

A vision for distance learning for the 21st century

Response proforma for Discussion Paper

Respondent/s: Names -

Representing: Parents and supervisors of Home based students of Karabar
Distance Education Centre

Location: South Eastern Regional NSW

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The respondents are a group of parents and supervisors of students enrolled at the Karabar Distance Education Centre, an integrated Distance Education Centre located in Queanbeyan.

For the past nine years supervisors at this Distance Education Centre have been expressing their concerns about problems associated with integration which we believe disadvantage Distance students. The current review has identified many of these issues and will allow them to now be addressed to provide equity for Distance Education students.

The model places the learner at the centre and it is from that perspective that we invite your comment.

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

- The model has carefully examined and defined the various types of learners that would be accessing their education through Distance Education delivery. This will allow a better understanding of student needs and requirements and possibilities of developments of best practice provide education to these learners.
- Teachers are able to focus on Distance Education students
- Teachers receive specific training to teach by distance
- Teachers are those who choose to teach in Distance Education
- Students have access to teachers when assistance is required. A well managed programme for support of new students is essential and can be provided by teachers working only in Distance Education. Flexibility in the way that contact occurs is important.
- Teachers are able to make the optimum use of technology available to enhance learning, due to sufficient training and time.

- Each student will receive an appropriate programme of learning when teachers have the resources and time to know the student's level and needs.

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Limited career opportunities and prejudices about Distance Education teaching currently occurring in the DET mean that teachers may regard a DE teaching or executive position as a career backwater, resulting in a smaller number of quality teachers available for DE students.
- The view that, unless a teacher is effective in face-to-face classroom teaching they cannot be a good teacher, must be changed so that the most effective DE teachers can reach their full potential teaching DE students.
- The wide ranging curriculum offered may be more limited in an autonomous setting, unless all DE centres work together to use technology, resources and staff more effectively and work cooperatively to deliver those subjects with small student cohorts.
- Fees for those who will be required to pay fees should be structured in such a manner to ensure all who require distance education can access it.

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

- Development of links between all students regardless of their enrolment classification.
- Autonomous Distance Education centres, with an executive – i.e. Principal, Deputy and Head Teachers – would be making decisions solely for DE students, whilst being totally in touch with the needs of these students. As in other NSW schools of similar size, Distance Education Schools would have allocation for Learning Difficulties, Careers and Library.
- Distance Education Schools would receive and control their own global funding. All funds would be spent on the provision of distance education.
- All Distance Education funding spent on Professional Development would benefit Distance Education learners.
- Enhancement and/or acceleration of students' learning can occur when teachers have time, training and resources available, to give equity for

Distance Education students with in-school programs such as selective classes.

Home distance learning

Preschool and Stages One to Six

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

- Recognition of the long term full time students.
- The development of personal learning relationships.
- Distance education pedagogy trained teachers
- When families are permanently itinerant due to work commitments the students should be considered and treated as home learners, despite the fact that their homes are not in a permanent location. In addition these learners must be provided equitable learning opportunities for their education in stages 5 and 6 which appear only to be provided if they are classified as home distance learners.

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Difficulties ensuring equity of access to supports, particularly technology for all learners.
- Reliability of the technology. When learning is dependent on technology the technology must be reliable, easily maintained and dependable.
- As a reasonable percentage of home based learners have medical or other issues which make school attendance difficult, many would also be restricted by default from the full inclusion in mini school and other activities to increase learning and social opportunities, if support is not provided to allow equitable access for these learners. This is an important part of distance education and learners should not be excluded solely due to the lack of resources to support these students. Students attending a normal state school can be funded for assistance and on an access and equity bases similar support/assistance should be provided to allow distance education learners to attend their school activities.
- Students will benefit from asynchronous learning to fit in with individual family commitments and routines. Class times for home students are not always successful as these students develop their own learning

routines and work at their own pace on each subject. Synchronous learning with set class times is not always desirable.

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

- In K-12 DE centres students would be able to access work to suit their ability and level more easily, and the transition between primary and high school would be much smoother, with ongoing teacher and administration staff relationships.
- Recognition of the DE Triangle (the student, teacher, supervisor relationship) happened at the outset of decentralisation. There were early efforts to nurture this concept: the annual DE Conference included teachers, supervisors and students in PD workshops and activities; a New to DE workshop introduced new teachers to student and supervisor perspectives; field trips enabled DE staff to have an understanding of DE families' circumstances, environment and needs. As integration became more encompassing, these initiatives were not continued. An autonomous Distance Education centre – where teachers are not restricted by the in-school timetable- allows more flexibility to engage in such activities.
- In a K-12 centre a more coordinated approach to technology would occur. All students must have access to the technology to support the learning processes; the technology must be reliable, easily maintained and dependable.
- Supervisor professional development can also be supported by access to technology. At present there is no professional development for supervisors in our integrated centre. Uniform provision of technology would enable all supervisors to access courses offered by TAFE such as the Supervisor Accreditation Scheme. A K-12 centre would be focussed on DE students and supervisors, and able to offer professional development to coincide with mini-schools.
- Distance Education schools could represent a place for which DE students and families felt some ownership and sense of belonging. This would encourage more supervisor participation in parent groups – similar to P&C or School Council.
- Development of social links

Tutorial distance learning

Stages Three to Five

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Need to plan the transition of these students to the next stage of learning after six months - will they be able to choose between home distance learning and their local school?

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

Rural linked distance learning

Stages Five to Six

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

What might be some limitations for the learner?

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

- Increased socialisation outside the learner's local community.

Single course distance learning

Stages Five to Six

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

- Teachers would not be restricted by an in-school timetable in an autonomous centre and so would be available to suit the students working within their home school schedule, providing suitable contact and support.

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Supports and supervision at local school.

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

Mobile distance learning

Stages One to Four

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Affordability of fees after one year for families who need to continue this style of education. This is particularly the case when families are permanently itinerant due to work commitments.
- Recognition is required that home supervisors are involved in this model, only they are mobile home supervisors. Thus they also should benefit from the support and professional development options available to all other home supervisors.

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

What do you see as the opportunities for the learner?

What might be some limitations for the learner?

- Who determines if the student should be learning through single course distance learning or on-line distance learning? Will the two types just merge into one over time?
- This style of learning requires the student to have a very mature attitude to learning and many students in stages 5 and 6 are not ready for the challenges that are inherent in this style of learning.

What might be some further enhancements for the learner?

Building and supporting the model

In addition comment is invited on each area identified in this section:

Community of Distance Learning Schools

- Development of links, shared resources and networks
- Opportunities of joint professional development for teaching and administrative staff
- All Distance Learning schools within the community will be autonomous, servicing a regional area.
- Each school will have a Principal, Deputy and Head Teachers.
- Each School will have its own global funding.

- All staff positions within the Distance Learning schools will be equivalent to those in main stream schools, in regard to teachers' careers and promotions.

Teacher Professional Learning

- Professional development is highly valuable and should be provided to teachers commencing Distance Education provision and on an ongoing basis.
- Enhancement of the image of distance education teaching. At present there is an issue with the perceived status attached to being a distance education teacher. Pedagogy methods are different and require teachers to operate quite differently to the way they do in face-to-face teaching. This has to be valued as a legitimate teaching role along with those who teach in normal state schools.
- Distance education pedagogy must be supported by a range of professional learning opportunities.
- At the school level there is the opportunity for teachers, students and supervisors to share workshops and forums. Within the Distance Education community other professional learning could be shared through conferences and workshops, with peers and expert instructors. Nationally, organisations such as the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools provide excellent forums for learning and sharing.
- Technology skills are vital for teachers to enable them to deliver teaching to students effectively. Teachers must also be able to access, develop and share resources on the appropriate web sites.

Learning Resources and Technology

- Use of technology is most valuable if all students are able to access the same technology regardless of their learner classification. Teaching is more equitable and teachers are able to use the most suitable way to teach each section of each course.
- When learning is dependent on technology the technology must be reliable, easily maintained and dependable.

- As distance education has been available as a guarantee that all students can access the full curriculum in NSW it is important that all courses are provided through the distance education school collective.
- Learning material specific to Distance Education is essential for successful student outcomes. The community of Distance Learning Schools must ensure that all resources available are shared amongst all DE centres, whether these resources are produced by individual teachers/schools or by a central organisation specific to DE.
- Technology provision is essential. All students must have equal access to suitable hardware that provides internet access, where Web-based systems such as Moodle and Bridgit can be used.
- All teachers must also have access to suitable hardware, such as a PC or laptop, with connection to the internet.

Learning Support

- It is important that all learners have an equitable access to education. Support needs to be provided to allow this to happen.
- There is an increase in enrolments of 'behaviour disorder' students who would benefit from teachers who have the training, resources and the additional supports to assist these and any other students that required such assistance to have an equitable access to learning.
- Learning support must be provided to distance education centres in the same way that main stream schools access it. The increase in the enrolment of students with mental illness and behavioural problems requires teachers to have more professional support than is currently available. An autonomous model would ensure that all allocation for support is used within the distance education centre and is focussed on the needs of DE students.
- Almost all students will have a supervisor involved supporting their learning. Supervisors are usually either home or school based. It is important that all supervisors are provided with the resources and support to undertake this essential role in the delivery of distance education.

Student Access Criteria

- It is important that all students have access to high quality education which allows them to achieve their potential. All learners should have access to the full range of courses at the various stages of study.

- Careful consideration should be given to how tight the definitions for access to distance education are, as some students would benefit immensely from distance education but may not totally meet the criteria for access.

The paper also identifies issues for immediate attention while the consultation, planning and implementation process is progressed. Comment on the issues listed in the paper or other issues needed to be identified for immediate action should be included in responses.

Ideas in relation to implementation:

AUTONOMY is the preferred option generally in isolated, medical and overseas categories of students. These students are the long-term full-time students presently enrolled in Distance Education.

These are the students who are most impacted by the disadvantages of an integrated DE centre.

The problems experienced in an integrated centre can be overcome by autonomy.

In an autonomous centre the focus of teachers and other staff is on the DE student.

Parents, supervisors and students believe that the effective DE teachers are those who are able to focus on students by:

- developing learning relationships with students
- having time to know students, their families and their circumstances (the DE triangle of student, teacher and supervisor)
- receiving P.D. in the specialised area of teaching by distance
- having time to receive training to use all of the technologies available to enhance learning
- having time to deliver learning using technology
- having time and ability to match resources and curriculum to students

Autonomy is the model that allows these things to happen.

Autonomy would also allow full management of funding allocated to distance education to be expended on distance education.

A Distance Education school can focus on distance education and develop as a centre of excellence in distance education pedagogy, technology and support structures for distance learners.

An **autonomous K-12 Distance Education Centre located in Queanbeyan** is the preferred option to achieve the best learning outcomes for Distance Education students in the south-east region of NSW.

The location of an autonomous K-12 Distance Education Centre in Queanbeyan is strongly supported by the students and their families at Karabar DEC. Queanbeyan is a readily accessible location for the South East Region, and DE teachers are already teaching and living in the area.

Supervisors strongly believe that the implementation of an autonomous K-12 Distance Education Centre located in Queanbeyan should happen within 12 months. It is felt that a relatively short time frame would reduce the stress associated with change and ensure there is no loss of key DE staff.

The advantages of the 1991 decentralisation of DE will continue:

- Mini schools and camps where students and teachers come together for socialisation and learning
- Teachers are there in person
- Supervisors meet each other for support
- Field trips occur
- A sense of belonging to a group is fostered

At present in Queanbeyan there are separate primary and secondary DE centres. Combining these centres into one distance education school is logical and presents advantages for home distance learning.

At present, teachers and admin staff are living and working in Queanbeyan. In respect to the physical and practical issues of location it would appear to be sensible to continue with a Distance Education Centre/School located in Queanbeyan. It is a large regional centre which is attractive to potential staff as a place of work and residence.

Buildings and resources currently exist in two campuses. Consolidation on to one site would aid the development of a cohesive functional k-12 Distance Education Centre. We consider it is in the best interest of all the learners that the entire school is on one location.

The Karabar Distance Education Centre (secondary) is currently located in demountable buildings on the grounds of Karabar High School. The physical location of the centre is of secondary importance to that of the autonomous functioning of the centre.

The Queanbeyan Distance Education Centre (primary) is located in a single building on the grounds of the Queanbeyan Public School. Additional

accommodation would be required to house the primary teachers and staff if they were relocated to the site at Karabar.

A regional centre that is readily accessed by the majority of students provides “real life socialisation”. All the on-line lessons in the world cannot take the place of contact with real people – both teachers and fellow students.

The most powerful learning happens when personal learning relationships are strong and meaningful. When a student knows that the teacher has expectations, understands the student’s abilities and level, and has knowledge of the student’s environment, the performance and results of student learning are much greater.

Having a **K-12** regional autonomous DE School in Queanbeyan is the preferred option.

For families with students in both primary and secondary schools, the co-ordination of events such as camp and mini schools would be a definite advantage. Trips to the DE school could be minimised and time when siblings work is interrupted by travel to events would also be kept to a minimum.

The building of personal relationships would be improved if the same centre was attended throughout the students’ education. More continuums between Years 6 and 7 could occur, with less disruption for students.

In addition this would be of great benefit to students who require work to suit their academic abilities rather than their official class level.

It is envisaged that this distance education school would provide support to students based in south eastern NSW stretching westwards to the Riverina providing full time education to home based students, school based students and those with various other needs who meet the access criteria for distance education.

A major factor in the staffing of the Distance Education Centre is the perception by many teachers that to work full time in Distance Education is not conducive to furthering their teaching career in any other area. The Department of Education and Training must put in place procedures to ensure that this is not a fact. Teachers and executive staff must be able to move between the two teaching modes without prejudice, to ensure that quality teachers are equally available to Distance Education students and face-to-face students. The profile of Distance Education must be raised so that it is not regarded as a kind of “alternative style education”, but the relevant and successful form of education it is.

Over the years, supervisors have proposed many ideas to increase the appeal of teaching in Distance Education. There are some teachers who are inherently attracted to Distance Education but others who would only consider

it as an adjunct to classroom teaching. Some suggested possibilities for enhancement for staffing include:

- The option for teachers to select block teaching where teachers could teach for three years in Distance Education then return to a main stream school.
- Part time teaching in a DEC and a main stream school
- A pool of teachers shared by the face-to-face schools in Queanbeyan and the Distance Education Centre.

As none of these suggestions have happened to date, we have no reason to believe that they will in the future while remaining integrated. Because there would be three secondary schools and several primary facilities in Queanbeyan it makes sense to enable teachers to work part time in more than one school in Queanbeyan including the Distance Education School. This is one mechanism to attract and retain specialised teachers to the betterment of all schools in Queanbeyan.

Any further comment:

- Education of the learner in distance education is driven by both the teacher and the supervisor. Professional development for the supervisors should be inherent in the model for distance education. Home based supervisors exist for isolated, medical, overseas, travellers and all other students who are not actually in a school setting.
- It is important that the separation for the Integrated Distance Education Centres occurs in a timely manner. Change which is too drawn out will only cause excess stress and in particular loss of key staff who would be an asset in the transition process.
- It may be that the focus should be on the student's educational needs rather than classification of their physical location.
- It appears the value of Distance Education within the operation of the school system is not often considered. Distance Education delivers the mechanism to provide innovative education in conjunction with the standard method of provision in state schools. Much more could be made of its potential. Distance Education has a low profile and very few people actually know it exists.
- Some students just don't fit well in the standard system. Distance Education if promoted well could allow these students to have an alternative to the local school. It could be available to them either on an equity or fee paying basis dependant on their situation. It has the potential to both improve the students' learning achievements and reduce some challenges in the classrooms of local schools.

- One possible use for distance education could be as an early intervention option for learners whose behaviour is causing concern. Early removal from the local school environment for a period of time may well stop or reduce the potential escalation of behaviour issues for the student.
- A number of long term students have to repeatedly prove their continuing need to be learners through distance education. Students with long term medical conditions or other reasons should be able to prove their need once and then have continuous access to distance education till they complete their education or their needs significantly change and their enrolment requires review. This would reduce administrative issues significantly for both schools and families concerned.

SUMMARY

Supervisors understand that implementing this new model for Distance Learning involves many parties and points of view. However, we are approaching the plan from the perspective of DE students.

Autonomy of the Distance Education Centre provides staff that are focussed on Distance Education Students and can deliver equitable and appropriate education for students.

A regional autonomous Distance Education Centre located in Queanbeyan delivers all the advantages that were seen when decentralisation occurred.

A K-12 autonomous Distance Education Centre located in Queanbeyan ensures an ongoing and coordinated approach to the students learning.

As supervisors, we are encouraged and pleased by the overall findings of the Review and look forward with enthusiasm to the implementation of an **autonomous K-12 Distance Education Centre in Queanbeyan.**