I am making this submission as an experienced state government secondary school teacher of 35 years’ standing, as well as being a Leading Teacher responsible for supporting high achieving students in the senior school component (Years 10-12) in a large 7-12 non-selective secondary college, in the southeast of Melbourne. In addition, as a longtime senior VCAA/ VCE English assessor, I am well aware of the need to challenge able students to attain their best possible final results.

1. It is clear that talented students from less affluent and more socio-economically challenged areas are typically less able to access programs which might enhance their learning and extend their intellectual capacities. This is often caused by parents being less willing to support such involvement or participation as they are often simply less aware of the potential benefits. It can also relate to a lack of capacity on the part of parents to co-fund such participation eg. to access public transport. Without overt school support, therefore, such students often cannot access such suitable programs. This can reinforce their sense of futility and frustration, as well as stultify their willingness to consider applying for other programs.

2. Less publicly-acknowledged government secondary schools often are not made as aware of potential programs as perceived ‘high performing schools’, which consequently can simply reinforce any sense of some schools being less advantaged or ‘under-performing’. This nexus must be broken if we are to ensure that all students are afforded equal educative opportunities. Otherwise, there is the risk of this becoming a veritable self-fulfilling prophecy.

3. There should be specific funding made available to schools in less affluent areas to encourage and support the participation of their most gifted and able students to be able to access the same high calibre regional and state programs that students in more affluent areas readily access. For example, for the last two years at my own school in a struggling area in SE Melbourne, we have been obliged to allocate finds from several different budgetary areas to be able to subsidise the participation of 25 high achieving Yr 10 students in an outstanding week long city-based initiative run by the Foundation for Young Australians (Worlds of Work). This program has been instrumental in encouraging our best students to strive to excel and has indirectly led to several of them being awarded places in other programs, both in Years 10 and 11. Given that our funding sources are already so stretched, without a special grant system, it remains unclear if we can continue to support such key initiatives for our most able students in the future.

4. Given that some schools are not able to as easily access programs which are located in and around the city, there should be some funding made available to facilitate transport, especially by bus. Given that local bus costs have escalated most considerably in recent years, some less affluent schools often cannot support student participation simply due to such prohibitive transport costs.
5. The unit which supports these activities for students in the DEECD needs to be expanded in such a way as to more explicitly encourage participation from ‘less typical’ schools so that there is a conscious effort to break any negative community perceptions. This is especially needful with the growth in select-entry schools, given that some perceive that only students from these government schools will be winners of awards or gain entry to participate in specialised programs.

6. It is important that the identification of such gifted and talented students is not based on too narrow a set of indicators. This is especially the case for girls and students from non-English speaking backgrounds, who without explicit encouragement, may not appear to meet such a profile. In addition, we should not base such judgements on purely numerical test scores, but also include such factors as initiative to investigate, creativity, originality of thought, collaboration, leadership and commitment.