

Review of Distance Education in NSW





Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people that contributed to the development of this report.

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Executive Summary

The NSW Department of Education (the department) provides distance education to more than 8,000 students, from preschool to Year 12. Distance education supports students who are geographically isolated, unable to attend school on a regular basis due to special circumstances or unable to access an appropriate curriculum at their local school.

From June 2024 to March 2025, the department conducted a comprehensive review of distance education. The review addressed the evolving educational landscape and increased demand for flexible learning options over the last 10 years. The review identified strengths, gaps and opportunities within the distance education system.

The review focused on equitable access, teaching and learning, student wellbeing, staffing and enablers, policy and technology. The review included consultations with distance education school leaders and key stakeholders, site visits, data analysis, a literature review and interjurisdictional analysis. This contributed to an analysis of the current system and identification of future policy directions that optimise equity, access and excellence in outcomes for students.

Equitable access

The current enrolment policies and procedures are complex, with multiple categories and criteria, creating barriers that hinder equitable access for students. While single course enrolments help students to meet curriculum requirements, annual quotas can limit course choices and availability. The review also noted a significant increase in non-government student access to single courses.

There are some effective practices and programs in place that support equity and excellence, particularly for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with disabilities and those in remote areas; however, access to quality education and resources remains inconsistent.

This review recommends that enrolment policies and procedures are simplified while maintaining specific enrolment categories. The review also recommends that enrolment processes be standardised, including aligning timeframes for government and non-government single course enrolment applications.

Teaching and learning practices, curriculum and outcomes

The review highlighted that evidence-informed practices in teaching and learning are found across the 11 distance education schools and Aurora College. This includes an evolution of modes of delivery from paper-and-post to the use of live lessons and eLearning platforms to enhance student learning. However, approaches differ significantly between schools, which have a high degree of autonomy in their modes of delivery. The review recommends that the department defines and supports consistent virtual education models that prioritise high-quality teaching.

Approaches also differ between schools in how student outcomes are monitored, with no system-level data (beyond the HSC) or reporting mechanism. The review recommends that robust data systems are implemented to monitor student outcomes.

The review found a wide range of curriculum offerings across distance education schools but with the capacity to expand access. It recommends that policies are updated to ensure equitable access to the NSW curriculum for all students, irrespective of their location or circumstances.

Student wellbeing, engagement and attendance

The review found there were various attendance monitoring methods across schools, impacting attendance data consistency. While distance education can improve attendance for some students, it also poses challenges related to self-regulation and parent/carer supervision. Improved and consistent monitoring mechanisms will further support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

students, students with disabilities and students in remote areas. Additionally, empowering parents and carers as active learning partners is crucial for student success.

The review recommends the department address defining and monitoring student attendance, and management and reporting of disengaged students.

Distance education schools use various in-person learning opportunities, such as field visits and learning hubs, to enhance student engagement. However operational procedures vary, including in relation to risk assessment and approaches to work, health and safety. The review recommends the department address work, health and safety implications during in-person engagement to ensure a safe environment.

Staffing

The review findings highlight an opportunity to enhance the attractiveness of distance education teaching as a career, given its potential to impact on diverse student needs through innovative methods. Teachers require specific skills for virtual learning, indicating a need for targeted recruitment and professional development. Addressing staffing challenges may require more flexible staffing models and collaboration with nearby schools to share resources. Overall, staff engagement levels are relatively high with most teachers feeling a sense of belonging and support. However, there is a desire for more focus on core responsibilities and reduced administrative tasks.

The review recommends the department works toward future staffing models that create accessible curriculum offerings, fostering a flexible virtual workforce focused on quality online education, prioritising staff wellbeing and the provision of tailored professional learning.

Enablers, policy and technology

The review found a strong desire from distance education schools and some stakeholders for central oversight and support. This could foster stronger collaboration and resource-sharing among distance education schools, which can enhance the quality of education. Central oversight would mean coordinated support for the unique challenges faced by distance education schools. For this reason, the review recommends that the department establish common strategic leadership for all distance education schools and Aurora College to improve oversight and support. It is also recommended that the department develop and implement a consultation plan to support the delivery of the recommendations.

The review found that central leadership could also support the development of high-quality online curriculum resources that could be shared across distance education schools and possibly beyond.

In relation to technology, the review found the diversity of online platforms used by schools creates challenges in data accuracy and consistency. The review makes a specific recommendation regarding the data processes and practices linked to the reporting of enrolments for funding purposes. More broadly, the review recommends the department should implement consistent learning management and student management systems across distance education schools.

Finally, the review found that current staffing and funding models do not reflect the complexities of the provision and require evaluation to better support students, particularly those requiring learning adjustments. The review recommends realignment of the current funding and delivery models, to deliver access to an equitable curriculum offering across NSW.

Recommendation 1:

The department should simplify and streamline distance education enrolment policies and procedures to enhance equitable access for all students.

Recommendation 2:

The department should standardise distance education enrolment process, including alignment of enrolment application timeframes from government and non-government schools.

Recommendation 3:

The department should implement data systems to:

- i) enable provision-wide and system-level data monitoring of student outcomes
- ii) ensure they are fit-for-purpose for distance education schools and improve data quality.

Recommendation 4:

The department should define and support provision-wide consistent, flexible virtual education models of delivery which focus on quality, evidence-informed online teaching and learning practices.

Recommendation 5:

The department should update policy to support equitable student access to courses in the NSW curriculum, regardless of where they live or their circumstances.

Recommendation 6:

The department should address the following distance education operational matters that support student wellbeing:

- i) defining and monitoring student attendance
- ii) management and reporting of disengaged students
- iii) work, health and safety implications for in-person delivery.

Recommendation 7:

The department should work towards future staffing models which enable:

- i) more accessible and equitable curriculum offerings for students across NSW
- ii) a flexible virtual education workforce focused on quality, evidence-informed online teaching and learning
- iii) an ongoing focus on staff wellbeing and distance education as a career pathway and
- iv) professional learning specific to the distance education environment.

Recommendation 8:

The department should:

- i) establish a function which brings together all 11 distance education schools and Aurora College under common leadership
- ii) develop a consultation plan for the implementation of recommendations from the review report.

Recommendation 9:

The department should leverage and support the development of online curriculum resources by distance education schools.

Recommendation 10:

The department should implement measures which address the challenges of reporting enrolments for funding purposes.

Recommendation 11:

The department should implement funding and delivery model options for distance education aligned with delivering access to an equitable curriculum offering across NSW.

Recommendation 12:

The department should implement consistent learning management and student management systems for use across the provision.

1. Introduction

On 29 May 2024, the NSW Department of Education (the department) announced a comprehensive review of distance education from June 2024 to March 2025. This report presents the review findings and identifies future opportunities. The department will use this report to ensure NSW is positioned to respond to the changing educational landscape and ensure all distance education students have access to the best practice modes of curriculum delivery.

1.1. Background

Context for the Review

The department last reviewed state-delivered distance education in NSW 16 years ago. The focus of the review was to identify the strengths, gaps, and opportunities to enhance education provision in NSW with a focus on access and equity.

How distance education works in NSW

The department's distance education schools are the largest providers of virtual and hybrid teaching and learning in NSW, providing education to more than 8,000 students from preschool to Year 12.¹ The provision is used by government, independent and Catholic schools in NSW.

Technology facilitates real-time and independent learning opportunities where students connect and engage with content, teachers and their peers online. Distance education schools offer full-time enrolment and single course enrolment.

Full-time distance education is available to students with circumstances preventing them from attending their local in-person school. Enrolment eligibility for full-time access to distance education is subject to specific criteria and is available, for example, to students who are geographically isolated; elite athletes and young performers with demanding schedules; travelling students; and students with health issues, including mental health, that prevent attendance at their local in-person school for a period of time. Students can also be enrolled temporarily while being supported with a planned transition to their local school, employment or further education and training. Distance education provides educational security for some of the state's most vulnerable students for whom in-person schooling is not suitable either in the short or long term.

The single-course provision is available to registered government, independent or Catholic schools. Those enrolled in a single course remain enrolled in their local school and are hosted by distance education schools for the single course/s only.

¹ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

NSW distance education schools

There are 11 distance education schools across NSW, and together they provide curriculum options from preschool-aged to Year 12. Within the 11, there is one school for specific purposes and one specialist language high school. Two schools include a preschool-aged provision. The distance education school students are affiliated with depends on their location as each school in NSW has a specific linked distance education school.



*Aurora College, a virtual selective school for years 5-12, is not classified as a distance education school.

The distance education schools that support primary enrolments only are Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education, North East Public School Distance Education, School of the Air (Broken Hill and Hay campuses) and Sydney Distance Education Primary School. Delivery methods range from a mix of online and offline learning experiences to fully paper-based delivery. Most of the primary distance education schools have increased the number of synchronous learning opportunities as technology has become more accessible.

Secondary distance education is accessed from 6 regionally distributed sites. Some schools teach Kindergarten to Year 12, including Dubbo School of Distance Education, Finigan School of Distance Education and Southern Cross School of Distance Education. Sydney Distance Education High School and Camden Haven High School teach Years 7 to 12. Camden Haven High School is a dual-mode school, with staff working across distance education and the in-person school. The schools collaborate to co-program and co-develop online courses and resources. Additionally, Sydney Distance Education High School supports juvenile justice centres (the only school to do so); and Dubbo School of Distance Education supports traveling show children. The secondary schools provide synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. The number and regularity of synchronous learning opportunities varies between the schools.

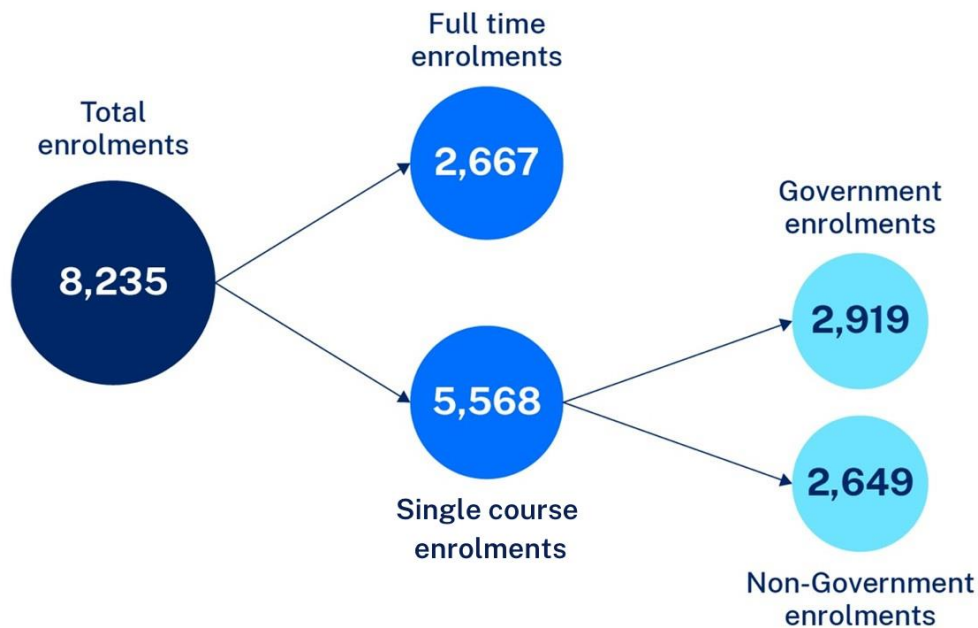
Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School (Distance Education Support Unit) is the only distance education school for specific purposes. The school operates from a dual-mode site in St. Ives, Sydney and supports students with a moderate to severe intellectual disability from across NSW. Student learning is increasingly supported synchronously with students using a broad range of strategies and specialist devices to communicate.

The NSW School of Languages operates as the largest single course school for languages, enrolling students from the Sydney metropolitan area and where a language is not available through a regional distance education school.

A Community Safety Net Pilot (2024) operated from Dubbo School of Distance Education and School of the Air Broken Hill, providing young preschool-aged learners in rural and remote areas access to quality educational experiences from home. These programs use technology to provide engaging and interactive learning opportunities that are tailored to the developmental needs of preschool-aged children.

In addition to 11 distance education schools, Aurora College is a virtual selective school catering to rural and remote students in Years 5 to 12. The school offers opportunity classes for Years 5 and 6, selective classes for Years 7 to 10 and a range of courses for Years 11 and 12 students. Aurora College is the only fully synchronous school.

Enrolments in Distance Education Schools*



*NSW Department of Education (unpublished) Term 2 2024, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024

1.2. Purpose

In line with Our Plan for NSW Public Education, the department conducted a review to determine how distance education can enhance access, equity and opportunity for students to the NSW curriculum. The review identifies strengths, gaps and opportunities in the provision of distance education schools in NSW and how distance education can be leveraged to meet the broad range of students' personal, circumstantial or curriculum needs.

1.3. Terms of Reference

The terms of reference are outlined below and specify that the review will consider and provide insights into:

- the way the department provides access to curriculum, teaching and learning through the 11 schools for distance education in NSW
- the provision of alternate hybrid and virtual models of teaching and learning across NSW, Australia and other jurisdictions
- how distance and other virtual provisions are effectively managed within systems existing policies and structures
- approaches to teaching and learning provision in line with best practice pedagogies of online and distance modes of learning
- technology and infrastructure considerations
- opportunities for future policy directions, programs and services that optimise equity and excellence in outcomes for students and ensure statewide consistency and focus.

1.4. Our Approach

To conduct a comprehensive review of distance education, the department considered the current state of the NSW distance education system and conducted an interjurisdictional analysis and literature review.

The review team consulted distance education school leaders, key education partners and non-government peak bodies. This provided valuable insights on the achievements, challenges and opportunities for distance education provision. Consultation was guided by the focus areas of the review: equity, teaching and learning, student wellbeing, staffing, technology and system/policy enablers and the future. The review team visited each distance education school during the review to enhance understanding of individual school contexts.

In addition, internal subject matter experts were consulted through a reference group and steering committee that was established to support the review. This group included department staff with extensive knowledge and experience in distance education, curriculum, educational policy, Aboriginal education, student wellbeing, disability and technology.



2. Equitable access to distance education

Distance education schools play a vital role in delivering equity and excellence. This aligns with the department's Our Plan for NSW Public Education to ensure every learner receives a high-quality education that enables them to excel. Students must meet the eligibility criteria for one of the enrolment categories to be considered for enrolment (see appendix 8.2).² However, students and families may find they are ineligible for distance education if they do not meet the eligibility criteria or supervision requirements.³

2.1. Findings

Distance education supports a range of student learning needs

Geographically isolated students

As at Term 2 2024, there were 281 geographically isolated students enrolled in distance education, representing approximately 11% of full-time enrolments.⁴ This has slightly reduced, by 1%, compared to the number of students enrolled in 2014.⁵ Distance education plays a crucial role in providing these students with access to education, regardless of their physical distance from in-person school settings. This helps to reduce the disadvantages they face in accessing quality educational opportunities. However, during site visits variations in the teaching and learning models and access to resources and technology were identified.

² NSW Department of Education *Distance Education Enrolment Procedures: Implementation document for Enrolment of Students in NSW Government Schools policy*, NSW Government, 11 November 2013 at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006-02>.

³ NSW Department of Education *Distance Education Enrolment Procedures: Implementation document for Enrolment of Students in NSW Government Schools policy*, NSW Government, 11 November 2013 at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006-02>.

⁴ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

⁵ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Historical enrolment data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

Case Study: Dubbo School of Distance Education Community Safety Net Pilot 2024

This program, in partnership with Dubbo School of Distance Education (Dubbo SDE), served small rural and remote communities without a preschool, providing 42 young children with access to a play-based learning environment at their future local public school. The public schools engaged with the pilot in 2024 were located in Broke, Carinda, Louth, Girilambone, Marra Creek, Quambone, Rowena and Wanaaring.

Each participating school employed a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO) who received tailored teaching programs and resources from Dubbo SDE's Early Childhood teachers. These programs focused on nurturing children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development, supported by a resource package of activity instructions and tactile materials.

Dubbo SDE also offered professional development for SLSOs and facilitated school-based workshops and live online sessions through Microsoft Teams for preschool-aged students. The program's operational days were set collaboratively by the school and SLSO, who organised activities and supported children during live lessons that included cooking, art, music, science, and literacy. This approach enriched learning and fostered connections among students across New South Wales.

In Term 1 2025, key enhancements have been made to the program, and from Term 2 the pilot will transition to the b4-Kindy Program and will combine mixed-grade activities, with breakout sessions specifically designed for children in the year before kindergarten. Whilst adjustments will be made to the program, its overarching goal of ensuring children living in small rural, remote and very remote communities with limited access to centre based early childhood education can participate in an early learning program will remain unchanged.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students

As at September 2024, there were 801 Aboriginal⁶ and/or Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in distance education.⁷ Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students make up 9.7% of total enrolments in NSW government schools, which is similar to a total of 10% of students enrolled in distance education.⁸ Distance education schools acknowledge the importance of supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to learn about, nurture and value their cultural identity, which supports their success as learners. The schools actively embed Aboriginal perspectives in their learning programs, courses and resources. To support rural and remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, targeted programs and initiatives have been designed and implemented across some distance education schools. These programs and initiatives leverage the strengths of Aboriginal culture and connection to help students achieve their learning potential.

Enrolment numbers for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students vary across distance education schools,⁹ which may be explained by various underlying factors. Some barriers for

⁶ Students are included in the reporting as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander if they or their parents/carers/kin provided this information on the school enrolment form. Throughout this report, the term 'Aboriginal' is inclusive of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

⁷ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Distance Education schools and Aurora College enrolment data (excluding Aurora College Young and Deadly Mob program) based on student headcount in 2024*, NSW Government, August 2024.

⁸ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Head count from 2024 Mid-Year Census enrolments for overall % of students*, Centre for Educational Statistics and Analysis, NSW Government, extracted in January 2025.

⁹ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Distance Education schools and Aurora College enrolment data (excluding Aurora College Young and Deadly Mob program) based on student headcount in 2024*, NSW Government, August 2024.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation arise from the design of distance education. The requirement for parent or carer supervision may represent a challenge for many Aboriginal families due to diverse living arrangements and care arrangements within some communities. There are also challenges associated with distance education schools establishing and sustaining relationships with distributed and diverse communities.

Students with disability and additional learning support needs

As at Term 2 2024, there were 1,326 students enrolled in distance education enrolment categories for students with additional learning and support needs or significant support needs.¹⁰ This represents a total of 50% of full-time students enrolled in distance education (increased from 39% enrolled in 2014).¹¹ As at Term 2 2024, 28 students were enrolled in the Distance Education Support Unit at Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School.¹²

There are full-time enrolment categories for students with additional or significant support needs. These include:

- Students with additional learning and support needs - requires a disability confirmation and all other department resources and supports must be exhausted before seeking enrolment in this category. This category is not subject to a limited period of enrolment.
- Transition for students with significant support needs - short-term provision (200 school day limit). All other department resources and support must be exhausted before seeking enrolment in this category. A managed transition strategy is required to facilitate a transition to their local school or other post school options in a shared time-limited enrolment.
- Distance Education Support Unit - for students with moderate to severe intellectual disability. This category is not subject to a limited period of enrolment.

Eligibility for these enrolment categories is through an access request and placement panel process. Placement panels are held twice a term and follow the department's standard operating procedures.

In addition to the above categories, many students who are enrolled in distance education for extraordinary circumstances may also present with additional learning and support needs.

Further to this, the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on students with disability recorded that 55% of full-time distance education students have a disability requiring learning adjustments compared to an average of 28.3% across all educational settings. 74% were identified within the Socio-emotional NCCD primary category.¹³

There has been growth in NCCD identified students with additional learning and support needs across all education settings from 18.7% in 2015 to 28.3% in 2024.¹⁴

¹⁰ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹¹ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Historical enrolment data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹² NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹³ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Distance Education NCCD Survey – Including Aurora and excluding NSW School of Languages*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹⁴ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *NCCD data*, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation NSW Department of Education, extracted in January 2025. Note the percentages are from a different source, hence may not be directly comparable.

A large proportion of full-time distance education enrolments gain access through a placement panel where the student's support needs and circumstances are considered. Once approved by the panel, enrolment can be delayed while home supervision requirements are confirmed.

The review identified growth in the number of students with a confirmed disability accessing distance education. In Semester 1 2024 there were 250 access requests for additional learning and support needs with a department approved disability confirmation.¹⁵

Additionally, there has been growth in the number of students with significant support needs accessing distance education with a transition plan to return to their local school or to post-school pathways. In Semester 1 2024 there were 376 access requests under the 'transition for students with significant support needs' enrolment category.¹⁶ Where a transition process is unsuccessful and distance education is the best option for a student and their family, the student is returned to the panel with a disability confirmation to extend their access to distance education by changing their enrolment category. This process creates additional administrative burden. There is no data available to determine the number of students who successfully transition back to the local school during the 200-day transition period. However, distance education schools reported that although transition support staff are available, many students with time-limited enrolments do not transition back to an in-person school setting.

There are examples of distance education schools that work with department services to support student success, including engaging with a dedicated learning support team, specialist programs, health and safety, student wellbeing and safety as well as other organisations. This highlights the complexity of the support distance education schools need to access and provide to address specific learning needs and ensure inclusive and equitable education for these students.

Other student cohorts enrolled in full-time distance education

There are additional student cohorts for which distance education delivers the curriculum and provides for. For the remaining full-time distance education enrolments categories, as at Term 2 2024 there were:¹⁷

- 279 students travelling within Australia
- 246 students enrolled under school for specific purpose or youth justice schools
- 140 students travelling overseas
- 102 students with a medical condition that prevents their attendance at a regular school or other local provision (short-term provision)
- 99 students in extraordinary circumstances
- 59 vocationally talented students
- 33 students registered with the National School for Travelling Show Children

¹⁵ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Number of Access Request applications for Distance Education 2.8 and Distance Education 2.9 for all priorities data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹⁶ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Number of Access Request applications for Distance Education 2.8 and Distance education 2.9 for all priorities data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹⁷ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

- 10 students where an enrolment direction has been made by the department's Secretary or delegate and
- 7 pregnant students or young parents.

Due to the diverse student base in distance education, there are a range of individualised methods of delivery and teaching practices to meet student needs and circumstances. Distance education provides these students with the flexibility and access they need to maintain their academic progress.

Complexity of enrolment policies and procedures impacts access

The department provides distance education to students living in NSW who are geographically isolated or unable to attend school on a regular basis due to their circumstances. In some instances, distance education is available to students where a course of choice is not available at their local school.

Distance education schools and other stakeholders told the review team the current enrolment policies and procedures for distance education are complex and restrictive, hindering or limiting access to the provision. There are 12 full-time enrolment categories, each with a different set of criteria and documentation requirements and some full-time enrolment categories are time-limited. Single course access is limited by quotas for both government and non-government students. Several schools and stakeholders raised the need for clarification of the enrolment categories and clear expectations for the census schools. Additionally, there is inconsistent application of the enrolment procedures across the 11 distance education schools.

This complexity makes the enrolment process difficult for students and parents to navigate. Families often find it difficult to understand their options and face delays due to documentation requirements, resulting in missed opportunities for quality, flexible education.

Improved flexible learning options through distance education, and communication of the options available in government schools, may impact the volume of home schooling and non-government enrolments.

Single course enrolments enable curriculum access

As at Term 2 2024, more than 5,500 students were enrolled in a distance education single course.¹⁸ Single course and curriculum access provisions enable students to meet the mandatory curriculum requirements of both the department and NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) in Stages 5 and 6. For a student to be enrolled, the distance education principal must be satisfied the student's needs cannot be met by their local school¹⁹ or setting, or by accessing other local resources. Single course enrolment is managed directly between the local school and the distance education school, not by the parent/carer, and requires the local school principal's sign-off that the student has the capacity to learn independently.²⁰

¹⁸ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

¹⁹ NSW Department of Education *Distance Education Enrolment Procedures: Implementation document for Enrolment of Students in NSW Government Schools policy*, NSW Government, 4 March 2024 at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006-02>.

²⁰ NSW Department of Education *Distance Education Enrolment Procedures: Implementation document for Enrolment of Students in NSW Government Schools policy*, NSW Government, 4 March 2024 at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006-02>.

Single course applications are subject to an annual quota based on the size of the local school. Some courses may also have limited capacity due to the availability of staffing expertise in the distance education schools.²¹ This quota limitation may impact student curriculum choice for students seeking single-course enrolment. At the same time, growth in single course enrolments has the potential to limit the breadth of curriculum choice for full-time students. One secondary distance education school has needed to limit its single course curriculum options to prioritise full-time students. The review found there is some desire to lift the quotas but active demand management would be critical.

Growth in non-government school single course access

As at Term 2 2024, 48% of single course enrolments were non-government students, increasing from 29% in 2005.²² Consultation with non-government peak bodies highlighted that allowing non-government students to enrol in single courses ensures all NSW students can access a broad curriculum they might otherwise miss due to small cohort sizes.

Typically, non-government enrolment applications are lodged before government school enrolments. This occurs as department enrolment reporting timelines occur at the start of Term 1 and there may be a preference to retain enrolments within the local school. This sequence has implications for government students' access and potentially affects distance education schools' capacity to accommodate them for high-demand and specialised courses.

Distance education schools and education partners noted the current fee structure for non-government access does not reflect the true cost of providing these services.

The review found that individual distance education schools determine the proportion of non-government single course fees retained for administrative and resourcing costs, leading to an inconsistency of the amount retained across schools.

Effective practice and programs support equity and excellence

It is crucial for distance education schools to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment that meets the diverse needs of students. This includes Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and additional learning needs and students living in geographically isolated regional and remote areas. The review identified various programs and initiatives that reflect a commitment to equity and excellence in distance education, such as learning models tailored to individual needs, adaptive and interactive online learning, access to specialist support staff and robust support systems designed to address specific challenges faced by priority cohorts. Examples within individual schools include a middle school program, to help students in Stages 4 and 5 to build confidence and capacity across core subjects, and an opportunity class for rural and remote Aboriginal students. Some distance education schools maintain collaborative partnerships with families and communities, but access to quality education, resources and opportunities that meet the needs of every learner remains inconsistent.

²¹ NSW Department of Education *Distance Education Enrolment Procedures: Implementation document for Enrolment of Students in NSW Government Schools policy*, NSW Government, 4 March 2024 at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2002-0006-02>.

²² NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Term 2 2024 Census Data*, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

Case Study: Transition to Fully Online Delivery – Sir Eric Woodward Distance Education Support Unit

Sir Eric Woodward School is a School for Specific Purposes that supports students from Kindergarten to Year 12 with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, enrolling students from across NSW through the Distance Education Support Unit (DESU) panel managed by Rural and Distance Education within the department.

In 2023, DESU initiated a gradual transition to fully online learning, ensuring robust support for students, families, and staff. Parents were surveyed to assess technology needs, and training was provided for everyone involved. An online learning platform was created to host educational resources for families.

Class groups meet online twice a week, with additional live lessons in cooking, music, reading, library activities and a social club. Alternative communication technologies like eye gaze technology (for users with limited muscular use) and visual response boards are utilised to enhance interactions and promote independence. Teachers gather formative data during these lessons to inform individualised learning programs, leading to increased cognitive, expressive, receptive and social skill interactions.

Students engage in personalised learning through the online platform, where they can access resources and work skills tasks at their convenience. Parents and tutors manage the submission of work, including videos and daily reflections to track progress. Since the shift to online delivery, student connection and engagement have notably improved.

2.2. Areas of opportunity

Streamline complex enrolment policies and procedures

The review highlighted the current enrolment processes and procedures can inadvertently create barriers to access, impacting equity and inclusivity for all students. To promote a more inclusive education environment, it is recommended the policies and procedures are simplified and streamlined. Although full-time distance education should remain only available to the specific enrolment categories, simplifying the procedures and policies will make it easier for students and families to navigate and enrol.

Standardise single course enrolment processes and timeframes

The review identified inconsistent closing dates for single course enrolments between the distance education schools. To improve access to single course distance education, it is recommended that enrolment timeframes for government and non-government students in single course provision are aligned.

Non-government schools generally submit their single course enrolments prior to the end of the school year for the following year. Government schools submit their single course enrolments after the commencement of the school year.

The department should identify and address the current system obstacles and perceptions delaying or discouraging NSW public school access to the single course distance education provision. There is an opportunity to broaden curriculum opportunities. This could be addressed through promotion of the provision, quota adjustments or by limiting impact on local school staffing entitlements. However, the resourcing implications of any scalability will need to be considered.

Recommendation 1:

The department should simplify and streamline distance education enrolment policies and procedures to enhance equitable access for all students.

Recommendation 2:

The department should standardise distance education enrolment process, including alignment of enrolment application timeframes from government and non-government schools.

3. Teaching and Learning practices, curriculum and outcomes across distance education

Distance education schools provide flexible teaching and learning experiences to cater to diverse student needs. This is underpinned by the department's Our Plan for NSW Public Education which includes the following goals: to ensure every student achieves ambitious learning goals each year; for all children to have the best start in life; and for every student to finish school ready to succeed in their chosen pathway as an informed, responsible citizen. The combination of evidence-informed hybrid and virtual teaching and learning practices with co-developed high-quality resources, enable students to thrive in their educational journeys.

3.1. Findings

Evidence-informed teaching practices are integrated into programming and curriculum design

Distance education schools embed common elements of pedagogical frameworks and practices, including explicit teaching and trauma-informed education, to create comprehensive and supportive learning environments for students. These frameworks and practices enhance curriculum design by ensuring teaching and learning is structured, goal-oriented, flexible and responsive to individual student needs. The department supports these evidence-informed practices through state-wide resources and professional learning. The review considered how these practices apply in distance education schools with varying modes of delivery.

Wider range of curriculum offerings across distance education schools but also opportunities to expand access

There are over 150 syllabuses offered for Stage 6 and about 30 syllabuses for Stage 5 by NESA.²³ Stage 5 and Stage 6 courses from NESA syllabuses are offered by distance education schools with varying cohort sizes across each school. A total of 116 Stage 6 courses are offered across all schools,²⁴ and of those, 29 are offered at all schools.²⁵ The courses with the greatest number of enrolments include English Standard, English Studies, Legal Studies and Spanish Beginners.²⁶ There are 23 Life Skills courses offered across secondary schools, and 9 Vocational Education and Training courses. The breadth of courses reflects the diverse needs of distance education students, from those requiring significant support to those that are self-directed learners.

²³ Syllabuses A–Z (Stage 6); All syllabuses taught in Stage 5 © NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) for and on behalf of the Crown in right of the State of New South Wales, 2024.

²⁴ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools with respect to their offerings at a point in time in February 2024*, NSW Government, August 2024.

²⁵ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools with respect to their offerings at a point in time in February 2024*, NSW Government, August 2024.

²⁶ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools with respect to their offerings at a point in time in February 2024*, NSW Government, August 2024.

A total of 42 Stage 5 NESA-developed and content-endorsed courses are offered across the distance education schools. Food Technology, Visual Arts and Languages are the non-mandatory courses with the greatest number of enrolments.²⁷

Distance education schools use flexible pedagogy

The role, skill set, and practice of the distance education teacher has shifted significantly over the past decade because of improvements with technology, capability, connectivity and access. Notably, internet speeds have improved along with the capacity of video conferencing software.

Distance education teachers offer a range of group and individual synchronous ‘live lessons’ for students. This has enabled teachers to develop rich co-learning experiences and improved connection with and between students. Feedback for learning is provided in real-time, improving the continuity of learning. Several distance education schools reported that live lesson opportunities have improved student engagement and outcomes.

eLearning platforms have also improved with a gradual uptake across the distance education provision. These platforms provide students with highly structured learning experiences that are interactive but still enable students to work at their own pace and at a time suited to them. This mode of delivery allows media-rich and adaptive delivery of curriculum. The courses include opportunities to collaborate with peers. Learning ‘scaffolding’ is accessible when required and accessibility features such as screen readers are embedded. Video content allows students to access teacher instruction at any time. While the core learning activities occur online, there are opportunities for students to complete tasks offline before uploading their work to a learning management system. The platforms provide rich data and oversight of student learning, allowing teachers to be responsive and to provide individualised support at point of need.

Both live lessons and eLearning are designed using consistent evidence-informed pedagogical models to build the capacity of the student as an empowered, self-aware and active learner. As distance education has evolved from the ‘paper and post’ correspondence model and moved increasingly online, teaching has become more connected and immediate. Significant skill development has been required of distance education teachers in relation to technology and effective online communication.

Schools have autonomy in determining modes of delivery

Distance education schools use various delivery modes, including paper-based resources, online resources, synchronous learning and asynchronous (self-paced) learning, with the ability to determine the mode that best suits their school setting and student cohorts.

As students progress through their education, there is a noticeable increase in asynchronous learning, resulting in a more consistent delivery mode across secondary education schools.²⁸ This trend may reflect students’ increasing independence and the demand for flexible learning options that cater to their individual needs and circumstances.

²⁷ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools with respect to their offerings at a point in time* in February 2024, NSW Government, August 2024.

²⁸ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

Additionally, secondary schools have a strong preference for online delivery, which is offered by all schools.²⁹ In contrast, primary schools have a wider variety of delivery methods, ranging from fully paper-based resources to fully online resources or a combination of both.³⁰ This shift towards online delivery reflects increased digital literacy and ability to use technology among older students and the desire for more interactive learning. Some schools have transitioned from paper-based resources to online platforms, reporting significant improvements in student engagement, connection, turnaround time and the quality of learning and feedback provided.

Case Study: Transition to Microsoft Teams for Live Lessons – School of the Air Broken Hill and Hay

The School of the Air (SoTA) has been a leader in distance education since its founding in Broken Hill in 1956, originally using radio for communication. With advancements in technology, SoTA transitioned to Microsoft Teams for lessons, enabling more students to connect simultaneously.

Collaboration with the department's Information Technology directorate ensured a smooth transition for students, staff, and families. Microsoft Teams has transformed teaching practices alongside the new curriculum, allowing real-time monitoring of student comprehension and increasing engagement through simultaneous camera use and interactive activities. Students can share responses publicly or privately, fostering immediate feedback and a more dynamic assessment process, which helps identify those needing support early on.

In 2024, data from InitialLit and Maths was used to target students for focused teaching across small groups. Microsoft Teams has enhanced flexibility for Stage 3 teachers, who now conduct online maths lessons four days a week, relying less on printed materials. Additionally, Kindergarten to Year 6 lessons can be delivered simultaneously, allowing for daily explicit instruction.

The InitialLit literacy program is now taught through live lessons for Kindergarten to Year 2, overcoming previous technological constraints. The number of lesson studios has increased from 2 to 6, and the school emphasises a blend of online and offline activities.

The new format fosters connections among students and teachers, which is crucial for those in geographically isolated areas. Technology is bridging gaps and helping students feel a sense of belonging within their school community.

Limited insights into student outcomes across distance education schools

Higher School Certificate (HSC) performance for students across distance education, particularly in the top 3 band rate, is comparable to performance across the rest of NSW. However, the smaller numbers of participating students across distance education schools in NAPLAN assessments and Phonics Screen Check poses a challenge when aggregating student outcomes.³¹ The small number of participating students in these assessments means that estimates of performance are

²⁹ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024. Note that 6 out of 7 high schools have 80% or more online resources.

³⁰ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

³¹ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Phonics, HSC and NAPLAN for Distance Education schools data*, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

prone to greater uncertainty than broader system-level estimates, and so it is difficult to draw conclusions about outcomes for these students relative to the system as a whole.

Distance education schools individually monitor student engagement and outcomes using various methods, however, there is no system-level reporting mechanism in place. All schools provide an A-E report to parents twice yearly, in accordance with the NESA Assessment and Reporting Guidelines³² and *Australian Education Regulations 2023*³³ requirements. Some schools also opt to provide progress reports or access to an online parent portal for continuous reporting.

Supporting students to explore post-school pathways

The NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey from 2021-2023 indicates that students in distance education schools are entering employment at a similar rate (26%) to other state government students. However, the rate of entry into apprenticeships/traineeships is lower for distance education students (12%) than for other government students (21%).

A smaller proportion of full-time distance education students (30%) are enrolling in further education than the state average (42%). Overall, a higher proportion of distance education students (32%) are unemployed and not engaged with education or training post-school compared to the state average (12%).³⁴ Some schools provide career counselling for their students. There may be potential to explore options to enhance post-school pathway options by increasing support through additional career counselling sessions, work experience programs, and partnerships with local businesses for apprenticeships.

3.2. Areas of opportunity

System level data to monitor student outcomes

The review highlights the absence of a robust system level data framework for distance education schools, which impacts the ability to effectively monitor and assess student outcomes collectively across these settings. Various methods are used by distance education schools to track student engagement and performance, leading to inconsistencies in data quality and reliability between schools. This variability makes it challenging to derive meaningful system-level insights into student outcomes.

Consistent, quality, evidence-informed learning provision

Aligning evidence-informed practice, resources and delivery across the provision will ensure all students have a high-quality learning experience, regardless of their location or circumstances. Coordinated curriculum resource design, creation and access provides an opportunity to rationalise resources while maintaining quality. There is an opportunity to explore expanding the syllabus

³² Reporting and Using Grades © NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) for and on behalf of the Crown in right of the State of New South Wales, 2025, accessed 27 February 2025
<https://curriculum.nsw.edu.au/assessment-and-reporting/reporting-and-using-grades#common-grade-scale-years-1-to-10>

³³ Australian Government (2024) *Australian Education Regulations 2023*, accessed 27 February 2025
<https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2023L01020/latest/text>

³⁴ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *2021- 2023 time series Post Schools Destinations Data*, Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024. Note: Population estimates and percentages presented are weighted for non-response. Population estimates with fewer than 5 observations contributing to them have been suppressed.

offerings through distance education, thereby extending the curriculum opportunities for all students in all schools.

Recommendation 3:

The department should implement data systems to:

- i) enable provision-wide and system-level data monitoring of student outcomes**
- ii) ensure they are fit-for-purpose for distance education schools and improve data quality.**

Recommendation 4:

The department should define and support provision-wide consistent, flexible virtual education models of delivery which focus on quality, evidence-informed online teaching and learning practices

Recommendation 5:

The department should update policy to support equitable student access to courses in the NSW curriculum, regardless of where they live or their circumstances.

4. Student wellbeing, engagement and attendance

Providing a supportive learning environment promotes overall student success and fosters a sense of belonging. As part of the department's Our Plan for NSW Public Education goal to ensure every student is known, valued and cared for, distance education schools are striving to achieve this. A further focus on monitoring student engagement and attendance, and initiatives to support priority cohorts are key to achieving this goal across the schools.

4.1. Findings

Student engagement opportunities to promote belonging and connection

In-person learning opportunities support students to feel a sense of belonging and connection with their distance education school, build relationships and enhance their overall educational experience. Eight schools offer face-to-face opportunities 4 times a year, and 11 schools provide 2 or more opportunities throughout the year.³⁵

Field visit practices vary across distance education schools and have been found to support some students to feel a sense of belonging and connection to their school. Ten schools offer field visits,³⁶ which includes a teacher traveling to provide in-person support to a student at their home or within their local community. School-level guidelines are used to determine when and how they are conducted.

Learning hubs provide another way distance education schools support student engagement, providing students with the opportunity to receive in-person small group support with their learning. The availability of learning hubs varies, with 5 schools offering them, and they are more commonly in place for distance education high schools, especially in regional areas. However, the procedures for the operation and resourcing of learning hubs are inconsistent between schools.

³⁵, ³⁶ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024. Note that a field visit is when one or more teachers travel to provide in-person support to a student and/or their supervisor at their home or in their local community.

Case Study: Student Induction Course – Finigan School of Distance Education

Finigan School of Distance Education collaborated with Open Access College in Adelaide to create an induction course for students transitioning to distance education. This one-week course introduces new full-time students to live lesson protocols and various online learning activities, helping them become familiar with the school's learning frameworks, trauma-informed practices and how to effectively engage with eLearning materials.

The course emphasises self-organisation, providing templates and support to enhance student success. Students complete a literacy and numeracy assessment during the transition, generating baseline data for teachers. The induction teacher gathers vital information to inform necessary adjustments and communicates this back to class teachers.

Previously, students started the curriculum unprepared, often causing confusion and time pressures as teachers individually explained how to learn online. The induction course has significantly reduced administrative burdens on teachers, allowing them to focus on teaching. As a result, students now begin their curriculum fully prepared. A student evaluation survey revealed that 78% found the course materials "very effective" or "extremely effective," while 76% felt they understood the eLearning content well.

The course has evolved to meet diverse student needs, with specialised programs for travelling students, Stage 6 students, and those in a School for Specific Purposes. The induction teacher provides follow-up support for the first four weeks to ensure timely identification of students needing early intervention.

The success of this program has inspired similar initiatives at Dubbo School of Distance Education and Sydney Distance Education High School.

Various mechanisms are in place to monitor attendance

Distance education schools monitor student attendance in various ways, including tracking engagement with learning activities, conducting student reviews and maintaining regular contact between students, teachers and supervisors.³⁷ Each school is responsible for maintaining a register of interactions between the student and teacher and use this to assess satisfactory attendance. There is no consistent approach to defining 'attendance' in the distance education context and the monitoring of it between schools. A variety of methods and systems are used by the distance education schools. This makes it challenging to gain a comprehensive understanding of student participation across distance education schools.

In secondary schools, a range of mechanisms are used to monitor attendance, including the completion of course work (learning tasks) and attendance at live lessons. Although the formal monitoring of work return rates showed increasing improvements for higher years across the schools,³⁸ the reliability of this data is affected due to inconsistencies in data-recording policies and practices.

During consultation, some schools reported that students' participation (attendance) rates in distance education improved compared to a student's previous in-person school. These schools reported that they are able to support students with a history of chronic non-attendance and

³⁷ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

³⁸ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

provide a viable alternative for continued learning in an environment with tailored support. The literature on remote education provision also revealed that while distance education is often used to maintain participation for at-risk students, it also presents specific engagement challenges due to the higher requirements for student self-regulation and parental supervision.³⁹

The review heard that it can be complex to provide wellbeing support for students with shared enrolments between the local school and a distance education school. There are roles for both schools to play and there is a requirement for ongoing collaboration, communication and a focus on the student's needs to create a supportive education environment.

Support for priority cohort students

Research indicates that for priority cohorts enrolled in distance education, the provision of additional support resources can be beneficial in ensuring at-risk students remain engaged with their studies.⁴⁰ At the same time, distance education can present unique opportunities to personalise learning plans and reduce barriers to participation by using technology to provide required accessibility adjustments.⁴¹

Some schools have specific programs and initiatives to enhance the learning experience for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, developed in conjunction with a local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. The programs aim to improve engagement and retention, facilitate transitions back to in-person schooling or post-school opportunities, build strong community and cultural partnerships, and create a culturally safe space for in-person visits. Support for the students can be strengthened through closer links with Aboriginal support services.

Through consultation, it was identified that the support and understanding of distance education provision and enrolment criteria from the local 'Team Around a School'⁴² is inconsistent across distance education schools. This can impact on the school's ability to adequately support student wellbeing and provide access to services. Improved collaboration and understanding of the distance education context can have a positive impact on the support students receive from this provision.

Distance education schools strive to support the wellbeing of students with additional learning needs by co-developing individual learning plans. These are based on student and family need, individual or small group tuition, learning adjustments in accordance with NCCD requirements and personalised learning pathways for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. Many of the schools have an engagement team to provide additional support for identified students. A range of

³⁹ See Radcliffe C (2023) 'The urbanization of distance education in Australia', *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 24(1):43-54. , and Borup J, Graham CR, West RE, Archambault L and Spring KJ (2020) 'Academic Communities of Engagement: an expansive lens for examining support structures in blended and online learning' *Education Technology Research Development* Vol. 68:807-832
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2016.1232157>

⁴⁰ Mills M and McGregor G (2016) 'Engaging students in engaging schools: Lessons from Queensland's alternative education sector,' *Youth Affairs Network Australia Queensland*.
<https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:690400>

⁴¹ AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) (2024) 'Evaluating the evidence for educational technology: Part 2 – enabling learning', *Spotlight*, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/evaluating-the-evidence-for-educational-technology-part-2-enabling-learning>.

⁴² The Team Around a School works in partnership with principals and schools to provide support for students in the areas of learning and wellbeing, disability and inclusion, mental health, behaviour, attendance, Aboriginal student support and transition. There are 28 'Team Around a School' teams in NSW.

wellbeing programs and targeted initiatives are required, considering over 50% of distance education students have additional learning needs.

Growing need to empower parents and carers as learning partners

Research indicates that parents and carers play a crucial role in ensuring that distance education students remain engaged in their learning, particularly for younger children, and that parent involvement in student learning is positively associated with student outcomes.⁴³ Parent and or carer supervision for distance education students is pivotal for their participation and successful engagement with the learning opportunities provided. There is regular and ongoing communication with parents and or supervisors.

Distance education schools offer student and parent inductions to assist in clarifying roles. A small number of schools have parent groups to provide opportunities for parents to connect and network. During consultations, it was found there is a growing need for increased support and resources to help parents and carers navigate their responsibility effectively. Areas requiring increased support and resources include managing technology, balancing responsibilities, fostering a community among parents and understanding educational content.

4.2. Areas of opportunity

Consistent approach to monitoring student attendance

Establishing a clear and consistent definition and understanding of student attendance is essential to accurately assess student engagement across distance education schools. The review highlights the importance of effectively monitoring attendance to support priority cohorts, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability and geographically isolated students, who may face unique challenges in their educational journey that impact their level of engagement. A standardised approach will not only facilitate better visibility of participation but also enhance the ability to identify and support at-risk students and cater to students cultural and individual needs.

By implementing comprehensive monitoring mechanisms, schools can gain valuable insights into student engagement, allowing for targeted interventions that promote educational success and reduce disengagement. A consistent, integrated student management system across the provision will improve the quality of system level data and oversight.

Consistent approach to management and reporting of disengaged students

A coherent strategy for the management and reporting of disengaged students is essential, particularly in addressing the challenges faced by priority cohort students in distance education. The review highlights that inconsistencies in understanding and accessing support services can hinder the ability to effectively support student wellbeing. This presents an opportunity to implement improvements that leverage support services, community partnerships and cultural

⁴³ See Downes N, Roberts P and Barbour M (2020) 'Defying distance, ameliorating access: School education for remote Australian students', *Education in the North: The Journal of Scottish Education*, 27(20): 248-255, Curtis H and Werth L (2015) 'Fostering Student Success and Engagement in a K-12 Online School', *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 1(2):163-190, Ricker G, Belenky D and Koziarski M (2021) 'Are parents logged in? The importance of parent involvement in K-12 online learning,' *Journal of Online Learning Research*, 7(2):185-201

resources to manage disengaged students and create an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

A focused approach to reporting is essential to accurately monitor disengaged students and those who may be at risk of disengagement. Consistent reporting processes, and improved integration with department systems, will provide valuable data to monitor student progress, identify trends and implement timely interventions.

Strengthened approach to health and safety considerations for in-person delivery

While there are a variety of in-person engagement opportunities, field visits and learning hubs occurring across distance education schools, prioritising the safety and well-being of students and staff during in-person delivery is vital, particularly for students who may need additional support.

There is a need for a consistent approach to: risk assessment procedures, supervision and staff-to-student ratios during in person delivery, health considerations for students with health and medical needs, students' cultural safety needs, transport safety needs, staff training and monitoring and feedback on in-person engagements.

Developing consistent guidelines that address the unique needs of students and work health and safety requirements for staff, will not only ensure the welfare of students and staff but also enrich educational experiences.

Recommendation 6:

The department should address the following distance education operational matters that support student wellbeing:

- i) defining and monitoring student attendance**
- ii) management and reporting of disengaged students**
- iii) work, health and safety implications for in-person delivery.**

5. Staffing distance education

Distance education schools are staffed according to the department's staffing procedures⁴⁴. Aurora College is currently staffed outside of the department's staffing procedures as an atypical school. Each school has faced staffing challenges similar to those faced by other schools across NSW. The department is committed to ensuring that our distance education teachers and staff feel valued, included and supported, enabling them to perform at their best, as part of commitments made under Our Plan for NSW Public Education.

⁴⁴ See appendix 8.3 for individual workforce data from the 11 distance education schools' and Aurora college Annual School Reports 2023.

5.1. Findings

Potential to strengthen the role of distance education teaching as an attractive career choice for those with the right skills

There is an opportunity to design and promote virtual teaching as a career option, recognising its potential to have an impact on a broad range of students, deliver innovative teaching methods and support diverse student needs. However, misperceptions about the nature of distance education can impact on its perceived value as a career path and the necessary skills for success.

Consultation with distance education schools and literature review findings highlighted that teachers require different skills for virtual learning settings, which vary from in-person teaching.⁴⁵ This may have implications for targeted recruitment and professional learning initiatives to help equip teachers with the essential skills for delivering high-quality education in virtual learning environments.

Staffing challenges could be addressed through enhanced staffing models and collaboration

The review heard that distance education may be able to address current staffing challenges faced by many schools and alleviate related pressures, from teacher and resource constraints, by enabling staff to work more flexibly regardless of location.

In addition, the need for stronger collaboration with nearby schools and staff was identified. By fostering partnerships among nearby schools, resources, expertise and support systems can be shared, resulting in enhanced educational offerings for all students.

One distance education school is part of the department's priority recruitment program, which aims to address staffing shortages and attract highly qualified educators. Recognising the unique needs of distance education, there is a desire from distance education schools for targeted recruitment strategies to attract teachers with specialised skills relevant to online teaching and learning settings.

Distance education staff have relatively strong levels of engagement

When compared to all public schools, staff perceptions of wellbeing are more favourable in distance education schools while staff engagement levels are slightly lower. All distance education schools participated in the People Matter Employee Survey 2023, achieving an average response rate of approximately 41%, exceeding the overall public schools' rate of 32%.⁴⁶ The employee

⁴⁵ See Grammens M, Voet M, Vanderlinde R, Declercq L and Wever BD (2022) 'A systematic review of teacher roles and competences for teaching synchronously online through videoconferencing technology', *Education Research Review*, 37, Ames K, Harris LR, Dargusch J and Bloomfield C (2021) "'So you can make it fast or make it up": K-12 teachers' perspectives on technology's affordances and constraints when supporting distance education learning', *Australian Educational Researcher*, 48(2):359-376, Rehn N, Maor D and McConney A (2018) 'The specific skills required of teachers who deliver K-12 distance education courses by synchronous videoconference: Implications for training and professional development', *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 27(4):417-429.

⁴⁶ NSW Department of Education (2023) *NSW People Matter Employee Survey (PMES) staff wellbeing - Distance Education 2023*, NSW Department of Education, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024. Note: Data of all the schools that had 10 or more respondents. Any respondents from schools with less than

engagement score for distance education schools increased from 60 in 2022 to 63 in 2023, reflecting a three-point improvement. However, this remained one point below the overall public schools score of 64.⁴⁷ While engagement levels among distance education staff have improved, they remain slightly lower than those of public school staff overall. The wellbeing topic score in 2023 for distance education schools was 45%, which was 5 percentage points higher than all public schools in NSW (40%).

In 2023, 6 distance education schools participated in the Tell Them From Me Teacher Survey, with a total of 382 teachers responding to the survey.⁴⁸ This data was considered to further understand staff engagement and wellbeing, however due to the low response rates, insights may not be an accurate representation. From the responses gathered, there was a desire for more time to focus on core responsibilities, with 50% indicating this need and 57% preferring less administrative work.⁴⁹ This trend aligns with challenges faced by teachers across NSW. Despite these results, 81% of teachers reported feeling a sense of belonging at their school and 74% felt supported in their roles.⁵⁰

5.2. Areas of opportunity

Staffing strategies for further exploration

Advancements in technology, improved access and the shift to online learning present an opportunity to enhance teaching efficacy and student outcomes through a broader staffing strategy, that includes all distance education schools and Aurora College. The department should establish a new career pathway, targeting teachers seeking flexibility, who are equipped with the specialist skills required for effective online teaching and learning. This has implications for teacher training partnerships, recruitment, professional learning and staffing models.

The department should work toward extending the range of courses offered through distance education, supporting in-person schools to address specialist staffing challenges and broaden student curriculum choice. However, it would be necessary to consider updated staffing models to deliver this effectively.

By implementing these reforms the department can look to improve staff engagement and retention, leading to a more equitable and effective educational experience for all students.

10 were unable to be retrieved due to privacy thresholds. PMES team (People, Culture and Capability), NSW Department of Education.

⁴⁷ NSW Department of Education (2023) *NSW People Matter Employee Survey (PMES) staff wellbeing - Distance Education 2023*, NSW Department of Education, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

⁴⁸ NSW Department of Education (2023) *Tell Them From Me student, teacher and parent data*, Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Department of Education, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024. Note: Teachers from 6 Distance Education schools (382) participated in TTFM in 2023. The information is obtained from the TTFM respondents only.

⁴⁹ NSW Department of Education (2023) *Tell Them From Me student, teacher and parent data*, Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Department of Education, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

⁵⁰ NSW Department of Education (2023) *Tell Them From Me student, teacher and parent data*, Centre for Educational Statistics and Evaluation, NSW Department of Education, NSW Government, extracted in August 2024.

Recommendation 7:

The department should work towards future staffing models which enable:

- i) more accessible and equitable curriculum offerings for students across NSW**
- ii) a flexible virtual education workforce focused on quality, evidence-informed online teaching and learning**
- iii) an ongoing focus on staff wellbeing and distance education as a career pathway and**
- iv) professional learning specific to the distance education environment.**

6. Enablers, Policy and Technology to deliver distance education

Distance education schools rely on infrastructure, policies and technology to deliver high-quality education that is accessible and equitable for all students. The department's goal under Our Plan for NSW Public Education is to provide support services that are efficient, effective and easy to access. This emphasises the need for streamlined services for students, teachers and families to access the necessary resources, including the accessibility and flexibility of learning materials, technological support and professional learning for staff.

6.1. Findings

Education can be enhanced through collaboration and resource-sharing among schools

Distance education schools are collaboratively developing high quality resources to support teachers to be present with students, build relationships and adapt learning to meet student needs. Since 2023, a dedicated team established by the distance education schools has been creating interactive online resources aligned with the new curriculum for Kindergarten to Year 12 syllabuses, receiving positive feedback from some schools on the benefits. Education partners also recognise the importance of high-quality, evidence-informed resources that offer flexibility. There is a strong desire for continued funding of the course-writing project, enabling continued central development of collaborative resources for the new curriculum. Implementing formal structures could improve collaboration between distance education schools and could be extended to other schools across NSW.

While resources are shared across schools, individual schools and teachers can tailor these to address specific school and student needs and at times choose to develop their own resources. Some schools also adjust their lesson programming a few weeks in advance to align with student progress, ensuring high quality flexible learning experiences that benefit students.

Sharing learning spaces and resources among nearby schools fosters collaboration and enriches the educational experience for students. During consultation, one distance education school shared their positive experience with partnering with a school to share resources. This approach enables schools to pool resources, providing students with access to high-quality materials and experiences that align with learning objectives and support academic growth. This also encourages the sharing of ideas and best practices among teachers, leading to innovative teaching strategies and improved student outcomes.

Additionally, collaboration allows teachers to share insights and strategies, enhancing their collective expertise and improving overall quality of teaching.

Case Study: Curriculum Reform Writing Project

Distance education has long provided flexible learning options, enabling students and families to study from anywhere at their convenience. Traditionally reliant on paper-based materials, the shift to online learning has enhanced connectivity through real-time experiences, creating more interactive and immersive eLearning environments.

In response to the reform of the NSW Curriculum, and advancements in technology, distance education schools in NSW are collaborating to streamline resource coordination. The Distance Education Curriculum Reform Writing Project aims to centralise curriculum delivery by developing master courses for all new K-12 syllabuses. In 2024, the project completed 25 courses, with plans to reach a total of 46 by the end of 2025.

Course design is based on established learning theories and incorporates Universal Design for Learning principles to ensure accessibility for all students. This initiative has reduced teacher workloads, promoted collaboration among schools and ensured consistent course formats while allowing for customisation to meet individual student needs.

The improved course design has led to increased student engagement and satisfaction, enhancing learning outcomes. The interactive courses provide valuable data for teachers to tailor their instruction and identify additional support needs.

By centralising course development, the project significantly reduces duplication of effort and costs, allowing educators to focus more on teaching and enhancing instructional quality, ultimately boosting student engagement.

A need to address equity in students' access to technology

A recurring theme heard throughout consultations was the significant equity challenges relating to student access to technology. Specific issues raised included access to specific software to support learning needs, lack of devices available for preschool-aged students to undertake their learning activities and lack of internet access leading to preference for physical resources by some parents. Some schools provide a laptop with the department-provided software and internet filtering installed. One issue raised by geographically isolated families was the department-provided desktop devices do not have Wi-Fi capability, presenting connectivity and mobility issues within the home.

These disparities hinder some students' ability to fully engage in their learning experiences, since access to reliable internet and required hardware is essential for achieving educational outcomes in distance education.⁵¹ Addressing technology barriers will enable schools to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments.

⁵¹ See AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) (2024) 'Evaluating the evidence for educational technology: Part 2 – enabling learning', Spotlight, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership accessed 27 February 2025. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/evaluating-the-evidence-for-educational-technology-part-2-enabling-learning>

More consistent use of online platforms and systems could improve data accuracy

A wide range of online platforms, including Maths Pathway, Stile, Essential Assessment and ClickView, are used across distance education schools, each designed to serve specific educational purposes. While this diversity of platforms provides valuable resources and tools for teachers, it also presents challenges as students and teachers need to move between various systems.

There are inconsistencies in the use of the Canvas learning management system, with the system used across 7 distance education schools.⁵² Canvas has several built-in learning adjustment features, as well as the capacity to provide teachers with courses that they can adjust to meet their needs. Various barriers impact the use of Canvas, including technological challenges, inadequate support and limited professional learning opportunities for teachers. However, positive feedback was shared by schools during consultations on the transformational change that the introduction of Canvas has had for schools.

The student management system used varies across the provision, with 5 distance education schools using the Distance Education Management System.⁵³ Some distance education schools indicated during consultation that this system does not meet their needs. In some cases, it is not fit for purpose for a school's particular context, leading to data accuracy issues. This highlights the need for a more effective provision-wide system and the consistent use of the system across schools to ensure accuracy of data collected. Improved system visibility of enrolments including non-government enrolments in single courses is required to understand enrolment trends allowing for more effective resourcing.

Positive feedback on the recent uplift of technology was shared during consultation by some distance education schools. Distance education schools also shared the need for the department to embed technology upgrades and training when developing processes and policies. This would alleviate challenges schools face related to outdated systems and lack of training, enabling teachers to deliver high-quality education experiences and access the resources and support needed to perform their jobs effectively.

Marshalling specialist expertise helps build an effective virtual learning environment

To effectively support distance education teachers, bespoke professional learning programs and collaborative practices are essential for skill development. Tailored training equips teachers with the specific competencies needed to navigate various digital tools and platforms, enhancing their ability to deliver engaging online instruction. A small number of distance education schools raised in consultations that there is a need for technology support to address equity gaps in rural and remote areas.

Additionally, expertise is required when developing high-quality, effective digital resources tailored for virtual learning settings. This is important to allow for the creation of consistent, effective and flexible materials that engage students and adequately support their learning needs.

⁵² NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

⁵³ NSW Department of Education (unpublished) *Self-reported data from distance education schools at a point in time*, NSW Government, July 2024.

Stakeholders support more central oversight and support for distance education schools

There is a strong desire from distance education schools and some stakeholders for increased departmental oversight and support for distance education schools. This would foster a cohesive understanding within the department of the unique challenges and opportunities for these schools and ensure that distance education provision is recognised, valued and supported. Distance education schools shared experiences of the need for greater understanding by the department's education support staff of their unique contexts and the diverse needs of their students.

Distance education school funding model needs to evolve to reflect current modes of delivery and diversity of students

The review found that distance education schools have a unique staffing and funding model which has not been updated by the department since 2000. The funding model was developed as a calculation of teacher time per student and according to the NESA indicative course hours. The time per student was previously used to design and allocate paper-based learning materials and provide written or phone-based feedback. Since that time, the provision has evolved due to increased connectivity and online delivery, with digital resources and real-time learning opportunities using video conferencing technology. The current staffing model does not reflect the increased complexity of the role and diversity of enrolments. For example, 54% of full-time distance education enrolments require some level of learning adjustments and individualised support. Under the current model the same proportional time allocation is provided for single course students that may not require learning adjustments.

Students with a disability enrolling in an in-person public school may be entitled to a place in a support unit based on their factor of need⁵⁴ and available positions. If a student is deemed eligible for a support unit placement but there is no place available, they can apply for integration funding support while they are in mainstream classes waiting for a position. Support units have a lower teacher/student ratio as well as a Student Learning Support Officer to meet the complexity of student needs. Distance education has an increasing number of enrolments with a disability that would be eligible for support unit placement. However, there is no differentiation of the staffing allocation based on student need and complexity in distance education. Additionally, distance education schools do not have an allocation for Student Learning Support Officers. This discrepancy needs to be reviewed to ensure the learning needs of all students are adequately supported.

6.2. Areas of opportunity

Bring together schools under common leadership

It is recommended the department establish common leadership for all distance education schools and Aurora College to increase oversight and direction. This approach will enhance leadership and support, fostering an understanding of the unique challenges and operations of distance education schools and Aurora College. The department should determine the most suitable approach for implementing common leadership.

⁵⁴ NSW Department of Education and Communities (2014) *Specialist support classes in regular and special schools*, accessed 27 February 2025. <https://schoolsequella.det.nsw.edu.au/file/3180627a-c80c-44e4-8378-8e2c4222395/1/Specialist-support-classes.pdf>

Support online curriculum resource development

The development of online curriculum resources by the distance education schools has shown positive results. The department should leverage and support this resource development to enhance educational outcomes across distance education schools. By utilising the proposed common leadership, an oversight mechanism can be established that ensures students benefit from high-quality, evidence-informed materials that support flexible and engaging virtual learning experiences. There is potential for these resources to be accessed more broadly to support teachers beyond distance education.

Reporting of enrolments for funding purposes

As the department seeks to enhance the effectiveness and equitable provision of distance education, there needs to be a greater focus on precise reporting of enrolments for funding purposes. The review identified inconsistent data practices and reporting processes, complicating accurate enrolment assessments. Addressing these issues will ensure that enrolment reporting is efficient and transparent and that accurate enrolments are recorded for funding purposes.

Funding and delivery models for distance education

The department should reform the current funding and delivery models for distance education. The nature of distance education has evolved since current funding models were established. Any new approach should support the delivery of a curriculum that ensures equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their geographic location or circumstances.

Consistent learning management and student management systems

The review highlighted inconsistencies in learning management and student management systems across distance education schools. It is recommended the department implement standardised systems to streamline processes, enhance data accuracy and improve reporting. A consistent system would enhance the user experience for the schools and students, while increasing the efficiency of distance education.

Recommendation 8:

The department should:

- i) establish a function which brings together all 11 distance education schools and Aurora College under common leadership**
- ii) develop a consultation plan for the implementation of recommendations from the review report.**

Recommendation 9:

The department should leverage and support the development of online curriculum resources by distance education schools.

Recommendation 10:

The department should implement measures which address the challenges of reporting enrolments for funding purposes.

Recommendation 11:

The department should implement funding and delivery model options for distance education aligned with delivering access to an equitable curriculum offering across NSW.

Recommendation 12:

The department should implement consistent learning management and student management systems for use across the provision.

7. Next steps

The review recommends operational and policy changes to improve distance education across NSW and achieve equity and excellence goals within Our Plan for NSW Public Education. The recommendations build on existing strengths of distance education while addressing necessary improvements to policies, strategies and models to enhance the provision.

The department has begun work which supports the implementation of recommendations, including establishing the Rural, Regional, Remote and Unique Settings directorate in February 2025, as the common leadership function to support distance education schools and Aurora College. This directorate will lead the implementation of the recommendations within this review.

Significant changes are recommended that require detailed planning and consultation with distance education schools, education partners and non-government peak bodies. The Rural, Regional, Remote and Unique Settings directorate will develop a consultation plan to implement the recommendations.

By implementing these recommendations, the department will improve access, equity and opportunity for all students to the curriculum and respond to the changing educational landscape.

8. Appendix

8.1. Consultations

Over 23 consultation sessions were held with distance education schools, education partners and non-government peak bodies from August 2024 to February 2025, either online or in person at relevant offices or schools. All distance education schools and Aurora College were visited during the review to further understand individual school settings.

Consulted Stakeholders	
Aboriginal Education Consultative Group	NSW Primary Principals' Association
Association of Independent Schools NSW	NSW School of Languages
Aurora College	NSW Secondary Principals' Council
Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education	NSW Teachers Federation
Camden Haven High School	Public Service Association
Catholic Schools NSW	School of the Air Broken Hill and Hay
Dubbo School of Distance Education	Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School
Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW	Special Education Principals' and Leaders' Association of NSW
Finigan School of Distance Education	Southern Cross School of Distance Education
Isolated Children's and Parents' Association	Sydney Distance Education High School
North East Public School of Distance Education	Sydney Distance Education Primary School

Internal subject matter experts were also consulted as part of the review. This included Directors Education Leadership, Public Schools Executive Directors and other executive across the department.

8.2. Student enrolment categories

Distance education enrolment categories are outlined below and more information can be found at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/familiarisation/enrolment/distance-education>

Category 2: Full-time enrolment in distance education

Full time enrolment in distance education is available to students who are isolated or whose special circumstances prevent them from attending a school or another appropriate local provision. Students must meet the criteria for one of the below enrolment categories:

- 2.1 Enrolment of preschool students in distance education
- 2.2 Students who are geographically isolated
- 2.3 Students intending to travel within Australia
- 2.4 Students intending to travel or temporarily reside overseas
- 2.5 Students with a medical condition that prevents regular attendance at their local school: Short-term provision of minimum 50 days and must not exceed 400 school days
- 2.6 Pregnant students and/or young parents without appropriate local provision
- 2.7 Vocationally talented students employed in the entertainment industry and students participating at elite levels in the performing arts or sport
- 2.8 Students with additional learning and support needs

2.9 Students with significant support needs: Short-term provision where period of enrolment should be planned to be completed within 200 school days

2.10 Students in extraordinary circumstances

2.11 Students registered with the National School for Travelling Show Children

2.12 Students where an enrolment direction has been made by the NSW Department of Education Secretary or delegate

Category 3: Single subject provision

Single subject provision is available to registered schools that cannot provide the necessary breadth and flexibility of curriculum and where a local solution such as a connected classroom with another local school is not available.

Category 4: Curriculum access provision for special education settings

Special education settings such as schools for specific purposes and schools located in youth justice centres, may request curriculum access provision by distance education school if the setting is unable to provide curriculum access for students in a key learning area at an appropriate stage level through other means.

Category 5: Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School Distance Education Support Unit

The Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School of Distance Education Support Unit provides a specialised distance education mode of delivery of education for geographically isolated students with a confirmed moderate to severe intellectual disability.

8.3. Distance education school workforce

Table 1: Workforce Composition Full Time Equivalent - Distance Education Schools and Aurora College 2023

School	Principal	Deputy Principals	Assistant Principals	Head Teachers	Classroom Teachers	Learning and Support Teachers	Teacher Librarian	School Counsellors ****	School Administration and Support Staff	Other Positions
Aurora College*	1	1		1	0	0.4	1		1	1
Bourke-Walgett School of Distance Education	1		2		4.62	0.1	0.17		1.43	
Camden Haven High School**	1	3		21	117.8	3	1	2	25.79	1
Dubbo School of Distance Education	1	1	2	15	53.24	0.4	0.4		17.94	
Finigan School of Distance Education	1	1	2	13	75.37	1.2	0.2	2	19.15	
North East Public School of Distance Education	1	1	2		12.9	0.3	0.8		5.42	
NSW School of Languages	1	1		12	71.5	0.4		1	13.3	
School of the Air Broken Hill and Hay	1	1	2		12.65	0.1	0.28		5.07	
Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School***	1	1	4.2		16.38		0.2		9.21	
Southern Cross School of Distance Education	1	1	2	20	100.97	0.9	0.17		19.49	
Sydney Distance Education High School	1	2		25	123.6	1.4		1	23.33	
Sydney Distance Education Primary School	1	1	2		18.84	0.2	0.6		6.62	

Source: Annual School Reports 2023

Notes:

*Aurora College is subject to an alternative staffing model. Teachers at Aurora College work on part-time temporary contracts while maintaining a teaching position in an in-person school.

** Camden Haven High School is a dual mode site with staff teaching in the distance education school and in-person school.

*** Sir Eric Woodward Memorial School is a school for specific purposes with a different student to staff ratio. The school is also a dual mode site with staff teaching in the distance education support unit and in-person school.

**** School counsellor allocations may reflect a counsellor's base school rather than a school's entitlement

8.4. Distance education across jurisdictions

Apart from the ACT, all Australian states and territories conduct some form of distance education. Jurisdictions are split between those with largely centralised provision (Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania), some operating multiple campuses or with curriculum supplementation programs, and those jurisdictions with multiple geographically dispersed providers (NSW, Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia). Distance education is provided in the ACT via a partnership agreement with the NSW Finigan School of Distance Education. The Northern Territory's Alice Springs School of the Air enrolls some students from remote Western Australia and South Australia.

In addition to distance education provided as an equity provision, several jurisdictions extend curriculum access via specialist distance education, through either specialist schools (the NSW School of Languages, the Victorian School of Languages) or programs (QLD Virtual STEM Academy, Tasmania's Gifted Online program, Victoria's High Ability program).

The eligibility criteria for accessing distance education are relatively consistent between jurisdictions, with most systems limiting enrolment to students who are geographically isolated, unable to attend in-person school for medical reasons, raising infants, participating in elite sporting events/significant sporting commitments, or travelling with parents and/or carers for an extended period. This excludes Queensland, which does not limit enrolment to these groups, but does prescribe fees for students who do not meet a similar set of criteria.

NSW has the largest number of public schools providing distance education in Australia. The number of non-government distance education providers varies widely by jurisdiction, with fewer than two registered in most states and territories but multiple providers (including both hybrid onsite/DE and DE only schools) in both NSW and Queensland.

8.5. Literature Review

The department conducted a literature review of distance education. The published report is available at https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/strategies-and-reports/nsw-distance-education-review/NSW_Distance_Education_Review_Literature_Report.pdf.

8.6. Glossary

Term	Definition
Access	The ability to reach, utilise, or acquire information, resources, or services to provide equitable education.
Accessibility	Providing equal access to information, resources and experiences for all individuals, with consideration for those with disabilities, to ensure fair opportunities for learning and success.
Adaptive technologies	Digital tools offering personalised and responsive experiences tailored to individual users.
Asynchronous learning	Learning that occurs flexibly, allowing students to engage with materials at their own pace outside real-time learning activities.
Census school	School in which the student is enrolled. Most students are enrolled in their local public school. The distance education school is the host school.

Term	Definition
Curriculum	A plan for learning based on mandated and approved syllabus documents and current departmental policies and procedures.
Digital	Information or content in electronic form accessed and communicated through digital devices.
Digital device	Electronic equipment, generally connected to the Internet, which provides the ability to input, manipulate, create, communicate, store and display data.
Digital literacy	The knowledge and skills required to navigate, create, communicate, investigate data, and collaborate effectively using digital technologies.
Digital technologies	Tools and systems that use digital devices and the Internet to create, store, manage, and share information, supporting teaching and learning.
Distance Education	An education provision that facilitates flexible learning for students unable to attend or access curriculum through an in-person school due to their circumstances.
Distance Education enrolment category	NSW students need to meet specific criteria in order to access distance education as outlined in the NSW Distance Education Enrolment Procedures.
eLearning	Education delivered through digital devices, offering interactive content and self-paced learning experiences.
Equity	Ensuring fairness and inclusion in education by ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of personal or social factors, to reach their educational potential.
Explicit teaching	A set of principles that inform a range of dynamic and responsive teaching strategies. It involves teachers clearly explaining, demonstrating and modelling to students to facilitate learning effectively.
Face-to-face	Interactions or activities that can take place either in-person, online or a combination of both, giving flexibility for learning in various situations.
Field visit	A visit by a teacher/s to provide in-person support to a student at their home or in a local community space.
Flexible learning	Teacher-directed options where students may choose when and where they learn, adjusting pace, content, and assessment to suit their needs.
Hybrid education	Teaching and learning that can occur in-person or online, occurring independently and not simultaneously.
Inclusive education	Ensuring all students can fully participate in learning, supported by tailored teaching strategies.
In-person learning	An opportunity for instructional learning in a physical classroom setting.
Learning hub	A space in a local community that allows distance education students to access in-person support with their learning.
Learning Management System (LMS)	A digital platform used to organise and deliver course content, host communication between course participants, and track student progress in online learning.

Term	Definition
Live lesson	A face-to-face synchronous learning activity using video conferencing technology and may include the use of real-time collaborative tools.
Mode of delivery	The format used to deliver instruction and facilitate learning (i.e. blended, virtual, in-person).
Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD)	The NCCD is an annual collection of information about Australian school students with disability. Data about the type of disability (physical, cognitive, sensory, socio-emotional) and the level of adjustment (supported within quality differentiated teaching practice, supplementary, substantial, extensive) is collected for each student with a disability.
Online	Activities or services that are conducted or accessed via the internet, typically through a connected device (i.e. computer, tablet).
Online learning	Students using online and digital resources to access learning and interact with teachers and peers.
Online teaching and learning	The delivery of instruction and educational content through digital platforms, enabling real-time interaction between teachers and students in a virtual environment.
Personalised learning	Customising learning experiences to meet individual student needs and goals.
Platform	A digital environment that enables communication, information sharing, and collaboration among users, facilitating interactive learning experiences.
Real-time	Live teaching that is being received by the students instantly, either in-person or online.
Responsive	Being attentive, sensitive, and adaptable to students' needs, fostering a supportive environment.
Return rate	A measure of engagement/attendance based on the expected return of weekly asynchronous learning tasks used by distance education schools.
Self-paced learning	Students engage with asynchronous course content independently, progressing at their own speed.
Single course enrolment	A student accessing the distance education provision for one or more courses that cannot be provided by their government or non-government school.
Student Management System (SMS)	A digital platform for school administration designed to manage enrolments, track student progress, communication, reporting, wellbeing and support.

Term	Definition
Supervisor	The designated adult in the home (parent/carer) for full-time students or in the enrolled in-person school (teacher) for single course students.
Synchronous learning	Real-time interactions between students and teachers typically through a video conferencing platform.
Transition	The planned and supported movement of a student from distance education to an in-person school or post-school pathway.
Video conferencing	A technology that enables real-time communication between participants in different locations using video and audio over the internet.
Virtual	Experiences happening through digital or online environments.
Virtual classroom	Online space for real-time student, teacher or peer interactions.
Virtual learning	Utilising digital tools to replicate, enable or enhance learning experiences, typically encountered in physical classrooms.
Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	A dynamic international framework to guide the design of learning environments and experiences that are accessible, inclusive, equitable, and challenging for every learner. udlguidelines.cast.org