

CHAPTER 5

THE ROLE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

5.1 Many submissions made detailed suggestions as to how the Commonwealth should intervene to improve practices in gifted education. However these ideas must be seen in context of normal Commonwealth-State relations. School education is the responsibility of the states and territories. The Commonwealth contributes through general recurrent grants for government and non-government schools, capital grants, and a number of programs of targeted grants. Targeted grants for 2001-2002 are \$502 million, plus \$150 million for the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme.¹ Current priorities for targeted programs are improving learning outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students; and improving outcomes in specific targeted teaching and learning areas.

5.2 As well, the Commonwealth has come to assume a key role of national coordination and leadership in education policy, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). Commonwealth initiatives in education policy have wide effects on school education.

5.3 Many submissions also suggested that the Commonwealth should somehow 'mandate' gifted education units in university teacher training courses. However universities are independent bodies established under state law. The Commonwealth contributes about half their running costs, as determined by 'profiles' negotiations with each university; but as a matter of policy the Commonwealth does not involve itself with the design of particular courses.²

5.4 The Committee's consideration of the role of the Commonwealth in gifted education aims to suggest reasonable areas for Commonwealth assistance or coordination while respecting broader policy and the norms of Commonwealth-State relations.

National strategy

5.5 Many submissions recommended that the Commonwealth should establish a national strategy on gifted education, to ameliorate the changeable and unstable state of policy and practice which results from the low profile and uncertain acceptance of this area of special needs (see paragraph 3.119). It was suggested that this could deal with matters such as a nationally uniform definition of giftedness; a strategy for professional development; a strategy for curriculum materials; a strategy for raising

1 *Federal Financial Relations 2001-2002*, Budget Paper No. 3

2 Commonwealth grants, excluding HECS, were 46 per cent of university sector revenue in 1999. The Hon. D. Kemp, Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Higher Education - report for the 2001-2003 triennium*, March 2001, p.62

public awareness of gifted education needs and combating misconceptions and negative attitudes.

5.6 The Committee agrees that this is an appropriate goal for national co-ordination.

Recommendation 17

MCEETYA should develop a national strategy on education of the gifted.

National research centre

5.7 Many submissions urged that the Commonwealth should fund a national research centre on gifted education. Some felt that there should be one national centre, on the basis that concentration of resources would be more efficient. Others, especially from the outlying states, thought there should be a centre in each state. Many recommended as a national centre the Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales, on the grounds that it is already the pre-eminent such site in Australia. GERRIC was established in 1997 in the School of Education of the University of NSW, and is involved in teaching, research, and holiday programs for gifted children. It presently has 2 ½ academic positions.³ However it should be noted that GERRIC is funded by the UNSW's normal operating grant, and so is not now the independent national centre envisaged by the recommendations of the 1988 Senate Select Committee report. The University of Adelaide commented:

Once a university has ownership of a body of knowledge, unless otherwise mandated and funded, all research becomes the intellectual property of that institution. No matter how well-intentioned and well-serving the researcher, the interests of that institution must predominate.⁴

5.8 GERRIC itself, not unexpectedly, favoured the idea that it should become a national centre. However it also stressed that 'GERRIC does NOT see itself as substituting for, or taking over any Australian programmes or initiatives which are already in place, but rather as adopting a co-ordinating role and as assisting in the establishment of further initiatives.'⁵

5.9 The Committee agrees that the Commonwealth should fund a national centre. This form of positive discrimination in relation to one specialty of education is justified by the special needs described in this report. The Committee understands that no existing Commonwealth program is well adapted to be the source of funds. Cooperative Research Centres, which the Commonwealth subsidises, are focussed on public-private collaboration in applied science. Australian Research Council funding

3 Submission 215, GERRIC, p.80. J. Milner Davis, *Hansard*, Sydney, 16 July 2001, p.451

4 Submission 101, University of Adelaide, p.3

5 Submission 215a, GERRIC, p.1

is competitive and could not be mandated for a particular centre. This example raises the general question of how the Commonwealth could or should co-ordinate the university system to create national centres of excellence in subjects not covered by the Cooperative Research Centre structure.

Recommendation 18

The Commonwealth should fund a national research and resource centre on gifted education.

5.10 As to what research priorities should be, this would be a matter for the experts involved. Submissions made some suggested about research priorities. Dr McGuigan argued that there is a need for more Australian-based research, since most literature in the area is American. Professor Braggett saw a need for research on basic school organisational practices and, in particular, the ways in which teachers may cater for gifted students within the comprehensive classroom. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training urged Commonwealth support for research and development of the tools to identify gifted children.⁶ The Committee suggests that some other priorities would include longitudinal studies of the effects of gifted education interventions, and study of the ways in which giftedness is handled in fields of endeavour outside the traditional academic curriculum.

Funding support

Targeted programs

5.11 From 1993 to 1995 the Commonwealth funded a Gifted and Talented component in its National Equity Program for Schools. Funding was roughly \$1 million each year. Several witnesses regretted that the broadbanding of Commonwealth targeted programs for schools in 1996 put an end to this support. They recommended assistance for gifted education as part of the Commonwealth's targeted programs.

5.12 A relevant targeted program is Grants for Improving Learning Outcomes for Educationally Disadvantaged Students. However the guidelines make it fairly clear that 'educationally disadvantaged' is intended to refer to students with sub-standard literacy and numeracy, and does not refer to the disadvantage suffered by the unrecognised, underachieving gifted child. The same applies to the Country Areas subprogram, which is intended to 'enhance the learning outcomes for students in geographically isolated areas so that their learning outcomes match those of other students.'⁷

6 Submission 10, Dr K. McGuigan, p.9; similarly L. Kronborg, *Hansard*, Box Hill, 11 May 2001, p.143. Submission 40, Prof. E. Braggett, p.26. Submission 273, NSW Department of Education and Training, p.v

7 *Commonwealth Programmes for Schools - Quadrennial Administrative Guidelines 2001-2004*, p.69ff,83

5.13 The disadvantage suffered by the unrecognised, underachieving gifted child is real. In the Committee's view it would be reasonable to amend the guidelines so that this educational disadvantage is within scope for the program.

Recommendation 19

The Commonwealth should amend the guidelines for targeted programs for schools to confirm that the disadvantage suffered by gifted children whose needs are not met is within the meaning of 'educational disadvantage'.

Curriculum materials

5.14 Submissions recommended that the Commonwealth should support development of national curriculum materials to support differentiating the curriculum for the gifted (including online materials). The Committee agrees that this is an appropriate activity for national co-ordination.

Recommendation 20

The Commonwealth through MCEETYA should support development of national curriculum materials to differentiate the curriculum for gifted children.

Teacher training

5.15 Teacher training is discussed in chapter 4. It is not appropriate for the Commonwealth to attempt to mandate the contents of particular university courses, as many submissions suggested. This would be an unprecedented intrusion into the details of university operations. However teacher employing authorities, as 'clients' of the universities, are in a position to tell the universities their requirements in relation to the qualifications of graduates. The Committee recommended in chapter 4 that state and territory education authorities, as a condition of employment, should require newly graduated teachers to have a unit on special education (giftedness) in their degrees (see paragraph 4.67).

5.16 The Commonwealth has supported professional development for teachers since the National Professional Development Program of 1994-96. This Commonwealth involvement is highly appropriate in view of the professional development needs suggested by the aging demographic profile of the teaching force. The current program is the Quality Teacher Programme, which will provide \$74 million over three years for professional development. Priorities are 'literacy, numeracy, mathematics, science, information technology, vocational education in schools, and specialist skills for teaching Indigenous students, students in rural or remote locations and students in urban disadvantaged schools.'⁸

8 *Teachers for the 21st Century: Making the Difference*, Dept of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, no date [2000], pp.5,15

5.17 In view of the special needs suggested in this report, the Committee has recommended that the Commonwealth should consider specifying professional development on issues to do with giftedness as a priority in the Quality Teacher Programme (see paragraph 4.72).

