In Australia, every state and territory has an established policy for gifted and talented students. These policies are congruent with the Gagné’s giftedness model (Gagné 1985). His model has provided common terminology for the education community.

As we see it, attention to education priorities and integration of education policies for gifted and talented students has had a mixed impact (effect) in schools, tertiary pre-service and teacher post-graduate education.

Due to a lack of universal understanding of how to define and identify academically gifted and talented students, issues such as equity, elitism, and reduced funding have diminished the effectiveness of the integration of current educational policies and the preparation and delivery of academic programs.

Conversely, it appears that programs for those gifted in music, art and sport have had greater funding, acceptance and success.

Researching the journals for research articles on giftedness and talented education, it appears that there has been a wealth of research and research literature on giftedness in the 1980’s, 1990’s and early 2000’s.

However, possibly due to it not being seen as “politically correct” to endorse the notion of giftedness (intellectual giftedness), attention to gifted education and integration of research results into schools and tertiary education facilities appears to be limited and constrained.

Anecdotal conversations with academic colleagues at various institutions revealed confusion in defining and identifying a gifted child. In general, giftedness appeared to be identified with high academic achievement in external examinations. This in turn has been aligned with private school education, children belonging to families from high socio-economic status (SES), privileged education and money.

These factors can, and do, improve the academic performance of a child, even when the child is not gifted. However, if a child is gifted and in a low SES situation, the identification of giftedness and the provision of facilities to support the academic journey of these low SES gifted children, will ensure that they are able to turn their gifts into talents.

The consequence of equating wealthy households with academic giftedness is a negation of the potential of children in the western suburbs. Children have no control over the socio-economic status of the family they are raised in, and usually have little control over their school’s attitude to gifted education (Gross 2004, p7).

It is this confusion that has prompted an interest in presenting a balanced perspective on giftedness in the design of some of the courses we are involved with, and has also driven this submission to this Parliamentary Inquiry.
**Definition of important terms**

**Giftedness**

There is no universally agreed upon answer to the question “What is giftedness?” Giftedness, intelligence, and talent are fluid concepts and may look different in different contexts and cultures. Even within schools, a range of personal beliefs about the word "gifted" can be found. This term has developed multiple meanings and much nuance (NAGC 2008).

Gagné (1985) proposes a clear distinction between ‘giftedness’ and ‘talent’. He defines ‘giftedness’ as the possession of natural abilities or aptitudes at levels significantly beyond what might be expected for one’s age in any domain. By contrast, the term ‘talent’ equates with ‘achievement or performance at levels significantly beyond what might be expected at a given age’ (Gross 2004, p5).

In converting giftedness to talent one needs to examine the heart of Gagné’s model where he places the quality of the child’s learning as central to all teachers.

**Differentiated curriculum**

A differentiated curriculum is a program of activities that offers a variety of entry points for students who differ in abilities, knowledge and skills. In a differentiated curriculum teachers offer different approaches to what students learn (content), how students learn (process) and how students demonstrate what they have learned (product).

Van Tassel–Baska (1988) notes that gifted students embody three important characteristics that underscore the rationale for curriculum differentiation. These are that they have the capacity to (i) learn at faster rates, (ii) find, solve and act on problems more readily, and (iii) manipulate abstract ideas and make connections (Van Tassel Baska, Feldhusen et al. 1988).

**Identification of giftedness and strategies for dealing with gifted children**

Much has been written on the identification of giftedness and is available through examination of the relevant literature. What is inadequately understood is the vast range of giftedness. In particular, giftedness is not confined to the academic realm.

Nonetheless, when the term ‘gifted’ is raised there is often a presumption of academic predisposition, and it is this aspect of intellectual giftedness which has recently been met with a form of resistance to providing special academic programs for primary and secondary students and tertiary teacher education courses.

It should be noted though that no-one challenges the concept of high ability in music, art and/or sport. The term “gifted” is readily accepted in these fields of achievement, resulting in funding for special schools and programs that promote the development of children who possess these outstanding abilities.

Giftedness is often seen in the early years as precociousness in reading or asking questions that are well beyond the years of the young child. These children are often advanced into school earlier than their peers. However, again anecdotally, these same children do not receive a differentiated curriculum, as
often teachers are either not trained or insufficiently trained to identify and provide appropriate learning opportunities for these same children.

Gifted students wait for stimulating and interesting challenges of new knowledge and concepts, but too frequently the curriculum lacks flexibility to cater for their needs as depicted poignantly by an eleven year old gifted boy in the following poem, which he wrote.

“All the time I just sat there
Sat there
Waiting for something to happen
My teachers should have ridden with Jesse James
My teachers should have ridden with Jesse James
For all the time they stole from me “ (Delisle 1984)

By year three many gifted students are no longer interested in learning. A cycle of learned behaviour commences whereby the student deliberately underachieves for social acceptance and/or may even develop negative behaviours.

This is particularly evident in the “invisible” underachiever such as migrant and indigenous students, where expectations of high academic achievement are often absent.

For the migrant student, language and cultural differences substantially over-ride any potential identification of giftedness.

In general, attitudes in indigenous communities do not support and promote academic giftedness, though it is obvious that gifted artists, musicians and dancers are well represented and celebrated within both the indigenous and wider communities.

It is often not until year seven that these children can be catered for through select entry schools (SEALS) or accelerated programs. However, even these schools have problems with staff not being sufficiently trained or prepared to develop programs and support gifted children. By contrast, teachers who are able to identify gifted students and their needs will nurture these students and help reinforce the transition from gifted to talented.

There is a large body of research that provides strategies for dealing with academically gifted students. Yet there is still much argument regarding which strategies best support gifted children’s learning. Some of these are mixed ability groups, homogenous grouping, special schools, and special programs. The problem is that these strategies may not address the needs of all gifted students.

A myth exists that all gifted students are academically equal. However, there are significant differences in ability within this range of academic giftedness. This is a fact that is often misunderstood or overlooked in curriculum planning for gifted students.
In summary, we have identified issues that meliorate against academic gifted programs which include the following:-

1. Professional development in this area has fallen off over the years
2. Pre-service teacher training at VU does provide some small amount of discussion in our 2nd year courses but this is insufficient to allow novice teachers to identify and deal with academically challenging students
3. There has been no opportunity or demand to provide post graduate studies in gifted education at Victoria University
4. There has been no demand from teachers for professional development in this area in the western suburbs
5. Current programs are ineffective in identifying the gifted underachievers and the ‘invisible’ underachievers

As a consequence we are raising the following points.

There is/are:-

- positive existing Government policies for gifted education
- a lack of depth and opportunity for integration of these policies in pre-service teacher education courses
- confusion associated with relating giftedness to high achievement
- a lack of demand for post-graduate courses in gifted education at Victoria University
- a lack of demand for teacher professional development from teachers in the western suburbs
- a lack of research into programs and facilities for gifted children in the western suburbs
- a need for acknowledgement of giftedness in indigenous and immigrant children, and
- a need to understand that there are gifted underachievers

**Our recommendation**

We have identified a range of demographically related and social issues, negatively associated with the identification and acceptance of academically gifted children. To counter these issues we suggest the following:-

1. Community based education programs that
   - acknowledge the range of giftedness
   - acknowledge importance and needs of academically gifted children
   - disassociate the notion of academically gifted children from ideas of elitism
   - develop societal acceptance and support for academically gifted children
2. Training for education academics in the identification and management of academically gifted students
3. All teachers to receive professional development in the identification and management of academically gifted students to enable them to realise their full potential
4. Increased funding support for universities to provide teacher professional development and modified pre-service teacher training
 Essentially, when the Government deems that acknowledgment of “academic giftedness” is an important area for improving Australia’s future potential to provide a knowledge economy, then society will modify its understanding and acceptance of giftedness and support the provision of associated programs. Provision of appropriate academic programs in schools and tertiary institutions requires Government commitment to ongoing funding.

**About the authors**

*This submission is made by the authors as a personal reflection on their involvement in education in primary and secondary schools and tertiary education facilities over the last approximately 40 years.*


Barbara Black has worked at a range of primary and secondary schools (1968-2009 range of part-time and full-time positions) and Victoria University (2009-present).

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**References**


