APPENDIX A

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY’S ABLE LEARNERS’ ENRICHMENT PROGRAM: AN INNOVATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

In Australia, much needs to be done to nurture a culture of opportunity, challenge, and support to gifted children, and their parents, particularly so in regional and rural locations. Since 2000, via the Able Learners Enrichment Program (www.latrobe.edu.au/giftedchildren), La Trobe University School of Education at La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus has offered an annual enrichment workshop program for gifted and talented children, and made available relevant knowledge and support for their parents in central Victoria. Several aspects of this innovative program are overviewed: ALEP’s development, feedback comments from parents, and reflective comments from participating education students.
1. THE CHALLENGE OF GIFTED EDUCATION PROVISION IN RURAL AREAS.

A central paradox of Australian national life is that despite its vast geographical expanse, more than 85% of its population is urban-based, clustered in just a dozen cities, and along the narrow urban strips mainly along the east coast. In the state of Victoria for example, 70% of its 5 million people live in Melbourne. Life for the minority of families and children living in regional and rural Australia in general means poorer access to a wide range of services, opportunities and experiences, compared with their urban cousins; for example, employment, medical, human and business services, and educational and wider cultural experiences. Regional university campuses are a phenomenon of the past 15 years in Australia and provide new opportunities for addressing long standing educational inequities. Of the Melbourne-based La Trobe University with its 27,000 students, about 20% are based at regional campuses, the largest of which is the Bendigo one with more than 4,000 students. Of Bendigo’s students in 2005, most (79.1%) were from rural areas, while another 0.7% originate from isolated areas.

A recent national study concluded that across the nation, there is a strong spatial clustering of child disadvantage, a key dimension of which is the regionality and rurality factor. They concluded that ‘…children living outside capital cities face a much higher risk of social exclusion than those living within the capital cities’. (Harding, McNamara, Tanton, Daly, and Yap. 2006, p 27) Given that this disadvantage can be said to apply to all regional and rural children, it applies even more so to sub-groups (not mutually exclusive of one another) of this population: children with disabilities or ongoing medical difficulties, those of Aboriginal cultural background, children from remote area locations, and those which are gifted and talented. This latest piece of research just adds to a considerable archive of research on regional and rural educational disadvantage and the corresponding poorer school retention rates in rural, as compared with urban, Australia. Research in New Zealand shows a similar situation (Riley, 2003), with the Working Party on Gifted Education (quoted in Riley, 2003) identifying to unique needs of gifted children in rural New Zealand.

By virtue of geographical location, gifted and talented children in regional and rural areas typically experience inequitable access opportunities to appropriate intellectual and cultural experiences. For a combination of reasons, they tend to be under-identified (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) and their specific learning needs are often less frequently recognized, compared with their urban cousins. This situation is not unique to Australia, with the same situation found around the world (Ayr, 2003; Colangelo, Assouline, and New, 1999). A recent study in regional Victoria for example, found considerable reluctance among both teachers and parents to identify children attending school in small towns as gifted or talented (Faulkner, 2006). Another study in central Victoria which involved interviewing the principals of rural schools about their school policy
and education provision for gifted children found that in most schools there was minimal or no provision in both these areas (Chambers, 2004).

There is a limited international literature on the challenges for gifted education in non-urban or rural areas, (Colangelo, Assouline, and New, 1999; Baldus, 2003; Bowd, 2003), and an even sparser literature in Australia. However, this problem was recognized at the Australia national level via the 2001 Senate Report, *The Education of Gifted Children*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001) which comprehensively explored many dimensions of the education of gifted children across Australia. This Report noted that low socio-economic status, rural isolation, and Indigenous background are key factors in the under-identification of gifted children, which in turn can work to limit their self-aspirations, their healthy development as able learners, and schools' educational provision for them.

The Senate Report also made recommendations on the following findings, that, 'negative attitudes and mistaken beliefs about gifted children appear to be widespread' (Commonwealth of Australia 2001, xiii) and that 'untrained teachers are more likely to identify as gifted children of the dominant culture and less likely to notice giftedness among minority or underprivileged groups' (Commonwealth of Australia 2001, xiv). One of these recommendations (*Recommendation 14*) urged that in the light of the evidence about the apparent paucity of Australian university’s pre-service teacher education content relating to giftedness and gifted education, that ‘…. newly graduated teachers should have at least a semester unit on the special needs of gifted children in their degrees. This should include training in the identification of gifted children and the pedagogy of teaching them’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2001, 96). As authors of this paper, we endorse this recommendation, while noting also a more pressing need for such content inclusion in a university B.Ed. program in regional Australia, which is precisely what we at La Trobe are doing through the *Able Learners Enrichment Program* (ALEP).

Consistent with the 2001 Senate Report findings, the widespread under-identification of gifted and talented children in regional and rural areas contributes to the systemic educational under provision for this population. Since 2000, the ALEP for gifted children in regional Victoria at the Bendigo campus of Trobe University has begun to address some aspects of this problem. This Program is unique in Victoria. There is no other university-community program like this currently offered in Victoria, let alone regional Victoria. From its beginning in 2000, the *Able Learners Enrichment Program* has been received with high interest from many parents and from the young people themselves.

In Sydney, the Gifted Education, Research Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) located at the University of NSW offers a range of programs for children, parents and teachers, as does the regional campuses of Charles Sturt University. In the state of Victoria, the University of Melbourne offers evening professional development programs for teachers but these do not extend to
regional Victoria. Similarly, in urban universities, no programs of a community nature are offered for primary or lower secondary school children. Indeed, no other Victorian university is running anything similar to the ALEP for gifted and talented students and their parents. In 2000 it began as a very modest program, running totally on volunteer contributions for the first five years. Its expansion from 2005 with Telstra Community Development Foundation funding has provided a small though significant paid time component for the position of the Program Co-coordinator, just 5 hours a week.

2. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT FOR THIS PROGRAM IN NORTHERN VICTORIA

The Bendigo campus of La Trobe University with 4,100 students is located in central Victoria, 150 km north-west of Melbourne. With a city population of 100,000, Bendigo’s campus draws its students primarily from a wide, and typically sparsely populated regional expanse from northern Victoria. This rural hinterland to this service city is loosely bounded by the river towns of Mildura (45,000), Swan Hill (8,000) and Echuca (9,000) in the north, by Shepparton (35,000) and Benalla (15,000) in the east, by Maryborough (9,000) in the west, and Kyneton (5,000) in the south. Bendigo is a gateway to the drier regions of the continent. While distances are not great compared with those in other states, nonetheless, the tyranny of distance for those living in north central Victoria remains an ever-present reality. For example, Bendigo and Mildura are more than 400 km distant. Northern Victoria is not a wealthy region, affected as it is by the vagaries of climate, particularly drought, and many of the La Trobe students who have come from rural locations or small towns are first-generation tertiary educated representatives in their families of origin.

3. HISTORY OF THE ABLE LEARNERS ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

La Trobe’s ALEP began in 2000 as a modest one day a year workshop program for gifted children in regional Victoria. The first program in 2000 offered a choice of just 7 workshops for children across the age range 7–14. This soon grew to between 10 or 14 workshops, so that on these days 150 – 220 children and their parents would visit the campus. From its beginnings, the ALEP has always been a non-selective open access program. While schools are invited to suggest or nominate children who would benefit from attending, its other main networks of publicity have been first via the parent associations for the gifted and talented, second, from the web site since it was established in 2005, and third, increasingly from word of mouth. Thus, there are many children who attend who have not been formally assessed on a psychological test. Via the publicity networks we use, the ALEP attracts a mix of children, those who are bright and most competent learners, as well as those who on any external indicators would be regarded as gifted.

From the beginning, the ALEP has provided complementary enrichment agendas for both children and their parents. For children, the largely campus-based program has offered a variety of interest-based workshops led by a combination of university academics from across the campus, community teachers, and more recently, by La Trobe’s B.Ed. and M.Ed students. Though the
majority of children attending ALEP come from Bendigo and immediate surrounding districts, some parents have travelled distances of between 2 and 5 hours to have their children participate in these workshops. For parents, a guest speaker program on giftedness or aspects of gifted education has remained a foundation feature of this university-regional community program.

The ALEP is consistent with La Trobe University’s mission statement to provide highly qualified graduates capable of meeting the diverse needs of the communities served by the University and to be an innovative provider of higher education programs in regional Victoria.

Between 2000 and 2004, workshop offerings were led by a combination of university academics, co-opted staff from Bendigo-based institutions such as the Science Discovery Centre and the Bendigo Art Gallery, and by committed community educators, or by outstanding school-based teachers. In this period it was one day a year program only, and between 12 and 15 half and full day workshops were offered. The range was very wide inclusive such themes as ancient mathematical systems, an interactive introduction to ancient Greek and Roman as a means of better understanding contemporary English, the practice and mechanics of boomerang throwing, understanding the environment from geological field excursions, competitive chess, and introductory psychology. Student workshop numbers were generally restricted to 16 and workshops generally had age bands of 3 to 4 years, and catering for children up to 14 years of age.

With family incomes in country areas generally lower than that of their capital city counterparts the cost to participants has been kept to a minimum. This has been a significant achievement given the current macro-political climate affecting Australian universities which now strongly encourages an entrepreneurial and a customer pays culture, concomitant with steadily reducing government funding to tertiary education. Within this climate, those busy academics who have taken on responsibility as workshop tutor have generously donated their time for the joy of working with gifted children, and in so doing have contributed in a small but significant way to the wider community. Parents in the country are extremely grateful that they can afford to access a program of this sort and still afford to travel to get here.

The ALEP has developed significantly in the last couple of years, following some modest funding from the Telstra Community Development Foundation. Through 2005, and 2006, ALEP now offers three separate workshop days for children across the year, and in addition, specialist speakers are contracted to address parents on each of these days on topics of relevance to the giftedness and gifted education; for example, knowledge about gifted and talented learners, learning styles, issues of parenting with gifted children, and, issues relating to parent-school relationships. Since 2005, the Coordinator of the ALEP Pam Lyons, has taken on an additional role of organising a conference on a significant theme for teachers and parents in November each year. In the last two years, final year B. Education and M.Ed. students as part of their elective studies on giftedness, have been ALEP
workshop leaders a stimulating role which has provided them with some practical educative experience of very able learners.

Although the beginning of the ALEP program preceded the Australian Government 2001 Senate Report *The Education of Gifted Children* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), the recommendations of that report provide an important rationale for developing a program of this sort in regional Australia. The Report noted the widespread negative attitudes towards intellectual giftedness across the Australian community, and recommended that teacher education programs should give particular attention to gifted children who experience educational disadvantage for a number of reasons, disadvantages such as low socio economic status and rural isolation.

4. INVOLVING THE B. ED. AND M.ED STUDENTS IN THE WORKSHOPS

The development of ALEP with *Telstra Community Development Foundation* funding enabled new possibilities to develop. As some final year students in the pre-service B.Ed. course enrol in gifted education studies as their course electives, it seemed to the authors of this paper, that the ALEP program could provide valuable learning experiences and practical teaching opportunities for these students. It could also seek to better address concerns of the 2001 Senate Report, which is corroborated by other research (Carrington & Bailey, 2000; Plunkett, 2000) From 2005 therefore, these B. Ed. students, (and in 2006, Master of Education coursework students too), have participated in the ALEP as workshop tutors. The subject *Gifted and Talented Youth* had required that students undertake a case study of a very able learner in the school setting, and the ALEP workshops within which La Trobe students would participate as workshop tutors, is scheduled towards the end of the teaching semester program. Thus in these two complementary ways in this subject, final year and post graduate education students now gain practical experience with gifted and talented children.

5. SOME EVALUATIONS FROM THE ALEP PROGRAM

Written evaluations have been formally completed by parents of children attending the ALEP, and by La Trobe education students. There are also many positive and encouraging anecdotal comments from ALEP tutors, both university lecturers and community teachers, which we have not included in this paper. Instead here we include some of the qualitative observations of the parents and from the La Trobe education students. The children participating were not surveyed but the anecdotal comments from them consist of statements of the amount of fun they had and that fact that they made new friends. Most importantly, they all leave with smiles and a wish to return.

(i) Parent Comments on the benefits of the ALEP for their Children
After each workshop day, parents are surveyed about the ALEP and invited to share their views about its value for their children, and for themselves. The following responses are from parents to one question on the 10 item questionnaire (‘what do you believe your child(ren get out of the program?’).

“My child enjoys attending. The challenge and enjoyment is something totally different” (P1)

“She really enjoyed extending her interests, as or example, ‘Latin with a focus on Harry Potter’ She was interested in both aspects of the program and came home and worked on the homework sheets, contact with like minds.” (P2)

“The chance to explore topics outside the narrow confines of normal class curriculum.” (P3)

“The opportunity to mix with other able learners – my daughter attends a small school where these opportunities are limited.” (P4)

“‘Jason’ really enjoyed participation in the ALEP. As the mother of a child with Aspergers, I liked the way he worked with another boy, and going back to the car, he was saying goodbye to others in the group.” (P5)

“My child gained acceptance, friends, and stimulation that isn’t in the current education system.” (P6)

“Freedom to think, self esteem, and social interaction” (P7)

“Extra stimulation that just doesn’t happen at school. I’ve noticed that while the workshops cater for gifted children, they don’t lose sight of the fact that those gifted students are children.” (P8)

(ii) Parent Comments on the Value of the ALEP Parent Information Sessions

“Please keep up the ALEP. I’d be quite interested in attending short affordable courses learning about giftedness and supporting gifted individuals.” (P9)

“The information sessions are useful, but the level of information about the topic is irrelevant if teachers have little knowledge in this area.” (P10)
“I really enjoyed finally meeting people (parents and guest speakers) who understand what I feel.” (P11)

“I would love to have attended them, but work has prevented me. My husband attended one and found it very informative.” (P12)

“We need all the help we can get.” (P13)

“I have only attended one parent information session to date and found it very interesting: lots of websites, and information to research to help cope with behaviour etc. Felt comfortable to be ‘in the same boat’ as other parents. Was great to listen to other parents’ concerns.” (P14)

“Very informative – obtained some great hints and insights.” (P15)

“Excellent! Keep them coming! Would be good to have smaller group workshops for parents which would allow discussing personal case studies.” (P16)

(ii) Reflective Observations of La Trobe University education students from their participation in the ALEP workshops

Example 1: The ‘Pasta-Making’ workshop for children aged 7 – 9 years

“We had varied responses as to why children chose the pasta making workshop. One girl said that she liked to learn new skills and then practice them by teaching them, an amazing response from a 7 year old.”

“The workshop was very ‘hands-on’, the students were very observant, quick to pick up skills, listened well and used their initiative to help others. Given that this group have never been together, they were very comfortable and cohesive. I recall one boy stacking the pasta sheets for a girl “I’ll put your pasta in piles of 5 for you so that it will be easier” This same boy offered to dismantle the pasta machine because he remembered how it went together.”

“I was intrigued to see a girl of 7 years sitting at her desk knitting while she waited for the pasta to cook. Her response to my question about the knitting was, ‘I take it with me, and use it if I need to fill in time’ What a practical solution! I wondered how receptive a teacher would be to a child knitting in class!”
“On reflection of the workshop, I think that we needed to be more selective about how we ask questions to extend their thinking. We need to avoid questions with yes/no answers, and ask more investigative questions to stimulate thinking.”

**Example 2:** The ‘Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence’ workshop for children aged 7 – 9 years

“As preparation for the class, one child had already researched current views of life on Mars while others in the group thought more conventionally of cartoon space monsters. This experience brought home the importance of being flexible in both your definition of giftedness and the provision of learning experiences for gifted and talented children. “

“One of our activities that had been tried successfully by my fellow presenter with a grade 5/6 class fell completely flat for several reasons. It involved role-playing trying to communicate with an alien. One boy could not get past the idea that the only realistic aliens would be algae or bacteria, and communication with them would be impossible. Another found it too boring because he had been looking forward to discussing all the possibilities of what and where extraterrestrial life may be.”

**Example 3:** The ‘Acting Up’ workshop for children aged 7 – 9 years

“Assuming that I’d know exactly what was going to happen with the students, I was pleasantly surprised when they were more than willing to make suggestions on how we might vary the exercises we had planned. Although not all suggestions were viable, they were happy to hear the reasons for this, accepted this and continued to enjoy themselves.”

“I was surprised at how well they were able to work on their own with minimal assistance from myself or from my partner so when it came to the final activity for the day, we were able to alter the plan and allow the `students to work on their own which ended up with them being able to make up their own play and present their own version of a fairytale to an audience.”

“If I was conducting another workshop, I now know that I can afford to be flexible in my planning so as to allow for some independent learning time etc for the students, as they seem to appreciate this. Also, the vast range of personalities has shown me that no two gifted children will ever be the same.”
**Example 4:** The ‘Bushrangers and Outlaws’ workshop for children aged 7 – 9 years

“It was great to see these kids really enjoying themselves and it was obvious that they had chosen the topic because it was something that they were really interested. Those kids taught me more about bushrangers that day than I had known previously!”

“One thing that I noticed about these kids was that they all got along quite well considering they had never met each other before.”

**Example 5:** The ‘Puzzlemania’ Workshop for children aged 7 – 9 years

“I did enjoy the different ways the children approached the puzzles. Some flitted from puzzle to puzzle and one boy roamed the room so frequently, he completed just one puzzle in an hour. Others displayed great determination to stick at the task till the end, particularly the girls who were definitely the quieter ones in the group.

The comment I most remember though was one 8 year old boy saying to me ‘I’m gifted in maths’ as he began to solve a magic square puzzle, only to give up five minutes later, and not return to the maths puzzles for the rest of the session. I wondered where his perception of ‘being gifted’ had come from, and concluded that he lacked the ‘judgement’ in relating to boasting of his abilities that the American expert on giftedness Dr James Webb, spoke of in the video we saw.”

**Example 6:** Language Workshop for children aged 9 – 10 years

"At first, I had to admit that I was very apprehensive about doing the workshop due to my fear about being possibly outsmarted by them. However, my fears were quickly alleviated as I got to know them. It was great to see that since they were all of reasonably the same level or at least interests, they socialized really well and actually surprised me how mature they were by using their manners all the time, listening to you, etc.”

"We had one activity where students had to talk about a specific topic for about a minute. It was amazing listening to the topics they came up with (Al Capone, Ronnie Biggs, and Tutankhamen). This program didn’t really give me much of an idea as to how to teach these individuals but it did give me great insight into what they might be like behaviour wise and what they are capable of.”
6. OUR OWN REFLECTIONS ON THESE COMMENTS

These students, enrolled in either the Master of Education or B.Ed, who ran these workshops did so as part of their assessment, and so the planning and teaching of a group of gifted students formed part of their learning. The academic level of the workshops is aimed approximately two to three years above the chronological age of the children participating. The tutors choose topics of their passion so the workshops are fun for all. The practical experience of teaching gifted students makes a significant difference to their understanding of the characteristics and needs of these students. As can be seen from the above reflections, the a purely theoretical study of giftedness does not completely prepare teachers for the variety of differences they will encounter when teaching gifted children. Following these workshops, both authors ran debriefings with the tutors and confirmed that their increased understanding of the special needs of gifted children had made them well able to teach in this field.

7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The ALEP will continue to develop, and we will continue to learn from all the participants. Many children and their parents, having participated just once, look forward to returning again to the workshops. Some repeatedly travel several hours to the program. We have been encouraged by the positive comment from all categories of participant, though just a selection from parents and La Trobe’s Education students are provided in this paper. The ALEP has provided a valued experiential and pedagogic focus for these La Trobe students complementing the usual lectures, seminars, and course readings. An added benefit is the anecdotal evidence of the increased awareness of the existence giftedness in rural areas that this program has achieved, both in schools and in the general community.

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