed to make the best use of network strengths and digital learning opportunities to widen student choice and opportunities.*
- Secondly, we want to get resourcing right so that two key drivers of competition, school resourcing and principal remuneration, play less of a role, and schools serving disadvantaged communities are better resourced. (p. 75; emphasis added)

Unfortunately, the recommendations relating to digital learning focused on infrastructure and access, tools and devices, and content.

However, months before the taskforce would release its final report, the new Government introduced the Education Amendment Bill (No 2), which—among other things—proposed to repeal CoOLs.

In 2017, the Education Act 1989 was amended by the Education (Update) Amendment Act 2017 to introduce a new regime to expand the provision of distance education through communities of online learning. The new legislative provisions allowed for distance education for part-time and full-time tuition, and enabled accreditation of distance education provision by public or private providers through a statutory accreditation system. These provisions are repealed. This will provide further time to consider the future of online learning in New Zealand, in the context of wider education sector reviews. (Government of New Zealand, 2018, p. 2)

There were far fewer submissions to the Education and Science Committee with respect to this change (i.e., 19, compared to 286 for the earlier Bill), with most both praising the repeal of CoOLs and underscoring the need for a regulatory update to allow greater access to distance learning. Unfortunately, beyond the repeal of CoOLs, there was very little contained in the Bill relating to the provision of distance learning, although the Minister's own confidential briefing (proactively released) stated that:

Having a regulatory framework that supports distance education delivered online is likely to be essential in the future, given New Zealand's geographic isolation, the potential for ongoing skills shortages for teachers in specialist subjects, the range of opportunities that online distance education provides and the key role it is likely to play in teaching and learning. This report provides options to progress technical regulatory changes in distance education delivered online through the Education and Training Bill. (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 1)

None of these options to create a framework that would better support distance learning were included in the Bill, which became official on May 19, 2019—before the first CoOL was even proposed.

## The advent and impact of COVID

The impact of school closures during Aotearoa New Zealand's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought much of the work of those involved with virtual learning in the

compulsory sector into sharp focus. This situation created unique challenges for students, whānau, teachers, and school leaders across the country. When news of the lockdown was announced, the Ministry of Education moved quickly to put in place a range of support for teachers, students, and families for the time that students and teachers would spend learning and teaching from home. The support for home learning was achieved by:

- providing online resources across three websites
- working with schools to ensure that all students had internet access, or printed learning resources where this was not possible
- broadcasting two television channels—Home Learning TV | Papa Kāinga TV (in English); and Mauri Reo Mauri Ora (in te reo Māori).

The provision of online resources was achieved by working in partnership with Te Kura to open up access to all of their learning materials so that any teacher or student could use them as the basis of their online learning. This was made possible through the immediate response of Te Kura's learning management system provider who established a “mirror” site of all resources that could then be accessed without having to go through the process of enrolling first as a Te Kura student (Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, 2023). The VLNs were also approached to find ways to expand access to the online resources, courses, and programmes they offered (Mutch, 2021).

Only a few teachers and schools took advantage of these courses and resources, largely due to the relatively short time of school closures, and immediate concerns about student wellbeing taking precedence over continuity of learning. The lessons learned through the process of establishing this access, however, will prove useful in the future as we look to establish a more resilient schooling system. A summary of key findings from Aotearoa New Zealand and international research, drawn from a synthesis of over 40 national and international reports and articles, was prepared for the Ministry of Education following the lockdown (Wenmoth, 2021). It identified four significant findings:

1. the importance of taking a coherent, system-wide approach to digital planning and investment
2. the lack of universal access to technology, and a lack of the skills and capability needed to use digital technologies in ways that support effective teaching and learning, exposing existing inequalities in the NZ education system
3. the negative impacts of increased exposure to digital technologies by learners and teachers working remotely
4. the considerable potential for increased flexibility in approaches to education delivery.

These recommendations were used to help inform the development of *Connected Ako: Digital and Data for Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2023), which provides a 10-year strategy to guide the digital and data direction of Aotearoa New Zealand government education agencies.

It is worth noting that an independent evaluation of the only distance learning programme that was specifically established to provide learning opportunities for students who had experienced multiple lockdowns (i.e., Te Kura 400) reported that this programme had great success in serving students in the Auckland area. The Education Review Office (2021) report indicated:

- parents and whānau told us that the TK400 programme was having a positive effect on their children's wellbeing
- the wellbeing of students in the TK400 programme was positive
- Te Kura staff told us that they observed an increase in confidence in learning as they progressed in the programme

- achievement was similar to a matched group of Te Kura's fulltime students who live in similar communities with the same socio-economic status, over the same duration of enrolment (around two terms)
- students felt that they would have been more negatively impacted without the opportunity presented by the programme
- the programme appears to have engaged those students who participated in the programme. (pp. 11, 13, 15, 21).

The success of the Te Kura 400 programme in the Auckland area underscores the distinction between planned distance learning programmes and instances of remote learning implemented as a response to an unplanned crisis (Barbour et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

## Opportunities for further work

In this article we have provided a comprehensive history of distance learning in Aotearoa New Zealand's school sector over the past century—beginning with the establishment of The Correspondence School in 1922, through the evolution of distance learning using various technological advancements, to the formation of virtual or e-learning clusters in the 1990s. We also explored government initiatives, consultations, and legislative changes aimed at supporting and regulating distance learning. We concluded with the advent of COVID-19 and how distance learning was used in response to the pandemic, often in ways that highlighted existing inequities in the school sector. One of the issues that should be underscored by this discussion is how the regulatory framework related to distance learning has remained largely unchanged despite numerous innovative initiatives, funded examinations and consultations, and even legislative efforts. There is still only one distance school in Aotearoa New Zealand, although several public programmes and private schools provide distance learning to students otherwise unserved or underserved by their traditional state schools.

Throughout this article we have emphasised the ongoing challenges of sustainability, equity, and quality in distance education, as well as the continuous efforts to adapt to technological changes and meet diverse student needs. While the history presented underscores Aotearoa New Zealand's long-standing commitment to providing flexible learning options and overcoming geographical barriers to education, the lack of a coherent legislative foundation that supports all forms of distance education provision has made it difficult to create an ecosystem of quality distance education provision that is available to all. Building on the historical narrative provided in this article, we see an opportunity for further work to be done in the three areas of sustainability, equity, and quality.

### Sustainability

First, with respect to sustainability, the ongoing operation of all of the entities described in this report is affected by the availability (or lack) of funding that ensures the security of their operation. Only Te Kura and the three health schools operate with equivalent full-time student funding provided by the government. The others rely on forms of direct payment or grants that restrict their ability to plan for any form of longer-term, more strategic contribution to the Aotearoa New Zealand education system. This affects, in turn, the ability to grow and sustain relationships within and among schools, as well as the ability to recruit and retain staff with the specialist knowledge and skills to operate effectively in virtual environments.

### Equity

Second, in terms of equity, providing access to educational opportunities for those who are unable to attend a regular school has always been a primary driver for distance education provision in Aotearoa New Zealand. While early forms of distance education were designed to address the needs of learners who were unable to physically attend a local school, the scope of



provision has expanded to address the needs of those learners who are unable to access specific areas of learning locally. Although the efforts of organisations such as Te Kura and the VLN can be commended for the way they address these inequities in our system, their offerings are not yet available to every student in every location—including some Aotearoa New Zealand learners located overseas. Further, the entry of some private providers into the distance education ecosystem necessarily privileges those who are able to pay for these services, and leaves some without access.

### Quality

Finally, with reference to quality, distance education has for a long time been regarded as a “second best” option for learners who are unable to attend their local school. That attitude is changing as learners are increasingly exposed to alternative forms of access to subjects and learning experiences they cannot access locally. As distance education provision becomes more “normalised” within our system, the issue of quality becomes even more important. Schools, including Te Kura, are currently reviewed by the Education Review Office on the same basis as regular schools. However, the criteria for these reviews don’t necessarily recognise or make provision for distance teaching and learning and the requirements in terms of learning design, pedagogical practices, learner support, feedback, and assessment as they apply to distance education. Although Te Kura has a strong internal culture of professional development and quality management of its programme design, there are currently no quality standards applied across all providers in the distance education ecosystem for Aotearoa New Zealand schools.

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## Biographical notes

Michael Barbour

mkbarbour@gmail.com

Michael is the Director of Faculty Development and a Professor of Instruction for the College of Education and Health Sciences at Touro University California. He has been involved in K–12 distance, online, and blended learning as a researcher, evaluator, teacher, course designer, and administrator for over two decades. Michael's research has spanned the globe with a particular focus on the effective design, delivery, and support necessary for students to be successful in these flexible learning environments. His involvement in distance and virtual learning in Aotearoa New Zealand began in 2008 and has included presenting keynotes and other papers at Flexible Learning of New Zealand conferences, several national reports, and serving on the boards of multiple Virtual Learning Network programmes.



**Derek Wenmoth**

derek@futuremakers.nz

Derek Wenmoth is the founder of FutureMakers which he established after stepping back from his position as Director, eLearning at CORE Education, a not-for-profit organisation providing professional learning, research, and consultancy services across all parts of the education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. Derek has been a teacher, principal, teacher educator, distance educator, and education policy writer in a career spanning more than four decades. He helped establish the Virtual Learning Network in New Zealand in the mid 1990s, was the eLearning manager at Te Kura (New Zealand's Correspondence School) where he oversaw the transition from correspondence to online activity, and was awarded a life membership of the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand in 2016. He has been involved in providing strategic advice on flexible and online learning to the Commonwealth of Learning and departments of education in a number of international contexts.

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