

**Report of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business
and Education References Committee**

The Education of Gifted Children

Government Response to the Report



**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE SENATE EMPLOYMENT,
WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES
COMMITTEE ON THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED CHILDREN**

INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth Government supports the underlying assumption of the Report that all Australian children should have the opportunity to maximise their educational potential. It is in the national interest that every child's gifts and talents should be nurtured and allowed to flourish.

The Commonwealth seeks to work co-operatively with school education authorities throughout Australia to achieve this shared aspiration. To this end, in April 1999 Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers of Education meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), endorsed *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*. The Preamble to the Adelaide Declaration recognises that "Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision."

The Adelaide Declaration represents an historic commitment by all jurisdictions to improving Australian schooling within a framework of national collaboration. Significantly, the first national goal states: "Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students."

A number of the recommendations in the Report, *The Education of Gifted Children*, propose action by MCEETYA as the appropriate forum where national policies and strategies can be pursued. The Government will submit these recommendations to MCEETYA for consideration or to other appropriate bodies where the proposed action is not for MCEETYA to pursue.

Recommendation 1

The Committee **RECOMMENDS** that:

MCEETYA should expand the national reporting framework for school education to focus on not only minimum benchmarks but also high achievement targets for gifted children.

Response

In 1999 MCEETYA affirmed its commitment to national reporting of comparable education outcomes and agreed to six areas which would provide a basis for the first stage of reporting: literacy; numeracy; student participation, retention and completion; vocational education in schools; science and information and communication technology. The benchmarks for literacy and numeracy specify minimum standards that should be achieved by all Australian students. Work is proceeding within the MCEETYA Taskforce on Performance Measurement and Reporting to develop measures in the other areas specified by MCEETYA.

The concept of developing high achievement targets and measuring achievement in relation to those targets would be a matter for the MCEETYA Taskforce on Performance Measurement and Reporting. It would need to be made clear that any targets that might be developed were not seen as putting an upper limit on possible achievement. Another question to be weighed up would be a judgement about jurisdictions' reporting responsibilities and how far these can be extended without imposing a heavy burden on resources.

This is not to say that the Commonwealth and States and Territories are not already valuing, measuring and reporting on high achievement among students. In 1998 the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments accepted an invitation to participate in the first OECD-led study of international educational achievement, known as the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. The assessment is not primarily a test of curriculum content but rather of how well students can apply their knowledge, understanding and skills to meet real situations encountered in adult life. Three domains (or subject areas) are tested: reading, literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy. During 2000 over 6,000 Australian 15 year old students participated in the assessment of the three domains. For 2000 reading literacy was the major domain. In 2003 and 2006 the major domains will be mathematical literacy and scientific literacy respectively. In PISA 2000 Australia was amongst the highest performers in all three domains. In both reading and mathematical literacy, Australia was (statistically) significantly outperformed by only one country (Finland in the case of reading and Japan in maths), in scientific literacy students from only two countries, Japan and Korea, significantly outperformed our students.

As the incidence of giftedness can be assumed to be similar from country to country, it is valuable to know that the results of Australia's top-performing students compare extremely well. For example, in reading literacy which was the major focus of PISA 2000, Australia has one of the highest proportions of students at the highest proficiency level (and one of the lowest proportions of students at the lowest level).

Participation in PISA 2000 cost Australia some \$1.9 million, of which the Commonwealth has met \$1.1 million and the States and Territories \$0.8 million. Continuing participation in PISA should yield more useful insights into Australian students' achievement levels

The Commonwealth will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA.

Recommendation 2

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

MCEETYA should commission research into the reasons for negative attitudes to high intellectual ability.

Response

The Government believes that if a study of this nature is undertaken it would need to examine not only the reasons for negative attitudes but also how they might be addressed. For example the study should set out strategies that teachers might apply to deal with situations where students of high intellectual ability are subjected to the negative attitudes of other students. The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA.

Recommendation 3

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

Peak education policy documents such as the Adelaide Declaration or State/Territory equivalents, where they refer to special needs or individual differences, should make it clear that 'special needs' includes giftedness.

Response

MCEETYA has currently no immediate intention to revise *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century*. As mentioned in the Introduction, the way the national goals are framed at present, the Preamble and the first goal are fully inclusive of all students, by definition encompassing gifted students. Their rights to a rewarding life and to have their talents and capacities fully developed are implied by the comprehensive statements in the Preamble and first national goal. The Commonwealth Government supports the thrust of this recommendation and will refer it to MCEETYA.

Recommendation 4

The Committee **RECOMMENDS** that:

Training for teachers to identify giftedness should pay particular attention to the need to identify gifted children who have disadvantages such as low socio-economic status, rural isolation, physical disability or Indigenous background.

Response

The Commonwealth Government agrees that teacher training programmes should equip teachers to identify gifted children whose gifts and talents may not be easily recognised or may not be potentially realised because of disadvantages such as low socio-economic status, rural isolation, physical disability or Indigenous background.

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training has undertaken to bring these issues to the attention of the higher education sector in general and in particular to the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee and the Deans of Education, by specifically highlighting the need for teacher training programmes to address issues associated not only with identifying giftedness, but also managing it effectively in the classroom setting. The Department's Higher Education Division is funding a relevant study under its Evaluations and Investigations Programme entitled *University Credit for School Students*. The report, which will be circulated throughout the sector, concerns current policies and programmes that allow school students to gain university credit and/or complete university subjects while still at school.

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training has also undertaken to bring these issues to the attention of the Secretariat of the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education. The Review, which is to commence shortly, was foreshadowed in the Government's Innovation Action Plan *Backing Australia's Ability*.

Recommendation 5

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

MCEETYA should develop a strategy setting out goals for differentiating the curriculum for the gifted.

Response

This is a matter which the Commonwealth Government will refer to MCEETYA for consideration. If it is agreed that MCEETYA needs to support work in this area, it seems likely that the Curriculum Corporation will be involved in progressing it.

Recommendation 6

The Committee *RECOMMENDS* that:

The Commonwealth should propose that MCEETYA develop a consistent policy encouraging suitable acceleration for the gifted.

Response

The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA. If MCEETYA agrees to pursue this recommendation it is possible that MCEETYA would seek expert advice and perhaps commission research in order to come to a position on which any future policy statement might be based.

Recommendation 7

The Committee *RECOMMENDS* that:

MCEETYA should develop a consistent policy exploring the options for ability grouping and supporting ability grouping as a way of meeting the needs of the gifted, whether in selective or comprehensive schools.

Response

As for Recommendation 6 above, the Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA. Differences between jurisdictions in terms of population factors and geographic distribution of schools, may make a national position on this issue difficult to reach and it may be that individual school authorities will prefer to frame their own policies on this and other issues.

Recommendation 8

The Committee **RECOMMENDS** that:

The Commonwealth should propose to MCEETYA that states with selective schools or classes should research the effects and outcomes of selective schooling.

Response

The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA. The decision whether or not to conduct this proposed research is essentially one for the jurisdictions concerned.

Recommendation 9

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

Policies on gifted education should include discussion of the resource implications and the sourcing of the necessary resources.

Response

This is primarily an issue which States and Territory school authorities, both government and non-government, need to address in the light of budgetary priorities. The MCEETYA Taskforce on Schools Resourcing is examining the broader issues that need to be taken into account in resourcing high quality education including the impact of factors such as students' special needs. The work of this Taskforce will be used to inform a variety of resourcing issues dealt with by school education authorities. The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA.

Recommendation 10

12

The Committee **RECOMMENDS** that:

MCEETYA should investigate the options for wider provision of centres of excellence in the public school system.

Response

This Recommendation is one for individual government school authorities to consider in the context of their overall policy on this issue. The Commonwealth will refer this recommendation to the Heads of Education Departments in each State and Territory.

Recommendation 11

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, in consultation with school education authorities, should develop a policy providing more flexible university entry and study options for gifted students.

Response

As set down in the response to Recommendation 4 above, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) will refer this recommendation to the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and the Deans of Education. The circulation within the higher education sector of the report *University Credit for School Students* commissioned by DEST under its Evaluations and Investigations Programme will assist in informing the debate around this issue. It will be a matter for each university to determine its policy in relation to flexible university entry and study options for gifted students.

Recommendation 12

14

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) should investigate and report on the profile of postgraduate studies in gifted education over the last five years, in particular whether postgraduate funding policies have had detrimental effects on participation in such studies. DETYA should monitor the effect of the new Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme in this regard.

Response

The Commonwealth Government is unable to support this recommendation. The Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) was introduced to assist in removing barriers to investment in education, training and skills development and thereby increase participation in postgraduate studies. Universities' preliminary estimates for 2002 suggest the number of fee-paying non-research postgraduate students has increased by over 20 per cent this year. Further, the Commonwealth has encouraged universities to allocate more HECS-liable subsidised places to non-research postgraduate study, particularly in areas such as education and nursing. The universities' response to this initiative will be monitored closely.

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (formerly the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs) does not collect statistics that would enable it to report on the profile of postgraduate studies in gifted education over the past five years. Therefore it is not possible to determine if a correlation exists between participation specifically in such study and higher education funding policy generally. The monitoring of participation in postgraduate study, via the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) will continue, as under the previous regime, to be at a more general level. This is because monitoring the effects of PELS on the profile of postgraduate studies in gifted education and in every other field of study at the same level of detail would require universities to provide considerably more detailed information than at present and this would be inconsistent with the policy of looking at ways of reducing the reporting requirements of universities.

Recommendation 13

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

The Commonwealth should fund targeted postgraduate places for gifted education studies.

Response

The Commonwealth Government does not support this recommendation. While the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training does discuss postgraduate coursework provision by field of study with universities, the discussion is at a general level and does not address areas of such specific focus (see the response to Recommendation 12). The Department's view is that this type of issue is a more appropriate topic of discussion for universities and teacher employers.

Postgraduate places for gifted education studies are available under existing programmes. The targeting of postgraduate places specifically for gifted education could set an unwelcome precedent and lead to demands for targeting of places in other areas. This could significantly impact on existing postgraduate provision, which is designed to meet demand flexibly.

Recommendation 14

16

The Committee **RECOMMENDS** that:

The Commonwealth should propose to MCEETYA that State and Territory education authorities should require, as a condition of employment, that newly graduated teachers have at least a semester unit on the special needs of gifted children in their degrees. This should include training in identification of gifted children and the pedagogy of teaching them.

Response

This is a matter for teacher employers in both government and non-government schools, rather than MCEETYA. The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to the Heads of Education Departments in each State and Territory, the National Council of Independent Schools' Associations and the National Catholic Education Commission.

Recommendation 15

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

The Commonwealth should specify professional development on issues to do with giftedness as a priority in the Quality Teacher Programme.

Response

The Quality Teacher Programme (QTP) is administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). DEST undertakes to consider this recommendation in the context of developing advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training on priorities for the QTP for the 2003-05 triennium.

Recommendation 16

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

The Commonwealth should propose to MCEETYA that State and Territory education authorities should require that teachers in selective schools and classes have suitable gifted education qualifications. The authorities should ensure that the necessary professional development is available. The commonwealth should support this through the Quality Teacher Programme.

Response

The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to the attention of MCEETYA. The Quality Teacher Programme (QTP) is administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). DEST undertakes to consider this recommendation in the context of developing advice to the Minister for Education, Science and Training on priorities for the QTP for the 2003-05 triennium.

Recommendation 17

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

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

Response

This is a recommendation which the Commonwealth will refer to MCEETYA for consideration.

Recommendation 18

The Committee *RECOMMENDS* that:

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

Response

There is no immediate prospect that a new centre of this kind will be established with Commonwealth support. However it should be noted that the Commonwealth Government funds universities and several of these are already working in the field of gifted education. It would seem more practical for those universities to progress their existing activity rather than run the risk of wasteful overlap and duplication.

Recommendation 19

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

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'.

Response

The Commonwealth's role in school education is complementary to that of the States and Territories, which have primary responsibility for the provision of schooling. Funding provided by the Commonwealth is not intended to meet the full cost of providing all services for all students in government or non-government schools. The principal source of Commonwealth funding is General Recurrent Grants. Additional targeted assistance is provided for those students with the greatest need.

The Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes (SAISO) Programme is the major Commonwealth targeted funding programme. It is aimed at students educationally disadvantaged in terms of their educational participation and learning outcomes, particularly literacy and numeracy outcomes. Specifically the focus is on support for students with disabilities and students not performing satisfactorily in literacy and numeracy. The guidelines for the programme reflect the intent of the programme that educational disadvantage may be associated with a range of factors such as disability, a language background other than English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, low socio-economic background and learning difficulties.

In this context, the Commonwealth does not support amending the guidelines for the SAISO Programme to specifically include gifted and talented students as a target group in their own right, and regardless of their educational outcomes. Such a change would dilute funding which is already in high demand, and change the nature and focus of the programme.

The Country Areas Programme (CAP) assists students disadvantaged by geographic isolation to have the opportunity to improve their educational opportunities and learning outcomes. The CAP provides an additional \$21.07 million annually to State and Territory education authorities to assist eligible schools to provide quality education to students in geographically isolated areas. These education authorities have the flexibility to allocate funds according to the priorities identified by them, utilising their knowledge of local need.

While the CAP does not specifically target gifted and talented students, these students benefit from the programme when they attend schools that attract CAP funding. This is because those schools may utilise CAP funds to support activities that enrich and foster relevant curriculum appropriate for the educational needs of geographically isolated students. Gifted and talented students also benefit from the utilisation of CAP funds that support school excursions, visiting professionals, the provision of non-core subjects such as drama, languages other than English (LOTE), music, communication and information technology and sporting events. Similarly the Commonwealth does not support amending the guidelines for the CAP Programme

Recommendation 20

22

The Committee RECOMMENDS that:

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

Response

The Commonwealth Government will refer this recommendation to MCEETYA to establish if a project of this nature can be supported using the resources of the Curriculum Corporation.