



ROYAL LIFE SAVING
AUSTRALIA

Towards a water-loving nation free from drowning: The role of learn to swim

September 2022







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Executive summary

Australia is an island nation surrounded by stunning beaches and filled with rivers, lakes and other waterways. Water-based activities have long been central to Australian culture.



Annually, nearly 1 in 5 Australians swim for physical activity, totalling over 4.8 million people.¹ Many more Australians swim for leisure, to escape summer heat, or as part of other activities such as surfing or boating.

The social, health and economic benefits of being able to swim are well established. In 2021, we prepared a report exploring the benefits that accrue to individuals, communities and society as a result of activities undertaken across the aquatic industry, incorporating council-owned pools, such as aquatic and recreation facilities, and publicly accessible privately owned pools, such as fitness centres and gyms.

These benefits are significant: \$9.1 billion annually in social, health and economic benefits.

The benefits of being able to swim are significant, but they are disproportionately enjoyed by those who can confidently and safely engage in aquatic activities. Ensuring every Australian has an opportunity to learn how to swim is therefore key to accessing these benefits into the future.

Purpose of this report

PwC Australia was engaged by Royal Life Saving Society - Australia **to map, understand, and assess the learn to swim ecosystem in Australia.** Learn to swim refers to the access programs, delivery providers and infrastructure which supports the delivery of swimming and water safety education (which is also commonly referred to as swimming lessons).

Our assessment has considered:

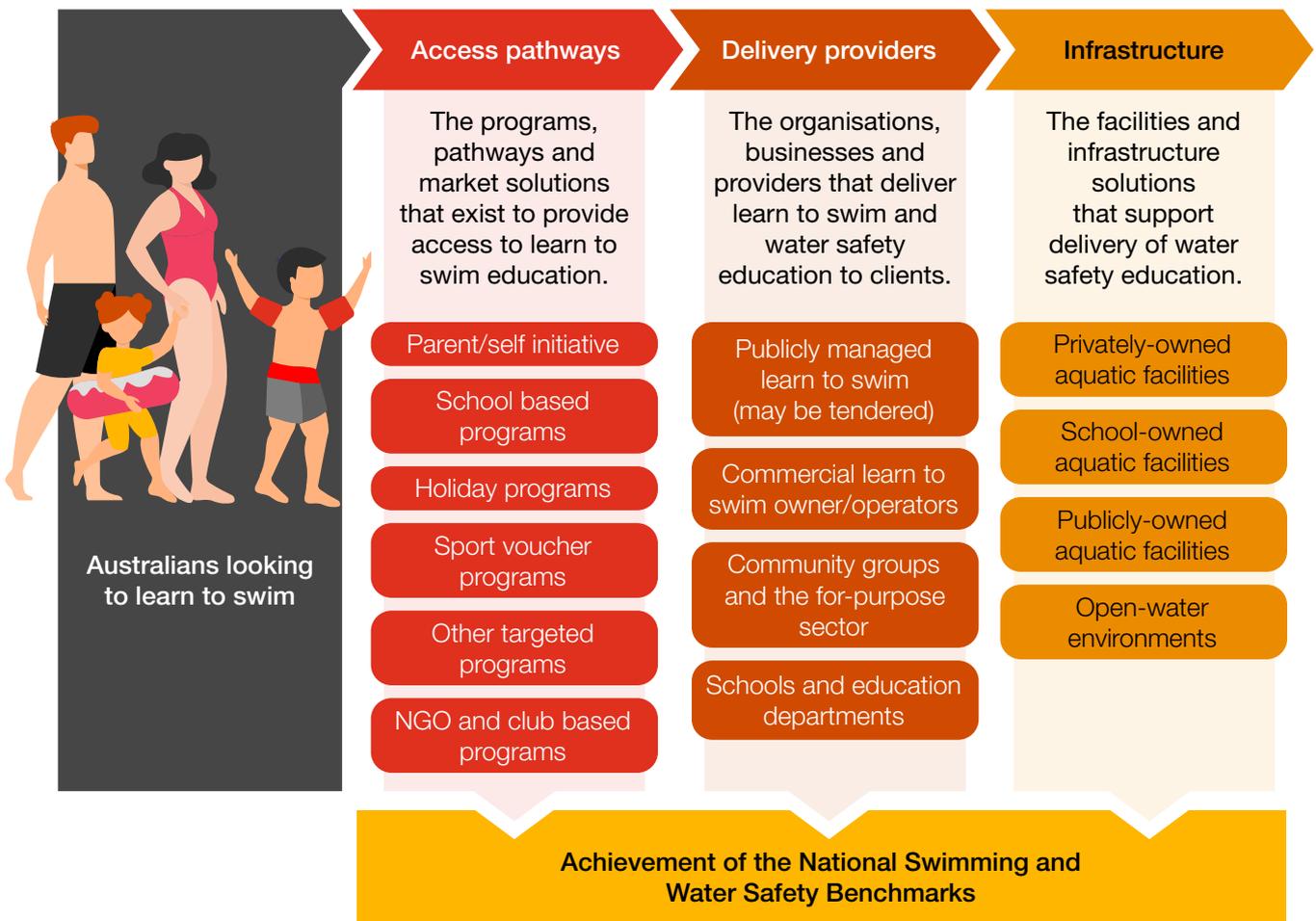
- Who is missing out on learn to swim education? Looking at the evidence of swimming and water safety ability in Australia, with a focus on those from high-risk communities who, according to the evidence, are less likely to meet the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks and therefore more likely to drown.
- What are the programs in place that support delivery of learn to swim programs? Considering supports across government plus the private and for-purpose sectors.
- Opportunities for governments and other stakeholders to maximise their impact on Australia's swimming ability, and further contribute towards a nation free from drowning.

Our findings

Mapping the learn to swim ecosystem

Learn to swim refers to the access programs, delivery providers and infrastructure which supports the delivery of swimming and water safety education (which is also commonly referred to as swimming lessons). Australia has a complex and somewhat fragmented learn to swim ecosystem. Support is provided across the ecosystem through initiatives to lift access to learn to swim, coordinate or facilitate delivery of learn to swim programs or through provision of infrastructure such as swim schools and aquatic facilities. A map of the learn to swim ecosystem is shown below in figure 1.

Figure 1: Learn to swim ecosystem map



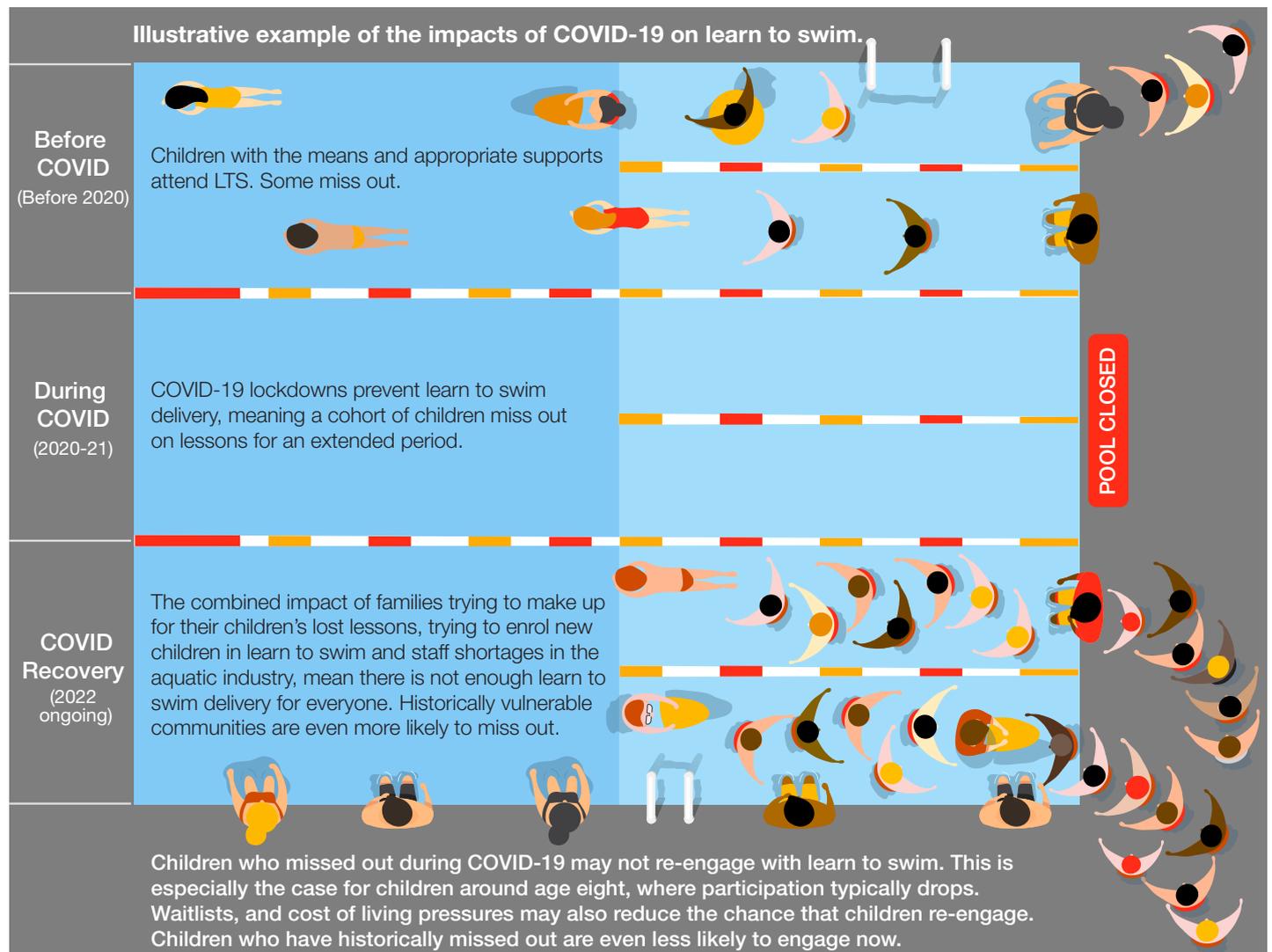
Those missing out on learn to swim

Despite the supports offered across different parts of the system, some Australians miss out on learn to swim education or, despite participating in lessons, fail to achieve the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, **Royal Life Saving Society - Australia estimated that more than 40 per cent of children leave primary school unable to achieve the minimum National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks for the age of 12 years.**² This is even though a lack of swimming skills and water safety knowledge is known to be a major risk factor in drowning.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this issue, with close to two years of swimming lessons disrupted and an estimated 10 million lessons cancelled. Now, due to cost-of-living pressures and staff shortages, the return of Australians into learn to swim is slower than is necessary to facilitate a sufficient 'catch-up' of learn to swim. **With reports of individual facility wait lists exceeding 300 children, wait times of many months and 25 per cent of families citing the cost of lessons as a barrier to participation, these issues are emerging as key risks for swimming skill attainment and have generational impacts on drowning risk.**

In addition to a growing concern surrounding general swimming and water safety education access in Australia, research shows that a number of groups are currently accessing learn to swim programs at lower rates than national averages.

Multicultural communities, lower socioeconomic populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people with disabilities are all found to be less likely to be attending swimming and water safety education programs.⁴



Towards an Australia where everybody learns to swim

Our assessment of the learn to swim ecosystem and the outcomes it delivers presents a range of findings and associated opportunities for further consideration by stakeholders.

	Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
Access pathways	1.1 Programs targeted to high drowning risk groups are emerging, but not yet established.	Implement expanded and nationally-available targeted programs, funding or grants, focusing on groups at a higher risk of drowning. Explore partnerships and market based solutions to maximise access to water safety education.
	2.1 Children are very likely to disengage from formal learn to swim education by age eight, and hence miss the opportunity to achieve the Benchmarks.	Explore incentives and funding which support greater retention and participation in swimming lessons for children aged between eight and 14, and to reach the cohort who missed out entirely due to COVID-19.
	2.2 Due to COVID-19, two years of swimming lessons have been disrupted for a cohort of students, who are now at risk of disengaging with swimming lessons.	
	3.1 School and early engagement programs can enable access for many Australian children who would otherwise face financial barriers to learn to swim education.	Explore programs and education initiatives that increase parent and child engagement in preschool water safety programs, and increase access to primary school learn to swim education.
	4.1 Data on and evaluation of program success are not standardised or widely available.	Embed consistent data collection and open reporting into government funded learn to swim programs, allowing more effective program evaluation and developing a broad dataset on Australian childrens' swimming ability.
Delivery providers	5.1 Commercial delivery generally targets areas and population groups with high demand for learn to swim education.	Consider incentives for learn to swim operators to provide services for groups at a higher risk of drowning, and for older children who have not achieved the benchmarks and who require greater pool space.
	5.2 There are some examples of collaboration between commercial and public learn to swim operators, such as tendered management.	
	6.1 Remote and regional learn to swim delivery is sparsely available during out of season months.	Explore opportunities to increase the availability of swimming teachers, such as employment pathway programs, funding training and ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications and licenses domestically (between States and Territories) and internationally.
	6.2 The aquatic industry is reporting acute labour shortages, which impact the availability and cost of lessons.	
	7.1 Swimming and water safety education is not always delivered in alignment with the National Benchmarks.	Assess the benefits and costs of potential reforms or incentives which promote greater alignment between learn to swim curricula and the Benchmarks.
	7.2 Inconsistent evaluation and data reporting are contributing to lower national achievement of the Benchmarks.	
7.3 Australian swim teaching certifications are recognised globally for quality and safety.		

Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
<p>8.1 Australia has a strong portfolio of public aquatic facilities, although there are challenges emerging.</p>	<p>Assess the need for state and national level strategic aquatic infrastructure planning to ensure sufficient infrastructure is maintained and developed to meet the needs of Australia's growing population.</p>
<p>9.1 Challenges exist to ensure regional and remote communities have access to aquatic infrastructure.</p>	<p>Increase aquatic facility access in regional communities, particularly remote Aboriginal communities. This may include cost-effective incremental investments, such as staffing, employment pathway programs or water heaters for summer-only facilities.</p>
<p>10.1 Privately-owned learn to swim facilities are often lower cost and smaller scale, and hence more responsive to demand. However, they often have less sophisticated facilities, which are not purpose built to teach swimming to a wide range of participants.</p>	<p>Consider options to address deficiencies in private learn to swim infrastructure, such as partnerships with better-equipped public facilities.</p>
<p>11.1 Public and private partnership on aquatic infrastructure development is rare.</p>	<p>Explore the potential of private-public partnerships and outcome-based funding of commercial aquatics facilities in order to enhance the impact of the private sector, and more effectively serve high-risk communities.</p>

Infrastructure



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1

Introduction

Time spent by the water plays a central role in many Australian's lives, and the local pool is an important community space, where many are first introduced to the positive sensations water provides.

As individuals learn how to swim, they are taught skills that can lead to a lifelong appreciation for aquatic activities and a number of subsequent health, leisure, and social benefits that accompany being a competent swimmer.

Many Australians, however, may be surprised to discover that learning to swim is far from a universal experience. Despite the perception that swimming is a universal leisure activity, **the Royal Life Saving Society - Australia estimates that more than 40 per cent of children leaving primary school are unable to achieve the minimum national standards for swimming and water safety skills.**⁵

This is a striking gap, notably given that a lack of swimming skills and water safety knowledge is known to be a major risk factor in drowning.⁶

In this report we have sought to map, understand and assess the learn to swim ecosystem in Australia, and identify potential high-level opportunities for improvement. Critically, our assessment considers the evidence of water safety ability in Australia, with a focus on those from identified high drowning risk communities who, according to the evidence, are less likely to meet the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks and therefore at a higher risk of drowning.



1.2 The National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks

For the purpose of this report, we define learning to swim as meeting, or having the opportunity to meet the National Swimming and Water Safety Benchmarks (the Benchmarks). Published in the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework (the Framework), the Benchmarks were developed with the support of a reference group of leading swimming and water safety organisations and experts, and are endorsed by the Australian Water Safety Council.⁷ The three Benchmarks outline the desired competency standards every Australian should have the opportunity to acquire and maintain. Listed in Table 1, the skills identified in each of the Benchmarks focus on maximising safety around water and preventing avoidable drownings incidents.

These Benchmarks were developed with the goal of equipping Australians with the water safety knowledge and skills needed to minimise the likelihood of accidental drowning. Achievement of the Benchmarks also supports Australians to safely engage in aquatic leisure activities such as swimming, water sport, hydrotherapy and other aquatic activities, encouraging lifetime participation.

Table 1: National Benchmarks for Swimming and Water Safety

Benchmark strands	Benchmark by age		
	 6 years	 12 years	 17 years
Hazards and Personal Safety	Identify rules for safe behaviour at aquatic environments at or near the home	Understand and respect safety rules for a range of aquatic environments	Understand behaviours that affect personal safety in aquatic environments and activities
Entry and Exit	Enter and exist shallow water unassisted	Enter and exit the water for a range of environments	Assist others to exit deep water using bystanders
Flotation	Float and recover to a standing or secure position	Float, scull or tread water for two minutes and signal for help	Float, scull or tread water for five minutes and signal for help
Swimming	Move continuously for five metres	Swim continuously for 50 metres	Swim continuously for 400 metres
Underwater	Submerge the body and move through an obstacle	Surface dive, swim underwater and search to recover an object from deep water	Search in a deep-water environment and recover a person
Lifesaving	Identify people and actions to help in an aquatic emergency	Respond to an emergency and perform a primary assessment	Respond to an emergency and provide first aid
Rescue	None	Rescue a person using a non-swimming rescue technique with non-rigid aids	Rescue an unconscious person in deep water
Survival Sequence	Perform a survival sequence to simulate an accidental entry	Perform a survival sequence wearing light clothing	Perform a survival sequence wearing heavy clothing

Source: Royal Life Saving Society - Australia, 2020. National Swimming and Water Safety Framework

2

Benefits unlocked by learn to swim

The significant social, health and economic benefits of swimming and the aquatic industry are well established.

In 2021, we prepared a report for Royal Life Saving exploring the benefits that accrue to individuals, communities and society as a result of activities undertaken across the aquatic industry. This includes council-owned pools, such as aquatic and recreation facilities, and publicly accessible privately-owned pools, such as fitness centres, gyms and commercial swim schools. These benefits are significant: \$9.1 billion annually in social, health and economic benefits.

Some of these benefits can be directly attributed to learn to swim education. The aquatic industry employs over 14,000 swimming coaches, instructors and officials, many of whom deliver learn to swim education.⁸ Through its operation, learn to swim delivery provides economic benefits by supporting jobs and contributing to Australia's gross domestic product. In addition, a lack of swimming and water safety knowledge is found to be a major risk factor in drowning.⁹ The industry which delivers learn to swim facilitates the attainment of critical water safety education and skills to Australians that directly contribute to reduced drowning risk.

From an economics standpoint, the direct benefits from learn to swim education are difficult to quantify at this point in time. However, many quantifiable benefits flow from being able to swim and participating in aquatic facilities, activities, fitness and recreation.

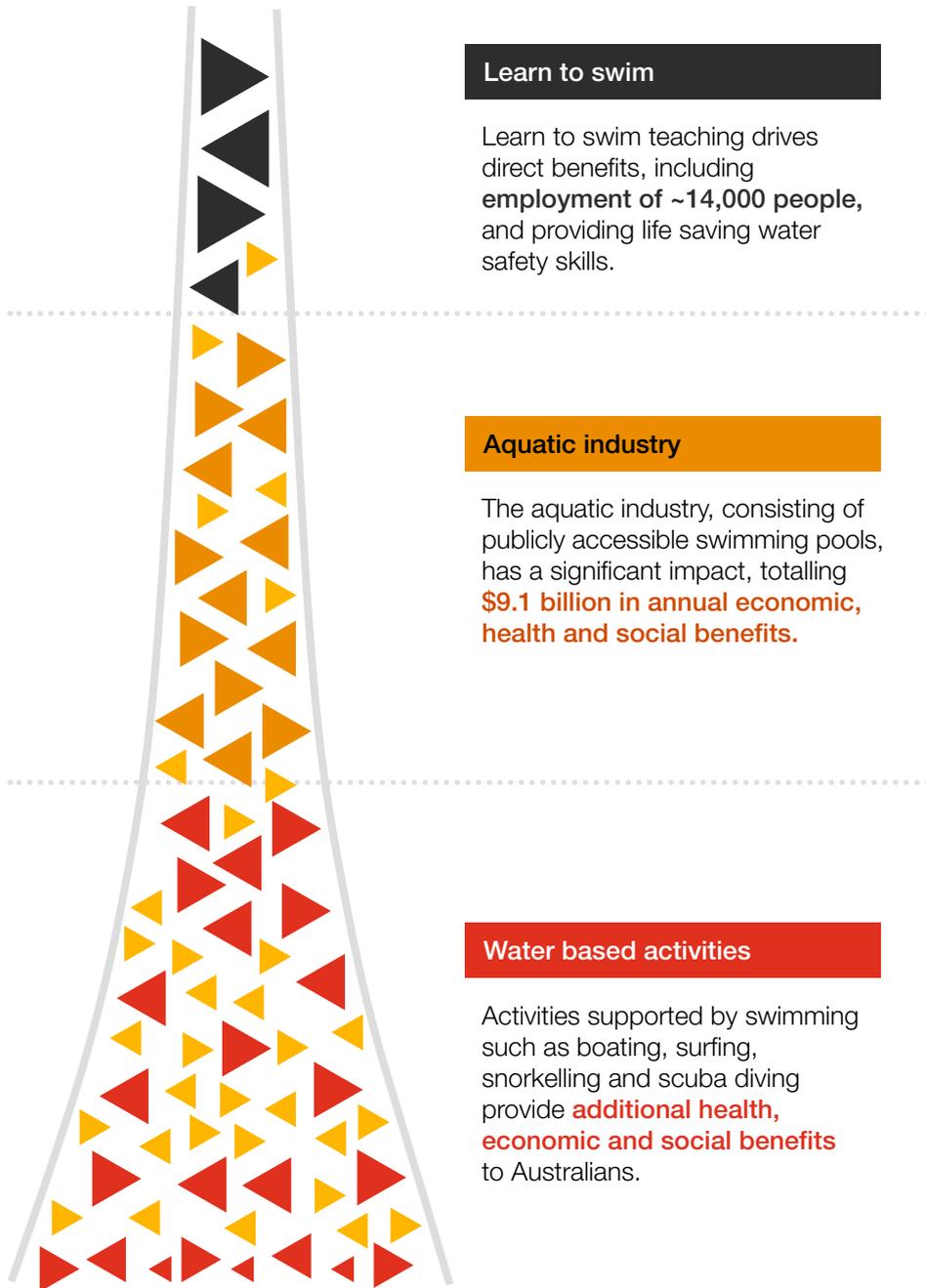
Indeed, research suggests that swimming ability is critical to participation in the activities provided by the aquatic industry with 84 per cent of participation associated with lap swimming, open water swimming, or swim club training.¹⁰ This suggests that the benefits provided by the aquatic industry and swimming more broadly are contingent on Australians' swimming ability - emphasising the importance of learning to swim. In turn, the identified benefits of aquatic recreation are partially 'unlocked' by learn to swim engagement.

The \$9.1 billion in benefits identifies only the benefits that accrue to individuals during the 333 million visits to publicly accessible pools each year.¹¹ This does not account for the economic, social and health benefits that accrue to individuals who engage in aquatic activities at privately-owned pools that are not available to the wider community, such as household, apartment, caravan park, resort and hotel pools.

Additionally, the ability to swim, as partially unlocked by learn to swim education, can be considered as a gateway to the social and health benefits that accrue to individuals engaging in other forms of aquatic activities that occur outside of the local aquatic centre or pool. Activities such as boating, surfing, snorkelling, scuba diving and other aquatic-based sport and recreation are largely inaccessible to individuals who are unable to swim - suggesting there are even more benefits beyond the \$9.1 billion identified that may be unlocked by Australia's learn to swim industry.



Figure 2: Illustrative presentation of the social, health, and economic benefits unlocked by learning to swim



Learn to swim

Learn to swim teaching drives direct benefits, including **employment of ~14,000 people**, and providing life saving water safety skills.

Aquatic industry

The aquatic industry, consisting of publicly accessible swimming pools, has a significant impact, totalling **\$9.1 billion in annual economic, health and social benefits.**

Water based activities

Activities supported by swimming such as boating, surfing, snorkelling and scuba diving provide **additional health, economic and social benefits** to Australians.

Source: Learn to swim employment based on Australian Taxation Office, Taxation Statistics 2018-19, Individuals – Table 15. Benefit of the aquatic industry based on PwC Australia (2021); The Health, Social and Economic Value of the Australian National Aquatic Industry. Prepared for Royal Life Saving, Melbourne, Australia.

2.1 Economic benefits

The Australian aquatic industry is one of the largest employers in the sport and recreation sector with over 2,000 aquatic facilities across the country.¹² These facilities provide space for active recreation, water safety skills development, education and community connection while also generating economic activity by supporting jobs and contributing to Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP).

The operations of the aquatic industry in Australia are estimated to support approximately \$2.8 billion in economic output per year.¹³ The direct economic impact is predominantly generated through compensation paid to employees, which is estimated to be \$1.4 billion annually, supporting up to 21,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs. Additionally, the purchasing of goods and services from ancillary industries to support the operations of aquatic facilities indirectly contributes \$1.3 billion annually to the Australian economy, supporting an additional 12,400 FTE jobs. Notably, these economic contributions are spread across the country, with 55 per cent of pools located in regional and remote Australia, helping to support jobs in areas of higher unemployment.¹⁴

2.2 Physical health benefits

The physical health benefit captures the benefit of reduced Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) and reduced burden on the healthcare system. DALYs estimate the cost of disease to individuals and Australia, by measuring years of life lost due to premature death, in addition to the years of life lived with a disability. Evidence has shown that physically active people are less likely to develop certain diseases, leading to a lower burden of disease.¹⁵

Key populations benefitting from physical activity at aquatic facilities are older Australians and people with disabilities. Approximately 20 per cent of individuals over 65+ years old get their physical activity at aquatic facilities.¹⁶

With over 40 per cent of the disease burden attributed to this population, swimming, hydrotherapy and other aquatic activities serve as highly effective activities for maintaining physical health.¹⁷ The aquatic industry also greatly benefits young people. Research shows being physically active in childhood and adolescence serves as a predictor of physical activity in young adulthood.¹⁸

Aquatic facilities offer significant health benefits to Australians by providing safe and highly accessible locations for individuals to undertake physical activity. Aquatic facilities are estimated to reduce the total burden of disease in Australia by approximately 7,500 life years annually, a benefit valued at \$1.6 billion. In addition to this benefit to individuals, the Australian healthcare system experiences savings of \$62.7 million each year, driven by the improved physical health of aquatic activity participants.¹⁹

2.3 Mental health benefits

Contact with water induces a calm state of mind.²⁰ This aligns with other findings, with research showing that swimming lessons for students aged 11-13 resulted in significantly reduced stress levels.²¹ Approximately 11 per cent of Australian swimmers use swimming as a means to improve their mental health, and for good reason, as activities such as swimming have been found to reduce the risk of developing mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression by 26 per cent.²² The annual benefit from reduced mental health conditions due to swimming and aquatic activities is \$227.7 million, in addition to a decrease in healthcare costs of \$10.7 million.²³



2.4 Wellbeing benefits

Regular physical activity is not only beneficial for improving physical health or reducing risk of mental illness, but it also improves a person's day-to-day quality of life and wellbeing. Studies show that physically active people are happier, have lower levels of stress, increased self-esteem and confidence, and improved psychological wellbeing.²⁴

Notably, swimming provides people with a 44 per cent higher increase in subjective wellbeing when compared with the average for other sports.²⁵ It is estimated that people who swim at least twice per week have on average a subjective wellbeing benefit valued at \$3,400 annually, increasing to \$4,350 when exercising three or more times per week.²⁶ The total wellbeing benefit provided by the aquatic industry in Australia is calculated at \$3.0 billion annually.²⁷

The aquatic industry serves as an important facilitator of improved leisure time. Spending personal leisure time doing enjoyable activities provides people with the opportunity to recover from the stressors encountered in daily life. As a result, people typically experience perceived benefits of a leisure visit to an aquatic facility which are greater than the cost of the visit. Willingness to pay for a leisure visit to an aquatic facility was recently surveyed at \$14.90, increasing for facilities with better amenities.²⁸ On this basis, the leisure benefit of going to an aquatic facility is estimated to be \$538 million per year.²⁹

In addition, there are further social benefits provided by the aquatics industry. For example, swimming lessons for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were shown to improve socialisation amongst their peers, in addition to the benefits of improved safety around water.³⁰

2.5 Drowning risk reduction benefits

Since 1894 (when records began), the drowning rate has declined from 20.3 per 100,000 to 1.1 in 2021.³¹ Many factors have contributed to this reduction over the past 130 years, including the proliferation of aquatic facilities, providing safe spaces with lifeguard supervision, while also increasing awareness of danger, and educating parents on the importance of supervising children.

In 2021, the Australian Water Safety Council published the Australian Water Safety Strategy 2030, which sets the goal of reducing drowning deaths by a further 50 per cent by 2030.³² A key strategy to reduce drownings is to increase the number of people in the population who have swimming and lifesaving skills. Participation in swimming lessons was associated with an 88 per cent reduction in drowning risk for children aged one to four.³³ Given the steady decline of child drowning rates, the annual benefit of avoided child drownings provided by the aquatic industry is valued at \$174 million annually.³⁴

2.6 Further considerations

In addition to the benefits identified within the previous report, learn to swim education is also an important enabler of aquatic recreation and sport activities that occur outside of our local aquatic facilities. Participation in a number of these activities is contingent on an individual's ability to swim, such as surfing, diving, scuba diving and snorkelling. For other aquatic based activities such as boating and fishing, lower confidence in swimming ability may act as a barrier to participation.

Enabled by swimming, surfing is one of Australia's most iconic sports, engaged in by over 550,000 Australian's annually.³⁵ Similar to engagement in swimming, participation in surfing can provide individuals with significant physical and mental health benefits. Surfing events can also provide economic and social contribution through increased tourism and expenditure, notably within coastal regional areas. The total value of these benefits has not been identified but are likely to represent a significant impact that is enabled by learning to swim. Recreational boating serves another example of learn to swim's flow-on impacts - the Department of Transport Victoria estimates the recreational boating industry is worth \$4.5 billion annually to the Victorian economy.³⁶

Further, strong swimming abilities can open the door to benefits beyond recreation. For example, being able to swim opens varying employment opportunities including as a lifeguard, swimming teacher, outdoor educator, tour operator, and in the emergency services.

However, these benefits, including the \$9.1 billion annually accrued at public-access aquatic facilities, are not a certainty. Learn to swim education is integral to unlocking these benefits and ensuring that they can continue to be enjoyed universally by Australians in a safe and equitable way. This is particularly relevant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing nation-wide lockdowns and limiting access to water safety education for children across the country. Continued advocacy is necessary to ensure that these children do not miss out on the opportunity to enjoy these benefits in the future.



3

Gaps in Australia's swimming ability

Australia is an island nation surrounded by stunning beaches and filled with rivers, scenic lakes and other waterways.

Water based activity has long been central to Australian culture. Annually, nearly one in five Australians participate in swimming for physical activity, totalling over 4.8 million people.³⁷ In addition, this does not include the millions of visits to the local pool, beach, river or body of water undertaken by Australians every year, meeting friends, escaping the summer heat, or for personal leisure.

While the benefits of access to swimming identified in the previous chapter are significant, these benefits are disproportionately enjoyed by those with the means and opportunity to engage in learn to swim. In this chapter we identify evidence which suggests that not all Australians are able to engage in learn to swim, in-part worsened by the impacts of COVID-19. Further, we identify a number of groups that are less likely to learn how to swim, and hence, less likely to enjoy the broad benefits of aquatics during their lifetime.

1 in 4 Australians have poor swimming abilities.³⁹

Less than 40 per cent of Australian adults report having good or excellent swimming skills.

3.1 Less than complete participation in swimming lessons

The broad access to water activities enjoyed by Australians reinforces the importance of promoting water safety across the country. Despite significant reductions, there is still a tragic number of drownings occurring every year in Australia, with 294 lives lost in 2021.³⁸ Drowning prevention is a significant consideration for governments, industry and the community, and there is still a significant deficiency in Australia's swimming ability: **one in four Australians have poor swimming abilities.**³⁹ **Less than 40 per cent of Australian adults report having good or excellent swimming skills.**

Swimming and water safety education are a key component to promoting safe use of aquatic environments and drowning prevention. A lack of swimming skills and water safety knowledge is found to be a major risk factor in drowning.⁴⁰ Despite this, the Royal Life Saving estimates that more than 40 per cent of children leaving primary school are unable to achieve the minimum national standards for swimming and water safety skills.⁴¹

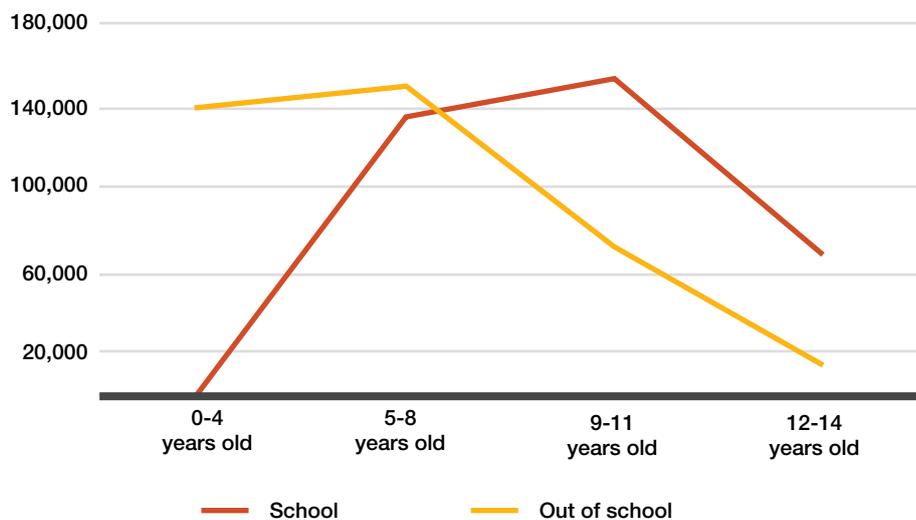
One of the key barriers to consistent achievement of the Benchmarks is a **distinct drop-off in participation by children at the age of eight or nine in formal, non-school aquatic education and training.**

AusPlay data on children's participation in swimming lessons, presented in figure 3, demonstrates this barrier.

Out of school participation in swimming lessons experiences a distinct participation reduction after age eight, with a 64 per cent drop in participation for nine to 11 year olds. Following this, a further 81 per cent drop-off in participation occurs between the nine to 11 age group and the 12-14 age group. The trend demonstrated by AusPlay data is supported by previous research by Royal Life Saving, which found that 75 per cent of children stop participation in swimming lessons from eight years of age.⁴²

Notably, the number of children participating in learn to swim programs at school increases for children aged nine to 11 years old, becoming the predominant form of learn to swim participation.⁴³ This is likely a reflection of the fact that all children within this age group are of primary school age, whereas not all children have started attending primary school by the age of five.

Figure 3: Annual participation in organised swimming lessons in Australia (participation per year of age)



Source: Clearinghouse for Sport (2022), AusPlay: Sports and physical activity reports (Swimming Detail Report)

Notes: (1) Data was normalised to per-year participation to acknowledge the inconsistent populations in each published age-group (4 years in 0-4 and 5-8 years old, three years in 9-11 and 12-14 years old); (2) AusPlay surveys does not capture frequency of participation, so this data is limited to the number of participants. Participants in out of school lessons are more likely to spend more time each year in learn to swim activities.

Learn to swim programs delivered through schools provide a valuable safety net, and assessment point but may be limited compared to out of school programs, with most school programs not exceeding 7.5 hours per student per year. The typical out of school learn to swim program runs for 10 weeks, with one 30-minute lesson per week. A child participating in these programs would be expected to spend at least six and up to 24 hours a year in swimming lessons, completing between one to four terms of lessons per year.

Retention of participants after age eight in out of school lessons is also limited by a lack of alignment between learn to swim education curricula, and the National Benchmarks. Research shows that many swim schools do not provide adequate teaching of water safety and survival skill training in line with the framework guidelines. For example, a recent study found that 29 per cent of program levels did not have any water safety or survival skills listed, suggesting a disconnect between the delivery of swimming and water safety education curricula with the requirements for drowning prevention.

As a result, parents may remove their children from lessons prematurely, incorrectly believing they are competent.⁴⁴ A national survey of Australian parents found that parents stopped their children's lessons when they deemed their child to have gained adequate water safety skills and competence in the water, rather than when they met objective criteria, such as the Benchmarks.⁴⁵ This suggests that more children could attain life saving water safety skills if the misalignment between parental understanding, learnt to swim curricula, and the National Benchmarks was resolved.

In addition to the growing concerns surrounding general swimming and water safety education access in Australia, COVID-19 has created new challenges.



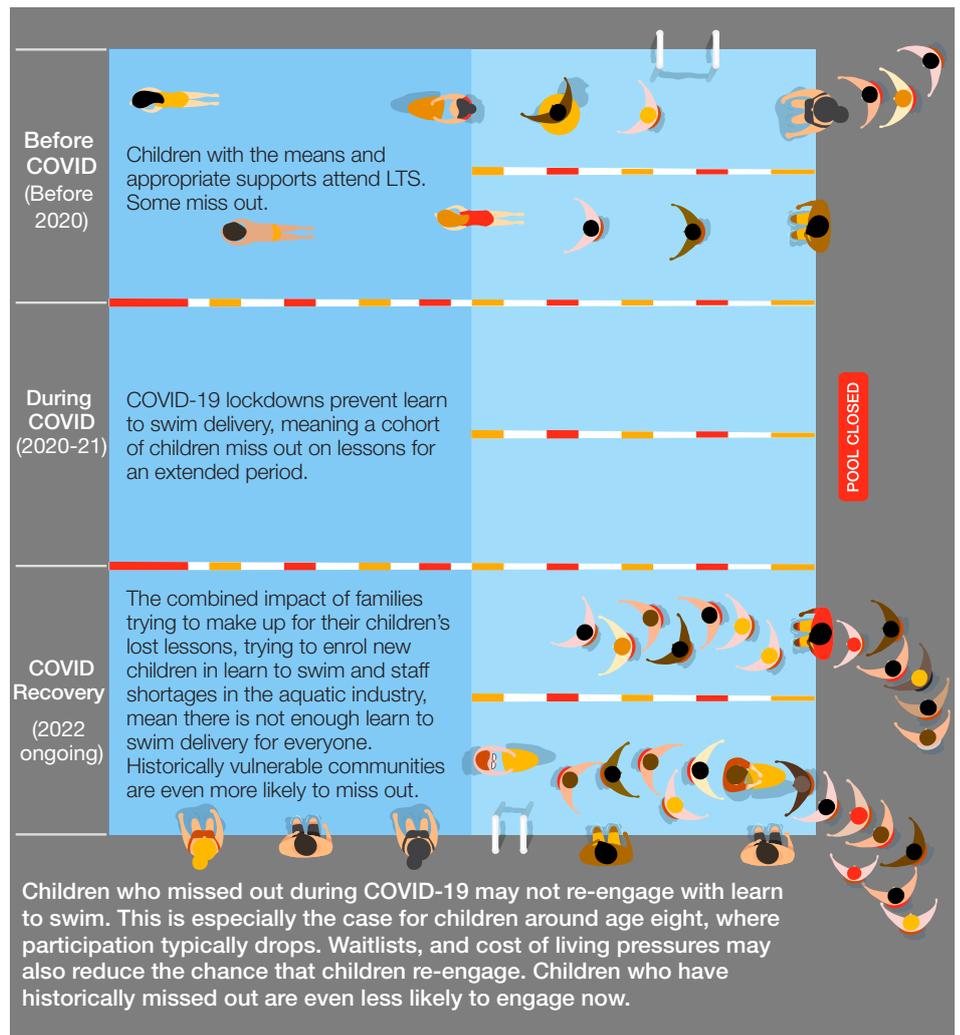
3.2 Challenges related to the impact of COVID-19

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has exerted stress on many sectors Australians often take for granted. Learn to swim is no different - the aquatic industry was one of the first sectors to close, and last to re-open. Each of Australia's 2,113 public and privately-owned aquatic facilities were closed at some stage, with many remaining closed for months at a time, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales which endured the longest lockdowns.

During these closures, learn to swim delivery ceased. As a result, many Australian children have missed up to two critical years of water safety education. With intermittent lockdowns occurring for approximately two years in Australia, it is possible that a child aged eight today may not have participated in swimming lessons since five or six years old. Given Royal Life Saving research reveals that most participation in non-school learn to swim occurs between ages four to eight, there is a risk that this disruption could have an enduring impact on children's swimming abilities. Figure 4 illustrates the potential impact of COVID-19 restrictions on swimming lesson participation.

In the example, a child aged six years old at the beginning of COVID-19 has missed out on up to two years of learn to swim due to COVID-19 lockdowns, and may continue to miss out or have disrupted participation over the coming years. Further, a significant increase in learn to swim engagement will be required in order for children to catch-up on missed lessons. Indeed, Royal Life Saving estimates that across Australia 10 million swimming lessons have been cancelled due to COVID-19, likely exceeding 500,000 hours of water safety education.⁴⁶ Following the move away from public health restrictions in 2022, further challenges threatening learn to swim have emerged which threaten to continue the disruption to learn to swim education.

Figure 4: Illustrative example of the impacts of COVID-19 on learn to swim.



With 45 per cent of participation in non-school swimming lessons occurring from age six to nine, this four-year disruption risks significant impacts on water safety across the Australian population. Disruptions are having an amplified effect, as learn to swim providers attempt to meet higher levels of demand, driven by a backlog of lessons which were not delivered during COVID-19.

While data regarding this impact on Australian's swimming abilities is still emerging, early research conducted by Royal Life Saving has demonstrated some emerging trends.⁴⁷

A survey of 408 parents in Victoria and New South Wales found:

- Most children's swimming lessons were impacted by COVID-19, with 61 per cent of parents reporting that their children's participation in learn to swim was disrupted due to lockdowns or individual COVID-19 related safety concerns.
- Many children's swimming abilities are seeming to decline, with 55 per cent of parents reporting that their child's swimming abilities have declined since COVID-19 began.
- Few children have recommenced swimming lessons with only 21 per cent of parents stating that their children have returned to swimming lessons since COVID-19.

During 2022, a number of emerging COVID-19 related issues are challenging the return to learn to swim. These issues challenge both the aquatic industry's ability to deliver, and the community's ability to engage with learn to swim. These issues are detailed further below.

Staff shortages:

Like many other sectors in the economy, the aquatic industry has experienced labour shortages during early 2022. In November 2021, over 813 advertisements for swimming teacher positions were live online.⁴⁸

Engagement with industry suggests that each advertisement may be seeking from one to 25 staff, suggesting a total number of empty positions well in the thousands.

The aquatic industry has also reported that hiring sufficient staff to cover all lessons remains a challenge.

Aquatics facilities may be forced to cut swimming lessons,⁴⁹ and reports of overflowing wait lists nearing 300 children in some facilities suggest that providers are unable to meet pent-up demand in the wake of COVID-19.⁵⁰

There are examples of government intervening to support the industry, such as the Jobs Victoria program, which will fund training, mentoring, equipment and initial salaries for 280 new swimming teachers.⁵¹

Cost of living pressures:

The cost of swimming lessons can represent a barrier to some children's participation in learn to swim. Research conducted for Royal Life Saving found that amongst children in New South Wales and Victoria who were unlikely to return to swimming lessons, 25 per cent cited cost of lessons as a barrier.

Since this research was undertaken in November 2021, cost of living pressures have increased, with annual inflation growing to 5.1 per cent in the March quarter,⁵² and the RBA increasing its cash rate target by 1.25 per cent in 2022 (as of July). As such, it is likely that more prospective students (and their parents) will face financial barriers to participating in learn to swim than in the past.

Some state governments have introduced additional programs in response to COVID-19 impacts, which are designed to offset disruption to publicly subsidised learn to swim program. Victoria and New South Wales have introduced or extended voucher programs, with the Victorian Government targeting primary school aged children, and the New South Wales Government supporting children in kindergarten.⁵³

In combination, the impact of disrupted lessons and supply since 2020 will place greater pressure not only on private learn to swim providers, but also on school learn to swim programs, which are one of the main providers of learn to swim for children aged above eight.

These challenges will not impact all sections of the community equally. Cost of living challenges will disproportionately affect socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.

In addition, research shows that a number of groups are currently accessing learn to swim programs at lower rates than national averages. Multicultural communities, lower socioeconomic populations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people with disabilities are all found to be less likely to be attending swimming and water safety education programs.⁵⁴ The barriers facing these populations are outlined in more detail in the next section.



3.3 Challenges for particular community groups

Multicultural communities

Australia is a highly culturally and linguistically diverse country, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' reporting that 30 per cent of Australia's total population was born overseas,⁵⁵ and a further 20.9 per cent of Australians had one or both parents who were born overseas.⁵⁶ While diversity is a great source of pride for many Australians, the country's large migrant population presents several challenges for the aquatic industry in terms of encouraging participation and providing learn to swim access to these communities. This cultural diversity is now being reflected in drowning statistics, with migrants accounting for 29 per cent of total drowning deaths in Australia.⁵⁷ Multicultural populations are recognised in the Australian Water Safety Strategy as a priority area for reducing drowning by 2030.⁵⁸

Studies suggest that culturally diverse populations are at higher risk of drowning due to lack of swimming and water safety skills, poor risk perception of drowning, unfamiliarity in the new environment and overall lower rates of participation in water-based activities.^{59,60} The 2016 National Social Survey found that children of parents who spoke a language other than English at home were significantly less likely to either be participating in swimming lessons, or have participated previously, than those who did not speak another language at home.⁶¹ A New Zealand study of Asian migrants found that 52 per cent of survey participants had increased their participation in aquatic activity compared to when they lived in their home country. However, most respondents reported having no previous water safety education or cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) knowledge, and reported low levels of swimming and floating skills.⁶²

Multicultural communities face numerous potential barriers to accessing learn to swim, both for children and parents, many of whom may not have had opportunities to learn to swim in their countries of origin. A qualitative study conducted in New South Wales, centred around reducing inequities among adult female migrants in learn to swim, found that cost was a common barrier to participation, especially for participants whose children were already enrolled in learn to swim lessons. In addition, participants also cited linguistic barriers, specifically a lack of accessible information on how to access public swimming programs for adults, gain membership, or rates for casual swimming.⁶³

Another barrier identified by the study were the cultural differences surrounding attitudes towards swimming, including a fear of water, and using water for leisure purposes as opposed to daily life and work in their country of origin. Participants of the study noted the lack of culturally appropriate swimming programs, which inhibited or discouraged migrants of specific religious and cultural backgrounds from participating in other programs.⁶⁴

Cultural perceptions around water passed down over generations can also affect participation in learn to swim. A qualitative study of Vietnamese American adolescents and their parents explored cultural beliefs and attitudes towards swimming and water safety. Findings revealed that the Vietnamese community may avoid recreational or social activities around water, and may have more limited knowledge of drowning risk, with less sufficient skills to keep themselves or their community safe around water.⁶⁵ With parents being identified as key decision makers in children's swimming and water safety participation, it is clear these barriers need to be addressed in order to increase participation in multicultural communities.⁶⁶

Socioeconomically disadvantaged communities

Socioeconomically disadvantaged communities have also been found to have lower participation in swimming lessons. A 2016 analysis of the competency of 43,201 children aged between five to 12 years attending swimming lessons in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria found that 57 per cent of participants lived in higher socioeconomic areas, while only 10.7 per cent of participants lived in lower socioeconomic areas.⁶⁷ Of these participants, 1,584 children were able to competently swim 50-metre freestyle, of which only 5.9 per cent of children were from lower socioeconomic areas.



Further analysis showed that two-thirds of children who had reached the 50-metre freestyle benchmark had attended lessons at the same swim school prior to the study, of which 70 per cent lived in higher socioeconomic areas.⁶⁸ A study conducted in the Australian Capital Territory found that children who attended private schools were over three times more likely to achieve a high level of competency against the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework over those who attended public schools.⁶⁹

In addition, a recent study on adults attending swimming lessons found that 84 per cent were from areas high on the scale of social-advantage and disadvantage (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) decile rank 6 - 10).⁷⁰ With an average cost of \$21.00 per lesson, adults were only attending around nine lessons, with most (50 per cent) acquiring skills equivalent to the fundamental stage of the Framework (applicable to children aged up to six years).

The most commonly cited barrier to participation for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities was cost.⁷¹ The 2016 analysis found that two-thirds of children who could swim the 50-metre freestyle benchmark had been attending lessons for one to two years, averaging to 27 lessons at an average of \$15.50 per lesson, equating to a total cost of \$418.50 per child.⁷² This is a substantial time and financial cost, disproportionately affecting lower income families from meeting the Benchmarks. Data from the 2016 National Social Survey showed low-income parents whose children were enrolled in swimming lessons were significantly less likely to believe that parents had the obligation to fund swimming lessons than high income parents.⁷³

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children have been reported to have lower levels of swimming and water safety skills compared with non-Aboriginal children and are less likely to achieve the Benchmark skills outlined in the National Swimming and Water Safety Framework.⁷⁴

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in national drowning statistics, accounting for 5.5 per cent of total drowning deaths in Australia, despite only making up 3.3 per cent of the Australian population.⁷⁵ Statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report that drowning is among the leading causes of unintentional fatal injuries among Aboriginal people across all ages, accounting for approximately three per cent of total deaths, at a rate of 2.1 per 100,000 people, compared to 1.2 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous in the same time period.⁷⁶

Australia has made significant progress to reduce the drowning rate amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with a 47 per cent reduction in drowning cases from 2008 to 2018.⁷⁷ Despite this, the drowning rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remains 1.7 times higher compared to non-Indigenous people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 2.9 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to drown.⁷⁸

Swimming and water safety knowledge for Aboriginal communities remains an issue of concern and drowning rates still remain disproportionately high. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data shows that while 38.1 per cent of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations live in areas classified as outer regional, remote and very remote, these communities represent 68.4 per cent of drowning deaths.⁷⁹ The Royal Life Saving has suggested that further investment in aquatic facilities to service these remote populations is required to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander swimming capabilities and water safety knowledge.⁸⁰



People with a disability

While the evidence is still emerging, disabilities (both physical and cognitive) are known to pose a barrier to participation in swimming lessons. Access to suitable facilities and properly trained staff has been reported as a challenge for Australians with a disability, particularly those living in regional and remote areas. While evidence is still emerging, significant research has been completed on the impacts of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and epilepsy on drowning risk. ASD can prevent success in mainstream swimming lessons, and is experienced by an estimated one in 70 Australians.⁸¹ These barriers are not limited to individuals with ASD, with qualitative evidence suggesting that many Australians with physical or cognitive disabilities can be denied access to the pleasurable experiences of water-based activities.⁸²

Autism Swim notes that because individuals with ASD process information and acquire skill sets differently, there is a need to provide specialised training to instructors.⁸³ Lessons also need to be tailored to the specific strengths and needs of the individual. As a result of the increased complexity, there are fewer options for suitable swimming lessons for individuals with ASD.

Despite the lack of specialised services, there is a clear need for additional water safety education for people with ASD. In Australia, between 2002/03 and 2017/18 (a 16-year period), 33 people drowned where ASD was known to be a factor, accounting for 0.7 per cent of the total drowning deaths during this time. Children and adolescents with ASD are three times more likely to drown than those without ASD.⁸⁴

4

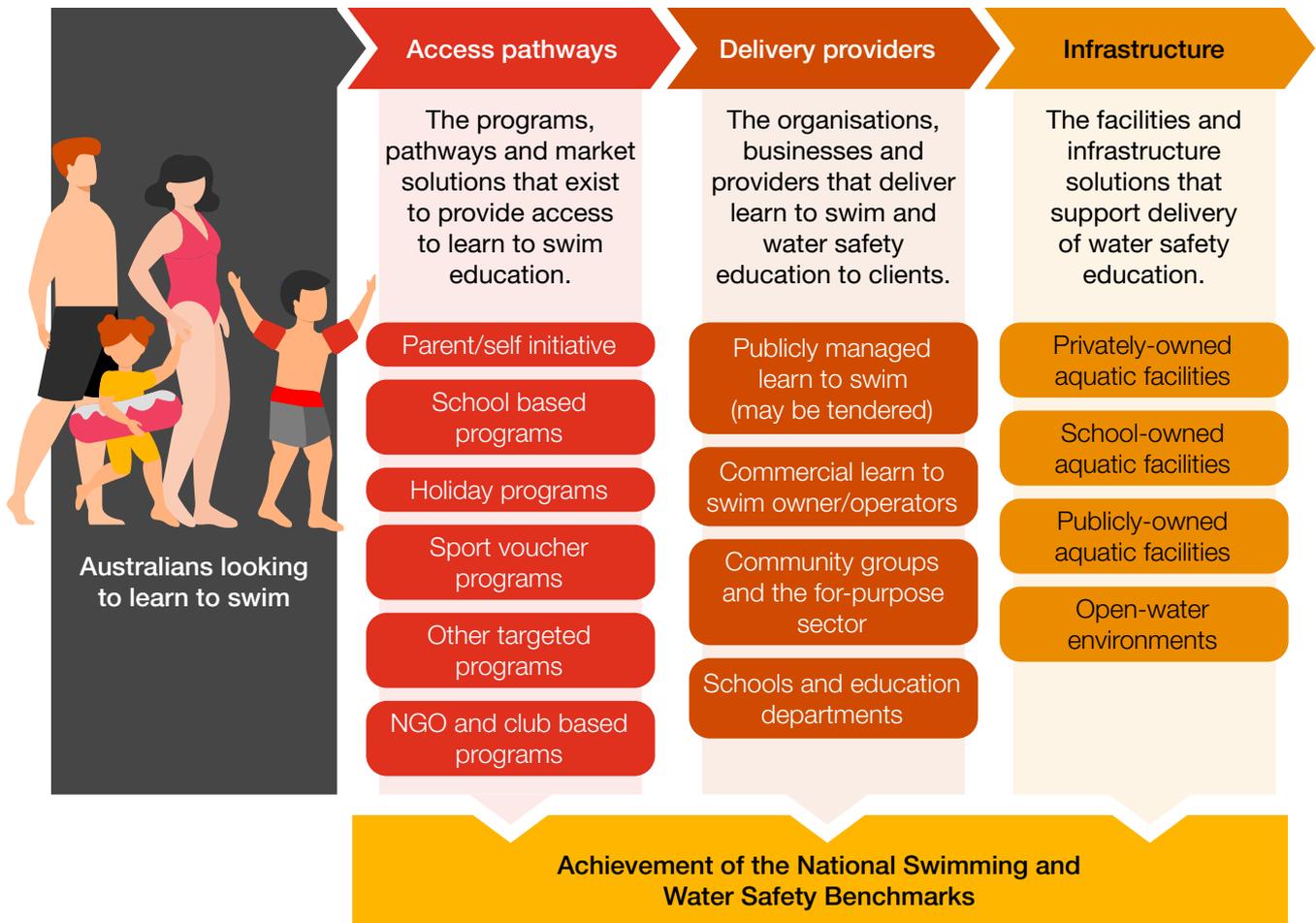
Learn to swim in Australia



4.1 Learn to swim is provided within a complex ecosystem

Australia has a complex and somewhat fragmented learn to swim ecosystem. Figure 5 provides a visual representation of this, outlining the current pathways to achievement of the Benchmarks. Each of the segments is discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Figure 5: Learn to swim ecosystem map



Access pathways

Access pathways describe the options available to the community to access water safety education. Pathways primarily target children, as this is a crucial time for learn to swim skill acquisition. Learn to swim programs are primarily accessed by the community directly through the commercial market or via government access programs. Non-government organisations (NGOs), the for-purpose and the not-for-profit sector also deliver programs, typically related to other sports such as nippers for surf lifesaving, sailing and boat programs, and sea scouts. While these programs do not directly provide learn to swim education, they do support water safety skill development in a range of aquatic environments.

In general, parent initiative plays a large role in swimming lesson access, with AusPlay data revealing that 1.4 million children participate in privately organised swimming lessons annually.⁸⁵ Lessons organised through schools also play a significant role, with 1.2 million children participating in a school related swimming lesson annually.⁸⁶

More than one access pathway may be used in each person's journey to learning to swim, either simultaneously, or at different times throughout a student's development. For example, parent initiative is the most common access pathway for children younger than nine, with 68 per cent of swimming lessons for this age group occurring outside of school.

The opposite is true for children aged nine to 14, with 72 per cent of lessons organised through schools.

In addition to school programs, alternative pathways are provided by governments to support participation in swimming lessons. Holiday programs are another common option for learn to swim programs, offering parents and guardians the opportunity to enrol their children in intensive school holiday programs. Holiday programs are generally subsidised by state governments, significantly reducing the cost to parents and guardians.

Sport vouchers also offer an alternative access pathway for learn to swim engagement. These vouchers, accessible in a number of states within Australia, provide funding directly to participants to subsidise sports fees. Parents may use vouchers to offset the cost of enrolling their child in private learn to swim programs.

Government supported pathways to learn to swim for children are primarily funded by state and territory governments, which results in variation in the programs available by jurisdiction. Table 2 below provides an overview of the differing government funded supports available in Australia within each state and territory. Appendix A contains a detailed assessment of the programs available in each jurisdiction.

1.4 million
children participate
in **privately organised**
swimming lessons
annually⁸⁵



1.2 million
children participate
in a **school related**
swimming lesson
annually⁸⁶



More than
one access
pathway
may be used in each
person's journey to
learning to swim

Parent initiative
is the most common
access pathway for
children younger
than nine



Children younger than nine

68%
of swimming lessons
occurring **outside**
of school

Children aged nine to 14

72%
of swimming lessons
organised **through**
schools

Table 2: Summary: Government provided learn to swim access pathways and support available by jurisdiction (Refer to Appendix A for full program review)

	 School based programs In-term swimming programs, facilitated and funded through education departments and schools.	 Holiday programs Holiday programs are five to 10 day intensive programs, delivered during school holidays and subsidised by governments.	 Voucher programs Vouchers are provided by governments to parents, guardians or children to pay for sport (including learn to swim).	 Targeted programs Broad-based state government programs that are specialised and available for minority groups who may need additional support.
New South Wales	✓	✓	✓	🔍
Victoria	✓	✓	✓	🔍
Queensland	✓	🔍	✓	🔍
Western Australia	✓	✓	✓	✓
South Australia	✓	✓	✓	🔍
Tasmania	✓	🔍	✓	🔍
Australian Capital Territory	✓	🔍	🔍	✓
Northern Territory	🔍	🔍	✓	✓

Source: Program details provided by Royal Life Saving, based on a review of information published by state and territory governments



Delivery providers

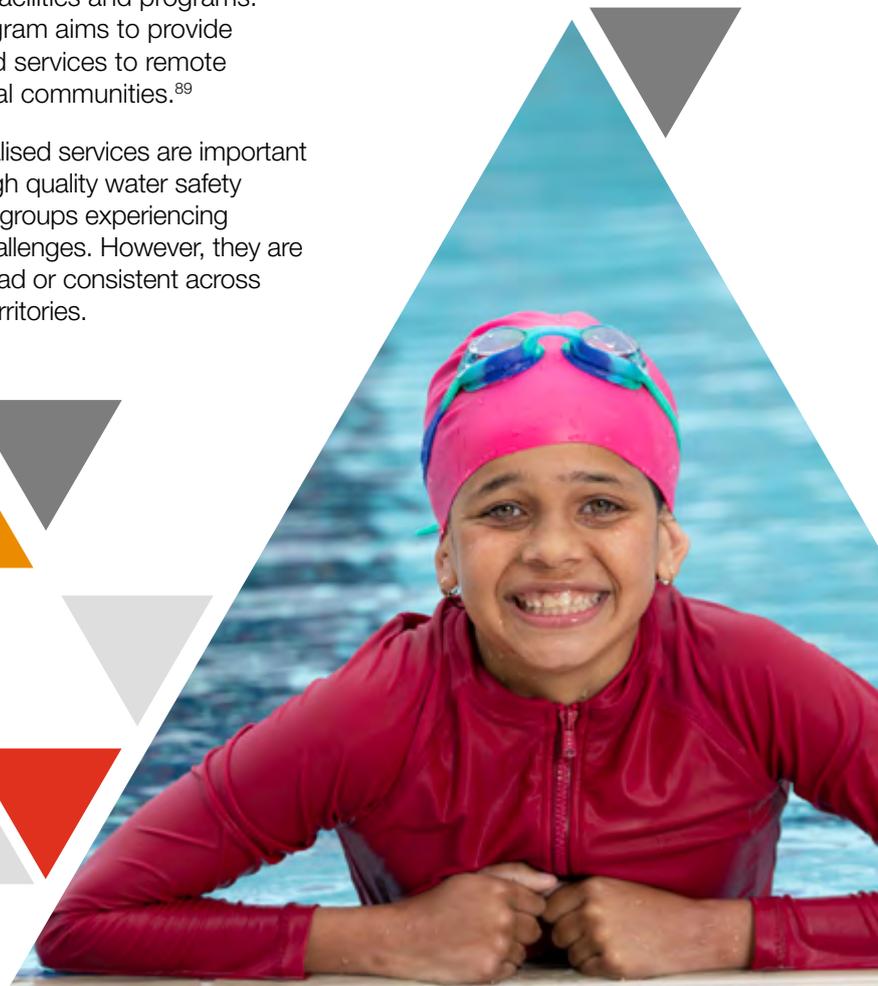
There are two predominant categories of learn to swim delivery providers in Australia:

- **Privately-owned, commercial learn to swim operators:** Deliver learn to swim education in the private market. These operators vary from nationwide franchises to small, local owner-operators. Not all commercial operators are for-profit organisations, however even not-for-profit providers seek to cost-recover the services provided. Delivery by commercial learn to swim operators peaks in engagement from the ages of zero to eight, before public delivery through school and holiday programs are introduced to Australian families.⁸⁷
- **Publicly-owned learn to swim:** Learn to swim education is delivered at many publicly-owned facilities. Most commonly, local governments are the owners of public facilities and may choose to manage delivery in-house, or tender service delivery to a commercial operator. For the purposes of this report, we consider all learn to swim education delivered on behalf of the public sector as public learn to swim, given public entities maintain ultimate control over the services provided.

In addition to these mainstream providers, there are examples of specialised services provided by community groups or the for-purpose sector. These programs typically deliver water safety education to populations with a higher risk of drowning, as discussed earlier in Section 3. There are isolated examples of such programs, including:

- Social enterprise Autism Swim, which provides training and certification to swimming instructors who wish to learn how to teach swimming and water safety skills effectively and safely to students with ASD.⁸⁸
- The Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project, a collaboration between the Western Australian Government and Royal Life Saving Western Australia. The program established a network of pools, where employed pool managers live and work in the community for nine months each year to deliver safe, efficient, and effective aquatic facilities and programs. The program aims to provide improved services to remote Aboriginal communities.⁸⁹

These specialised services are important to provide high quality water safety education to groups experiencing additional challenges. However, they are not widespread or consistent across states and territories.



Infrastructure

Australia is home to over 2,113 publicly accessible aquatic facilities, consisting of: ⁹⁰

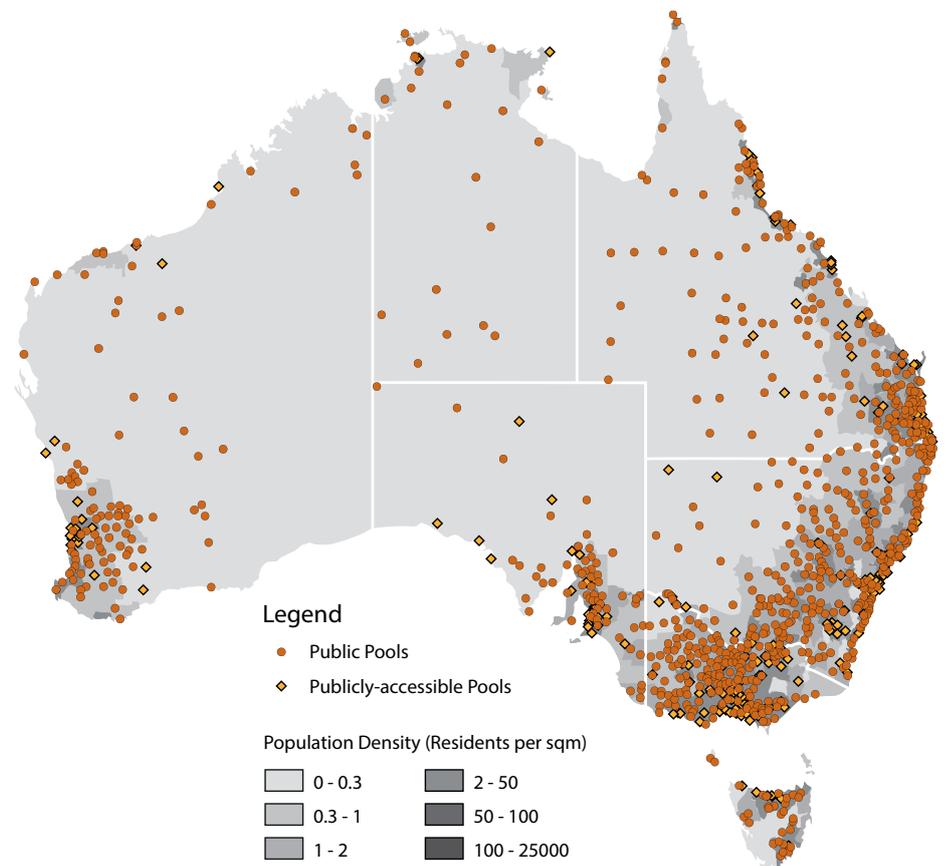
- 1,306 publicly-owned facilities, encompassing aquatic recreation facilities owned by local, state or federal government.
- 807 publicly accessible privately-owned aquatic facilities, which include pools located at commercial learn to swim centres, fitness centres, gyms, universities and schools.⁹¹

These facilities provide the aquatic infrastructure for the delivery of learn to swim education across the country.

Table 3: Publicly and privately-owned publicly accessible aquatic infrastructure in Australia by State and Territory (2021)

In Australia, 89 per cent of people live within a 20-minute drive of an aquatic facility. In Victoria, this proportion is as high as 94 per cent, whereas only 63 per cent of the Northern Territory population live within 20 minutes' drive of one of these facilities, the lowest of any state or territory. In addition to swimming pools, some Australian providers also offer learn to swim services in open-water environments.

Commercially-owned learn to swim facilities are privately funded and profit-driven, and hence located in high-demand areas to maximise the potential return on investment. In general, this results in a higher concentration of commercial facilities in high-income areas, where a large proportion of the community has the social and financial means to pay for swimming lessons.



	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
Public facilities	445	290	285	129	76	42	11	28
Publicly accessible privately-owned facilities	213	280	168	79	44	8	12	3
Proportion of population living within 20-minute drive of an aquatic facility	89%	94%	85%	87%	88%	67%	100%	63%

Source: PwC Australia (2021); The Health, Social and Economic Value of the Australian National Aquatic Industry. Prepared for Royal Life Saving, Broadway, NSW Australia. Note that while it is expected that learn to swim is delivered at many of these facilities, some facilities may not.

As noted above, Australia has over 1,300 publicly-owned aquatic facilities, which are owned and funded by local, state and territory or federal government. A recent review by Royal Life Saving found that many of these pools require significant investment, **with approximately 500 pools built from 1950 to 1970, which are now at the end of their asset life. These pools are in need of renewal, replacement or decommissioning, which Royal Life Saving estimate will cost more than \$8 billion over the coming decade.**

Capital funding of the construction of these pools is led at the local level, with a review of 14 recently funded aquatics projects finding that 64 per cent of funding was provided by local governments, 23 per cent was provided by state or territory governments, and 15 per cent was provided by the Federal Government.

Funding by the federal or state and territory governments may be made through established grant programs, or through budget appropriations made on a case-by-case basis.

For example, the Federal Government's 'Building Better Regions' fund invested \$34 million in 15 aquatic recreation projects from 2017 to 2022. Further, the incoming Labor government has made campaign funding commitments of over \$160 million for aquatic recreation facilities. Table 4 below provides an overview of infrastructure grant programs for each State and Territory.⁹²

Table 4: Infrastructure grant programs available for aquatics facilities from federal, state, and territory governments.

	Description	Specific infrastructure funding programs available
National	The 'Building Better Regions' fund invested \$34 million in 15 aquatic recreation projects from 2017 to 2022. In addition, the Female Facilities and Water Safety Stream committed \$118m in 12 aquatic facilities. Funding for aquatic facilities is set to continue, with the incoming Labor government has made campaign funding commitments of over \$160 million for aquatic recreation facilities.	
New South Wales	Infrastructure Grants for sports and recreation offer grants of between \$50,000 and \$300,000 with specific reference to funding of swimming pools.	
Victoria	The Regional Infrastructure Fund provides grant opportunities for aquatic facilities of between \$20,000 and \$3 million. In addition, the Community Sports Infrastructure Loans Scheme provides organisations access to government guaranteed loans of between \$500,000 and \$10 million for community sport and recreation infrastructure.	
Queensland	Queensland offers a number of grant programs for supporting sports infrastructure, including the Sport and Recreation – Queensland Recreation Centres Fund.	
Western Australia	The Western Australia state government offers the Western Australian Government's Community Sporting and Recreation Facilities Fund.	
South Australia	The Local Government Infrastructure Partnership Program commits \$100 million in funding towards improving local community infrastructure facilities.	
Tasmania	Tasmania has awarded one aquatic project funds through its Infrastructure Fund.	
Australian Capital Territory	The Australian Capital Territory does not currently offer an infrastructure subsidy program for supporting aquatic infrastructure.	
Northern Territory	The Northern Territory does not currently offer an infrastructure subsidy program for supporting aquatic infrastructure.	

Source: Royal Life Saving Society - Australia

4.2 Evaluating the learn to swim ecosystem

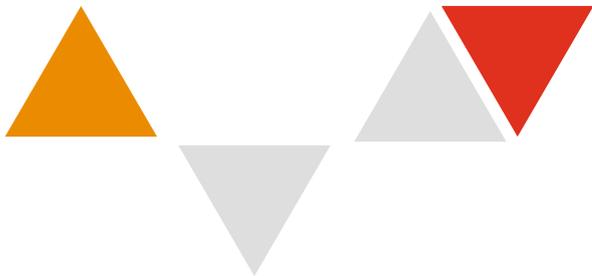
The complexity of the system - with a number of supports, operators, and players across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors - means that a holistic assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the system was not possible within the scope of this study. We have however identified the success of learn to swim supports, grants and other programs against the stated objectives of ecosystem participants and best-practice approaches to funding initiatives. Specifically, the principles are based on strategies and objectives published by Royal Life Saving, Infrastructure Australia, Sport Australia, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth), Department of Home Affairs (Cth), Department of Health (Cth) and the Australian Government’s National Agreement on Closing the Gap.⁹³

Table 5 below details the:

- Principles that inform the supports offered to components of the ecosystem in order to lift learn to swim outcomes.
- Objectives of the different segments of the ecosystem that guide its structure and operation, and the nature of supports provided.

Table 5: Principles for support in the learn to swim ecosystem

Relevant principles	Access and delivery objectives	Infrastructure objectives
<p>Universal and equitable access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure everyone has the opportunity to have swimming and water safety education, to promote public health outcomes notably for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. • Consider the diverse needs of students to enable achievement and increase access and equity of services. • Encourage the social and economic participation of Australia’s diverse communities to promote social cohesion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs are accessible to people in regional and remote Australia. • Initiatives effectively target gaps to reduce the barriers faced by populations at a higher risk of drowning. • Access programs and delivery providers meet the varying and unique needs of Australia’s diverse community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aquatic infrastructure suitable for the delivery of water safety education is available to all Australians regardless of location. • Infrastructure provides diverse aquatic environments, supporting delivery to participants of all abilities (including pool length and depth). • Aquatic facilities and supporting amenities are accessible to people with a disability.



Relevant principles	Access and delivery objectives	Infrastructure objectives
<p>High quality, outcome-focused planning, implementation and evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform long-term planning to identify gaps and deliver targeted solutions. • Set targets and monitor progress and outcomes through appropriate data collection and evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiatives and water safety education are targeted to improve water safety outcomes, with reference to the Benchmarks. • Programs and delivery providers effectively measure the outcomes delivered to allow the evaluation of program and investment success. • Participates are effectively advised by delivery providers to facilitate informed consumer decisions. • Government and industry stakeholders are appropriately informed to promote effective reform and decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure funding decisions are strategic and outcome focused, supporting the goal of increased national attainment of the Benchmarks. • Infrastructure funding decisions are needs based, focusing on areas where the potential impact is greatest.
<p>Encourage partnership and innovation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider a breadth of potential funding sources and mechanisms beyond traditional grants approaches. • Build partnerships with organisations across the public and private sectors to drive efficiency and consistency across the system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access programs are structured to promote partnership with delivery providers, maximising impact. • Access programs seek innovative methods to maximise water safety education outcomes, such as reaching communities at greater risk of drowning, and support swimmers' transition from pools to open water environments. • Support access programs that allow for collaboration between commercial and public learn to swim providers, clubs and NGOs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available infrastructure funding is transparent and predictable, promoting innovative and efficient responses from beneficiaries, including the private market where relevant.



5

Towards an Australia where everybody learns to swim

In this section we outline a number of potential opportunities for consideration, exploration or further action.

These opportunities have been identified in reference to the assessment framework developed in section 4.2, which sets out principles for effective support of learn to swim by government, industry, and the not-for-profit sector. The opportunities are designed to support an increase in the achievement of the Benchmarks in Australia, with the goal of reducing the rate of drowning across Australia. The opportunities for the ecosystem are summarised in table 6 below, against each of the segments of the ecosystem identified.



Table 6: Key opportunities identified from the current state assessment of the learn to swim ecosystem

Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
<p>1.1 Programs targeted to high drowning risk groups are emerging, but not yet established</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some examples of access programs targeted to remote communities exist. Community group involvement demonstrates opportunities for reaching multicultural communities. Some innovative programs promote water safety outcomes for high drowning risk groups do exist but are inconsistent around Australia. 	<p>Implement expanded and nationally-available targeted programs, funding or grants, focussing on groups at a higher risk of drowning.</p> <p>Explore partnerships and market-based solutions to maximise access to water safety education.</p>
<p>2.1 Children are very likely to disengage from formal learn to swim education by age eight, and hence miss the opportunity to achieve the Benchmarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieving the Benchmarks reduce drowning, but many children cease participation before achieving them. 	
<p>2.2 Due to COVID-19, two years of swimming lessons have been disrupted for a cohort of students, who are now at risk of disengaging with swimming lessons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voucher programs provided by New South Wales and Victoria acknowledge the disruption to children's water safety education during COVID-19. Many Australian children aged six years old at the beginning of COVID-19 have missed out on up to two years of learn to swim education due to lockdowns. Over 10 million swimming lessons have been cancelled due to COVID-19, likely exceeding 500,000 hours of water safety education. 	<p>Explore incentives and funding which support greater retention and participation in swimming lessons for children aged between eight and 14 and supports children who have missed out on learn to swim due to the impact of COVID-19.</p>
<p>3.1 School and early engagement programs can enable access for many Australian children who would otherwise face financial barriers to learn to swim education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government programs provide access to many children without the ability to attend private swimming lessons, including in regional areas, and for older children. Insufficient initiatives exist to support access to preschool programs for people without the financial means to access them. 	<p>Explore programs and education initiatives that increase parent and child engagement in preschool water safety programs, and increase access to primary school learn to swim education.</p>
<p>4.1 Data on and evaluation of program success is not standardised or widely available</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some school-based programs measure valuable data on school children's swimming ability. Data collected by school programs is inconsistent, may not align with the Benchmarks, and is not broadly available, reducing comparability across jurisdictions. 	<p>Embed consistent data collection and open reporting into government funded learn to swim programs, allowing more effective program evaluation and developing a broad dataset on Australian children's' swimming ability.</p>

Access pathways

Table 6: Key opportunities identified from the current state assessment of the learn to swim ecosystem

Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
<p>5.1 Commercial delivery generally targets areas and population groups with high demand for learn to swim education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial providers efficiently serve areas with the highest demand. Less profitable services are not typically offered by all commercial operators, such as classes which require greater pool space. 	
<p>5.2 There are some examples of collaboration between commercial and public learn to swim operators, such as tendered management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public learn to swim operators are typically equipped to deliver services to a broader range of the community, including people with a disability, in part due to amenities; multicultural communities, through specialised programs; and low-income families, through concession pricing. Tendered management of public facilities by commercial operators is common, providing the opportunity for cost-effective service delivery. Notwithstanding tendered service delivery, there is little evidence of collaboration or coordination between governments and commercial learn to swim operators. 	<p>Consider incentives for learn to swim operators to provide services for groups at a higher risk of drowning, and older children who have not achieved the benchmarks and who require greater pool space.</p>
<p>6.1 Remote and regional learn to swim delivery is sparsely available during out of season months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water safety education may not be available in regional and remote areas. Availability of skilled staff is a key barrier to year-round delivery. 	
<p>6.2 The aquatic industry is reporting acute labour shortages, which impact the availability and cost of lessons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 has resulted in both an exodus of swimming teachers from the industry, and significant latent demand. Training requirements are crucial to maintain safety and quality of learn to swim, but licensing restrictions are creating increased friction. 	<p>Explore opportunities to increase the availability of swimming teachers, such as employment pathway programs, funding training and ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications and licenses domestically (between states and territories) and internationally.</p>

Delivery providers

Table 6: Key opportunities identified from the current state assessment of the learn to swim ecosystem

	Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
Delivery providers	<p>7.1 Water safety education is not always delivered in alignment with the National Benchmarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little benefit to delivery providers to adjust curriculum and reporting to align to updated Benchmarks, potentially reducing learn to swim's impacts on drowning reduction. 	<p>Assess the benefits and costs of potential reforms or incentives which promote greater alignment between learn to swim curricula and the Benchmarks.</p> <p>Options could include education campaigns for consumers, outcome-based contracts, and aligning outcome reporting for government programs to the benchmarks.</p>
	<p>7.2 Inconsistent evaluation and data reporting is contributing to lower national achievement of the Benchmarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is currently no clearly defined nationally consistent standard for learn to swim evaluation and data collection. Parents do not have an accurate understanding of their children's swimming abilities against drowning prevention metrics. 	
	<p>7.3 Australian swim teaching certifications are recognised globally for quality and safety</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water safety education delivered by both public and commercial operators is generally high quality, with certified teachers and high safety standards. 	
Infrastructure	<p>8.1 Australia has a strong portfolio of public aquatic facilities, although there are challenges emerging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the aggregate, aquatic facilities have strong coverage in Australia, reaching the majority of the population. Many publicly-owned aquatic facilities are ageing, resulting in increasing maintenance costs, and threatening the sustainability of these facilities, with an estimated 40 per cent of publicly-owned facilities needing replacement in the next 10 years. Evidence suggests that some growth areas are not effectively served by aquatic facilities. 	<p>Assess the need for state and national level strategic aquatic infrastructure planning to ensure sufficient infrastructure is maintained and developed to meet the needs of Australia's growing population.</p>
	<p>9.1 Challenges exist to ensure regional and remote communities have access to aquatic infrastructure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As commercial and public aquatic facilities are generally developed in areas of highest demand, regional and remote communities with lower or emerging demand may miss out. Some regional and remote communities may not have access to facilities during winter, with unheated pools only operating during summer. 	

Table 6: Key opportunities identified from the current state assessment of the learn to swim ecosystem

Relevant findings	Identified opportunity
<p>10.1 Privately-owned learn to swim facilities are often lower cost and smaller scale, and hence more responsive to demand. However, they may have less sophisticated facilities, which are not purpose built to teach swimming to a wide range of participants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Privately-owned learn to swim facilities can be developed at a low capital cost, allowing commercial operators to be demand-responsive. Private-learn to swim facilities are often limited by pool length and depth, which may prevent the consolidation of water safety education. 	<p>Consider options to address deficiencies in private learn to swim infrastructure, such as partnerships with better-equipped public facilities.</p>
<p>11.1 Public and private partnership on aquatic infrastructure development is rare</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public funding of aquatics infrastructure is typically restricted to traditional capital funding delivered by local and state governments. Privately-owned learn to swim facilities serve significant demand (as per finding 10.1), but are incentivised to build facilities which do not support delivery of advanced skills or broader community benefits such as leisure and physical activity for adults. Privately-owned learn to swim facilities are unlikely to be developed or operated in regional or remote communities (as per finding 9.1). 	<p>Explore the potential of private-public partnerships and outcome-based funding of commercial aquatics facilities in order to enhance the impact of the private sector, and more effectively serve high-risk communities.</p>

Infrastructure



5.1 Identified opportunities: Access pathways

Identified opportunity 1: Implement expanded and nationally-available targeted programs, funding or grants, focussing on groups at a higher risk of drowning.

Targeted programs can continue to help reduce the barriers to access faced by high drowning risk communities. Programs such as the Western Australian Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project (discussed in Section 4.1), provide examples of successful government interventions. It is likely that effective programs of this nature would be funded by state or federal governments and implemented in partnership with key stakeholders in the targeted community. For example, programs could focus on:

- Lowering barriers to entry for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.
- Increasing access to disability inclusive programs.
- Improving culturally relevant communications.
- Targeted access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



Key finding 1.1:



Programs targeted to high drowning risk groups are emerging, but not yet established

Implications:



Some examples of access programs targeted to remote communities exist.



Community group involvement demonstrates opportunities for reaching multicultural communities.



Some innovative programs promote water safety outcomes for high drowning risk groups do exist but are inconsistent around Australia.

Several programs are targeted toward high drowning risk groups in the ACT.⁹⁴ The Ngadyung program provides free swimming lessons to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, while the Swim4Life program is a holiday program providing free water safety education to children from a low socioeconomic background. The Refugee and Migrant Swimming project is a subsidised pilot for the delivery of swimming lessons to refugees and migrants that was initiated by community members in response to a drowning of an international student.

Single-gender swimming programs, which support cultural and religious requirements, are also available across most states and territories.⁹⁵

For example, a number of learn to swim programs for female members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities were recently introduced at the Melbourne University Propulsion swim club. These classes provide a safe space for women to participate in learn to swim education and achieve the National Benchmarks.⁹⁶ However, these programs are less likely to be available in regional areas.

It is possible that further partnerships and programs are available, beyond those identified in our research. To this extent, there may be value in a coordinated approach by governments to understand the programs available, in order to inform any further targeted investment.

Supporting opportunity: Explore partnerships and market-based solutions to maximise access to water safety education.

Within the current ecosystem, few examples exist of innovative partnerships or market-based solutions to improving attainment of the Benchmarks. Voucher based programs allow for the delivery of government subsidised learn to swim programs at registered providers, but these programs still emphasise parent initiative and government

promotions and are not necessarily mapped to outcomes such as Benchmark achievement.

There are options for governments to engage in programs which empower the market to actively engage with at-risk communities and provide water safety education directly.

These options may include outcomes-based contracts or other innovative social investment models. These funding solutions could provide further incentives to commercial operators to focus on improving water safety outcomes within the learn to swim ecosystem, driving greater collaboration between the private and public sectors.

Identified opportunity 2: Explore incentives and funding which support greater retention and participation in swimming lessons for children aged between eight and 14 and supports children who have missed out on learn to swim due to the impact of COVID-19.

Royal Life Saving estimates that up to 40 per cent of children leaving primary school are unable to achieve the minimum national standards for swimming and water safety skills. One of the key barriers to achievement of the Benchmarks is a distinct drop-off in participation by children at the age of eight or nine in formal non-school aquatic education and training. Currently, insufficient initiatives or programs exist nationally to support greater retention beyond this age group, limiting the impact learn to swim engagement can have on water safety education and reducing the risk of drowning in Australia.

The school-based programs in South Australia provide a strong basis of water safety skills for school children. Schools are funded to deliver in-term water safety education to primary school students. Each student is funded for 3.75 hours per year from reception to year two, and 7.5 hours per year from year three to year seven. Importantly, funding is also available by application for non-swimming children in year eight to nine, supporting participation in swimming lessons for children aged 13 to 15.

Alternatively, voucher programs can help to support and incentivise retention in private learn to swim education. In New South Wales, the Active Kids program provides two \$100 vouchers to parents of children aged 4.5 to 18 years old, available for use in many sports, including learn to swim.⁹⁷

Key finding 2.1:



Children are very likely to disengage from formal learn to swim education by age eight, and hence miss the opportunity to achieve the Benchmarks

Implications:



Achieving the Benchmarks assists in reducing drowning, but many children cease participation before achieving them.

Out of school participation in swimming lessons experiences a sharp reduction after the age of eight years old. Royal Life Saving research found that 75 per cent of children cease participation in swimming lessons from this age.⁹⁸ As a result, many children are disengaging from formal learn to swim education before they are able to reach the Benchmarks, reducing the impact that learn to swim education can have on reducing the risk of drowning.

Key finding 2.2:



Due to COVID-19, two years of swimming lessons have been disrupted for a cohort of students, who are now at risk of disengaging with swimming lessons

Implications:



Voucher programs provided by New South Wales and Victoria acknowledge the disruption to children's water safety education during COVID-19.



Many Australian children aged six years old at the beginning of COVID-19 have missed out on up to two years of learn to swim education due to lockdowns.



Over 10 million swimming lessons have been cancelled due to COVID-19, likely exceeding 500,000 hours of water safety education.

Due to COVID-19 lockdowns, almost two years of swimming lessons have been missed in Victoria and New South Wales, with an estimated 10 million cancelled lessons nationally. This disruption has potentially had the greatest impact on children aged six years old at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of whom are now eight years old.

These children have missed two critical years of learn to swim education, at the age shown to be where children are most likely to disengage with formal lessons.

Re-engaging in missed learn to swim education at this age is further challenged by cost-of-living pressures and staff shortages. Whilst those with the means to pay for private water safety education will likely re-engage, many other Australian families will face financial barriers to access.

In addition to supporting an overall increase in national achievement of the Benchmarks, incentives to support engagement beyond the age of eight will help to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic does not result in a cohort of Australian children that cannot swim.

Identified opportunity 3: Explore programs and education initiatives that increase parent and child engagement in preschool water safety programs, and increase access to primary school learn to swim education.

Children under five are the age group at highest risk of drowning and, on average, 27 children under the age of five years drown in Australia every year.⁹⁹ However, few publicly funded programs targeting preschool children and parents exist nationally. Some examples of these programs include:

• **Water Safety Awareness Program:**

Five funded water safety lessons offered by the Northern Territory Government, including one classroom session to provide water safety education to parents and guardians, and four water familiarisation classes. The program delivered early water safety education to approximately 21,000 participants during the 15 years to 2019.

• **First Lap vouchers:**

a \$100 voucher funded by the New South Wales Government, which can be used by parents to fund water safety programs for preschool children.¹⁰⁰ The State Government recently added to its 2021-22 Budget announcement of the \$10 million voucher program, extending the benefits to kindergarten children. This announcement was made as part of the response to COVID-19 impacts on children's swimming lessons, to support those that missed out during the state-wide lockdowns.

Noting the NT program provides fully funded lessons, universal access to programs is generally limited to families with the financial and social means to pay for and attend private lessons. While many government subsidies and programs exist to support school-aged children, there are few that encourage early parental and child participation in preschool water education programs.

Similar programs across Australia could help to reduce the barriers to accessing these programs in jurisdictions without subsidised programs. Preschool programs should ensure a sufficient focus on the education of parents within the curricula, with the goal of building knowledge of the importance of water safety, the risk of drowning, and the role of the Benchmarks.

Private learn to swim programs come at significant financial cost to parents, and government organised school programs play a critical role in increasing learn to swim engagement and reducing drowning rates in Australia. These programs, which are provided at state government discretion, are extended to families who face financial barriers to accessing learn to swim education.

This is most notable for early engagement programs. In a survey of learn to swim participants, approximately 56 per cent of children attending commercial swim schools in the zero to four age group were living in areas of high socioeconomic status.¹⁰¹ Programs such as the Water Safety Awareness Program for children aged under five in the Northern Territory provide access to water safety education that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

Key finding 3.1:



School and early engagement programs provide access to many Australian children who would otherwise face financial barriers to learn to swim education

Implications:



Government programs provide access to many children without the ability to attend private swimming lessons, including in regional areas, and for older children.



Insufficient initiatives exist to support access to preschool programs for people without the financial means to access them.

Identified opportunity 4: Embed consistent data collection and open reporting into government funded learn to swim programs, allowing more effective program evaluation and developing a broad dataset on Australian children's swimming ability.

Nationally consistent data collection and reporting processes could help to drive efficiency across the learn to swim ecosystem, by:

- Providing a consistent basis for program evaluation.
- Informing future funding decisions, by helping identify successful programs, areas of high demand and key communities missing out.
- Improving collaboration between private and public providers through a consistent approach to teaching curricula and evaluation.

Through this, a nationally consistent governance model to manage and define what data should be collected and how could help to drive increased attainment of learn to swim education. Opportunities exist to embed this within government funded learn to swim programs, such as school, vacation and voucher programs, where government can more quickly influence uptake.

A nationally consistent data program could be extended to private learn to swim if government consider further mechanisms to incentivise reporting.

Key finding 4.1:



Data and evaluations of program success is not standardised, or widely available

Implications:



Some school-based programs measure valuable data on school children's swimming ability.



Data collected by school programs is inconsistent, may not align with the Benchmarks, and is not broadly available, reducing comparability across jurisdictions.

There is no national database for the collection of data on learn to swim participation and student evaluation. In addition, a governance model to manage and define what 'good' data collection is has not yet been circulated, to provide the basis for how data should be collected and for which parameters.

Despite this, some successful examples of reporting do exist in state jurisdictions. The New South Wales School Swimming & Water Safety Program records student's results in a state-wide database, which will play an important role in allocating funding and resources in future years.¹⁰² Life Saving Victoria and the Western Australia Department of Education are also understood to collect data aligned with the Benchmarks. However, data collected is not consistent or shared. If such data was aggregated and shared, programs could be evaluated and compared, encouraging greater quality and effectiveness.

5.2 Identified opportunities: Delivery providers

Identified opportunity 5: Consider incentives for learn to swim operators to provide services for groups at a higher risk of drowning, and older children who have not achieved the benchmarks and who require greater pool space.

The most profitable market segments for commercial learn to swim providers are typically those requiring the least space in swimming pools, hence allowing a larger number of lessons to be run simultaneously. As a result, operators are less incentivised to seek retention of older children, who may have basic swimming skills but don't meet the 12-year-old or 17-year-old Benchmarks.

Likewise, delivering lessons for people with a disability, or who speak a language other than English, also requires higher teacher to student ratios and other adjustments.

Governments could consider mechanisms to incentivise the delivery of water safety education to less profitable market segments.

Research on private learn to swim participation shows that 57 per cent of learn to swim participants lived in higher socioeconomic areas, while only 10.7 per cent of participants lived in lower socioeconomic areas.¹⁰³

This flows from the fact that parents, being the largest cohort of buyers of learn to swim services, typically face

fees to enrol their children in learn to swim programs. Logically, commercial providers will establish in areas where there are more customers with capacity to meet enrolment costs, which means services are:

- Targeted towards learn to swim education for young children.

- Likely to be concentrated in wealthier areas.

As a result, facilities generally only consist of leisure pools designed for optimal learn to swim delivery, and do not generally cater delivery towards the larger population.

Key finding 5.1:



Commercial delivery generally targets areas and population groups with high demand for learn to swim education

Implications:



Commercial providers efficiently serve areas with the highest demand.



Less profitable services are not typically offered by all commercial operators, such as classes which require greater pool space.

Key finding 5.2:



There are some examples of collaboration between private and public learn to swim operators, such as tendered management

Implications:



Public learn to swim operators are typically equipped to deliver services to a broader range of the community, including people with a disability, in part due to amenities; multicultural communities, through specialised programs; and low income families, through concession pricing.



Tendered management of public facilities by commercial operators is common, providing the opportunity for cost-effective service delivery.



Notwithstanding tendered service delivery, there is little evidence of collaboration or coordination between governments and commercial learn to swim operators.

Identified opportunity 6: Explore opportunities to increase the availability of swimming teachers, such as employment pathway programs, funding training and ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications and licenses domestically (between states and territories) and internationally.

Acute labour shortages are putting pressure on learn to swim, with reports of aquatics facilities cutting lesson availability,⁴⁸ and experiencing long wait lists of up to 300 children.⁴⁹ This is likely to be experienced most significantly in regional and remote areas of Australia, where a lack of qualified swimming teachers has long been a problem for learn to swim delivery.

Early examples of government intervention have sought to address these shortages, such as the Jobs Victoria program, which will fund training, mentoring, equipment and initial salaries for 280 new swimming teachers. Continued support will be required to strengthen learn to swim teaching qualification attainment nationally.

This could include government subsidies for swim teacher training and supporting programs such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training and Working with Children Checks.

Alternatively, opportunities could be investigated to ensure mutual recognition of swim teacher licenses and qualifications domestically and internationally.

Key finding 6.1:



Remote and regional learn to swim delivery is sparsely available during out of season months

Implications:



Water safety education may not be available in all regional and remote areas.



Availability of skilled staff is a key barrier to year-round delivery.

A lack of facilities in regional and remote areas introduces a significant barrier to learn to swim education participation in these areas. High operating costs associated with heating indoor pools year-round in conjunction with lower facility demand during colder months mean that these pools may only be open on a seasonal basis. In addition, there is generally a lack of qualified swim teachers to deliver this education in regional areas and access to swim teacher training can be more difficult due to a lower frequency of training courses in regional areas.

The aquatic industry has suffered from significant labour shortages, as experienced across most of the economy during early 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2021, over 813 advertisements for swimming teacher positions were live online.

Key finding 6.2:



The aquatic industry is reporting acute labour shortages, which impact the availability and cost of lessons.

Implications:



COVID-19 has resulted in both an exodus of swimming teachers from the industry, and significant latent demand.



Training requirements are crucial to maintain safety and quality of learn to swim, but licensing restrictions are creating increased friction.

Engagement with industry suggests that each advertisement may be seeking from one to 25 staff, suggesting a total number of empty positions well in the thousands.

With less than 14,000 people working in learn to swim, this is a significant number of vacancies.¹⁰⁴ The aquatic industry has also reported that hiring sufficient staff to cover all lessons remains a challenge.

Identified opportunity 7: Assess the benefits and costs of potential reforms or incentives which promote greater alignment between learn to swim curricula and the Benchmarks.

Options could include education campaigns for consumers, outcome-based contracts, and aligning outcome reporting for government programs to the benchmarks.

A diverse ecosystem of delivery providers and no centrally coordinated data reporting mechanism results in inconsistent curriculum, teaching and data collection across differing public and private operators with regards to the reporting of tangible outcomes achieved by learn to swim delivery across Australia.

This gap within the ecosystem is driving a disconnect between participants or the parents of participants' understanding of their progress and water safety ability against the Benchmarks.

Parents are removing their children prematurely from commercial learn to swim programs without alignment to a consistent evaluation process, often perceiving that their child can competently swim without fully understanding what skills or competencies their child has developed.¹⁰⁵ This places an increased emphasis on public delivery to complete children's water safety education at later ages.

Further evidence into the potential benefits and costs of introducing a more consistent and transparent data collection process nationally could help to identify where reforms or incentives can be introduced to ensure consistent curriculum adherence to the Benchmarks as well as support greater retention of existing learn to swim customers and participants within existing delivery arrangements.

Key finding 7.1:



Water safety education is not always delivered in alignment with the national Benchmarks

Implications:



There is little benefit to delivery providers to adjust curriculum and reporting to align to updated Benchmarks, potentially reducing learn to swim's impacts on drowning reduction.

Research has found that many swim schools do not provide water safety and survival skill training in line with the framework guidelines. A study found that 21 per cent of program levels did not have any water safety or survival skills listed.¹⁰⁶ These results suggest a disconnect between the delivery of swimming and water safety education curricula with the requirements for drowning prevention.

It should be noted that the Benchmarks were recently updated within the latest National Water Safety Framework in 2020. Due to pool closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many learn to swim delivery programs may not have had the opportunity to appropriately adjust their curricula to correctly align with the new Benchmarks. In turn, further work is required to promote the implementation of the Benchmarks across the learn to swim sector.

A national survey of Australian parents found that parents stopped their children's lessons when they deemed their child to have gained adequate water safety skills and competence in the water, rather than when they met objective criteria, such as the Water Safety Benchmarks.

Key finding 7.2:



Inconsistent evaluation and data reporting is contributing to lower national achievement of the Benchmarks

Implications:



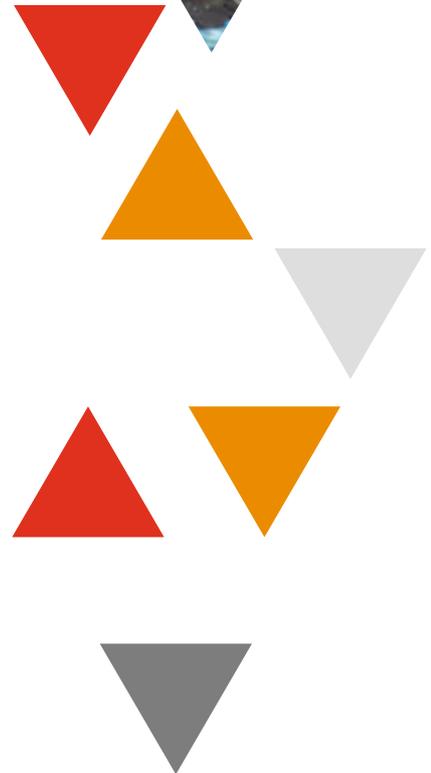
There is currently no clearly defined nationally consistent standard for learn to swim evaluation and data collection.



Many parents do not have an accurate understanding of their children's swimming abilities against drowning prevention metrics.

This is due to a lack of a standardised national data collection model, which can be applied consistently and collaboratively across delivery providers.

There are currently 30 nationally recognised organisations for swim teacher certifications in Australia, delivered by a range of registered training organisations.¹⁰⁷ Some of the accreditations available are also recognised internationally. These courses are designed to enable teachers to understand how to engage, interact and ensure the safety of a diverse range of students.



Key finding 7.3:



Australian swim teaching certifications are recognised globally for quality and safety

Implications:



Water safety education delivered by both public and commercial operators is generally high quality, with certified teachers and high safety standards.

5.3 Identified opportunities: Infrastructure

Identified opportunity 8: Assess the need for state and national level strategic aquatic infrastructure planning to ensure sufficient infrastructure is maintained and developed to meet the needs of Australia's growing population.

Emerging evidence suggests that there is a risk of insufficient access to aquatic facilities for learn to swim because:

- **Aquatic facilities are ageing, with many reaching the end of their useful life** - Australia's aquatic infrastructure was predominantly built in the mid-20th century and is now reaching the end of its planned life. Approximately 70 per cent of pools in Australia were built before 1980.¹⁰⁸ Many pools now require major maintenance to remain safe to run. Further operating costs are becoming high, as pools with deprecated energy inefficient equipment encounter modern electricity and gas prices. In the next 10 years, up to 40 per cent of public aquatic facilities owned by local governments will need to be replaced at a total cost of over \$8 billion.¹⁰⁹

- **Population growth in planned growth areas may exceed the provision of aquatics infrastructure**, threatening access to learn to swim¹¹⁰ - Australia's population is growing rapidly, and areas of very high population growth are emerging in most capital cities. These growth areas have an unprecedented need for new social infrastructure, including the commonly cited schools and kindergartens, but also active recreation facilities. An Infrastructure Victoria report on social infrastructure in Melbourne's new growth areas identified that increased funding will be required to support local governments to plan and deliver aquatic centres in Melbourne's seven growth area municipalities.¹¹¹ In response to rapid growth, Infrastructure Victoria recommended Victorian Government investment of \$200 million to \$300 million over five years.

In combination, these risks may warrant a closer analysis of the current and future state of Australia's aquatic facilities, with a focus on ensuring sufficient access to communities in order to promote water safety.



Key finding 8.1:



Australia has a strong portfolio of public aquatic facilities, although there are challenges emerging.

Implications:



In the aggregate, aquatic facilities have strong coverage in Australia, reaching the majority of the population.



Many publicly-owned aquatic facilities are ageing, resulting in increasing maintenance costs, and threatening the sustainability of these facilities, with an estimated 40 per cent of publicly-owned facilities needing replacement in the next 10 years.



Evidence suggests that some growth areas are not effectively served by aquatic facilities.

Our 2021 analysis found that approximately 89 per cent of Australians live within a 20-minute drive of a public swimming pool, indicating that most Australians have access to publicly accessible

aquatics infrastructure, which likely deliver for learn to swim education.¹¹² However, new challenges are emerging for ecosystem participants.

Identified opportunity 9: Increase aquatic facility access in regional communities, particularly remote Aboriginal communities. This may include cost-effective incremental investments, such as staffing, employment pathway programs or water heaters for summer-only facilities.

Remote and regional communities may experience reduced access to aquatic facilities, for several reasons. Notably, some communities do not have access to pools due to a lack of water heating, or staffing shortages. In these cases, relatively small investments may allow for more consistent utilisation of the facility, increasing economic and social benefits supported by the asset, in addition to promoting improved water safety.

Alternatively, some communities, particularly those in remote and very remote areas, do not have an aquatic facility located within a reasonable distance. People living in remote and very remote communities are two or three times more likely to drown or be hospitalised with a submersion injury.¹¹³ Despite the relatively high capital expense of swimming pools, the social, health and economic benefits of these facilities are also well established, and the possibility of investing in new facilities in remote areas should be further explored.

Programs such as the Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools project, have shown that aquatic facilities in regional and remote areas can deliver positive outcomes for communities, driving social, health and economic benefits. The 'No School, No Pool' policy introduced within the Jigalong community has increased school retention rates by approximately four times.¹¹⁴

In Burringurrah, child health has improved since the Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools project funded the development of an aquatic facility in the community. Ear problems have decreased by 40 per cent, with severe skin sores decreasing by almost 90 per cent.¹¹⁵

Key finding 9.1:



Challenges exist to ensure regional and remote communities have access to aquatic infrastructure

Implications:



As commercial and public aquatic facilities are generally developed in areas of highest demand, regional and remote communities with lower or emerging demand may miss out.



Some regional and remote communities may not have access to facilities during winter, with unheated pools only operating during summer.



Aquatic facility infrastructure is critical to provide safe and reliable environments to deliver water safety education. However, due to the lower demand in remote and, to a lesser extent, regional areas, these areas are not as effectively served by aquatics infrastructure.

Both the public and private sector are incentivised to develop and invest in facilities in areas of high demand, and as a result, are more likely to invest in metropolitan areas.

This has implications for the opportunities provided to children located in regional and remote areas.

Even when pools are available, they may not be open year-round, due to staffing shortages, or not being heated. Participants from the 2016 National Social Survey indicated that pools being closed during winter was a barrier to their child's participation in swimming lessons with a qualified instructor.¹¹⁶

Identified opportunity 10: Consider options to address deficiencies in private learn to swim infrastructure, such as partnerships with better-equipped public facilities.

Commercially owned learn to swim facilities are designed primarily to cost-effectively deliver swimming lessons for young children. That is, facilities are likely to only have a shallow indoor heated swimming pool, 25 metres or less in length. These low-cost facilities fulfil an important role in providing swimming lessons cost-effectively to young children. However, these facilities may be unable to effectively deliver lessons to swimmers who require larger and deeper swimming pools to practice advanced skills, such as swimming in deep water to retrieve objects.

When a swimmer's skill level exceeds the training that can feasibly be delivered in smaller learn to swim facilities, pathways should be developed which support students' transition to facilities and training which meets their needs. Public swim schools could coordinate with private schools to align curricula and develop a transition mechanism for students which maximise retention and development of further skills.

Many commercial learn to swim operators use facilities which they also own or lease, and manage. These facilities are typically lower cost than public facilities, as they are targeted towards learn to swim education for children. These facilities can be constructed more quickly, and on a much smaller property footprint than public aquatic facilities. They also have more control over programming and do not need to retain physical pool space for other community-expected programming such as water exercise, lap swimming, leisure and free play.

Key finding 10.1:



Privately-owned learn to swim facilities are often lower cost and smaller scale, and hence more responsive to demand. However, they may have less sophisticated facilities, which are not purpose built to teach swimming to a wide range of participants.

Implications:



Privately-owned learn to swim facilities can be developed at a low capital cost, allowing commercial operators to be demand-responsive.



Private-learn to swim facilities are often limited by pool length and depth, which may prevent the consolidation of water safety education.

As such, they are best suited to, and primarily used for programming for younger children.

Further, when considering opportunities to enter a new market, commercial learn to swim providers are likely to prioritise areas with enough demand to guarantee commercial viability and profitability. While this is to be expected of the private market, it does suggest that areas with less demand, such as lower income areas with a reduced ability to pay for private learn to swim, may be underserved.

Indeed, research on engagement in private learn to swim engagement shows that 57 per cent of learn to swim participants lived in socioeconomically advantaged areas, while only 10.7 per cent of participants lived in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.¹¹⁸ This suggests that commercial delivery may not be as profitable in areas with greater socioeconomic disadvantage.

Therefore they can facilitate higher throughput of learn to swim delivery, particularly for younger age groups.

For example, Jump! Swim School advertises initial franchise costs as low as \$220,000.¹¹⁷ The typical facility is likely to consist of a small indoor heated pool. These pools are often less than one metre deep, and typically less than 25 metres long, both of which serve to reduce capital and operating costs, but may limit the development of children needing to build deep water skills.



Identified opportunity 11: Explore the potential of private-public partnerships and outcome-based funding of commercial aquatic facilities in order to enhance the impact of the private sector, and more effectively serve high-risk communities.

Public funding for aquatic facilities has traditionally been limited to facilities where ownership is retained by the public sector, typically local governments. However, there may be opportunities to expand funding mechanisms to consider approaches which partner with the private sector to deliver infrastructure.

For example, by partnering with the private sector at the capital investment phase, governments can reduce the public expenditure required to build new aquatic facilities. Further, depending on the contract terms, private sector partners may then be responsible for operating and maintenance for a defined term. In this case, private partners are also incentivised to ensure that the initial build minimises ongoing operating and maintenance costs, resulting in more cost-effective investment in the medium-to-long-term.

Innovative financing and delivery options should be considered but may not be suitable for all situations. Such arrangements should seek to maximise the community social, health and economic benefits of the facility, including ensuring best-practice programming of facilities.

Beyond tendered service delivery, there are few examples of co-funded solutions between commercial learn to swim operators and local governments to support increased access to learn to swim education.

Key finding 11.1:



Public and private partnership on aquatic infrastructure development is rare

Implications:



Public funding of aquatics infrastructure is typically restricted to traditional capital funding delivered to local governments, with little consideration of other opportunities to fund infrastructure, such as public private partnerships.



Privately-owned learn to swim facilities serve significant demand (as per finding 10.1), but are incentivised to build facilities which do not support delivery of advanced skills or broader community benefits such as leisure and physical activity for adults.



Privately-owned learn to swim facilities are unlikely to be developed or operated in regional or remote communities (as per finding 9.1).

Anecdotally, examples exist of commercial providers contributing to the capital expenditure of public aquatic facilities, in return for the right to operate the facility for a period of time. In this case, the contributions of a commercial operator could support the development of aquatics infrastructure, where the full public funding is not available. However, such arrangements are rare, and there is little public information available to evidence their success.

Such partnerships could address other issues raised earlier in this report. Firstly, commercially owned facilities serve a significant portion of learn to swim market demand, and a greater acknowledgement of their role in the ecosystem could support more efficient delivery of learn to swim. Secondly, commercially owned learn to swim facilities are very unlikely to open in areas with non-commercial levels of demand, such as regional and remote communities, as they are less likely to achieve profitable operations in these areas. However, in some cases, small public investments may allow operators to achieve the necessary commercial outcomes, while providing access to learn to swim in communities which otherwise may miss out.



A

Appendix: Government program review



Table 7: Review of government programs

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
Australian Capital Territory	School based programs	The ACT provides the Aqua Safe Water Safety and Awareness Program, which provides 10 days of pool sessions, and five 40 minute classroom sessions for year two students.	The program provides foundational water safety education, but lacks repetition across years to develop long-term skills.
	Holiday programs	<i>No broad-based holiday programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in the Australian Capital Territory.</i>	
	Targeted programs	<p>Several programs are available targeted to high drowning risk groups:¹¹⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ngadyung program, which provides free swimming lessons to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. • The Swim4Life program, which is a holiday program providing free water safety education to nominated children from a low socioeconomic background. 	These programs target groups known to be at risk of drowning, reducing barriers to accessing water safety education.
New South Wales	School based programs	<p>Several funded in-term swimming programs are available:¹²⁰</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 10-day intensive program for developing swimmers, focusing on basic strokes and water safety. • A five-day program for all students, focusing on water safety skills and survival strokes. • Specialised programs for people with a disability. 	These programs cater to a broad range of abilities and can be implemented many times by primary schools, through the education of students.

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
New South Wales	Holiday programs	The New South Wales Government support SwimVac, a five to 10 day learn to swim program during the summer school holidays. The program caters for children aged three to 14 years old. It is subsidised by both the state, and Bendigo Bank, with a cost to students between \$37 to \$85, depending on the program level.	The program provides low-cost access to swimming lessons, aligned to the national Benchmarks, and available in 40 regional centres.
	Voucher programs	The NSW Office of Sport offer two voucher programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Lap vouchers: a \$100 voucher which can be used by parents to fund water safety programs for preschool children.¹²¹ • Active Kids vouchers: Two \$100 vouchers available to parents of children aged 4.5 to 18 years old, available for use in many sports, including learn to swim.¹²² 	Available programs support families without the financial means to access learn to swim programs. Fewer centralised programs are available for at risk groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or migrant communities
	Targeted programs	<i>No broad-based targeted programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in New South Wales.</i>	
Northern Territory	School based programs	<i>No broad-based school programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in the Northern Territory.</i>	
	Holiday programs	<i>No broad-based holiday programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in the Northern Territory.</i>	
	Voucher programs	Sports vouchers are available to children enrolled in school or home school in the NT. Valued at \$200 per year, vouchers can be used for participation in learn to swim classes.	Reduces the cost of accessing swimming lessons for families which choose to use the vouchers for this purpose, however, there is no incentive to use the vouchers specifically for learn to swim over any other sport.
	Targeted programs	The NT Government funds the Water Safety Awareness Program, for children aged under five and their parents or guardians. The program consists of five sessions: an emergency care session for parents, followed by four water familiarisation sessions conducted by registered swim schools. ¹²³ Each year, the program attracts approximately 2,200 enrolments, with an 80 per cent completion rate.	This early childhood program is supported by evidence of the importance of water familiarisation. Participation of 2,200 children per year against a total zero to four year old population of 17,600 suggests that a large proportion of NT children participate in the program. ¹²⁴

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
Queensland	School based programs	The Queensland Department of Education provides funding to schools without a pool on site to cover travel and pool entry for water safety programs. The Water Safety Action Statement indicates a plan for the Queensland Government to develop an evidence-based water safety and swimming education program that is aligned to the Australian curriculum. ¹²⁵	While some support exists to deliver water safety education in schools, no consistent statewide programs exist to ensure students meet the benchmarks.
	Holiday programs	<i>No broad-based holiday programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in Queensland.</i>	
	Voucher programs	The Queensland Government offers \$150 Fair Play Vouchers, which parents, carers or guardians can use towards sport and active recreation, including learn to swim.	Reduces the cost of accessing swimming lessons for families which choose to use the vouchers for this purpose, however, there is no incentive to use the vouchers specifically for learn to swim over any other sport.
	Targeted programs	<i>No broad-based targeted programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in Queensland.</i>	
South Australia	School based programs	South Australian schools are funded to deliver in-term water safety education to primary school students. Each student is funded for 3.75 hours per year from reception to year two, and 7.5 hours per year from year three to year seven. Funding is also available by application for non-swimming children in year eight to nine.	The program provides nearly 50 hours of water safety education if students participate each year, providing a strong basis of water safety skills for school children.
	Holiday programs	The South Australian Government offers VACSWIM, a five day learn to swim program during school holidays, for children aged four to 12 years old. It is subsidised, costing \$31.50 for the first block per student, plus pool entry fees.	While the program provides low cost access to swimming lessons, it does require parental supervision throughout, which may reduce participation.
	Voucher programs	The South Australian Government offers \$100 Sports Vouchers, which can be used towards sports memberships or learn to swim programs. Children in foundation to year nine are eligible for the vouchers.	Reduces the cost of accessing swimming lessons for families which choose to use the vouchers for this purpose, however, there is no incentive to use the vouchers specifically for learn to swim over any other sport.
	Targeted programs	<i>No broad-based targeted programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in South Australia.</i>	

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
Tasmania	School based programs	Tasmanian Government Schools deliver the Swimming and Water Safety Program to children in years three to five. ¹²⁶ Each year, students participate in ten 45-minute lessons. The program reaches approximately 17,000 students per year across about 160 schools.	The program provides nearly 25 hours of water safety education if students participate each year, providing an introductory understanding of water safety skills for school children.
	Holiday programs	<i>No broad-based holiday programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in Tasmania.</i>	
	Voucher programs	The Tasmanian Government offers two \$100 vouchers for use at eligible sport or recreation organisations. Children aged five to 18 years old listed on a health care or pensioner concession card are eligible. The vouchers can be used towards swimming lessons at government or private facilities. ¹²⁷	Provides subsidised access to swimming lessons for low-income families, if the parent, guardian or recipient chooses to use vouchers for this purpose.
	Targeted programs	<i>No broad-based targeted programs identified, hence there are opportunities to strengthen these at a population level in Tasmania.</i>	
Victoria	School based programs	<p>The Victorian Department of Education deliver the Swimming in Schools program. The program is designed to increase opportunities for students to learn how to swim, and ensure they develop lifelong skills in swimming and water safety. By the end of year 6, it is anticipated that students are able to demonstrate the skills and knowledge in the Victorian Water Safety Certificate. The program is targeting the achievement of 25,000 Victorian Water Safety Certificates in 2022.</p> <p>The Victorian Government has allocated \$72.8 million to the program over the 2021-2024 forward estimates.</p>	The program provides significant water safety education with opportunities for repetition and skill development through primary school.
	Holiday programs	The Victorian Government funds VICSWIM, which was established in 1976. Over 13,000 children aged four to 12 participate in five days of swimming lessons at a cost of \$35 to participants, plus pool entry in some locations. In 2019, 40 per cent of parents indicated that VICSWIM was the only swimming lesson their children participated in during the last 12 months. ¹²⁸	The program provides low-cost access to swimming lessons, with many options available for participants in regional areas. In recent years, the program has been disrupted by COVID-19 and teacher shortages.

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
Victoria	Voucher programs	The Victorian Government offers two vouchers of up to \$200 for use at eligible sport or recreation organisations. Children aged four to 18 years old listed on a health care or pensioner concession card are eligible. The vouchers can be used towards swimming lessons at government or private facilities. ¹²⁹	Provides subsidised access to swimming lessons for low-income families, if the parent, guardian or recipient chooses to use vouchers for this purpose.
	Targeted programs	The Victorian Government has allocated over \$6 million to Life Saving Victoria (LSV) in support of their water safety programs and services. This funding supports LSV's Multicultural Beach Programs, which deliver 2-3 hour sessions to multicultural groups and organisations, teaching participants how to keep safe in open water environments. ¹³⁰	The program offers a low-cost access to water safety education and was participated in by 22,000 multicultural individuals in Victoria in the 2019/2020 financial year. ¹³¹
Western Australia	School based programs	The Western Australian Government funds in-term swimming from foundation to year seven. Children participate in ten 40-minute sessions per year. The program is provided for free to public schools, and private schools in regional areas, while metropolitan private schools can access the program on an at-cost basis. About 90 per cent of government schools and 50 per cent of private schools participated in the program.	The program provides over 50 hours of water safety education if students participate each year, providing a strong foundation of water safety skills for school children.
	Holiday programs	The Western Australian Department of Education delivers VACSWIM, a holiday swimming program consisting of either five 35 minutes lessons, or ten 40-minute lessons, at a cost to participants of \$16 or \$31 respectively. A 30 per cent discount is also available to concession card holders. The program is available at over 180 pool and beach locations.	The program provides low-cost access to swimming lessons, with further subsidies available for low income individuals with a concession card. There are many options available for participants in regional areas.

State	Pathway type	Pathway details	Impact
Western Australia	Targeted programs	The Remote Aboriginal Swimming Pools Project, a collaboration between the Western Australian Government and Royal Life Saving Western Australia. The program established a network of pools, where employed pool managers live and work in the community for nine months each year to deliver safe, efficient, and effective aquatic facilities and programs. The program aims to provide improved services to remote Aboriginal communities. ¹³²	The program has driven significant community benefits, including four times great school retention, reductions in adolescent crime, and importantly an improvement in swimming and water safety skills.
	Voucher programs	The Western Australian government provides KidSport vouchers, which as of January 2021, can be used towards learn to swim. All Western Australian children aged five to 18 with a valid Health Care Card or Pensioner Concession Card may claim \$150 per year, which can be used to pay sport fees at registered sporting clubs.	Provides subsidised access to swimming lessons for low-income families, if the parent, guardian or recipient chooses to use vouchers for this purpose.

Source: Where not otherwise cited, program details were provided by state and territory branches of Royal Life Saving Society - Australia. Developed June 2022.

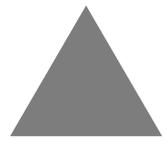
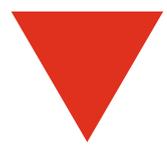
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