

Submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee

This submission is being made by Open High School, a specialist languages secondary school providing languages programs to secondary students in NSW and the ACT by distance education.

Background

Please refer to the 2008 Annual School Report for Open High School .
The following comments are provided for the Inquiry.

The financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools.

Students in rural and regional areas enrolling as a single course student through Open High School often experience some difficulty in attending tutorial and study days etc that are organised at Open High School. These are an important component of the school's curriculum delivery and alternative learning experiences are organised for those students who cannot attend. The majority of students in rural and regional areas are unable to travel to Sydney as the travel and accommodation costs are prohibitive with many parents not able to take time off work. A small number of families do travel long distances to Sydney and incur travel and accommodation expenses. These costs are not reimbursed by the school. The school has a Student Assistance fund which is used to support families experiencing financial hardship with fees and textbooks. The use of the fund does not extend to subsidising travel and accommodation costs.

All non government students (rural or metropolitan) pay a single course fee of \$800 per course per year. This means the total cost for a typical 2 unit HSC language course over 2 years (Yr 11 and Yr 12) is \$1600. Distance education schools retain \$50 with the balance being remitted to NSW DET Finance Directorate. Recent estimates out of Tasmania for full cost recovery of a single course is approx \$6000 per student per course per year.

The educational alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas

Primary and secondary aged students in rural and regional areas enrolling in distance education for reasons of geographical isolation, medical and other circumstances are able to enrol as a full time or single course student in a distance education school in regional NSW. Distance education schools that provide secondary curriculum pathways are located at:

Camden Have

Dubbo

Ballina

Queanbeyan

Dubbo

Bourke

Sydney (Open High School and Sydney Distance Education High School)

Commencing 2007 NSW DET initiated its Connected Classrooms program to provide students in all public (metropolitan and rural / primary and secondary) schools with

greater access to curriculum and opportunities to collaborate with fellow students in other localities through the use of interactive whiteboards, video conferencing and use of collaboration software tools.

This initiative is expected to reduce existing reliance on the traditional distance education model which at times has been unable to provide the kind of collaborative tools that engage students in their learning more successfully. Distance education schools in NSW were included in the first stage rollout of the interactive technologies of the Connected Classrooms Program and have played a leading role in the development of related online learning management systems, video conferencing and other interactive technologies such as collaborative desktop sharing to support rural and regional students in their learning.

As part of a recent review of distance education in NSW the following areas for further inquiry/clarification in terms of languages provision (including students in rural areas) were identified by Open High School.

Which schools are unable to sustain an elective language program and who are currently accessing distance education schools.

Which schools or clusters of schools could offer what languages in a sustainable fashion over the next 5 years.

Specific organisational and logistical resourcing needs including administrative ie School Admin Support Staff (SASS) and local tech support to enable the languages learning programs to be established.

Anticipated or estimated potential numbers of students.

Immediate and longer term sustainable availability of languages teachers to support the program.

Availability of quality, accessible, engaging and well sequenced whole of course language learning materials to support the language learner.

Congruence between the technology platform of the connected Classrooms Program and newly emerging collaborative and interactive desktop technologies that enable real time video and audio streaming via IP telephony.

Longer term viability of Open High School to continue as a specialist languages distance education provider.

Other related matters

In the recent Federal Government program 'Building the Educational Revolution' a number of distance education schools in NSW and other states were advised that they were ineligible for funding because they did not comply with the enrolments guidelines as applied by DEEWR.

As a result the benefits anticipated through the BER Program for many students in rural and regional areas did not materialise.

A more flexible interpretation of distance education schools enrolments and full time student equivalent enrolments (FTEs) by DEEWR would have ensured a more equitable distribution of federal government funding through the inclusion of distance education

schools thus ensuring that they could enhance the significant educational benefits and value added they are already achieving in rural and regional communities.

Should you wish to clarify any of the above points I would be happy to provide the Inquiry with further information

Stephen Murray
Principal