

7.0 Distance Education – Flexible Learning

The people of the Northern Territory believe that distance education will play an important role in the delivery of education services into the future. The dispersed settlement resulting from pastoral, mining, agricultural, defence and other economic activities is set to continue. Distance education services are and will be required for these people. In addition, the expected growth of demand for education in remote locations and the establishment of secondary provision resulting from the return to the homelands by Indigenous people are creating a different type of demand for these services.

In the Territory, a range of small but significant groups will need to access at least part of their education by distance delivery. They include:

- those who are travelling overseas or interstate
- people whose physical or emotional health mean they are unable to attend school
- those who are incarcerated for periods and need to access education as part of their rehabilitation.

7.1 Submissions

The recommendation in the Secondary Education Report to close NTOEC and develop a joint venture with OAC in South Australia for the delivery of distance education generated the greatest number of submissions and angry responses from the public.

Overall we received 87 submissions on distance education. These came from across the Territory, from students who currently use distance education services to those who would like to be able to access them, as well as parents, educators and members of the community who are interested in distance education.

Submissions received on the issue of distance education appear in Appendix II.

The concerns and responses of the community on distance education are focused on the following:

- policy
- client groups
- client group expectations
- curriculum development
- modes of delivery
- co-ordination and management of service delivery.

7.2 Policy

There is wide agreement to the following policy positions:

- because of the size of the NT population, distances between settlements and the population distribution, distance learning is an integral part of education services in the Northern Territory
- distance learning should be developed so that it can be accessed by adults as part of their lifelong learning rather than as just a service just for school age children.

While there have been high levels of support for NTOEC and distance education during the community discussions, distance education is not cited as the preferred model of delivery in most of the submissions received. While a few students have, either by choice or circumstances, taken all of their education services by distance mode, most submissions have argued the importance of face to face education. The desire for face to face learning is particularly strong in remote communities. Distance delivery is seen as the practical fallback in many settings.

7.3 Client Groups

The clients of distance education vary in what they need and expect from distance education providers. One size does not fit all in distance education. From the submissions we have identified four major groupings of clients/students. This group analysis is useful in understanding the wide range of responses we received from the community and the amount of public discussion the Report has generated on this topic.

Clients, including potential clients, for distance education can be grouped in the following way:

- isolated students
- urban and regional high school distance learners
- CEC, remote and homeland secondary students
- adult flexible learners.

7.3.1 Isolated students

This group consists primarily of those represented by organisations whose members are involved in isolated economic activities eg. living on pastoral properties. There is likely to be no teacher/trained educator support on location for the students, although a parent or an adult would normally take an active role as the education supervisor. We received submissions from numerous individual families as well as the industry and parent organisations that represent their interests. The submissions included those from ICPA and the Schools of the Air as well as parents in the Katherine and Alice Springs regions.

The features of this system of delivery are:

- the principal recipient of the service is the student
- students in this environment are in direct contact by distance mode with their teacher
- the distance teacher writes or sources the curriculum, provides it to the student by mail, radio or IDL and has regular direct contact with the student via telephone or email
- the student's work is assessed by the distance education provider.

Other socially isolated students have similar needs to the students identified above. They include, those who are travelling overseas or interstate for extended periods and need to keep their education going, those who have been incarcerated or those whose physical, social or mental health may require them to receive their education away from the conventional school environment. NTOEC has identified that this group comprises at least 124 students (as at August 2003).

These groups are huge supporters of NTOEC and the service it delivers. They are committed to political action to keep the school open.

7.3.2 Urban and regional high school distance learners (Dual enrolment)

No secondary school in the Northern Territory has sufficient critical mass to be able to provide all students with face to face teaching of all subjects that students wish to access. This is particularly true of NTCE Stages 1 & 2.

Every urban and regional high school has some students accessing the distance learning mode. The features of this system of delivery are:

- the students are in an environment where there is local teacher support but not available at the level required for a particular subject
- the principal recipient of the service is the student but a local teacher may also be a joint recipient
- the curriculum is sourced from a distance education provider
- assessment of the student is done in the same way as all other students undertaking this subject.

For this group, distance education has expanded the opportunities for these students to access more curriculum subjects. The curriculum and delivery are provided predominantly by NTOEC. In some cases, the curriculum is sourced from elsewhere, such as South Australia's Open Access College (OAC).

7.3.3 CEC, rural, remote and homeland secondary students

This group is mostly made up of Indigenous students for whom English is a second, third or foreign language. Submission after submission makes the point that distance education is inappropriate for this group. Face to face teaching is essential to success. The profile and needs of this group of students are unique, such as language and cultural issues, and distance education is not designed to accommodate these needs. However some distance education services will probably always be needed by this group. In Kalkaringi, distance education to this group of students was effective because there was support to students on the ground.

The features of this system of delivery are:

- the school populations are small to very small
- subject specialists will always be limited
- the local teachers are trained in some subject areas but not others
- there is a serious shortage of relevant and/or appropriate curriculum, although some schools are developing some excellent curriculum product
- there are some excellent pilots being undertaken to improve delivery.

Many submissions argued that there was a lack of responsiveness of NTOEC to this group. A few argued that responsiveness had improved over the last 18 months and particularly in the last 6 months.

Some individual teachers in this group were very pleased with NTOEC and argued strongly for its retention. They had developed excellent relations with NTOEC and saw the service as essential to their delivery. The availability of

specialist teachers and a variety of subjects make education more relevant to students.

Overall, the experience is very uneven.

7.3.4 Adult Flexible Learners

Many submissions identified the need for providing opportunities for ongoing and/or life long learning. Two groups in particular were mentioned:

- young Indigenous adults who had not attended high school but who in their late teens and twenties want an education
- urban early school leavers who wanted to get some skills and certificates but who are in part or full time work. Submissions argued that if we were to remodel systems of distance delivery then both these groups should be taken into account.

Some community members argued that there was plenty of evidence that the adults in work would be willing to pay. A local parent employed at the post office at Nhulunbuy said that parcels arrived every week from distance education providers from all over Australia.

This group of students is not recognised by NTOEC as a client group.

7.4 Client Group Expectations

One size does not fit all in terms of the expectations of the various client groupings. Through submissions, meetings and discussions in the community we have identified the priorities for the services that the different groups require from distance education.

Teachers from each of the current distance education providers argued that it takes a long time to develop a trusting relationship between student and distance delivery teacher and that this must be factored in to any decision on what improvements if any should be made.

The table overleaf summarises the expectations and delivery mode of the four key client groups.

Client Group	Relationship	Supervision	Requirements	Technology
Isolated students – include traditional pastoral community, prisoners, socially isolated, travellers	Distance Teacher – Student	Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum development • Teaching • Evaluation • Residential school 	Alice Springs School of the Air <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IDL • Print • Radio (replaced by IDL) Katherine School of the Air <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio • Print • Darwin – IDL NTOEC <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print • Broker based
Remote Communities	Distance Teacher; Teacher (local) - Student	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum product • May evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IDL • Print • Radio - satellite
Urban dual enrolments	Distance Teacher ↓ ↘ Local Teacher – Student	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum product • NTCE 1/2 • Evaluation – distance 	Less technology access - print
Adult Learners	Distance Teacher – Student	None (Student will pay in some cases)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum product • Tutorial classes • Evaluate 	Access to whatever technology is available

Support for and criticism of the current major provider, NTOEC, are embedded in these varying expectations of the different client groups.

7.5 Curriculum Development

Curriculum offered for distance learners is sourced from a range of providers around Australia. The following table has been compiled from the information we received in submissions from those who are offering or propose to offer curriculum product to other schools and communities.

The Schools of the Air are included as they have argued that if Year 7 is to go into secondary they will in effect become a secondary distance education provider. Both Katherine School of the Air and Alice Springs School of the Air have submitted that they should be a provider up to Year 9.

Curriculum provider	Write own curriculum products	Source curriculum from OAC	Source curriculum from NTOEC	Source from other states WA/Qld/NSW
NTOEC	Yes	Yes supplied to students after rebadging	Itself	??
Alice Springs School of the Air	Yes	No	No	Yes
Katherine School of the Air	Yes	??	??	Yes
CECs and other remote schools	Work commenced. See GAPU in curriculum section	Yes for a small number of students	Yes, but material needs to be reworked to be culturally relevant	Yes

It is clear from this summary that the providers are sourcing curriculum materials for distance provision from around the country. It is also clear from submissions that those teachers working in remote communities are exploring new pedagogies and approaches to curriculum and that they believe their product will form a part of future curriculum provision to Indigenous students. This is explored more fully in the previous chapter on The Community's Vision for Indigenous Education.

7.6 Modes of Delivery

The new and emerging technologies pose the biggest challenge and the greatest opportunity to review how distance education is delivered in the NT.

Each of the distance deliverers is now operating using one or more of mail, radio, telephony, internet and IDL. We also received a submission based on the use of satellite radio receivers which could be used in the most remote homeland communities.

7.6.1 Interactive Distance Learning (IDL)

The IDL mode is the subject of great enthusiasm among some providers as it allows the teacher to appear on the TV or computer monitor teaching the students. While the technology needs further enhancement before it is truly interactive, the experts submitted that this was not far away. IDL offers greater choice for families.

Alice Springs School of the Air offered and provided a demonstration of an IDL class in action as part of their submission to the consultation. Katherine School of the Air is equally enthusiastic, sufficient for them to travel to NTOEC in Darwin each week to use the studio there to run classes. Their submission includes a request for an IDL studio in Katherine.

The NTOEC submission has identified a number of opportunities that can be explored regarding IDL. They include examining different forms of distance education pedagogy for remote Indigenous students to include IDL in teacher-student contacts as well as comparing the effectiveness of delivering professional development through IDL for remote school teachers to face-to-face visits.

A submission and presentation from the Yirrkala CEC included a presentation of the use of video in developing curriculum and explored the possibility of employing this technology in other CECs and remote homeland communities to support IDL distance delivery.

7.6.2 Other modes

Satellite Radio

The use of satellite radio for language development was proposed by one of the submissions. The submission argues that the use of radio for the delivery of information, knowledge and messages over large geographical regions is well established. Compared to other media such as television, print or electronic media, radio can be produced at a fraction of the cost especially when translation into another language is involved. Radio also allows a cheap and easy way for consumers to access information.

Instead of trying to find ways of coercing Indigenous students into a classroom, radio can be used to take the classroom to them - where they live and in their own language.

Through providing information in language, adults within a particular cultural group may all become potential teachers; and the radio service creates a virtual classroom containing thousands of students within the overall cultural group.

It proposes using a computer based scheduler. Material may be played to air a number of times allowing for reinforcing and deeper learning. The radio material can also be web streamed, to allow schools, clinics and individuals to access the subject material developed in their language at their own convenience.

Using a bilingual approach where the radio content is said in English and then translated, spoken English can also be taught while delivering interesting information about health, economics, law and current affairs. People are able to gain a great deal of understanding about the subject in their own language and learn the key English words around that subject at the same time.

In another submission, we learnt that Katherine School of the Air has previously used radio as the primary form of communication with students but now favours the use of IDL.

Internet and telephone support

The Internet, email and telephony are used extensively by NTOEC to provide support to students, tutors, teachers and parents. However, they are not generally used to deliver the lessons, but rather as tools to supplement delivery.

As technology improves, it is likely that there will be more options on the different modes in delivering distance education. The problem remains for remote communities where there is no basic telecommunication infrastructure or, in some cases, electricity needed to support these modes.

7.7 Coordination and Management of Distance Learning

The submissions propose a range of options about who should co-ordinate and manage curriculum provision and delivery of distance education. Some argued that we move with the times and understand that as a result of the new technologies we should really be thinking about FLEXIBLE LEARNING, not just distance education. A number of submissions propose that NTOEC could provide the basis for an entity that could deliver flexible learning.

If that was to happen we need to consider the future of the two Schools of the Air. KSOA wants to increase its offerings to middle years to include Years 8 and 9, if the proposal of moving Year 7 into high school goes ahead.

In its submission, Alice Springs School of the Air (ASSOA) raises the possibility of it being able to take on a more active role in providing middle schooling for students. It would like to build links with other distance education providers and it also recognises the benefits in working with urban schools. Both KSOA and ASSOA see great opportunities to build on their foundation and expand their schools to offer middle schooling to students.

Most argue that DEET should retain the responsibility for managing Distance Learning with a brief to maximise its benefits as flexible learning for the widest range of students. A number were concerned that discussion of 'management' detracts the discussion from the more important issues of 'delivery' or 'provision' of education to students.

The community view is that distance education is:

- a school for some
- a curriculum service for use by schools where they do not have the staff with the necessary expertise to provide the appropriate curriculum

- a teacher support service where the teachers need appropriate levels of support to assist students who are using distance delivered curriculum.

Such a model assumes that there are:

- curriculum creators
- curriculum product developers
- delivery providers
- curriculum support services for generalist teachers
- accreditation and assessment services.

The government will need to establish who should undertake these services. Moreover, it will need to decide whether management of this entity remains in the Northern Territory. In this regard, the community has expressed strong support for it to remain an NT entity. The community is much less concerned about where the curriculum material comes from. Nevertheless, the curriculum should be relevant and of a high quality.

7.8 Recommendations

The following are recommendations in the Secondary Education Report that specifically pertain to distance education. A brief commentary has been provided for each recommendation to indicate the community's response to the recommendation.

Recommendation	Commentary
<p>15. to improve the quality and cost effectiveness of distance education for all students, NT DEET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revise the policy whereby the NT Open Education Centre (NTOEC) is the registered provider of secondary education in some remote communities, so that those communities with sufficient numbers of secondary students can become the provider and run a secondary program in the core learning areas of English, maths, science and SOSE, based on the later middle years schooling approaches outlined in Chapter 5 • establish regional pools of specialist subject teachers, use resources from NTOEC as appropriate to service a region or a precinct's remote secondary schools • consult with current stakeholders in distance education, and explore the feasibility of a joint venture with the SA Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), in order to develop a new model of open learning and distance education delivery in the NT that best meets the needs of secondary students • make appropriate transitional arrangements to allow for uninterrupted learning of current NTOEC students so that they are not adversely affected by the closure of NTOEC and the implementation of the new model in 2006 • work with NTOEC staff to identify options for their redeployment to the various precincts or the new Teaching and Learning Support Division. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is overwhelming support across the whole of the community for increasing face to face learning for remote Indigenous secondary students with trained teachers. In some remote communities there is strong support for the local school becoming the registered provider of education. • A number of submissions have raised concerns and objected to any changes to NTOEC. • Strong support was received for specialist teachers. • The proposal to investigate a joint venture with South Australia to develop a new model for open learning and distance education was rejected by most of the submissions. Joint venture

	<p>was perceived by the community as a form of 'outsourcing'.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The community believes that there is simply not enough time to put the new system in place by 2006. The government has acknowledged this. Depending on the actions that will be undertaken, the timeline in the Report will need to be revisited.• There are concerns about the effective management of any redeployment that may take place as a result of this recommendation.
<p>16. NT DEET move the teaching and learning support functions at the NT School of Languages (NTSOL) and the curriculum materials development functions at NTOEC to the new Teaching and Learning Support Division.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some support was received for this recommendation.

The reasons for the lack of support for the above recommendations are as follows:

- when the Report was first released, NTOEC supporters and clients focussed on the recommendation to close the NTOEC. This was seen by some, particularly isolated families, as the end of distance delivery in the Northern Territory
- it was also represented as a shift to South Australia of the entire Distance Delivery function. This generated great public outcry. Submissions have focussed on the contradiction in the Government, on the one hand proposing statehood, and on the other returning to the colonial mentality of getting things done, organised or managed by South Australia
- some NT students and ex students submitted that they had experience of lack of responsiveness of OAC
- the assertion that a joint venture with OAC will deliver better educational outcomes was untested
- NT perspectives will be lost if distance delivery is moved to South Australia.
- we will never be ready for any change by 2006.

Moreover, there has been an overwhelming response from the community who have had positive experiences with NTOEC. Comments commonly cited include:

- they appreciate the personal contact with teachers of NTOEC
- NTOEC's effective use of technology to deliver distance learning
- NTOEC's knowledge of the NT as being relevant to students in the Territory
- NTOEC is a RTO for the delivery of a number of VET subjects.

The above comments need to be counterbalanced by other evidence that:

- students who were opposed to studying under OAC are using curriculum materials developed by OAC but provided for them, badged and managed by NTOEC
- the lack of responsiveness of NTOEC and the need for improvements to a number of its services
- willingness of a number of students, parents, teaching professionals and schools to explore opportunities to partner with other states in delivering distance education to students in the NT. This was seen as an opportunity for the NT to look towards and develop a best practice model for distance education.

7.9 Community Ideas

Decrease possible demand for distance delivery by increasing face to face delivery to secondary students in remote communities

The community unequivocally supports the increase in face to face teaching for Indigenous students in remote communities.

While this would appear to reduce the number of students dependent on distance delivery, this may not necessarily be the case. A significant percentage of students in remote communities currently receive no secondary education at all. In addition, given the small numbers of teachers in these remote communities, it is highly likely that there will be subjects offered where the local teachers may not have the relevant expertise. If more students are engaged in the system, their face to face teachers will require significant support for subjects in which they have little or no expertise.

This may have the overall effect of increasing demand for distance delivery. DEET will need to establish what may change in the pattern of demand.

Shift from the notion of distance delivery as a “school” to a system that recognises the various client groups and what they either need and/or can contribute to distance delivery

The NTOEC submission proposes some actions which may contribute towards a solution for the way forward on delivering distance education to students in the NT and on catering for the needs of different client groups. NTOEC states that it is not resistant to change and claims that it was never given the official mandate to provide distance education to remote Indigenous communities. They have, however, provided distance education to remote Indigenous communities if they were requested by the local school or community.

In acknowledging the different clients' needs, the NTOEC suggests a thorough review of the current arrangements for delivering distance education. It sees a need to maintain the NTOEC or an equivalent institution in the Northern Territory as a centralised deliverer of distance education. However, it also seeks to formalise current arrangements with the South Australian OAC.

The notion of a school and a teacher - student relationship is only relevant to some of the client groups. It is essential to the isolated student client group and given the levels of satisfaction among that group with the NTOEC and/or the Schools of the Air service, that section of the community argues that NTOEC and/or the Schools of the Air should continue to provide that service.

Expand the opportunities to allow the Schools of the Air to offer the middle school curriculum

This would increase the number of distance providers of middle years curriculum at a time when the actual number of students may decrease through face to face provision in remote communities.

Parents of the Katherine School of the Air are overwhelmingly supportive of this idea. They believe that KSOA currently has good support for home tutors and students and argue that the services can be easily duplicated if adequate support is given. They believe that the school is well positioned to offer middle schooling.

Parents of Alice Springs School of the Air share similar sentiments about the potential for their school to offer middle years. The primary benefits for them are associated with having their children stay at home until they finish Year 9. ASSOA has also noted that they have the scope to offer middle schooling but it would require them sourcing relevant material for the students.

The NTOEC does not currently provide Year 7.

Building the NT's intellectual capital – Curriculum

Providers of distance education have been sourcing their curriculum material from all over the country. At the same time, some schools are developing exciting programs and material for their students that can be adapted and used in other schools. There is room to store the intellectual capital centrally. There are opportunities for the government to initiate a central knowledge bank and collect curriculum material. The

Department can play a more active role in providing assistance to distance education providers on relevant curriculum material.

New models of distance delivery in the Northern Territory

However, given the nature of the population distribution in the Northern Territory, distance education is likely to remain an essential feature of the Territory's secondary education system. Even though face to face learning is the preferred mode, the community expects that there is guaranteed provision of secondary education in all remote communities and acknowledges that the practical fallback is to provide this via distance delivery.

The Northern Territory community overwhelmingly supports the retention of a NT-based entity to manage and provide distance education. Local expertise and knowledge of the Territory were regarded as essential to the success of distance education in the NT.

While there is strong support for the NTOEC, the community is not resistant to making distance education better in the NT. In this sense, they see that the NTOEC can play a role in providing the foundation or basis for a new model of distance delivery.

Some submissions have suggested a merger between the NTOEC and the Katherine School of the Air to become a Transition-to-Year 12 distance education school. Proponents of this suggestion argue that this will provide better educational benefits through a comprehensive school arrangement and offer a more cost-effective solution.

The community is excited by the prospects that the Northern Territory can offer a world's best practice distance education

Distance learning could become an integral part of making sure that every remote community got access to the best teachers and pedagogy. Communities would be able to share the best of the curriculum developed in schools, including those from remote Indigenous communities. More resources could go towards developing culturally-sensitive curriculum materials which could be used in distance education.