

Briefing Paper

THE CHRONIC UNDERFUNDING OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA'S NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOL SECTOR.

November 2013

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1 History

1.1 Government Distance Education

- Government distance education has been established in all states for around 100 years.

1.2 Non-Government Distance Education

- Non-government distance education (NGDE) was formally recognised by the Commonwealth in the *States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act 2000*.
- The Act prescribed the lowest level of Commonwealth funding to these students.
- This funding was 13.7% of the amount that is allocated to educate a government school student (known as the AGSRC).
- As a result of this Commonwealth policy, NGDE students are the lowest funded school students in Australia. This low level of funding is current until the end of 2013.

2 The Issue: Continued Underfunding of NGDE - Post-Gonski

2.1 The “Better Schools Plan” - 2013

- The *Australian Education Act 2013* continues the legislated underfunding of NGDE students, into the next funding period.
- The Act restricts NGDE per-student funding to 35% of the SRS funding amount, which is allocated to other Australian school students [Section 33(3) & (4)].
- This 35% funding cap has no (i) educational or (ii) sociological justification.
 - (i) *Educationally*, it restricts the number of teachers in NGDE to a minimum, precluding appropriate student contact with their teachers and thus prescribing excessively high student-to-teacher ratios and high teacher workloads.
 - (ii) *Sociologically*, it ignores the socioeconomic status (SES) of NGDE families, as virtually all are single income families, because one parent must remain at home with the student, as a home-tutor / supervisor.

For NGDE the new “Better Schools” regime is little better than the former 13.7% AGSRC regime, as NGDE students will still be among the lowest-funded and most poorly resourced school students in Australia. Thus, the Commonwealth’s ongoing policy of underfunding NGDE students, continues to deny them appropriate contact with their teachers and access to appropriate educational resources.

3 What NGDE Looks Like

3.1 Research into NGDE

Harding's *A Description of Non-Government Distance Education in Australia* (Harding, 2012) is a researched report requested by the then Minister for Education. The first study of its kind, it examined and described the pedagogy of 11 of Australia's 13 providers of NGDE in the states of New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia.

The study presented 41 findings, some of which included:

1. Distance education is a different pedagogical mode than traditional schooling.
2. Distance education requires DE-specific methods and resources which are different to that of traditional day schooling.
3. Reasons why parents choose NGDE.
4. Student demographics.
5. NGDE is bona fide education conducted by registered schools.
6. NGDE students are engaged in full-time study, compliant with their State's syllabus and Australian Curriculum requirements.
7. NGDE is significantly underfunded compared with the rest of Australia's schooling.
8. NGDE schools have far fewer teachers and resources per-student, than traditional schools and government schools of distance education.
9. NGDE students are limited in their contact with their teachers because of excessively high student-to-teacher ratios.
10. NGDE Principals say that NGDE underfunding is their greatest problem.

Schools, which provide NGDE, face the same recurrent costs as schools, which educate children in the traditional classroom mode. They require teachers and educational resources. However, NGDE providers also face challenges and costs that are specific to distance education.

3.2 Costs of Distance Education

The recurrent costs of distance education are comparable to that of traditional day schooling, as all school students need teachers and resources. However, there is a major difference between how distance education and traditional day schooling is conducted.

Appendix 4 describes some of the operational cost centres, which are characteristic of distance education. These include:

- Creating an "at-distance" teaching and learning environment/infrastructure
- Providing DE-specific pedagogical requirements e.g. DE curriculum
- Providing DE-specific communication tools
- Using DE-specific communication methods
- Providing an individualised education plan for every student
- Providing individualised tuition for every student
- DE particularly attracts students with special education needs
- Staff salaries
- Providing DE-specific staff professional development
- Induction and professional development of parent home-tutors
- Communicating with parent home-tutors both individually and corporately

(See Appendix 4)

Note: Whilst recurrent distance education costs are similar to that of traditional day schooling, distance education provides governments with large cost savings in terms of capital expenditure.

4 Summary – The Disadvantaging of NGDE Compared to Other Forms of Australian Schooling

4.1 Four Funding Facts and Four Questions of Equity

1. Distance education students in Queensland, in the non-government sector are allocated 19% of the funding that is allocated, on average, to distance education students in the government sector. In Western Australia, they are allocated 14% of what government distance education students are allocated. *(See Appendix 1)*

- *Question 1: Why are DE students in the non-government sector massively underfunded compared to DE students in the government sector?*

2. Australian governments acknowledge that distance education requires appropriate numbers of teachers and resourcing, because distance education students in the government sector are funded at a higher rate than students in traditional government day schools. *(See Appendix 2)*

- *Question 2: Why does the Commonwealth not recognise that DE in the non-government sector has the same recurrent needs, which are acknowledged and resourced in the government sector?*

3. Distance education students in non-government schools are allocated only 23% of the Commonwealth funding that day school students, who are *enrolled in the same school*, are allocated. *(See Appendix 3)*

- *Question 3: Why are DE students deemed unworthy of funding support, which is equivalent to that of day school students, who are enrolled in the same school?*

4. All non-government school students are allocated a needs-based SES rank, in order to calculate their recurrent funding. NGDE students are excluded from this needs-based system, and their funding is artificially capped at 35% of what other students can receive. *(See Australian Education Act 2013, Section 33)*

- *Question 4: Why are NGDE students excluded from the needs-based SES system?*

5 Conclusion

5.1 Addressing the Chronic Underfunding of NGDE

In order for the Commonwealth to allocate appropriate funding to NGDE students, in a manner equivalent to the rest of Australia's non-government school students, a minor amendment to the *Australian Education Act 2013* is necessary. This amendment would be to delete any references to the 35% cap on the SRS funding amount, relevant to NGDE students.

It is unconscionable to conceive of the Commonwealth Government maintaining this gross, prescribed, legislated, educational deprivation, which intentionally targets one cohort of Australian school students with educational disadvantage.

The schools that provide NGDE across Australia, request that the Commonwealth brings immediate redress to this shameful discriminatory policy.

6 Reference

Harding, T. (2012). *A description of non-government distance education in Australia: A submission presented to the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth*. August 2012. Christian Education Ministries: Brisbane.

Comparing Government Distance Education Funding and Non-Government Distance Education Funding

A comparison between the funding of government distance education students and students in two non-government distance education (NGDE) schools, in the states of Queensland and Western Australia, in 2011, demonstrates the underfunding of NGDE students. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this funding inequality.

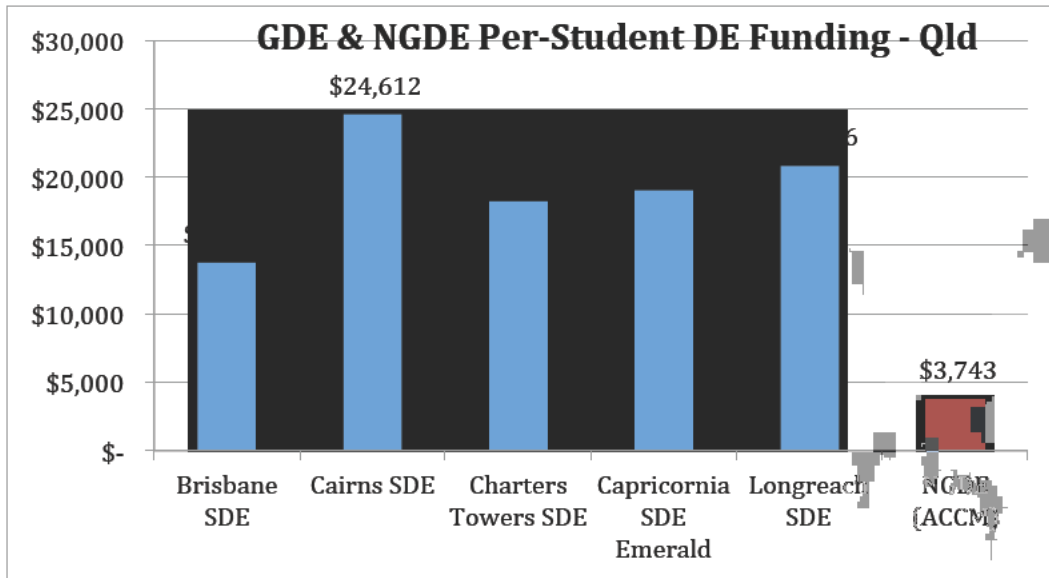


Figure 1. Comparing Government and Non-Government Per-Student Distance Education Funding in Qld. (Source: My School Website)

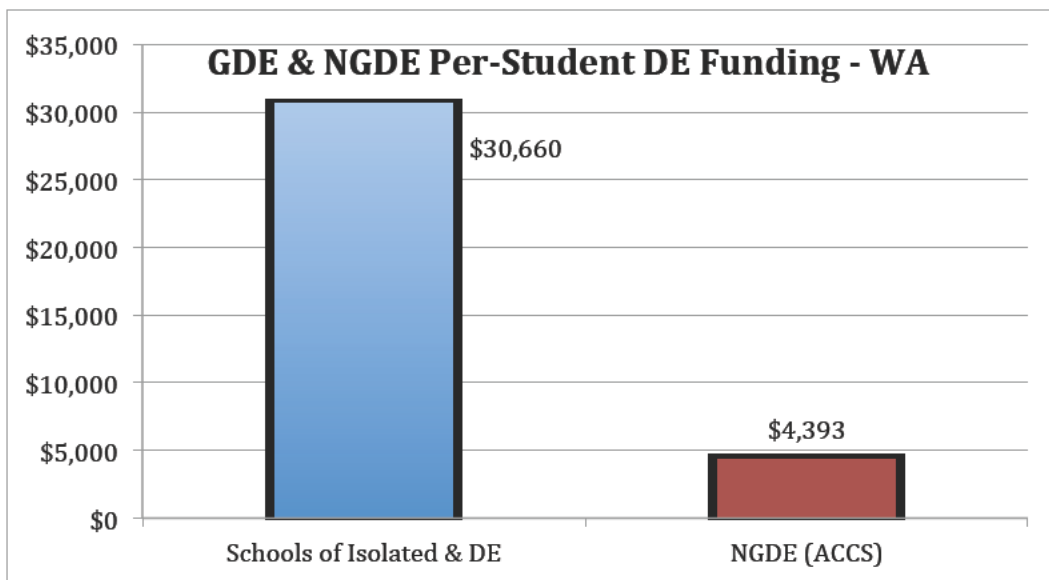


Figure 2. Comparing Government and Non-Government Per-Student Distance Education Funding in WA. (Source: My School Website)

These figures clearly demonstrate that there is a major underfunding / under-resourcing dilemma for distance education students, their teachers and their broader school communities, in the non-government sector.

Government Distance Education is Funded More than Government Day Schooling.

In stark contrast to NGDE, government schools of distance education are well funded by state and commonwealth governments.

A comparison of per-student funding of government schools of distance education with that of government day schools, demonstrates that government distance education is allocated per-student, recurrent funding at a much higher rate than traditional government day schools.

Figures 1 – 3 indicate that government schools of distance education in the states of Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia, are allocated more per-student recurrent funding than traditional government day schools, which are located in the same DEEWR-defined regions (metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote).

The darkened colours depict the schools of distance education (SDE) and the paler colours depict the day schools. The data is for 2011, and is sourced from the My School Website.

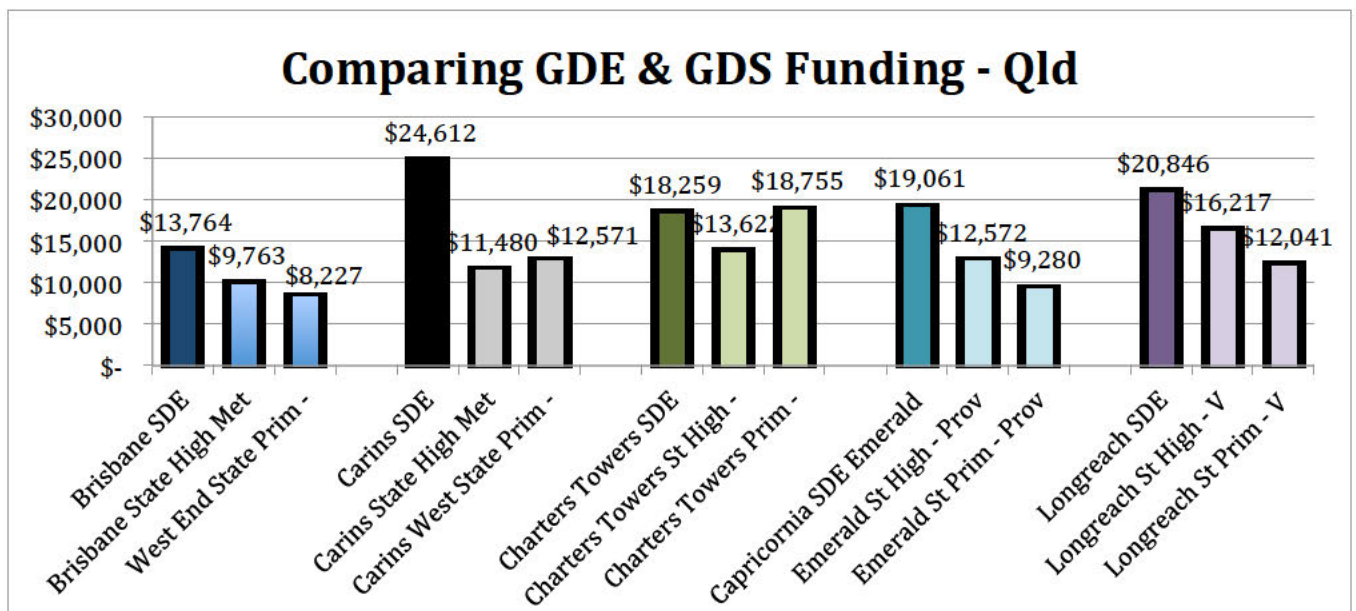


Figure 1. Comparison of Per-Student Funding in Govt. Distance Ed with Govt. Day Schools in 5 Regions in Qld (MySchool Website)

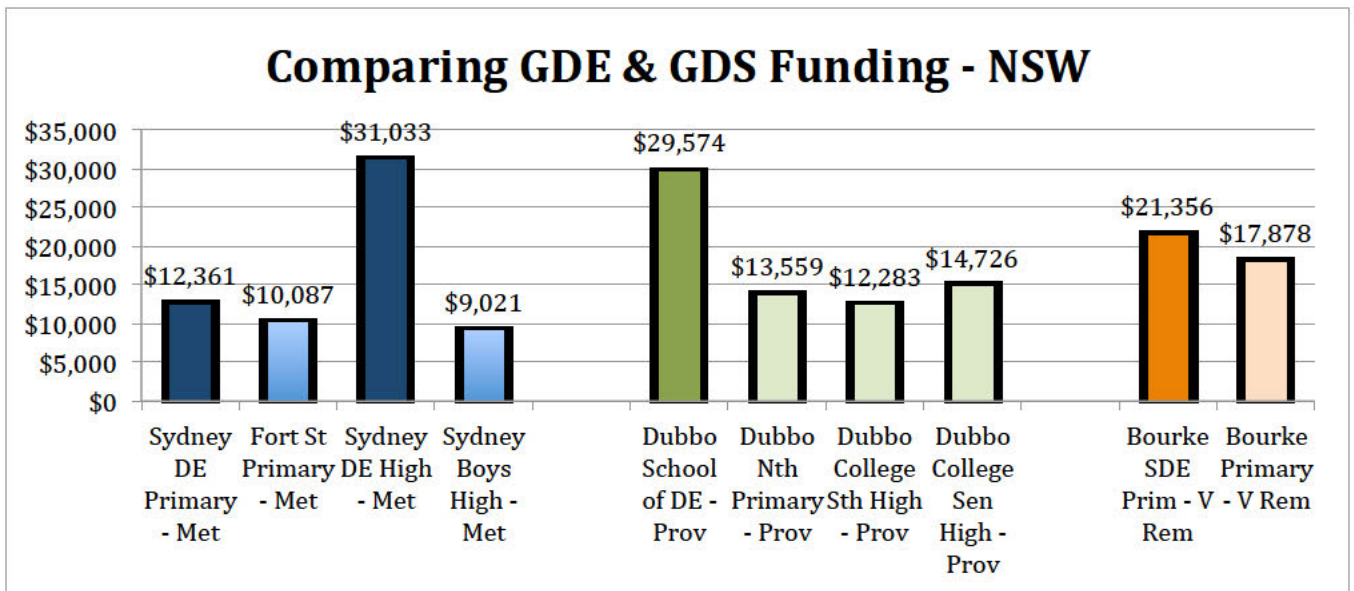


Figure 2. Comparison of Per-Student Funding in Govt. Distance Ed with Govt. Day Schools in 3 Regions in NSW (MySchool Website)

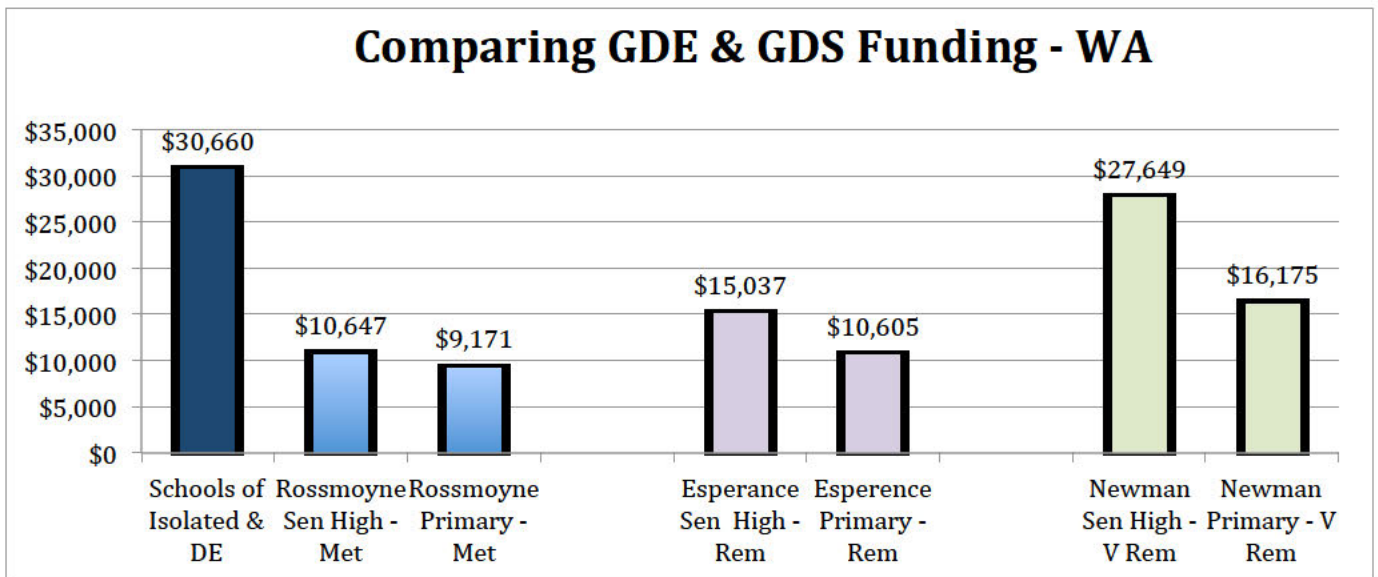


Figure 3. Comparison of Per-Student Funding in Govt. Distance Education (SIDE) with 3 Day Schools in Various Regions in WA (MySchool Website)

The Commonwealth Supports Day Schooling But Deprives Distance Education in the Non-Government Sector

Distance education students in the non-government sector are allocated only around 23% of the Commonwealth recurrent funding, which on-campus, day school students, who are *enrolled in the same school*, are allocated. This minimal funding to NGDE students creates major resourcing discrepancies between a school’s day school and distance education departments.

Figure 1 indicates this major in-house funding discrepancy in three schools in the states of Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia, in 2010. Because of this gross funding discrepancy, it is impossible for non-government schools to provide similar teacher-to-student ratios and educational resources, to their distance education students, in comparison to that which is provided to their on-campus day school students (Harding, 2012, p. 105).

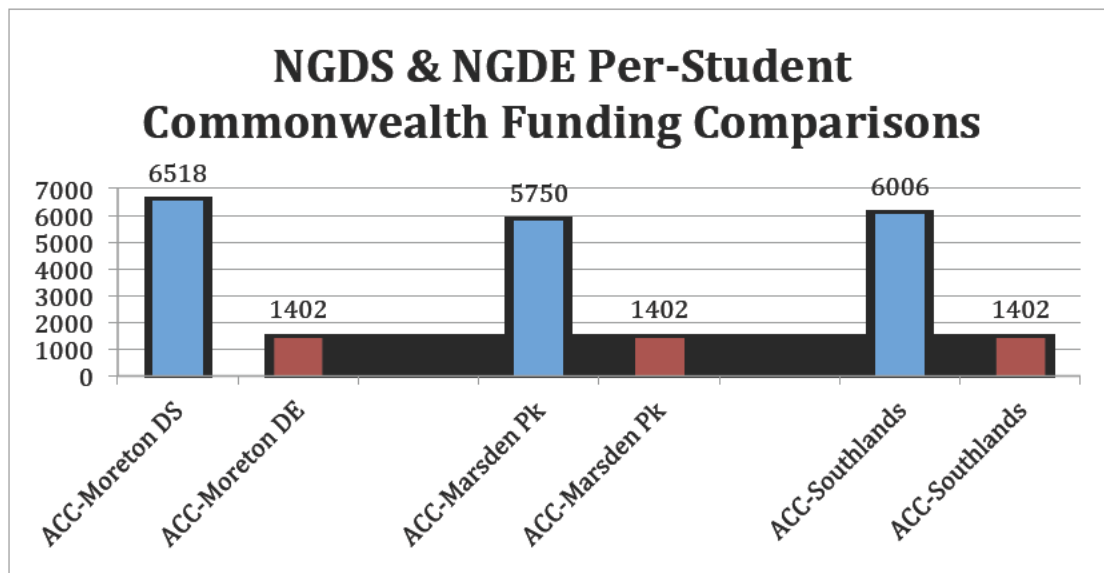


Figure 1. Comparing Commonwealth Per-Student Funding of Day School & Distance Education Students in Three Schools in Queensland, New South Wales & Western Australia. (Source: Schools’ Financial Data)

Operational Cost Centres in NGDE

Below are some of the cost centres, which are significant to the provision of NGDE in Australia.

1 Pedagogical Requirements of NGDE

Like government distance education, NGDE has pedagogical requirements, which are quite distinct from traditional classroom pedagogy. Distance education in both the government and non-government sectors requires the construction and maintenance of an at-distance learning environment. Distance education requires:

- distinctive curriculum design,
- curriculum development,
- course management
- course delivery
- specific educational infrastructure
- developing and maintaining an individualised education plan for each student
- individualised instruction of the student
- individualised instruction of the parent and
- specialised staff-to-student transactions (McFarlane, 2011).

2 Communication Tools of NGDE

Distance education also requires a higher level of communications resourcing than traditional classroom schooling. Whilst print and postage is a vital part of the delivery of distance education, ICT requirements are also a growing integral part of NGDE.

These communications requirements include:

- hardware,
- software,
- Internet connectivity,
- extensive use of electronic services such as phone and fax,
- print and
- postage

for all staff and students.

2.1 Technology

Distance education in 2013 is very different to distance education in 2000 (when legislated recognition and Commonwealth funding was first enacted). The very nature of educating students across distances requires the sophisticated implementation of Information Communications Technologies (ICT). NGDE staff and students need access to ICT hardware, software, support services and broadband connectivity as an educational necessity.

2.2 Post

Another core educational operative, specific to distance education is a strong reliance on postage. Australia Post and courier services provide the means to send school communications, academic resources and testing instruments to and from the school and the student's home.

2.3 Print

NGDE still relies heavily on printed curriculum materials as part of its educational delivery.

3 Communication Methods

Harding's research (Harding, 2012) cited the many tools and resources, which are required to create an optimal NGDE learning environment. NGDE principals and their staff cited (in addition to traditional paper-based educational resources) the following, as part of the NGDE process for communications between the school and its students.

- Phone tutoring
- Email
- Teaching chat rooms
- On-line learning management systems
- Skype meetings
- Forum posts
- Video conferencing
- On-line tutorial groups
- On-line individualised teaching
- Practical applications
- Fax
- Blogs
- On-line interactive white boards
- On-campus individualised teaching
- On-campus activities
- On-campus tutorial groups
- Student e-Magazine

(Harding, 2012,

p.66)

NGDE schools also indicated that they communicated with their students and parents in the following ways:

- Teacher visits to the student's home
- Parent-mentor visits to the student's home
- Field trips
- Camps
- Excursions
- Workshops
- Group activity days
- Newsletters
- Residential programs
- Student Councils
- Non-NGDE school contact teacher, for part time NGDE students
- Awards presentation nights
- Concerts

(Harding 2012,

p.66)

NGDE students have high expectations of their schools and their schooling. Oliver, Osborne and Brady (2009) examined the expectations that high school distance education students have with respect to their distance education courses. They found that these high expectations include, "detailed and interactive content, peer-to-peer collaborative activities and speedy feedback" (Oliver, Osborne, & Brady, 2009, p. 42), all of which require adequate communication tools and resourcing. Current Commonwealth funding of NGDE, precludes NGDE students from an adequate experience of such appropriate educational practices.

When the Commonwealth formally recognized NGDE in 2000, ICT pedagogical requirements were much less than they are today. In order for NGDE students to have

modern, appropriate, educational experiences and outcomes, NGDE schools need appropriate funding to enable teachers to have the tools to create and maintain optimal at-distance learning environments.

4 Individualised Education for NGDE Students

A key difference between traditional day schooling and distance education is that day schooling deals with groups of students, whereas distance education mostly deals with the individual student. The DE teacher interacts with the student on a one-on-one basis. The DE teacher diagnoses each student's learning gaps, prescribes specific remediation and then prescribes a learning programme and appropriate resources for the student to proceed, from that point of remediation. A day school teacher can deal with students in groups and thus can exercise economies of scale, which are unavailable to DE teachers.

In a similar manner, the DE teacher has to resource each student individually, whereas in classrooms, a day school teacher can have one set of resources for a whole class.

In short, dealing with NGDE students in an educationally equitable manner is both labour-intensive and resource-intensive. This requires specific funding to meet DE-specific educational needs.

5 NGDE Attracts Students with Special Needs

Further, distance education attracts a significant proportion of students with needs, which extend beyond the norm. Research (Harding, 2011) indicates that many parents choose NGDE to remediate problems, which could not be remediated in on campus day schooling. Such extenuating needs include issues such as:

- gifted and talented students;
- literacy and numeracy problems;
- students disengaged from learning at day schools;
- students with health problems;
- students with psychological problems;
- students with social problems;
- pregnant students; and
- students who live in remote locations.

6 NGDE Staffing

6.1 Inappropriate Numbers of Teachers

Independent Schools Queensland (2013), stated that non-government schools normally spend around 70% of their recurrent expenditure on staff salaries. This expenditure allows a "Medium Range" non-government day school (NGDS) to have the following staff-to-student ratios

- Primary NGDS staff-student ratio 1 : 16.5 – 18.5
 - Secondary NGDS staff-student ratio 1 : 10.5 - 12.5
- (Independent Schools Queensland, 2013)

Unlike a "Medium Range" private school, NGDE schools have the highest teacher-to-student ratios in Australia. One school was reported having a 1:58 teacher-to-student ratio, and other NGDE providers were higher.

The My School Website demonstrates that the teacher-to-student ratios in government distance education schools are comparable to, or lower than, the Independent Schools Queensland ratios. Thus both Independent day schooling and government distance education schooling enjoy far lower teacher-to-student ratios than does NGDE.

Both prominent educators (Brock, 2010; Gilbert, Keddie, Lingard, Mills, & Renshaw, 2011) and the Gonski-commissioned research (Deloitte Access Economics, 2011) have stated that appropriate funding plays a key role in the teaching quality of a school. The inappropriate Commonwealth funding of NGDE negatively impacts upon the (i) training, (ii) professional development, (iii) selection of staff, (iv) career progression and (v) retention of DE teachers. Further, it restricts the number of administrative and clerical staff in NGDE.

6.2 Teacher Training

Distance education teachers need to be trained beyond the training levels of traditional classroom teachers. Not only do they need to be knowledgeable of traditional pedagogy and course content, Oliver, Osborne and Brady (2009) demonstrated that distance education teachers need to be

- trained and able to teach online,
- able to use an appropriate range of educational tools, specific to distance education,
- able to use specialised at-distance communication skills,
- able to provide timely feedback,
- actively teaching rather than just moderating courses and
- providing individualised instruction to individual students.

There is currently no serious attempt by teacher training institutions to incorporate the above distance education-specific pedagogical skills into traditional tertiary education training. NGDE providers administer this teacher training from within their own schools. Such provision of on-the-job training means that these schools must resource and fund their own teacher training processes, at their own costs in time and revenue. Again, this means a further financial impost to be born by these schools, which are the least funded.

6.3 Professional Development, Selection of Staff, Career Progression and Retention of Teachers

Principals of schools providing NGDE indicated (Harding, 2012) that inadequate funding negatively impacted the teacher and teaching cultures in their schools. Low funding hindered NGDE schools in:

- attracting high quality teachers,
- rewarding high calibre teaching,
- shaping the allocation of teachers across and within schools and
- increasing teacher quality over time, via professional development.

The Commonwealth's underfunding policy has created a problematic teaching culture for NGDE schools. These schools are compelled to provide NGDE to their students, on low budgets, which in turn, limit their ability to attract and retain highly experienced teachers. It limits the schools' ability to develop their teachers over time, to outline normal pathways for teacher career progression and higher remuneration opportunities for NGDE teachers.

6.4 Inappropriate Numbers of Administration and Clerical Staff

Just as the Commonwealth's policy of underfunding NGDE delivers inappropriate numbers of teachers to NGDE, in similar vein, these schools suffer inappropriate numbers of administration and clerical staff. NGDE typically requires DE-specific administrative and clerical activities, to a greater extent than traditional day schooling.

7 Induction and Professional Development for Parent Home-Tutor/Supervisors

The Parent Home-Tutor/Supervisor is usually not a trained teacher. There are several areas, specific to distance education, for which parent supervisors require professional development. These include:

- a) Induction to NGDE
- b) Ongoing Parent Home-Tutor/Supervisor development
- c) ICT training
- d) Australian Curriculum implementation training

8 Communicating with NGDE Parent Home-Tutor/Supervisors

NGDE teachers not only have to deal with each student individually, they must also deal with the student's parent home-tutor/supervisor on an individual basis. This may involve assisting the parent with some training, the motivation of the student, administrative procedures of the school or assisting the parent in understanding how to deal with academic problems. Dealing with parent home-tutor/supervisors on an individual basis, as part of a school's educational programme is very labour-intensive.

9 Activity Days and other Socio-Educational Events

NGDE includes Activity Days, field trips, camps and other such gatherings, which are of great benefit to both students and the parent supervisors. The cost to deliver these services is considerable in terms of finances, staffing travel, accommodation and resourcing.

10 Remoteness

A significant minority of NGDE students are located in regional, remote and very remote locations. These students face unique educational challenges including limited digital delivery and distance from resources.

Part of the solution to isolation for these students includes:

- a) Allowing College teachers to reside in regional centres rather than the current requirement that they must operate from the College campus
- b) Providing activity days in regional centres
- c) Home visits, where practicable
- d) Annual camps
- e) Field trips

11 References

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