

# **THE INEQUITY OF THE COMMONWEALTH'S UNDERFUNDING OF NON-GOVERNMENT DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING**

**A Submission presented to the  
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations  
Committee  
Teaching and learning - maximising our investment in  
Australian schools**

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## Abstract

This submission demonstrates that non-government distance education (NGDE) students are among the lowest and most inadequately funded school students in Australia. This minimalist funding investment, prescribed in Commonwealth legislation, effectively minimises the number of staff and educational resources available to NGDE schools and their students.

The submission then addresses the Senate Committee's terms of reference by highlighting:

- that this minimalist investment policy negatively impacts the effectiveness of current NGDE pedagogical practices in assisting NGDE students to realise their potential;
- the limitations that the policy places on the adequacy of the tools available for NGDE teachers to create and maintain an optimal NGDE learning environment and
- that this funding policy adversely impacts the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in schools providing NGDE.

The submission highlights that there are no current efforts to redress this blatant, chronic problem of gross, educational underfunding. It concludes with a suggested two-fold strategy to remediate this Commonwealth funding problem, in both the short-term and long-term time frames.

## Executive Summary

### **1. ADDRESSING THE TITLE OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE'S ENQUIRY: TEACHING AND LEARNING – MAXIMISING OUR INVESTMENT IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS (pp. 3 - 11)**

Non-government distance education (NGDE) students receive THE LOWEST POSSIBLE investment from the Commonwealth's recurrent funding scheme. *NGDE is bona fide education, yet these students are allocated only 23% of the funding others receive*. This funding level is locked into legislation and thus far has been non-negotiable. This funding policy lacks equity when compared to the rest of Australia's school students. NGDE schools MUST maximise an unfair, MINIMALIST, Commonwealth investment.

### **2. RELEVANT TERMS OF REFERENCE (pp. 11 – 15)**

#### **2.2. TERM OF REFERENCE (a): The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools (pp. 11 -12)**

This funding policy precludes NGDE students from having appropriate numbers of teachers. Conversely, NGDE teachers have to work with exorbitant staff-to-student ratios, which are unheard of in the rest of Australian schooling. Limited access to teachers and educational resources adversely impact the effectiveness of the pedagogical practices of NGDE teachers and their students.

Such a policy telegraphs the discordant message that NGDE students do not need teachers and that this legislatively targeted cohort of students should be denied the educational opportunities common to the rest of Australia's school students.

#### **2.3. TERM OF REFERENCE (d): The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment (pp. 12 – 14)**

Distance education not only requires resourcing common to traditional on-campus schooling, it also requires resourcing specific to the delivery of education at-distance. Distance education requires specific curriculum development and course delivery tools. Opportunities to create and maintain these distance education-specific tools are, at best, being limited to NGDE teachers, or at worst, are being denied to them. Adequate Commonwealth funding would provide tools to deliver NGDE at optimal levels.

#### **2.4. TERM OF REFERENCE (e): Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system (pp. 14 – 15)**

The inadequate funding of NGDE also negatively impacts the whole teaching culture of schools that provide NGDE. Principals of these schools have limited capacity to attract high quality teachers, to reward high calibre teaching and to shape the allocation of experienced teachers across and within their schools. Professional development and opportunities for career progression are limited. Finally, teacher training must be done in-house, imposing further financial burdens on minimalist NGDE school budgets.

### **3. FAILURES TO REDRESS THIS EDUCATIONAL INJUSTICE (pp. 15 – 17)**

3.1. The Gonski Review has not mentioned NGDE and the necessities to redress inadequate funding.

3.2. The Minister is not convinced that NGDE is underfunded.

I have explored several avenues of appeal regarding NGDE underfunding in our liberal democracy, with no success. I seek this committee's empathy and assistance in addressing the underfunding of Australia's least resourced cohort of school students.

### **4. PROPOSAL TO REDRESS THIS INEQUITY IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL FUNDING (pp. 17 – 18)**

1. An immediate, short-term equity funding solution
2. A long-term, research-based funding solution

## **1. ADDRESSING the Title of the Senate Committee’s Enquiry “Teaching and learning – maximising the investment...”**

Before addressing the terms of reference, relevant to the committee, I would like to address the wording in the committee’s enquiry title. In particular I would highlight the words “maximising the investment”. This submission indicates that, in the case of non-government distance education (NGDE), the Australian government has minimised its investment, making NGDE students around Australia, the lowest funded and thus most poorly resourced students and schools in Australian schooling. This is a gross injustice to NGDE students, their schools and broader communities, and is the central feature of this submission. Thus, in order to exist, NGDE schools MUST maximise the Commonwealth’s minimalist investment.

### **1.1 Background**

Distance education for school-aged students has been well established in Australia’s various government school jurisdictions, for nearly a century (Evans, 1995; Sydney Distance Education High School, 2003). However, distance education is a recent addition to the non-government school sector. In the first study (Harding, 2012a) of NGDE in Australia, Harding found that currently, there are at least 13 non-government schools, which provide distance education for their students. These schools are located in the states of New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, and Western Australia. The Commonwealth Government’s current funding policy for NGDE is the major reason why these students are among the least resourced and most poorly funded school students in Australia (Harding, 2012a, b & c).

#### **1.1.1 NGDE is bona fide pedagogy**

In spite of this under resourcing, NGDE is bona fide education. Schools providing NGDE:

- are registered by their state educational authorities;
- comply with normal school registration requirements;
- comply with additional distance education registration requirements;
- must employ registered teachers.

Further, NGDE students in NGDE schools

- are enrolled as full time students in state-registered schools;
- study educational programs in accordance with state syllabus requirements;
- study educational programs in accordance with national curriculum requirements.

Because NGDE is bona fide education, meeting all pedagogical requirements of Australian educational authorities, the Commonwealth’s current minimalist funding regime for NGDE is completely unjustifiable.

### **1.2 NGDE students are the lowest funded school students in Australia**

The funding plight of NGDE was publicised in 2011, in two state-based newspapers in Queensland and Western Australia when per student recurrent funding figures were released in 2011 on the MySchool website (Chilcott & MacDonald, 2011; Tillett, Ryan, & Trigger, 2011). Both reports found that the lowest funded schools in both states were non-government schools, which provided NGDE.

The Weekend Australian also reported on the levels of funding of Australian schools in 2011 (Ferrari & Hooke, 2012, Mathieson, 2012). It stated that the national average expenditure per student was \$11,754. The highest level of expenditure was at a remotely located government primary school in New South Wales, which averaged \$130,000 per student. Significantly, the four lowest funded schools in Australia were providers of NGDE. The lowest funded school in Australia was the Australian Christian College – Caboolture (Moreton), which averaged \$3,739 in recurrent funding, per student (Ferrari & Hooke, 2012, p.10). Further, Chilcott (2012) corroborated these figures for the Australian Christian College - Moreton, in her online report on the funding of schools in Queensland. Chilcott (2012) reported that the average per student recurrent funding in Queensland for that year was \$13,730, a figure that dramatically overshadowed the \$3,739 per student funding of Australian Christian College – Moreton.

The following sections illustrate the underfunding of NGDE in greater detail by comparing the funding of NGDE with other modes of schooling in Australia.

### **1.3 Illustrating the funding problem – Comparing non-government distance education funding with non-government day school funding – NGDE is grossly underfunded**

A comparison between the non-government sector’s Commonwealth funding levels of on-campus day school students and distance education students, who are enrolled in the same school, highlights the underfunding of NGDE. Figure 1 shows comparisons between Commonwealth funding of on-campus non-government day school students (NGDS) and non-government distance education students, in 2010, for three schools. These three non-government schools are located in the states of Queensland (Australian Christian College – Moreton), New South Wales (Australian Christian College – Marsden Park) and Western Australia (Australian Christian College – Southlands).

I have chosen these three schools to illustrate the point of NGDE underfunding, as I have direct access to their financial details. These figures may marginally differ, for all other providers of NGDE across Australia; however, they are sufficiently close to the funding levels for all NGDE providers, in order to clearly present the general picture of Commonwealth NGDE per-student funding for all NGDE providers in Australia.

In order to make the funding comparison consistent with the rest of the figures in this submission, I have used the schools’ averaged primary and secondary Commonwealth per-student recurrent funding figures.

Figure 1 also cites the separate SES rankings of the day school and distance education departments of each of the three schools. This is an abnormal condition for non-government schooling, as all other non-government schools have only one SES rank. Schools providing NGDE, however, must have two SES ranks. The SES rank for their day school, reflects the needs-based SES determination for that school. The second SES rank of 130 is a fixed rank for NGDE, which does not correspond to the needs of the school nor of the families of NGDE students. It is this second SES rank which is the mechanism by which the underfunding of NGDE is actioned.

## NGDE & NGDS Per-Student Commonwealth Funding Comparisons

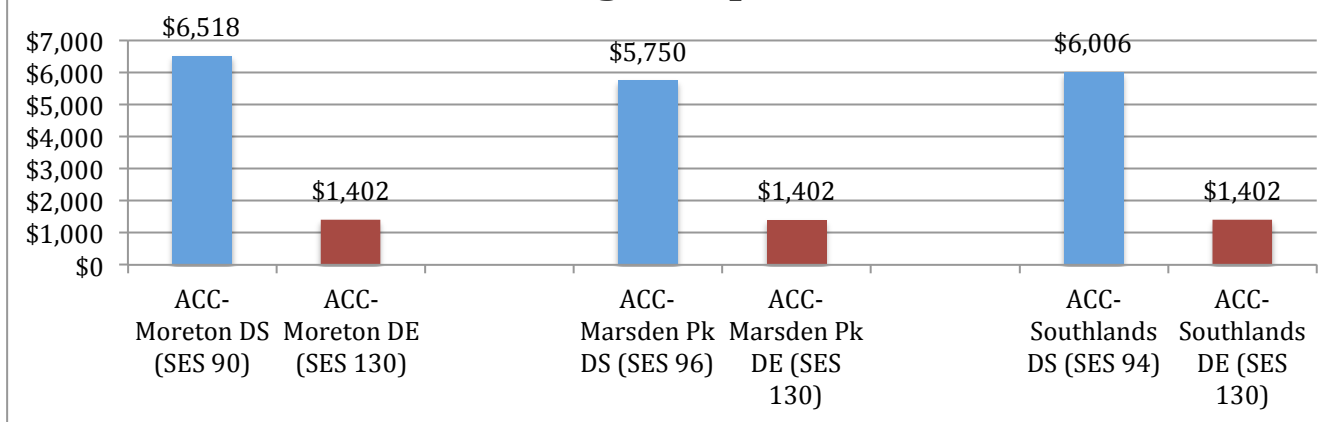


Figure 1. Commonwealth Funding of NGDS & NGDE Students in the Same Schools in 3 States

The graph demonstrates that:

- the Commonwealth funds NGDS students to a much greater level than NGDE students, even though they are enrolled in the same school.
- schools that provide NGDE are each allocated two different SES ranks; a needs-based rank for the day school and one fixed, non-needs-based rank (130) for the distance education department of the same school.

### 1.3.1 Differences in the Commonwealth funding of NGDS & NGDE students enrolled in the same non-government School

#### (a) Queensland – ACC-Moreton

NGDE students enrolled at Australian Christian College-Moreton are granted only 22% of the Commonwealth funding which is granted to their fellow NGDS students.

#### (b) New South Wales – ACC-Marsden Park

NGDE students enrolled at Australian Christian College-Marsden Park are granted only 24% of the Commonwealth funding, which is granted to their fellow NGDS students.

#### (c) Western Australia – ACC-Southlands

NGDE students enrolled at Australian Christian College-Southlands are granted only 23% of the Commonwealth funding which is granted to their fellow NGDS students.

### 1.4 Illustrating the problem – Comparing government distance education funding with government day school funding – Both are well funded

Figures 2 - 4 show comparisons between GDE and GDS funding in the states of Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. The government day schools selected for this comparison, are located in the same towns as the government schools of distance education. These schools are variously located in each of the four MCEECDYA schools location regions, which are classified as: metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote.

In figures 2 – 4, the darkened colours represent distance education funding and the paler colours represent day school funding.

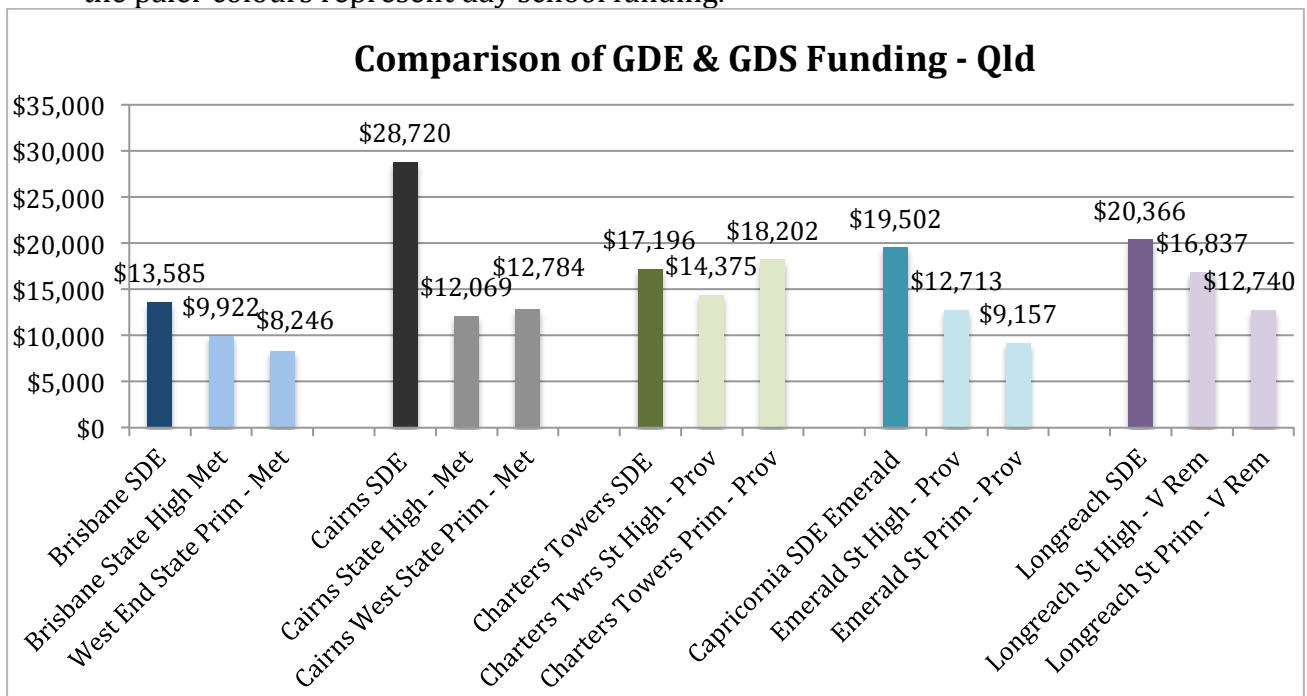


Figure 2. Comparison of GDE & GDS Per-Student Funding in Queensland

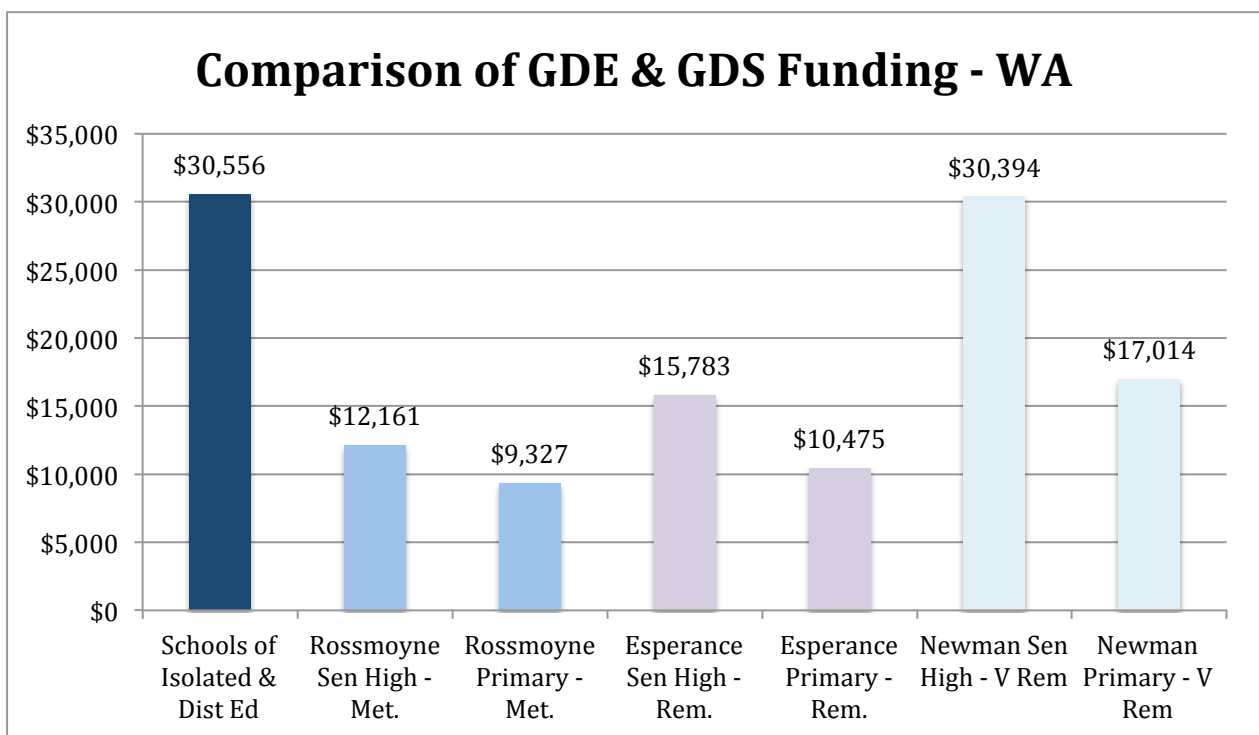


Figure 3. Comparison of GDE & GDS Per-Student Funding in Western Australia

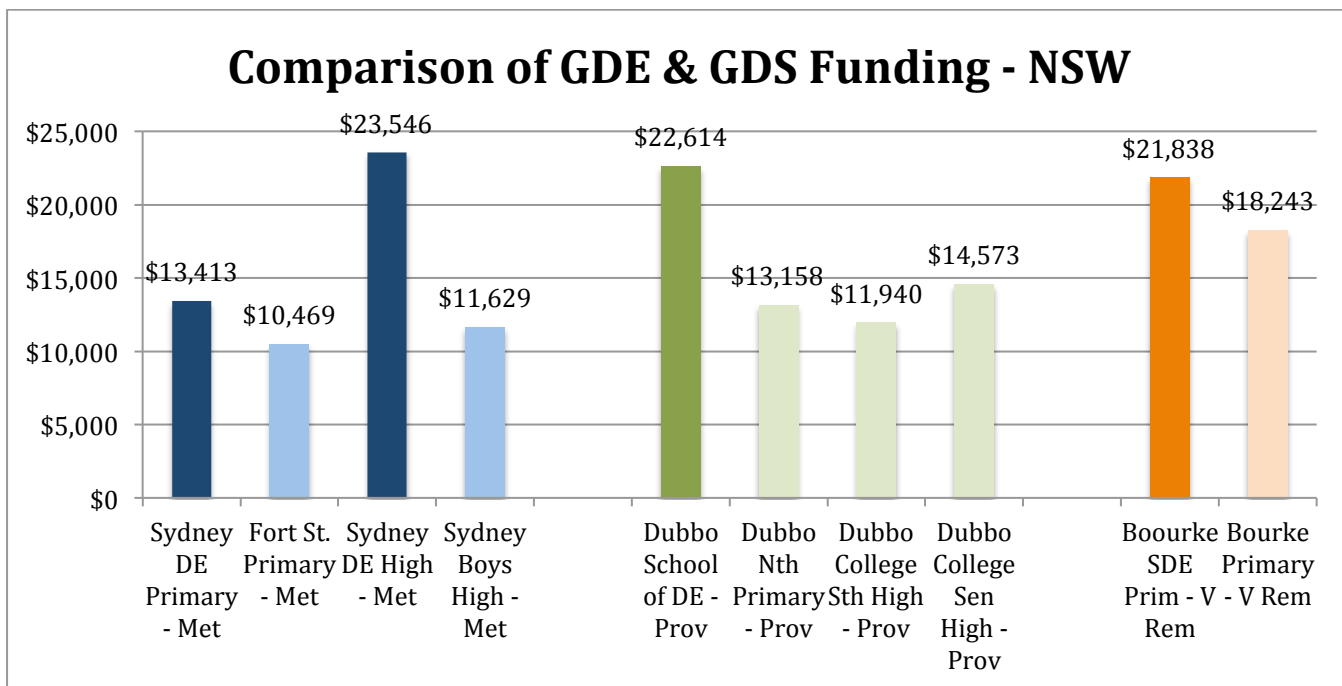


Figure 4. Comparison of GDE & GDS Per-Student Funding in New South Wales

The graphs indicate the consistent trend that GDE is allocated greater recurrent funding than GDS in the three states. This trend is true for the government sector, irrespective of whether the schools are located in the metropolitan, provincial, remote or very remote MCEECDYA regions. Thus, Australian governments recognise that distance education generally requires more per-student recurrent funding than on-campus day schooling. It is paradoxical to note that this recognition is not consistently attributed to distance education schooling in the non-government sector.

#### 1.5 Illustrating the problem – Government distance education funding compared with non-government distance education funding – NGDE is grossly underfunded

A direct comparison between the funding of government schools of distance education and that of non-government schools of distance education graphically illustrates the funding inequity between the two sectors. Figures 5 and 6 show comparisons between GDE and NGDE per-student recurrent funding in the states of Queensland and Western Australia. They demonstrate the major discrepancy between the funding of the government sector's schools of distance education and the non-government sector's schools of distance education. GDE schools are represented by various colours and the NGDE schools are represented by the maroon colour.

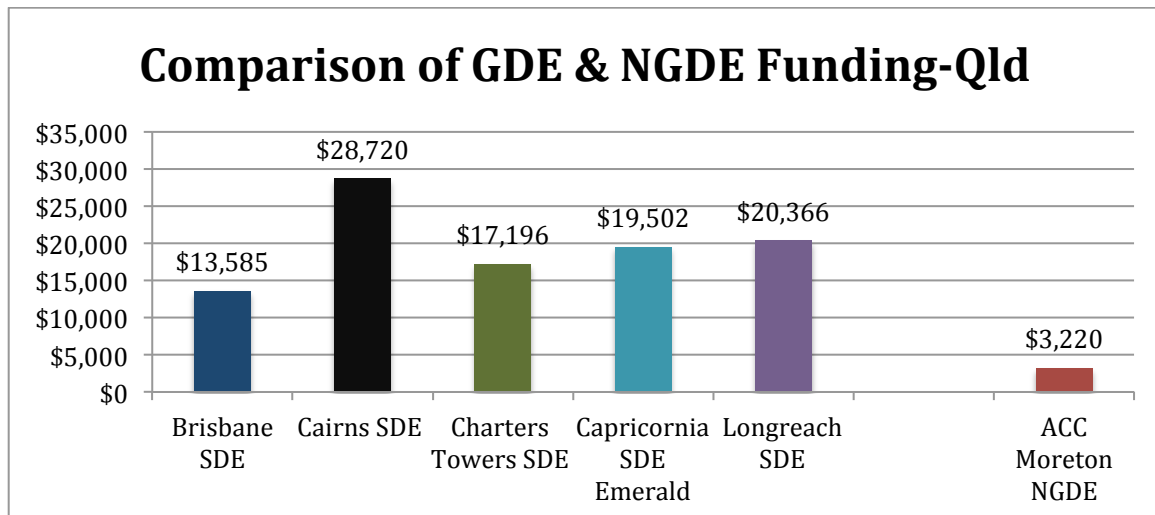


Figure 5. Comparison of GDE & NGDE Per-Student Funding in Queensland

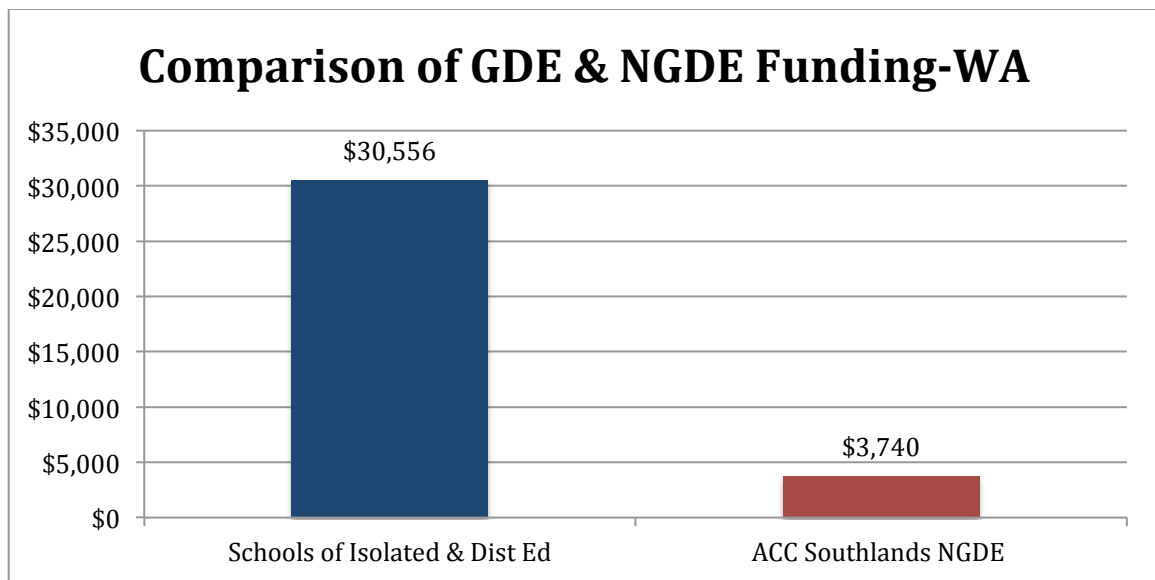


Figure 6. Comparison of GDE & NGDE Per-Student Funding in Western Australia

The graphs demonstrate that whilst distance education in the government sector is appropriately funded in Queensland and Western Australia, distance education in the non-government sector is by comparison, significantly underfunded in those states.

Whilst it is true that government schools and non-government schools are funded under separate regimes, it is interesting to note that:

- governments recognise that distance education in the government sector, should be adequately funded, yet
- in the non-government sector, this recognition of distance education is not given similar treatment in policy and practice.

#### 1.6 NGDE needs less recurrent funding than other schooling? - A false conclusion

The above figures could mistakenly entitle one to believe that distance education in the non-government sector requires much less recurrent funding than government or non-government on-campus day schooling or than government distance education.



However, a study of the pedagogical needs of NGDE students, as demonstrated in Harding's study (Harding, 2012a), demonstrates that this is a false conclusion.

Whilst it is clear that NGDE is a highly economical form of educational delivery when considering capital needs, for example, NGDE does not require land, buildings and maintenance infrastructure, located in most towns, as in day schooling; NGDE does require adequate recurrent funding to meet staffing and daily operational costs.

### **1.7 This low level of funding is prescribed in legislation**

The Commonwealth Government's funding of NGDE was formally legislated in 2000. When introducing this legislation, the Education Minister, the Hon. David Kemp, stated in his second reading speech: "For the first time it (the bill) provides recurrent funding for distance education students in the non-government sector receiving that education from non-government schools" (Kemp, 2000). The *States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act 2000* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000) provided a legislative foundation for the Commonwealth Government's financial support of NGDE in all Australian states and territories.

Whilst this Act formally recognised NGDE and committed Commonwealth funding to NGDE students, it did not treat them in the same way as other non-government school students. The Act prescribed that NGDE students should be resourced at the lowest possible funding level for non-government school students. Rather than allowing NGDE students to be assessed in the needs-based socioeconomic status (SES) system for the allocation of recurrent funding to non-government schools, the Act automatically assigned NGDE to the highest SES rank of 130. In turn, this rank automatically prescribed the lowest level of Commonwealth funding in the SES system to NGDE students. The SES rank of 130 prescribes funding to a school at the rate of 13.7% of the Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC). This funding level is similar to the low funding levels allocated to Australia's most elite and well resourced, private schools. NGDE's low recurrent funding level remains the same today, as it was in the 2001-2004 funding quadrennium and is reiterated legislatively in the *Schools Assistance Act 2008* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

One unusual aspect of this allocation of the highest SES rank to NGDE is that the AGSRC percentage figure for NGDE is written into Commonwealth legislation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The *Schools Assistance Act 2008* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) states in "Division 7 – Distance education funding", in section 57, that for primary school students in NGDE, the

*"assistance amount per student, for a program year, means the amount worked out using the formula: 13.7% x AGSRC for primary education for the program year"*

Similarly, Section 58 of "Division 7 – Distance education funding", states that for secondary school students in NGDE, the

“assistance amount per student, for a program year, means the amount worked out using the formula: 13.7% x AGSRC for secondary education for the program year”

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, sections 57 & 58)

The insertion of the actual AGSRC percentage figure for NGDE into the legislation is not usual practice for the allocation of Commonwealth funding to non-government schools. Apart from NGDE, no other mode of schooling in Australia has been allocated an AGSRC percentage in the Act. Rather, SES ranks and percentage figures for most non-government schools are to be found in an established needs-based SES funding schedule. Because the recurrent funding level of NGDE is set in legislation, if there is to be any change to NGDE funding in future, such a change would require a change to legislation.

Thus, unlike any other schools in the independent education sector, schools that provide NGDE have two distinct SES rankings (see Figure 1). The first SES ranking accounts for the school’s on-campus day school students. It is determined by the needs-based SES criteria, which takes into account the socioeconomic needs of families in the geographical region around the school. The second SES ranking is for the school’s distance education students. It is the predetermined, legislated rank of 130. It makes no reference to the needs of NGDE families or NGDE schools.

In effect, this practice of citing the AGSRC percentage figure in legislation, has excluded NGDE students and their families from the needs-based SES funding determinants, used to appropriately resource non-government school students throughout Australia. Commonwealth legislation and policy has effectively precluded needy students, who are almost entirely from single income families (Harding, 2011), from the nation’s needs-based educational safety net.

Harding (2012a & b) has posited that because NGDE funding levels are prescribed in Commonwealth legislation (*Schools Assistance Act 2008*) that NGDE students are precluded, legislatively, from what is considered to be a basic requirement on the Australian educational landscape, that is the opportunity to be educationally resourced in a similar manner to the resourcing of other Australian school students. Thus these students are victims of a legislated social injustice, in the form of an educational deprivation.

### **1.8 Summary –The Commonwealth’s minimal investment**

- (a) Australian governments recognise that distance education requires similar, if not greater recurrent funding than on-campus day schooling, as is demonstrated in the government sector (see figures 2 – 4)
- (b) NGDE students are grossly underfunded compared with on-campus students enrolled in their same school (see figure 1) and
- (c) NGDE students are grossly underfunded when compared with GDE students (see figures 5 and 6).

The Commonwealth’s “investment” into NGDE is minimal. This legislated, minimal input creates gross educational inequity for NGDE students and their schools.

Having demonstrated that the Commonwealth's "investment" into NGDE amounts to serious underfunding of NGDE students and their schools, I will now address some of the committee's terms of reference which are relevant to the Commonwealth's chronic underfunding of NGDE.

## **2 Addressing various terms of reference**

### **2.1 Background – Basic facts**

When considering the gross underfunding of NGDE, as demonstrated above, it seems that policy makers may have assumed that distance education in the non-government sector, is not "real schooling" and thus not requiring adequate financial support. This is a false assumption. Harding (2012a) has clearly demonstrated that NGDE is a bona fide school-based educational delivery. With this in mind, it is necessary to declare some basic educational facts about NGDE, so that the Commonwealth will consider it to be genuine mode of schooling in Australia.

- NGDE is bona fide school-based education.
- Schools, which provide NGDE are registered for that form of educational delivery, by their state educational authorities.
- NGDE educational programs are based on their state syllabuses and are approved by their state registration authorities.
- NGDE students are enrolled as full time students in these schools.
- NGDE students complete the same educational requirements as their on-campus day school counterparts who are enrolled in and attend the same schools.

### **2.2 Term of reference (a): The effectiveness of current classroom practices in assisting children to realise their potential in Australian schools**

The majority of most non-government schools' funding comes from Commonwealth recurrent per student funding. The majority of a non-government school's expenditure is directed toward staff salaries. The Commonwealth's minimal investment in NGDE implies that NGDE students do not need teachers, as it denies these students, the most important educational resource - access to teachers.

Independent Schools Queensland (2011) indicated that non-government schools normally spend between 65 and 72% of their recurrent expenditure on staff salaries. This expenditure, for example, allows a "medium range" non-government day school to have a teacher-to-student ratio of 1:16–18 in primary education and 1:11–13 in secondary education (Independent Schools Queensland, 2011). However, because NGDE students are allocated only around 23% of the Commonwealth funding that on-campus students are allocated (Harding, 2012a), it is impossible for non-government schools to provide similar teacher-to-student ratios for their distance education students, as they do for their on-campus day school students.

Similarly, NGDE funding does not enable NGDE schools to employ the same

number of teachers per student as are engaged in government distance education (GDE). Thus the pedagogical practices of NGDE are not comparable to that of distance education schools in the government sector. Chilcott and Cornish (2012) reported in Queensland's Courier Mail, that schools, which provide NGDE operate at a teacher-to-student ratio that is more than twice the teacher-to-student ratio experienced in on-campus day schools.

This denial of human resourcing to NGDE students is a clear educational inequity, which must disadvantage these students when compared to their GDE counterparts. Working with such high teacher-to-student ratios can be a limiting factor upon the effectiveness of pedagogical practices in NGDE. This in turn, can limit the educational experience of NGDE students.

Harding's research (Harding, 2012a) demonstrated that the principals of schools, which provide NGDE, were concerned that the Commonwealth's inadequate NGDE funding policy negatively impacted teachers and their teaching in NGDE schools. Principals cited the following direct negative impacts upon teaching:

- NGDE teachers have to work with very large numbers of students,
- NGDE teachers have to work longer hours,
- NGDE teachers have limited time to communicate with their students and
- NGDE teachers have limited time to deal with their students' academic and administration needs.

Aside from pedagogical considerations, such abnormal teaching requirements place unnecessary stress upon NGDE schools and their staff.

Given that leading educators (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Dinham, 2007; Hattie, 2003, 2009; Mulford, 2006; Rowe, 2003) insist that good teachers are critical to good schooling, Commonwealth NGDE funding policy telegraphs the discordant message that NGDE students do not really need teachers, in that it denies NGDE students fair access to teachers. This is an educational anathema and an attribution of status inequality to an entire segment of Australian school students. It follows that such a policy directly inhibits children in their realising of their potential in Australian schools, which provide NGDE.

### **2.3 Term of reference (d): The adequacy of tools available for teachers to create and maintain an optimal learning environment**

The Commonwealth's denial of adequate funding to NGDE, not only denies NGDE students of adequate teacher numbers, it also significantly restricts the tools and resources necessary to maintain an optimal NGDE learning environment.

The Commonwealth's persistence with this policy highlights its refusal to acknowledge the educational requirements of NGDE pedagogy, in the same way that state governments acknowledge the educational requirements of GDE pedagogy.

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

- distinctive curriculum design,
- curriculum development,
- course management
- course delivery
- specific educational infrastructure and
- specialised staff-to-student transactions (McFarlane, 2011).

Distance education also requires a high level of resourcing. Whilst print and postage is a vital part of the delivery of distance education, ICT requirements are a growing integral part of NGDE. These requirements include:

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

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

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

(Harding, 2012a, p.66)

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

- Teacher visits to the student's home
- Parent-mentor visits to the student's home
- Field trips and camps
- Excursions
- Workshops
- Group activity days
- Newsletters

- Residential programs
- Student Councils
- Concerts
- Awards presentation nights
- Non-NGDE school contact teacher for part time NGDE students  
(Harding, 2012a, p.66)

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

When the Commonwealth formally recognized NGDE in 2000, ICT pedagogical requirements were much less than they are today. In order for NGDE students to have modern, appropriate, educational experiences and outcomes, NGDE schools need appropriate funding to enable NGDE teachers to have adequate tools to create and maintain optimal at-distance learning environments.

### **2.3.1 Course content**

NGDE teachers are required to develop and manage their academic courses. Distance education students researched by Oliver, Osborne and Brady (2009) expected the content of their courses to be

- accurate,
- up-to-date,
- regularly revised,
- containing interesting resources, activities, study guides and quizzes.

These distance educated students wanted their content-related experiences to be embedded with interactive features such as games and simulations which illustrate relevance and connection to the working world, utilizing real world, authentic projects. The development of such course content is critical to the creation and maintenance of an optimal distance education-learning environment. Such development requires adequate resourcing, which is, to date, denied to NGDE communities, in Australia.

### **2.4 Term of reference (e): Factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system**

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

#### **2.4.1 Selection, career progression and retention of teachers**

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

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

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

#### **2.4.2 Teacher training**

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

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

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

### **3 Missed opportunities to redress this injustice**

#### **3.1 The Gonski Review**

2011 saw the submission of the final report of the Commonwealth's Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski, 2011). This represented the findings of the greatest review into the funding of education in Australia, since the Karmel Report (Karmel, 1973).

The Review was informed by submissions, meetings and commissioned reports. NGDE was represented to the Review by written submissions and I was able to

have a formal meeting with Mr. Gonski and informal discussions with other panel members.

The Review was also informed by four reports commissioned by the review panel, to assess Australia's school funding models (Deloitte Access Economics, 2011), the challenges and opportunities in schooling (MGSE, NILS & NOUS Group, 2011), funding to disadvantaged students (ACER, 2011) and to suggest a new funding model for Australian schooling (Allen Consulting Group, 2011). Not one of these reports mentioned NGDE. Furthermore, NGDE was not mentioned in the review's Final Report (Gonski, 2011).

The Deloitte Access Economics (2011) report mentioned the term "distance education" once (Deloitte, 2011, p. 4). However, that mention was to indicate that their assessment of existing funding models of schooling in Australia, would not include distance education funding in its review.

The Allen Consulting Group (2011) report made one mention of distance education as a possible area where further funding loadings could be applied to the base amount of the National Schooling Recurrent Resource Standard (NSRRS). This mention of distance education as an area of extra loading was applicable to government distance education (GDE) but there was no mention of NGDE being included in this suggested loading.

Similarly, the ACER (2011) report mentions GDE (p. 62) with respect to their disadvantaged students. This report also fails to mention NGDE.

Despite the Final Report's (Gonski, 2011) many references to fairness, equity and the elimination of educational disadvantage, its failure to mention NGDE is of great concern to NGDE practitioners. Effectively, NGDE had been overlooked by the Gonski review into school funding.

I discussed the Review's failure to mention NGDE, with Dr. Ken Boston, one of the Review Panel members. Dr. Boston stated that NGDE might have been overlooked in the Panel's deliberations, and that this should be brought to the Minister's attention (K. Boston, personal communication, May 22, 2012).

### **3.2 The Minister**

I have pursued this matter of funding equity for NGDE students for many years, and have approached various successive Commonwealth Ministers for Education and DEEWR.

Most recently, I have met with the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, the Hon. Peter Garrett, in 2011 to bring the underfunding dilemma to his attention, and to request that he remediate the problem. He requested that I write a description of NGDE as it is provided in all non-government schools across Australia. I wrote that report, entitled "*A description of non-government distance education in Australia*" (Harding, 2012a) and presented it to the Minister in September 2012. The report (Harding, 2012a), which is the first of its kind in Australia, cited 41 findings about NGDE and it made two key recommendations to redress NGDE's underfunding dilemma. The



key recommendations were (1) a short-term equity-funding model and (2) a long-term appropriate funding model (see below).

In October 2012, I met with the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth, the Hon. Peter Garrett, accompanied with the Executive Director of Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), Mr. Bill Daniels. The Minister indicated that he had no mind to change the funding of NGDE students. In a follow up letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> November, the Minister stated:

“The report (Harding, 2012a) does not, however, contain sufficient evidence to convince me that non-government distance education is underfunded under the present school funding arrangements.

Following further consideration of the report, I remain of the view expressed at our meeting (22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2012) and do not propose to make changes to the current school funding arrangements in the lead up to the introduction of wide-ranging school funding reforms from 2014.”  
(Personal correspondence, Minister Garrett to T. Harding, 28 November, 2012)

I feel that I have explored most of the avenues in our democratic system in the pursuit of fairness and equity for NGDE students and have yet to find fairness and equity.

## **4 Proposal to redress the injustice**

Gilbert et al. (2011) argued that in democracies, “democratic imperatives surrounding equity, equality and social justice” (p. 1) create high social expectations among citizens, and that large quantities of resources should be dedicated to education in order to reduce educational disadvantage. Clearly, a redistribution of funding, in measures equitable to other forms of schooling is the only answer that will deliver a degree of educational equity and social justice and bestow parity of participation in education to NGDE communities.

The problem of the Commonwealth’s NGDE underfunding policy may be addressed in two stages, firstly an immediate short-term solution, which would give immediate relief and assistance to these schools and a more appropriate, research-based long-term solution, which would align NGDE funding with NGDE optimal practice.

### **4.1 Short-term equity funding solution**

The short-term equity funding solution would be to allocate the SES rank of a non-government day school to that school’s NGDE students. This would at least provide the same level of funding for the school’s distance education students as is provided for its day school students.

### **4.2 Long-term appropriate funding solution**

The long-term appropriate funding solution would be the result of a research-based determination of the costs of providing NGDE. It would depend upon (i) the model of funding for schools, which will be implemented by Australian governments in the

future and (ii) applying an additional, calculated distance education loading, on an equal basis, to both the government and non-government providers of distance education.

Either solution would require a change to legislation.

## 5 Conclusion

Because NGDE is new to the Australian educational landscape, it is important that governments genuinely recognize and support it as a bona fide pedagogy and that they allow it to develop in its own context. Marsden (1996) argued that distance education ought not to be deemed as an inferior form of education; rather, that an educational hegemony, mostly uninitiated to distance education, ought to seek to understand and support it. As the emerging participant in distance education delivery, NGDE should be nurtured by Australia's education system, rather than being admitted to it and then starved by underfunding.

The Commonwealth's policy of underfunding NGDE clearly contradicts its stated educational policies of resourcing students and their schooling, as, for example, is indicated in the *Melbourne Declaration in Education Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008). This policy has become an example of a chronic resource inequity and a social injustice on the Australian educational landscape.

By depriving NGDE schools and their students equal access to educational resourcing, current policy excludes these students from what is considered to be essential in our society, that is, what the Prime Minister described as "a fair chance to a great education" (Christenson, 2010). Thus, unlike the rest of twenty-first-century schooling in Australia, NGDE is restricted to a resourcing level comparable to the minimalist funding of non-government schooling in the 1970s. At that time, the Karmel Report (Karmel, 1973) recommended that governments provide adequate levels of funding for all schools in Australia.

Without redress of the current policy, NGDE learning communities will continue to be subjected to entrenched resourcing disadvantage. The Gonski (2011) review of school funding in Australia provides a platform for redress of this funding inequity, in the long term. However, because of the gross inequality and serious nature of this defective funding policy, and the broad extent of its reach, community expectations of educational equity and social justice would warrant a short-term expeditious rectification of the problem of the Commonwealth's underfunding of NGDE.

As a pioneer, researcher and advocate of NGDE, I am happy to offer my assistance to any process of such a rectification.

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