Submission for

Inquiry Into Academic Standards of School Education

From
ACT Gifted and Talented Local Support Group of New South Wales Association of Gifted and Talented Children

This submission discusses some factors of the education of academically gifted and talented students as they progress through school, with particular emphasis on the ACT education system.

Gifted students represent the top 10% of our school student population. Researchers estimate there are 500 000 of these students across in Australia. These students need a curriculum that is differentiated from the standard curriculum. They need a program flexible enough to be able to enter school early; progress through school at a more rapid rate and experience depth and diversity in every subject studied that is more complex than other students.

Provision in K-Year 12

Gifted students need a program different to average students in school. This difference needs to be designed to allow for: more rapid movement, acceleration, through the school system; instruction from a curriculum that has been differentiated to allow for exposure to new ideas, in-depth mastery and use of critical and creative thinking skills.
Whilst the ACT has curriculum guidelines that allow the differentiation to a Gifted Program the use of the curriculum in this way is limited. Whilst research continuously supports educating gifted students together, the practice is often not adopted. Whilst policy provision exists to move students more rapidly through schooling by either a whole school year or in subject areas it often is not used.

Gifted students benefit from being with each other socially throughout their entire schooling, from K-Yr12 if at all possible. Although there are excellent examples of individual schools meeting the academic needs of some of the gifted students in the ACT, the programs are scarce, often full and unable to take additional students and fail to lead directly into another program as students' progress through the different stages of school. For example, a Kindergarten –Year 6 gifted program at a Primary School does not link into a Year 7- Year 10 High School program.
This creates two problems. First, students who have been performing well in a gifted program in primary school may not find an appropriate gifted program and suddenly come to a "go slow" or worse experience repetition of previous taught subject matter when starting high school. They comment to parents about being failures and parents comment to students about Year 7 being a gap year, not for new learning but just for getting new friends. As a society we can afford neither. Our students' need to continuously progress through a school curriculum that teaches new ideas and concepts. We don't need pay for an academic gap year. It is much better that gifted curricula are available to more students.
Second, school entry criteria in the ACT at High School and College no longer take into account the fact that their friendship group has applied to the school, something that was happening until three years ago. This means that gifted students may lose their social group upon entering high school (Yr7) or college (Yr11).
Together with a differentiated curriculum, gifted students need a lot of assistance with creating a subject pathway towards eventual workforce participation. Although all high schools in the ACT have a "careers program" it starts too late for many gifted students and often fails to assist students to select the shortest, simplest path to university degree and workforce participation. An example of this is the choice of students in Year 11 and Year 12 to study two lines of tertiary maths, but who do no tertiary science subject. For these students who select not one, but two lines of tertiary maths its hard to think of many examples where the University package they then proceed to doesn't contain at least one other science subject.

The ANU Secondary College

A recent initiative by ACT Department of Education and Training and the Australian National University is the development of a program where some students can study an extended Mathematics, Physics or Chemistry Unit as part of their Year 11 and 12 studies. Students who successfully complete these courses have the benefit of both using their marks in the calculation of their UAI and have the course credited to their ANU undergraduate degree. It in fact gives them a head start towards their degree.

For these students it gives them a chance to experience some of the University life and culture early. They can also access the ANU library and other facilities to help research assignments for their other subjects.

Currently, the scheme has a number limit of 35 students per subject rather than a minimum academic standard the student needs to attain to gain entry to the subject. It would be great to see the establishment of a minimum academic standard for entry into the program so that all students with the appropriate academic ability can gain entry into the course. This may require the need for additional funds for the program. It would be great to see it extended out of Science and into all other subject areas that students study in the ACT in Year 11 and 12.

A program like this has benefits for society because it can lead to: reduced HECS debt, students in public schools attend the program free; and perhaps the ability to compress a degree so that students become productive members of the workforce earlier.

ANU Music Program

In contrast to the above is the ANU Year 11 and 12 advanced music program. It has an audition entry. The program provides students with 2-3 hours a week of classes with 1hour a week of music tuition. The exam results at the end of the program are able to make up part of a students UAI, but the course currently does not gives students credit towards an appropriate university degree.

An example of a Similar Program in the US

Stanford University's Education Program for Gifted Youth Online High School

This program is designed to provide gifted students with access to more challenging curricula and ensure students receive college credit (equivalent to a university credit in Australia) for the advanced work they do in High School. The program is conducted online, but it does give students the opportunity to attend the Stanford University campus for up to 8 weeks during summer. This provides a chance to meet tutors face to face, and also to socially link up with other students doing the same courses. It has classes, (termed Advanced Placement (AP)) in music theory, languages, mathematics, history, physics, chemistry, Latin (and more). It allows for students to accelerate through the courses if the course pace is too slow.

Conclusion

The curricula in the ACT schools allows for differentiation to meet the needs of gifted students. However, the curricula are often not differentiated in this way, failing therefore to meet the needs of gifted students in this area. Students may find the opportunity to be in a gifted program for part, but not always all of their schooling.

Gifted students suffer from the lack of appropriate career education, which may lead to inadequate subject choice in Yrs 11 and 12 in preparation for tertiary study.

The development of classes at ANU Secondary College are creating additional opportunities for some gifted students and it is hopeful that this program will be extended.

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