Ms Kerryn Riseley, Executive Officer
Education and Training Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne 3002

Dear Ms Riseley

Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the above Inquiry. The University of Newcastle has a very successful Gifted and Talented Program that is run in collaboration with the Hunter Central Coast Department of Education and Training. We have responded to the issues raised by the Chair in the attached document. The submission was prepared by Ms Keryn Stewart and Ms Louisa Connors, who was also invited separately to respond.

Yours sincerely

Kevin McConkey
Deputy Vice Chancellor
(Academic and Global Relations)
Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students – Parliament of Victoria
University of Newcastle response

1. What programs you currently provide to Gifted and Talented students

The University of Newcastle currently offers the school-based Gifted and Talented program for exceptional high school students. Now in its fifth year, the University program provides an opportunity for exceptional students from all high schools in the region to undertake first year university courses while attending school. Following the successful implementation of the program in the Newcastle region, the Gifted and Talented program was expanded to the Central Coast region in 2010. Further expansion to other locations in the University’s catchment area is also being considered.

While the program does not provide an alternative entry pathway to university, courses undertaken in the program can lead to credit for university studies. The program aims to keep our best and brightest in our region, and to build opportunities for local growth.

The University’s Gifted and Talented program is run in collaboration with key local schools, and is supported by a memorandum of understanding between the University and the NSW Department of Education. In the Newcastle region, Merewether High School is the coordinating school, while on the Central Coast this role is undertaken by Gosford High School. As selective state secondary schools, both Merewether and Gosford High Schools have experience in the education of gifted and talented students.

As part of the program, students enrol in University of Newcastle courses and become university students. They have access to all University facilities, including the libraries (excluding restricted areas). Educational technologies, such as Blackboard, are a feature of all courses; approaches to teaching and learning are innovative and sensitive to diverse student needs. Courses offered in 2011 spanned a broad range of disciplines, including:

- Molecules, Cells and Organisms (BIOL1001)
- Introduction to Engineering Practice (GENG1803)
- Legal System and Method A & B (LAWS1001A & LAWS1001B)
- Marketing Principles (MKTG2120)
- Philosophy (PHIL1020)
- Introductory Chemistry (CHEM1010)
- Creative Reading and Writing (ENGL1201)
- Introduction to Software Engineering 1 (SENG1110)

Courses are typically 15 weeks long. In the case of science courses, students complete "wet labs" at the University of Newcastle during the school holiday period. Industry visits may also be included, and all excursions are conducted in line with Department of Education and Training policy. Students have a mentor at each coordinating school to support their learning and, if necessary, to guide students in their interaction with the University. When a course is completed, students are eligible for a credit transfer in a relevant university degree program.

In addition to the University-wide Gifted and Talented program, discipline-specific programs have been piloted at targeted local schools. The University is monitoring the progress of these smaller pilot programs. There are also two students currently attending the University on an early admission basis via a Gifted and Talented Scholarship. This scholarship, which provides a special entry pathway for exceptionally gifted young students, is assessed and awarded on an individual needs basis.
2. **Your experiences and issues surrounding these programs (including for example responding to negative attitudes towards giftedness)**

The overall experience of the Gifted and Talented program has been a positive one for students and staff, with the program increasing in popularity and reach as it progresses. One factor affecting the program’s success has been the establishment of strong “advocates” for the program within the coordinating schools. These school-based advocates not only coordinate the logistics of teaching spaces and timetabling, but also engage with interested students and their parents and promote the program’s benefits. We have found this kind of engagement essential to the success of the program.

Another key issue has been disseminating to schools the expectations and requirements for students undertaking university-level study. These expectations relate both to academic and non-academic capacities. The entry process for the Gifted and Talented program requires, as a threshold to application, that the relevant school principal endorses each student’s application. It also requires the school to certify that the students' work is performed at “an extremely high level” and that he or she “has demonstrated the necessary skills to be successful in this program”.

However, we have found the understanding of appropriate skill levels to differ widely between schools, with the result that a number of applicant students have struggled to meet the academic requirements of university-level study. A related problem is that a number of schools are endorsing very young students, or students who for some other reason do not demonstrate the emotional maturity to complete the course. While age is no barrier to application, it is important that students are guided by schools and teachers about the appropriate age for them to undertake accelerated study. This is particularly important for professionally-focused courses such as the Law program, which requires students to commit for a full year of study.

Another experience that has shaped the University’s approach to gifted and talented outreach has been ensuring that course offerings align with student needs. While interest in particular courses waxes and wanes between semesters, consistently under-enrolled courses may indicate the need to re-assess how well the offerings match student expectations. Different regional and school contexts may also affect what is offered. This became apparent when the program was expanded beyond its original region, as the pilot offerings in the expanded program were less popular than expected.

3. **The experience of students participating in these programs**

Feedback from students indicates that their overall experience has been positive, with students enjoying their courses and finding them beneficial. The value of accelerated courses as a pathway to further university study has also been demonstrated, with 70 former participants in the Gifted and Talented Program enrolling in undergraduate courses at the University between 2005 and 2010.

Some administrative issues for students have arisen from the different status of Gifted and Talented participants (as “non-award students” rather than students enrolled in a degree). For the most part, these issues have been resolved by establishing agreed workflows between different areas of the University and through direct coordination with host schools with the on-site “advocate”.

More detailed information on the experience of students undertaking the program will assist in continuous improvement course offerings. The University is developing quality assurance and review processes to ensure that courses offered through the Gifted and Talented program are regularly evaluated and that relevant student feedback is captured.
4. Your views about how the concepts of “giftedness” and “talent” should be defined

We would consider that these matters are primarily the purview of educators working at school-level. However, one factor that should be considered in targeting university-level responses to giftedness is students’ maturity level and capacity to cope with non-academic elements of university study. In the case of students undertaking the Gifted and Talented program, this emotional maturity and commitment is assessed via a joint school-university interview process. Students are asked to situate the course in the context of their future career plans, and must demonstrate that they are able to manage the additional time and study commitment imposed by university study. Should an otherwise academically gifted student prove unable to demonstrate such maturity, he or she will generally not be admitted into that intake of the program (although students are strongly encouraged to reapply in later semesters).

5. Mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students

Again, this falls outside the scope of university outreach programs. However, as noted above, key challenges include improving schools’ understanding of the expectations placed on gifted students undertaking university-level study, as well as promoting a focus on developing emotional as well as academic maturity in gifted students.

6. Any broader implications for school communities arising from the education of gifted and talented students

The University of Newcastle’s Gifted and Talented program with Hunter Central Coast DET developed as a result of enthusiasm and commitment of key staff in both organisations. The University has had enquiries from students in other states who have wanted to enrol in the program but at present the capacity to offer these courses online to this particular cohort of students is limited.