Submission to

THE VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT’S EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE’S (ETC) INQUIRY

THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS

Faculty of Education

Australian Catholic University
The Faculty of Education at Australian Catholic University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliamentary Education and Training Committee’s Inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented students. We are committed to quality education for all students and acknowledge that this group of students is often disadvantaged in our schools.

This submission pays particular attention to considering existing gifted and talented education studies, and other mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students.

It also addresses the following Terms of Reference:

1. The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:
   i. identification of gifted and talented students;
   ii. equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families; and,
   iii. impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students;
2. the scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students;
3. opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders; and,
4. opportunities for improved educational offerings for gifted and talented students through collaboration across all school sectors and with community, business and industry.
Introduction

Australian governments have acknowledged the need to support gifted and talented children in educational settings for some decades. The Australian Advisory Group on the Education of Gifted and Talented Students was established in 1981 following a significant growth in interest and activity throughout Australia and the world concerning the education of children with special gifts and talent. Issues of definition, identification, terminology and the need to provide pre-teacher and teacher education were raised. In 1983 the first Australian national conference on the education of gifted and talented children was held in Melbourne. The honourable Kim Beazley (senior) noted, “special adjustments to the education for the gifted should not be regarded as something abnormal, but part of the courtesy and grace due to every child” (Beazley, 1983).

In 1988 a senate committee was appointed by the Australian Government to report on the education of gifted and talented children. The committee recognised the need to “advise on the preparation of teachers to meet the needs of gifted and talented children” (Commonwealth Government Publishing Services, 1988, p. ix). The 1988 Senate Report suggested that “teachers…need to acquire appropriate expertise. In many cases additional study would be required” (Commonwealth Government Publishing Service, 1988, p106). The report highlighted concern over a lack of teacher training in gifted education.

In 2001, twelve years after the first inquiry, there was another inquiry “prompted by continuing concern about whether the education system adequately responds to the special needs of gifted children” (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001, pxi). The chair of the committee, Senator Jacinta Collins noted that there had been “little progress in the provision for gifted children since 1988…Gifted children have special needs in the education system; for many, their needs are not being met; and many suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress as a result” (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001, pxi). The report recommended that the Commonwealth “specify professional development on issues to do with giftedness as a priority in the Quality Teacher Programme” (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001, pxvii).

There has been some progress since the 2001 inquiry. A number of States and Territories in Australia, not all, have a policy addressing the education of gifted and talented students and most syllabus documents note possible provisions for these students. However, teachers will not be able to act on policy and syllabus directives without effective training in gifted and talented education. The
Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of NSW to design a series of professional development modules which are available through the DEEWR website to partly address the need to provide professional development for teachers. There are a number of university postgraduate courses in the education of gifted and talented students, including courses offered at the University of NSW, University of New England Armidale and the University of Western Australia.

Gifted Education has been given increased prominence in the Catholic Education sector over the last decade. The Catholic Education Office (CEO), Sydney released the document *Gifted Education K-12 - Position Paper* in February 2007. This represents the first formal statement on the education of gifted and talented students for Catholic systemic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney. Its purpose is to set out basic principles to inform schools’ policies and practices; to establish a common language and shared understanding related to gifted education; to build upon the strong equity principles that underpin education in Catholic systemic schools; and, to provide direction for future action.

The Adelaide Declaration was conceived by state, territory and federal education ministers in 1999 to provide goals for education in Australia. One such goal was to support:

> ...*individuals within groups and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective wellbeing, optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational) and achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice*  

(MCEETYA, 1999).

This statement recognises the importance of supporting children to work towards and achieve learning and development goals for the sake of their personal growth as well for the sake of the collective good. Academically gifted children can be supported within the education system to realise their potential in ways that enable them to enjoy personal wellbeing and optimal development as well as in ways that will enable them to contribute to the welfare of society. If these students are not nurtured and challenged within learning environments, then society will not benefit from their academic talents.
Existing gifted and talented education studies, and other mechanisms to improve the capacity of teachers to identify and adequately respond to gifted and talented students.

A cursory search on the internet reveals that an overwhelming majority of teacher education courses (early childhood, primary and high school) offered by universities in Australia, both undergraduate and post-graduate, do not include even one unit of study addressing the education of gifted and talented students. It appears that this has been the case for many years. Therefore it can be surmised that the majority of Australian teachers working in early childhood education, primary schools and high schools have no formal training, or at least very limited training, in identifying and responding to gifted and talented students. It is also the case that teachers will continue to have no or limited knowledge and skills in the area of gifted and talented education until this lack of training is remedied.

Teachers who do not have training in gifted and talented education cannot effectively identify gifted and talented students and cannot respond effectively. This has been documented in a number of research studies conducted in Australia and overseas (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Downey, 1999; Gear, 1978). Untrained teachers tend to identify middle class high achieving students from the dominant culture as being gifted and talented in the majority of instances, neglecting to realise the gifts and potential talents of students from diverse backgrounds and those who may not be revealing their gifts and potential talents in the school setting. As Senator Jacinta Collins noted, many gifted students “suffer underachievement, boredom, frustration and psychological distress” as a consequence of not having their needs met within the school system (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee, 2001, pxi). These students, bored and possibly acting out, would not appear gifted to the untrained eye, however they may arguably be the most at risk and most in need of effective approaches to the education of gifted students.

At Australian Catholic University we have developed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Gifted Education) to be offered nationally online from semester 2, 2011.

**Recommendation 1: Fund and support professional development for practicing teachers in gifted and talented education.**

Such professional development should enable teachers to learn about:
- Effective, research based, strategies to identify gifted and talented students, including strategies that are best employed to identify indigenous gifted students, those from cultures other than the dominant culture, those with additional needs (physical, psychological and learning needs); and those disillusioned within an unresponsive school system.

- Effective, research based, strategies to support the learning needs of gifted and talented students, including strategies that are best employed to support indigenous gifted students, those from cultures other than the dominant culture, those with additional needs (physical, psychological and learning needs) and those disillusioned within an unresponsive school system. These strategies will include using particular models to design and implement differentiated curriculum, using approaches for extension and acceleration of learning, ways to group gifted students for successful learning, and strategies to support the wellbeing of gifted and talented students, particularly their emotional wellbeing.

**Recommendation 2: Support universities and other tertiary education settings to include instruction in gifted and talented education in all initial teacher education programs, including those addressing early childhood education, primary school teaching and high school teaching.**

Support for education settings to include gifted and talented education in all teacher training courses needs to be considered within legislative and policy directives. It also needs to be realised in terms of financial and other resources that will enable a qualified cohort of academics to fill teaching and research posts at universities and other tertiary education institutions.

Instruction in gifted and talented education within teacher education courses may be considered as part of compulsory units of study that address the education of students with different needs. It should focus on providing the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to identify and respond appropriately to gifted and talented students. While there will be similarities across the early childhood, primary and high school sectors, for instance in terms of considering definitions of giftedness and talent, there will also necessarily be differences in terms of the appropriate ways to identify and respond to gifted students at various times in
their educational trajectory. It should include opportunities to engage with local and international research concerning the education of gifted and talented students.

To enable all teacher education courses to provide instruction in the education of gifted and talented students, there needs to be teacher education with such expertise. In searching the internet, it is clear that there are very few academics employed in universities across Australia with the qualifications necessary to provide such teacher preparation. There are very few Australians with doctoral level degrees in the area of gifted and talented education. There are slightly more people with post-graduate master and certificate level degrees in the area of gifted education. Many of these people with post-graduate qualifications necessary to lead and teach in the area of gifted and talented education have left tertiary level teaching posts or have stayed away from such work, possibly due to the very limited consideration this important area is given in tertiary teacher education settings as well as in schemes within Australia to fund research in the area of gifted and talented education. This contrasts with conditions in the American and European contexts, where there are Professorial Chairs in Gifted and Talented Education and research groups focussing solely on the education of gifted and talented students.

There needs to be incentives to attract people with post-graduate qualifications in gifted and talented education back to the tertiary education sector so that their expertise can be used more widely. As well as contributing to the preparation of teachers in gifted and talented education, these people should be encouraged to coordinate and teach post-graduate courses in gifted and talented education and to pursue research agendas. Support for a vital university-based culture concerned with the education of gifted and talented students will be a step towards ensuring a more robust and long-lasting consideration of gifted and talented students within Victorian schools.
Addressing the specific Terms of Reference

1: The effectiveness of current policies and programs for gifted and talented students, with particular consideration of, but not limited to:

   i. identification of gifted and talented students;
   ii. equity of access to quality educational choices for gifted and talented students and their families; and,
   iii. impact on the learning, development and wellbeing of gifted and talented students

2: the scope, coverage and effectiveness of current policies and programs for students from both metropolitan and regional school communities, school leaders, teachers and parents and carers to support gifted and talented students

3: opportunities and strategies for enhancing support for gifted and talented students, their parents and carers, teachers and school leaders

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) provides the following internet resources to assist school personnel to identify and respond appropriately to gifted and talented students:

- Summarised information about identification of “gifted and high potential” students, acceleration, teaching resources and contacts;
- Information about Selective Entry High Schools, including how to apply, practice tests, sitting the examination, outcome of the application;
- Information about the Select Entry Accelerated Learning Program which is currently being offered in 34 Victorian secondary schools.

**Recommendation 3: Easily accessible Policy and Supporting Documents**

The internet site of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was searched to locate a policy document addressing the education of gifted and talented students. This document was not easily found. It is critical that a policy
document is widely available and easily accessible to educators from the early childhood sector, schools and the tertiary education sector. Educators need to know and understand, through a policy document, their responsibilities towards gifted and talented students and their families. It would be beneficial to create an easily accessible space on the Department’s website dedicated to the education of gifted and talented students. This space could contain a Policy and supporting documents.

The Policy should contain a clear definition of what is meant by gifted and talented students and should list research supported identification procedures such as parent nomination, standardised achievement testing and objective ability testing. A definition should be considered in light of current research and should take account of children from culturally diverse backgrounds, those living in regional and remote areas and those with additional needs. Without a government supported definition schools tend to develop their own idiosyncratic definitions of giftedness and talent and tend to rely on teacher nomination to identify gifted and talented students. Research shows that teacher nomination is the most widely employed identification strategy used throughout Australia despite the fact that teacher nomination is one of the most inaccurate and least effective ways to identify gifted children (Gross, 2001). An inappropriate definition of giftedness along with inappropriate identification procedures tends to lead to students who are already succeeding in school being recognised as gifted. Those not identified tend to therefore be gifted and talented students from disadvantaged or minority groups, gifted students who feel constrained to conceal their abilities for peer acceptance, and gifted students who have become disengaged with learning due to being placed in an unresponsive school system.

A considered definition embedded within a mandated Policy would enable a more effective approach to the identification of gifted and talented students. In 1957, DeHaan and Havighurst proposed six domains of giftedness: intellectual ability, creative thinking, scientific ability, social leadership, mechanical skills and talent in the fine arts (Gross, 1993). Giftedness was seen as the potential for high performance or achievement. Their definition emphasized that giftedness is multifaceted since a child could be gifted in only one domain or in several. They acknowledged that many gifted children perform at levels below what might be expect from their ability; these gifted children can be said to be underachievers.
The most widely used definition of giftedness and talent currently in use in Australia is derived from the model developed by Canadian psychologist Françoys Gagné (Gagne, 1985). The model considers **gifts** in terms of potential or ability and **talent** in terms of performance or achievement. Gifts can develop into talents if the individual is supported adequately in their environment (including education settings), and if they themselves are motivated to learn and to develop their gifts into recognisable talents. In the words of Gagné (1985, p. 108): “Giftedness corresponds to competence which is distinctly above average in one or more domains of ability. Talent refers to performance which is distinctly above average in one or more fields of human performance”. Gagné identifies four major domains, namely intellectual, creative, socioaffective and sensori-motor. He notes that an individual may be gifted, that is, possess aptitude, competence, or potential, significantly beyond what would be expected for his or her age, in any one of the four major domains. The gifted individual may become talented, that is, demonstrate superior performance or achievement, in one or more talent fields if they are able to develop their gifts. Gagné acknowledges the need for a supportive educational environment if gifts are to develop into talents. A supportive environment can enable academic success as well as social and emotional wellbeing.

Gagné’s model has received wide recognition both in Australia and internationally. It has been used to determine definitions of giftedness and talent in New South Wales, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsed the Gagné definition at its meeting in Darwin in 1997.

**Recommendation 4: Easily accessible Professional Development materials**

The Gifted and Talented Education portal in the Department’s website could provide internet resources already available as outlined above, and new resources to support educators to meet the needs of gifted and talented students, such as examples of quality programming, planning and assessment, along with student work samples. Links to the professional development modules developed by GERRIC which are available through the DEEWR website may be helpful to include in this portal. Due to the current patchy coverage of the area of gifted and talented education in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching degrees, not all teachers practising today have the required knowledge or skills to offer quality educational choices to
gifted and talented students. This means that students and their parents do not have equal access to quality educational choices because many schools will not have staff who are able to support such choices. Online materials that are easily accessible and easy to use for teachers to support gifted and talented students would go some way towards remedying this. It would be particularly helpful if, once developed, all schools were encouraged to incorporate professional development concerning gifted and talented students into their yearly plans. This professional development could be accessed from the Department’s web portal and supported by face-to-face sessions with expert practitioners and university researchers.

The provision of Selective Entry High Schools in Victoria is important, as is the Select Entry Accelerated Learning Program. However the number of students served by these provisions is small in comparison to the number of students in Victoria who are potentially gifted and talented. Therefore, these programs are only serving a small proportion of all gifted and talented students in Victoria. To serve all gifted and talented students, the education of these students should be a concern in every classroom, including classrooms in regional and remote areas. Online resources, together with an online discussion forum monitored by an expert in gifted and talented education, could support teachers to cater for gifted students in regular classrooms, including those in regional and remote areas. There should be particular consideration given to resources to support the education of Indigenous gifted and talented children. Research shows that these students are regularly overlooked by traditional identification methods and require particular approaches to supporting their learning and development (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003). Chaffey (Chaffey, Bailey & Vine, 2003) has developed an approach to identifying Australian Indigenous students called the Coolibah Dynamic Assessment. This method has been successfully adopted for the identification of Indigenous students in Canada and New Zealand. It could be more widely used in the Australian context, particularly since it was developed for use within the Australian context.

Recommendation 5: Support moves towards the development of a national policy on the education of gifted and talented students

Australia does not have a national policy on the education of gifted and talented students despite support for such a development in national forums over the past thirty years,
including conferences and government reviews. It is an opportune time to raise the possibility of a national policy as the Australian Curriculum continues to be developed. Victoria can support this agenda on a national level by endorsing the development of a policy that provides a definition of giftedness and talent which is supported by current educational and psychological research. The definition should support the fact that gifted and talented students are found in all racial and ethnic groups and in all social classes, and that gifted students from disadvantaged and minority groups, and underachieving gifted students, are at particular risk of non-identification.

The Policy should address approaches to the education of gifted and talented students in early childhood, primary and secondary settings which are supported by educational and psychological research. These should include a range of ability and achievement groupings as well as forms of accelerated progression which research has found to be particularly effective with gifted and talented students (Roger, 2002).

**Recommendation 6: Use technology to support teachers, students and families in regional and remote areas.**

Technology that we have available today opens important opportunities to support teachers, students and families in regional and remote areas. These people are being poorly served presently.

An online **Clearinghouse** could be established to provide access to important documents, including research papers and government reports. This clearinghouse could also enable access to videos showing conference presentations.

**Video conferencing** with mentors and experts could provide real time support to teachers.

**Email and Skype** could be used to put gifted and talented students in touch with like-minded peers. Research shows these students tend to feel isolated because it is hard to find peers who share their academic interests and passions.

Technology could also support mentoring possibilities between gifted students and people working in their field of interest. For instance, school students may communicate with university students or researchers. Such mentoring relationships have been shown to be very
successful in supporting gifted students’ learning and keeping them motivated and engaged with learning.

Conclusion

In summary, the Faculty of Education at Australian Catholic University makes the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** Fund and support professional development for practicing teachers in gifted and talented education.

**Recommendation 2:** Support universities and other tertiary education settings to include instruction in gifted and talented education in all initial teacher education programs, including those addressing early childhood education, primary school teaching and high school teaching.

**Recommendation 3:** Easily accessible Policy and Supporting Documents

**Recommendation 4:** Easily accessible Professional Development materials

**Recommendation 5:** Support moves towards the development of a national policy on the education of gifted and talented students

**Recommendation 6:** Use technology to support teachers, students and families in regional and remote areas.

Professor Marie Emmitt
Executive Dean of Education
Australian Catholic University
Thursday 19 May 201
Reference List


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