

Submission  
No 144

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Organisation:** Home Education Support and Action Network (HESAN)

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Partially Confidential



# HESAN Submission to the Homeschooling Inquiry

Home Education Support and Action Network

*This Submission has been prepared in assistance with:*

*The views that are expressed in this submission are supported by more than fifty homeschooling families in New South Wales.*

# Submission to the Homeschooling Inquiry

By Home Education Support and Action Network (HESAN)

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## A. Introduction to our Homeschooling Network

As a group of more than fifty home educating families, we are grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Select Committee on Home Schooling. Families within HESAN (Home Education Support and Action Network) have extensive homeschooling experience over many years. The experience in our group ranges from those who have home educated for 20+ years to those who have just begun. Families represented in this group like to meet regularly for support and encouragement in various locations. Some families meet monthly for discussion nights where we share our educational experiences, discuss educational philosophies, approaches and day to day experiences, and answer questions for new homeschool families. We also gather socially as families providing a further layer of social interaction for both the parents and the home schooling children. We also use this network as a way to organize activities, joining together to form sports groups, art classes, gymnastic classes, teen debating / book discussion times, drama, dance, and many other experiences that come up and are advertised among our community. These activities have proven to be a valuable support for our home schooling children and families.

This submission has been prepared to outline the views that are supported within our group.

This discussion has arisen due to the updated Registration for Homeschooling Information Package, (IP) 2013. This IP has made a significant move from being a document which seeks to assist parents who desire to register for home education to one which is regulatory and prescriptive and at times restricting our flexibility to broaden the educational experiences of our home schooling children. With respect, the IP does not reflect an understanding of how home education works based on our extensive research and especially the research undertaken in Tasmania and overseas, nor does it provide flexibility for differing educational approaches.

Writing this submission allows us as a group to outline what homeschooling means to us, and we will present our concerns, facts, opinions and recommendations.

## Some Reasons and Benefits of Home Education to our children

Within our support group there are a mix of reasons to homeschool –

- Acknowledging and accepting parental responsibility of education;
- A strong belief that home education is better for our children due to the fact that children are more motivated to learn, and the unique parent/child relationship;
- The home can be a centre of learning across the ages, where parents and children are engaging in all types of learning experiences;
- An environment where the love of learning is promoted and shared;
- Family time is increased and all of life becomes shared experiences;
- Family values and culture is promoted and passed on; Family bonds are strengthened;
- Healthy relationships are encouraged;
- Learning difficulties can be addressed more easily due to awareness, time and one on one attention;
- Children can learn at their own pace – to slow down when needed, but also to excel past “grade” levels; Can pursue their own interests;
- Flexibility of Study
- Less dependence on peers and pressure to conform;
- Difficult circumstances within the school context including learning problems not being addressed, bullying, children who do not cope within the system;

Families who are considering home education greatly benefit from meeting other families from within our network community. Many potential homeschool mums come to our monthly meetings with an assortment of experiences and questions. In this forum, we discuss curriculum ideas, books to read, ways to address behavioral issues, online programs and tools, educational places to visit, upcoming events and groups we can join. We also support each other by sharing helpful resources (online and printed) and provide guidance to find the best materials and opportunities to encourage teens and others in self-directed learning. In our group Home Schooling is an opportunity for deeper learning for both the parents and children, acknowledging that we see ourselves as students in every sense of the word.

Most of the time, our families teach their children independently and our children learn to work at a pace agreed by the parents and students having regard to the individual strengths and weaknesses of the students. This is all done within the supportive context of the family. However, being a part of a Support Group (as is the case with other homeschooling support groups), our children have many and varied possibilities to join specialist classes to teach a skill or subject area such as Science, Drama, Dance, Choir, Basketball and other sports, Gymnastics, Thinking

Clubs, Debating, Book Discussion Groups, Art classes and more. This works by families recognizing a need, finding a resource (person, expert, community resource, educational experience, tours) and inviting others to join. We can also be far more involved in community events, library visits and engage in volunteer opportunities (such as visiting nursing homes) outside of the home. We also have a framework for socialization (e.g. monthly picnics, park play, beach sports, and birthdays). In the past, we had the benefit of being able to travel and continue to use our approved program as well as educate through the travel experiences but in the 2013 Information Package, we have been restricted to remain in NSW.

## Outcomes of Homeschooling

Of the families represented here, many children have already graduated. Several children have gone on to study at TAFE, University and other Tertiary Institutions, complete trades and/or run their own businesses and are effective in contributing to their communities. Home schooling does lead to proven educational outcomes as evidenced by the success of students who have been the beneficiaries of the home schooling environment. From a recent Homeschool Graduate study, (2014) where 137 graduates responded, we see many continuing in tertiary education:

Educational Qualification	Already Achieved: (%)	Currently studying towards: (%)
HSC or equivalent	30	3
Certificate 1	4	0
Certificate II	12	0
Certificate III	23	6
Diploma	15	6
Advanced Diploma, Associate Degree	3	4
Bachelor Degree	19	52
Bachelor Honours Degree, Grad Cert, Grad Dip	6	12
Masters	1	6
Doctoral	0	1
Other	17	9

The most common pathway to University was through TAFE courses (36%) and through Online University (31%).

## B. Regulatory Framework For Homeschooling

### Our Group's Experiences with the Registration Process

Quite a number of our homeschool support group have educated for 20 or more years. We have seen how the governing body progressively imposed more and more regulation thereby progressively restricting the learning experiences of our home schooling students. The example below illustrates this point. The last time the Education Act was changed, was in 2004. This was a significant change (arguably written more for public schools), but the change was not reflected in the following Information Package of 2006. In fact, the Board of Studies at that time sent a representative to regional meetings to assure us that this change did not affect home educators.

But, as time moved on, we began to notice changes among our own group. Some Authorised Persons left unusual and incorrect comments ("you need to school between 9 and 3") or added in extra requirements ("make sure you record to the outcomes") during our visits. Although the Home Education Association questioned the Office of the Board of Studies about these apparent changes in the registration process, the Board said nothing had changed. Even when the updated 2013 Information Package was released, they responded by saying that for parents who were meeting the requirements before the updated 2013 IP, there was no reason to change their approach.

In those days (post 2004, which was the date of the change in Education Act to pre-2012) we were assessed on providing our children with a quality education. The Authorised Persons would come and visit, discuss our plans, and see a huge variety of approaches even within our group. Although our programs were very diverse, we were all granted registration and were often commended on our excellent programs. Some of us in our group have reported that the Authorised Person would comment on the program and say it was way above their age level at school.

So, we had no reason for concern and we were fulfilling and even exceeding minimum curriculum requirements by giving our children a well- rounded, broad, diverse, interesting and quality education.

However, the statistics and stories of traumatic and inconsistent visits showed that increased regulation was occurring across the State in quite alarming numbers. It is our opinion that significant changes noted in the 2013 IP were directly responsible for the difficulties in registration that home educators were experiencing and reporting. These changes probably began to be

implemented directly after the 2011 IP was released and it appears that the 2013 IP is considered a “clarification” of policy rather than new policy. Nonetheless we strongly submit that the 2013 IP constitutes real change in the regulatory environment for home educated families in NSW as seen by the statistical evidence below:

Registration Details showing changes in the Registration Applications from 2010-2013

	2010-11	2012-13	Percent increase
Refused applications	8	43	438%
Withdrawn applications	169	335	98%
Registration for 3 months	7	49	600%
Registration for 6 months	99	242	144%
Total children registered*	2940	3705	26%

\* Data from the OBoS Annual Report

As can be seen, there is an increase of 98% of withdrawn applications and 600% increase in short registration periods. This data clearly demonstrates that there were significant regulatory changes taking place since 2011, and these changes have had a direct negative impact upon the home education community. It has created unnecessary anxiety among own community of homeschooling families about the next registration visits and more of our time is spent in discussing process as well as re-assuring the group. We take the view that registration visits should be helpful, friendly and supportive. We have no issue with balance and consistent oversight by an independent oversight body that seeks to be supportive and inclusive of the extensive experience that home schooling parents and students bring to the oversight body.

### **Families felt as though they were on Trial**

The language used in the 2013 IP made us feel as though we were on trial. That is why so many of us are anxious about the registration process which we see as combative rather than supportive. That may also be a reason why some choose not to register.

No longer are we “discussing our application” with the Authorised Person, but we feel like families are being put on trial, needing to prove ourselves and justifying our choice. We ask that our choice to home educate is supported by the registration process in a manner that respects the inherent right of the parents being actively involved in the schooling of their children

One important introductory statement was changed in the 2013 Pack has proved to be indicative of the fundamental change that occurred through many different parts of the IP.



"Home schooling, also ~~called~~ referred to as home education, ~~allows~~ requires a parent to integrate ~~deliver~~ the NSW Board of Studies curriculum ~~with the learning processes that occur naturally in the home throughout a child's development.~~"

## Adherence to the delivery of the NSW Syllabuses;

As far as our educational approaches to homeschooling, our group is hugely diverse. We have some families who have used textbooks continually through all their homeschooling years and some families who do not rely on textbooks at all. Most of our families are focused but eclectic in their approach and use many different and diverse resources and approaches to teach their children. Some families have used a Classical approach, Charlotte Mason approach, Literature based approach, a Natural Learning/ Unschooling Approach (which is being led entirely by life's experiences and directed by the child's interests) or a combination of some or all. Others have home educated using the Accelerated Christian Education (A.C.E.) curriculum as a base of their education, supplementing it in many ways. All of these approaches have been accepted by the Board of Studies and most of these families do not consult the NSW syllabuses when choosing their approach. The minimum curriculum requirements were met and exceeded by home educating families. Home schooling can be highly organized and focused.

If we were to begin with and/or restrict ourselves to the BOS NSW syllabus – we could not have the diversity which we have been able to enjoy which in turn denies our home schooling students the benefits of a diverse and sustained educational experience. The rich learning experiences and the outcomes of the learning would certainly have been hampered. We want to encourage curiosity, creativity and the freedom to learn to enable the home educated students to achieve their full learning potential. We do this through sustained parental and student efforts concentrating on real options, real choice, real diversity and play to the strengths of homeschooling.

Within our homeschooling support group, each family uses appropriate materials and curriculum and educates their children in the way that suits their family. Most families decide on and create their own program through extensive research according to their goals, size of the family, beliefs, values, cost and child's learning styles, not because they are looking to restrict themselves to simply the syllabus. Yet, these programs have all been approved. During our dedicated monthly meetings, we often discuss curriculum choices, options available and some

families choose to use the same material and possibly meet together in a group learning context. At other times, we arrange for a teacher to lead a class or teach a specific subject or skill.

We do not see children as neat little packages that fit into year levels. Rather, we see education happening at all times and at differing paces. Children are unique and home education enables them to receive a specialized and tailored educational experience under the guidance of loving and caring parents. This individualized education is what makes home education so different from one home to the other, and this unique individuality and diversity is also seen as its strength.

## C. Appropriateness of the Current Regulatory Regime

The Registration Process that homeschooling families need to go through to home educate in New South Wales, does not currently reflect an appropriate and informed understanding of Home Education. The points below show the progression towards more regulation and the increased lack of understanding of Office of the Board of Studies from 2000 onwards.

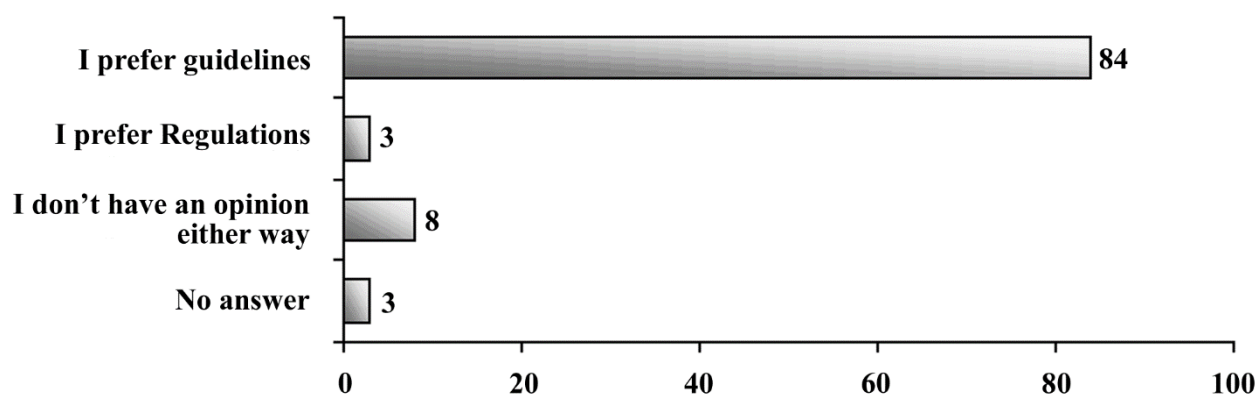
### **The Board Commissions a Home Education Study, in 1999**

In the past, the Office of the Board of Studies seemed to understand what home education looked like and was willing to engage, consult and consider home education as a separate entity. For example, in 1999, Taylor Nelson Sofres, an independent research company, was commissioned by the Office of the Board of Studies to conduct a process for consultation with home educators on the suitability of the requirements for registration for home schooling and whether regulations would be desirable. 1493 registered home educators completed the survey and one of the findings of the Home Education Consultation Report, 2000 revealed that 84% of the respondents favoured guidelines in favour to regulations.

#### The major findings from the consultation are as follows:

**Respondents favoured guidelines in preference to the introduction of Regulations.**

#### % of Responses: Regulations or Administrative Guidelines



## The Board Takes Note of the Research ... for a Time

We believe that this report had an impact on the registration of home educators for years. We have worked according to guidelines (rather than regulations) and specific Key Learning Area curriculum guidelines were listed for our benefit in each of the Information Packages until 2013. The question remains to this day: Why did they change it when their own research clearly stated that they needed to be more flexible with home educators?

However, in any case, it still showed that at that time, there was an interest in researching what would most benefit us.

## Positive Regional Meetings Held to Allay Fears in 2005

There seemed to be a degree of understanding and support that even when changes occurred in the Education Act in 2004, a representative from the Board of Studies held regional meetings to clarify and assure the home educating community that the changes would not affect home educators. (They still felt the impact of the research paper in their minds.)

## Information Packs Created in Consultation up to 2006

Another example of this top heavy approach rather than supportive role, is the fact that Information Packages were created in consultation with experienced home educators in 1998, 2004 and 2006 and feedback was welcomed in 2004 and 2006, but not in subsequent Information Packages (2010, 2011 2013)

## Lack of trust due to many contradictory statements

The current Information Package was released on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August and because there were such significant changes, many letters were written voicing disagreement and real concerns. However, the Office of the Board of Studies continually refused to acknowledge that their 2013 IP had been changed significantly. They stated it was for clarification purposes and for the introduction of the National Curriculum. Members within our group, created two comparison charts –

- Comparison Charts of the IPs from 1998 to 2013 See Appendix
- Comparison Chart of the 201 and 2013 IP

Because so many letters were written, by the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, a Question and Answer Paper was added to the OBOS website. This was to answer questions which were raised in the letters. Once again members within this network, investigated and compared the answers to the actual Information Package and found huge discrepancies and contradictory statements in the Q&A –

- Comparison of the 2013 AP and the Q&A Supplement ( )

This continual refusal to acknowledge that changes had been made and the fact that changes were seen on the `ground` as Authorised Persons progressively began to regulate homeschool families differently, has increasingly led to a lack of trust in the Board of Studies and some Authorised persons.

#### D. Ways in which the Registration Process can be improved

Home education is different from institutional schooling and should be treated appropriately having regard to the differences. The Information Package reflects an institutional school curriculum, institutional school understanding, and institutional school terminology. It should be written by those who understand home education, and have had experience in home education rather than out of the Office of the Board of Studies which has traditionally had an institutional school focus.

The BOSTES has shown over the years and in especially in recent times that they are wishing to regulate home education in the same way as the non-governmental schools. We find it difficult to work under a system which is not willing to support us and continually seeks to impose more inappropriate regulation.

Increased regulation does not mean better quality. Appropriate registration which is supportive and inclusive, and which is designed by an independent oversight body, is urgently needed to support the home schooling community.

The model which has proven to be the most effective in Australia is the Tasmanian model – Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council. This is directly responsible to the Education Minister. The registration and monitoring process was based on the Report of the Ministerial Working Party, October, 1991 Home Education in Tasmania. The report made 21 recommendations which had bilateral endorsement without modifications. It has proven to be cost effective and has facilitated appropriate understanding of home education since the council consists of three members who have been nominated by home educators and three other member, at the discretion of the Minister for Education.

We believe that this Tasmanian model recognizes the democratic right to freedom of choice in education by providing a body which understands and gives validity to home education and shows due diligence to oversee, facilitate and support home educating families.

### E. Support Issues for Homeschooling Families

Home educating families have felt that they are discriminated against because of their educational choice. Many educational services are not available to us – such as access to the hospital school, travel passes, TvET courses, part-time schooling, school libraries, Open Highschool. Nor are we notified of career days or immunization updates.

### Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our thoughts and concerns to this Homeschooling Inquiry. We are excited about the possibilities that the Inquiry can promote to support and nurture the vibrant and diverse home schooling community. It is our hope that, the Government has in mind the best interests of all children irrespective of what educational paradigm is adopted by the parents. We look to the Government to support all educational methods and choices available.

We believe that freedom in education is a choice and that choice and diversity brings excellence.

We want to provide our children with the best education possible and we want this educational choice to be seen as a valid alternative, supported by an independent oversight body. We want the body to be supportive from within and to demonstrate this through its policies and administration processes. We want registration to become fair, pedagogically-blind, philosophically-blind and respectful.

We do not believe that the Office of the Board of Studies can serve the home schooling community as well as an independent oversight body for Home Schooling can with the support of the Home Schooling community.

## Recommendations:

1. Establish an independent body to oversee, facilitate and support home education (based on the proven Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council model - THEAC)
2. That registration is managed by the above independent body. Registration as a basis of meaningful engagement with the Home Education community.
3. That home educators are given notification and equal access to educational support services, resources, opportunities and any initiatives which are available to children in the institutional school system. This will ensure that there is no discrimination against Home Education providers.
4. That "Centres of Homeschooling Excellence" be set up in various locations as resource centres for home educators. These centres provide facilities which homeschooling groups may use for shared classes, access resource materials, and may be used as an alternative location for registration visits.

## APPENDIX:

- Information Package Change Comparison Chart 1998-2013

This is a study comparing the changes that have occurred in the Information Packages from 1998 to 2013. The differences have been highlighted and noted. A comment regarding the changes in each section is added to the top of each section. The Information Packages which were used in this study are 1998, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011 and 2013. Written by Marianne Vanderkolk

- Report of Ministerial Working Party, October 1991 (Tasmania)

Contact on behalf of HESAN: