



newsletter

NSW Teachers Federation

September 2009

The Distance Education Restricted Committee is a Federation committee elected for a two year period; these members represent the full range of distance education (DE) delivery, including autonomous Distance Education Centres (DECs) city and country, integrated country DECs, a specialised DEC and a primary Distance Education school.

Our meeting term 3 meeting discussed the following:

- the changing nature of DE teachers' work which places placing enormous physical, intellectual and emotional pressure on teachers to keep up with the changes in their work practices
- inconsistencies in the way DECS and distance education schools are resourced and managed resulting in inequity across the board
- course and learning material production
- impact of emerging technologies.

The last two points are the most important.

Changes to distance education teacher's work

Below is a snapshot of changes which have occurred over the past few years in DE. Listed are either "new" or "additional" jobs and tasks that DE teachers are now doing:

Course writing

- production of new courses
- production of electronic course materials
- editing
- differentiating of curriculum to cater for changing students' profile due to an increase in enrolments of students with significant support needs.

Technology

- processing of emails from parents, students and supervisors
- production of electronic course materials
- on-line marking

- video-conferencing and tele-conferencing
- MOODLE — uploading course materials, links and audiovisuals, checking students' progress and managing class administration such as news, homework schedule, face to face
- satellite expansion into high schools and preschools, depending on IT changes
- smart boards for study days
- electronic data base — recording/reporting on students' work
- researching and integrating internet sites into lesson responses
- extra workload due to inconsistency of IT support across DECS (from IT specialists, to TAFE support, classroom teachers, trouble shooting, installation and maintenance of off site computers)
- extra workload due to inconsistency in the management of electronic data base, production of title/cover pages (for some DECS, teachers are still doing all the work involved with production of cover pages, whereas in others cover pages are all produced electronically with SASS help), management of MOODLE (uploading of files) which causes discrepancies between teacher and SASS workloads.

Other issues

1. Phone — delivery of lessons through regular, timetabled phone lessons
2. Professional learning — increased pressure to professionally develop, upgrade and up skill on technology
3. Vocational education and training (VET) — maintenance of teacher accreditation and updating of resources for VET teachers
4. Welfare — increased welfare responsibilities as the profile of students accessing DE has changed (for example, an increase of students with mental health problems)
5. Teacher/student contact increase — mini schools, field schools and increased preparation of lessons for those sessions
6. Travel increase — due to increased region responsibility as a result of closures of DECS
7. SASS support — increased workload as a result of lack of SASS support in certain areas such as word processing,

word processing in languages other than English, photocopying, exam production, ordering of materials.

Recommendations

The nature of teachers' work has changed, as the snapshot above reveals.

Within DE, there appear to be many inconsistencies in the way teachers are being asked to work and in the way in which they are supported. The Restricted Committee recommends the following:

- Production/editing/maintenance of any course materials/learning materials (either paper, on-line, for MOODLE) by teachers should be an extra allocation incorporated within a teacher's load, not over and above their teaching allocation.
- With the expansion of the use of new technologies and IT applications and increased use of technology, it is essential that each all DE centres be allocated IT support positions to maintain equipment, systems to support IT applications.
- Extra modes of DE delivery not be mandated but a voluntary strategy for individual teachers to employ, giving teachers discretion to make a professional choice (the use of MOODLE, video conferencing, e-learning).
- A review of the support mechanisms and allocation of resources (staffing/release/relief, use of SASS) presently in place in each individual site be undertaken to ensure DE teachers' working conditions are equitably allocated throughout DE.
- If resource development and material are to be shared across DE settings, compensation (negotiated) should be made available between DECS and schools.

Flexible hours' policy

The committee's discussion also covered the positive aspects of a flexible hours policy (presently adopted by some DE centres). This is an option that DE centres can explore; this is a policy where teachers work the same core hours (for example, six and a half required attendance hours, but with flexible start and finish times). The committee thought some of the advantages of adopting this type of policy could be:

- better meeting students' needs
- supporting family friendly practices
- support increased community participation
- increased staff morale
- increased productivity
- decreased cost and stress levels due to travelling outside peak hours.

Recommendation

DE centres and schools are encouraged to discuss the usefulness and or appropriateness of this policy at their centre and school