

THE CONVERSATION

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Distance education tutors don't need any formal qualifications – we should make this role a career

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There are an estimated 24,000-plus students who study by distance education in Australia.

While their lessons are delivered remotely, by law, all of these students still need to be supervised by somebody in person. This is the role of the “remote education tutor”, who is the link between the student and the teacher.

Despite the vital work they do, there is no prerequisite or formal qualification for this role, and no precise data on their number, as their work is often misrepresented as parenting, childcare or nannying.

We need to start recognising this key educational role as a career.

Who are remote tutors and what do they do?

For students who are unable to attend mainstream schooling, it is the tutor's job to facilitate everyday classroom learning. The student will be provided instruction and given materials by their school, but the tutor needs to organise and supervise the completion of tasks and lessons.

It is a vital role in the child's education.

We know remote education tutors are mostly women.

They are either a family member (typically the mother) or an externally employed person. If it is a non-family member, these tutors come from a wide range of backgrounds, including young people on a gap year, university students who want to work while studying, and domestic and international travellers.



It is the tutor's job to organise, supervise and support the 'classroom' at home. Shutterstock

It is hard to find and keep a tutor

We also know remote tutors are hard to recruit.

The position has complex demands and responsibilities, but wages are unregulated and there are no targeted qualifications required or available to advance people's careers.

This is not helped by a lack of government incentives for, say, teaching students to spend a "year in the bush", or visa provisions to allow overseas-qualified teachers to stay for longer periods in these roles.

So there is a high turnover. Most are only in the job with the one family for one to two years before leaving the role altogether.

There is a federal government allowance for families doing distance education and some minor state government subsidies for internet access and computer hardware. But families say these are not enough to help parents recruit and retain a supervisor.

Why should we recognise tutors?

If there is formal recognition of remote educator tutors' knowledge and skills, this provides status and makes the job a more attractive career pathway.

Tutors would not have to do a full education degree, like school teachers. Instead, they could be trained in specific components of a degree through microcredentials, or smaller courses of learning.

They could start with specific skills for setting up and managing a learning space, and strategies for teaching reading, spelling and basic numeracy. These examples are core to the remote educator tutor qualifications, which could also be later used as part of other qualifications, if they wanted to do future study.

Read more: Microcredentials: what are they, and will they really revolutionise education and improve job prospects?

This could go beyond distance education

Dedicated, targeted training for remote education tutors could be applied beyond this workforce as well. We know there are many school students studying at home for reasons other than being too far from the nearest school.

Growing numbers of students either study online at private schools or are home-schooled. They also need to be supervised (most often by parents).



A teenage girl works at her desk in her bedroom.

Growing numbers of Australian students are doing their schooling from home, regardless of where they live. Shutterstock

Other groups who would benefit from these training opportunities include:

- parents who are home tutors for their children enrolled in distance education
- parents who home-school their children
- parents who want to develop skills to tutor their child (or children) enrolled in general schooling.
- teacher aides who want to boost their current qualifications.

This training could be done through online university courses or other vocational providers. It would not only support the professional needs of remote tutors but also empower families to better support their children as they navigate distance education.

Read more: Australia has a new online-only private school: what are the options if the mainstream system doesn't suit your child?