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2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Submission

Rethinking online learning

Exploring new options and opportunities for expanding online learning

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As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields. This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

# Introduction

This report has been completed by Libby Hansell, Rural and Distance Education, Educational Support and Rural Initiatives, NSW Department of Education in partnership with Angelo DelliSanti, Science Blend-Ed/Online Teacher, Notre Dame High School, Alberta, Canada.

I currently work with the 11 distance education schools across NSW, working extremely closely on further developing the preschool provision of distance education to service geographically isolated students. I have been a part of the Learning from Home team for the second half of 2021 and witnessed the way the department and some schools have adapted to online learning to deliver the curriculum in an innovative and engaging way. Angelo is a high school science and maths teacher who has been delivering his courses asynschronously for the past five years. His students have choice over how they access their subjects with a blended model through face-to-face and online courses.

Angelo and myself are passionate about providing educational provisions that meet the needs of the individual student. We know that each students has their own preferred ways of learning, and for some, an online learning environment is a beneficial way for students to access the curriculum.

# Focus area / Research question

During our e-exchange, we explored the similarities and differences between Alberta and NSW’s online learning models. We discovered there were many similarities at a system level however when delving further into the operation of distance education, we realised there was a significant difference in how students access their learning and who is able to access this alternative model.

**Who can access online learning?**

In Alberta, some high schools offer blended learning opportunities which include student choice in whether they attend classes face-to-face or online. They are still enrolled in the one school but have the opportunity to take some classes virtually. In NSW, distance education is a safety net for the system’s most vulnerable students who cannot be catered for in their mainstream school.

We believe the recent COVID-19 lockdowns have provided evidence that some students flourish in an online environment. Particular types of learners benefit from the self-paced style of learning rather than the busy classroom filled with up to 30 students.

**Who supports the wellbeing of students when learning online?**

In Alberta, as students have access to the face-to-face school which is usually local to them, they are able to visit the school to be a part of the peer group and to access teachers, counsellors and other extra-curricular activities. In NSW, when enrolled in a distance education school, you may only have the opportunity to see your teachers once per term. By staying connected to a local school, students with additional learning needs may benefit from the positives of online learning plus the support of their school.

From these discussions, we explored which types of students suit an online setting and looked at resources and strategies for engaging and allowing them to experience as close as possible to hands-on learning especially in subjects like science. We also looked at what makes an engaging online lesson and how you are able to assess student learning in the online environment.

# Signficant learnings / Findings

**Student autonomy**

From our discussions and sharing opportunities, it became clear that the Canadian education model provided more opportunities for student autonomy and choice over the learning journey. Notre Dame High School provide ‘flex periods’ for their students which is two half-hour blocks per week. During this time, all teachers are off-class and students identify what they need help with and go to see that teacher for extra assistance. For example, if they need help with a maths assessment, they will be able to use that time to get clarification from their maths teacher.

Senior students also have the choice whether to complete some subjects face-to-face (traditional setting) or in an online environments (can be completed at home or at school depending on schedule).

These two aspects of the Alberta education model showcase strategies for students to develop their time management skills and to have control over their timetables and learning journeys, essential skills leading into careers beyond school.

**Learning styles**

During discussions, it became evident that the types of students who succeed in the aysnchoronous/synchronous learning models were independent and driven students. In NSW, distance education provides for some extremely vulnerable students and those with medical needs. Of course, it is extremely important that these students are continued to be supported in alternative education models; however I believe it is possible that there are other groups of students who could benefit from online learning. High potential and gifted education students could possibly achieve a high level of success in these types of classes and also introverted students who may not always flourish in traditional classrooms filled with 30 loud students. We both had anecdotal evidence of students who engaged deeply in content during learning from home lockdowns. We believe this should drive our systems to rethink online learning moving into the future.

**Rural and remote students**

Both education systems utilise distance education models for delivering curriculum to geographically isolated students. It seems that depending on the students level of access to technology, there is room for improvement in ensuring equity of access to curriculum for this group of students. Many rural and remote schools are limited in their subject choices in the senior years due to the small cohort size and lack of teachers with expertise in some areas. We discussed just how powerful drawing on lessons learnt from COVID-19 could be in looking at ways to allow rural and remote students to access online classes from anywhere in the state or beyond.

# Conclusion / Recommendations & sharing

**Enhancing my own practice**

As I return to a school in a new position from 2022, the aspects of this e-exchange that will become part of my own practice include thinking about how students are given autonomy over their learning. To ensure every student is ‘known, valued and cared for’ I would love to see the idea of ‘flex periods’ introduced as a wellbeing actitivity. It would be amazing for students to have allocated time to visit a staff member of their choice, to discuss their learning and any social issues they are having. This would be strong student-teacher relationships beyond their classroom teachers and allow students to feel empowered and enhance their sense of belonging. I also believe this would be beneficial for distance education schools to participate in, as often these students feel disconnected from their teachers and do not have the same level of connection with their teachers.

Secondly, this experience has made me reflect on the many opportunities that exist beyond the school gates. In my new role, I will endeavour to connect with other teachers and students online as much as possible. This will be done to continually expand my own knowledge and ideas but also to connect students with experts from across the world to enhance their education journeys and to see life beyond their own town.

**Possibilities for the NSW Department of Education**

As a system, I believe rethinking what distance education looks like could be extremely beneficial to many students in NSW, particularly HPGE [high potential and gifted education] and rural and remote students. COVID-19 lockdowns and learning from home have shown us that some students flourish in an online environment and that it often doesn’t matter where the teacher and students are geographically located. I think this opens a world of opportunity for rural and remote students to access a wide range of subjects being delivered across the state and potential extension for HPGE students.

I believe students being able to maintain enrolment in their local school while having the choice to complete some subjects online would assist in allowing student a broad curriculum and possibly alleviate staffing shortages in rural areas. Maintaining a connection to a physical school has many benefits socially and emotionally for vulnerable students.

The blended model of education delivery relies on a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. One last group that may benefit from this flexibility is mature aged students. In Alberta, students can access these courses up to the age of 20. This could be a wonderful opportunity for some NSW residents who may not have had the opportunity or support network to complete their HSC at 17 or 18. Allowing students to gain their HSC a little later in life would open up many opportunities for further study and careers. This model would also allow them to work and learn part time, increasing the skill set of the community which has incredible advantages in rural and remote towns and those with high EAL/D [English as an additional language or dialect] communities.