To support implementation of the Gifted and Talented Students Policy, the Education and Training Directorate commissioned specialist consultants, Gateways Education, to develop a series of six articles to provide information to parents and the community about gifted and talented children. Further information about gifted and talented education can be found on the Directorate’s website at www.det.act.gov.au/teaching_and_learning/gifted-and-talented-education.

The Australian Curriculum provides schools, parents and teachers with guidelines about the role of assessment in teaching and learning:

> Assessment encourages longer-term understanding and provides detailed diagnostic information. It shows what students know, understand and can demonstrate. It also shows what they need to do to improve. (ACARA, 2015)

Assessment is the process of gathering and interpreting evidence about students’ learning to assist in setting learning goals and planning the next steps in the teaching and learning process. Specifically, assessment:

- provides feedback on current levels of performance (VanTassel-Baska, 2002; Hattie and Temperley, 2007)
- identifies the strengths and areas requiring development in a student’s learning profile, in order to evaluate the best learning environment and experiences for students
- assess the effectiveness of the learning program (VanTassel-Baska, 2008)
- plan future learning experiences (Sheppard, 2000; VanTassel-Baska, 2005, 2010).

What is quality assessment?

Quality assessment of students’ learning is designed with the learners, curriculum content, learning goals, and the teaching in mind, and thus, is a complex interplay between these factors. The following points are integral to the development of quality assessments. Quality assessments:

- have strong validity and reliability – learning is measured accurately and similar results are obtained in a variety of contexts
- have good inter-rater reliability – results are consistent due to the clarity of marking criteria
- demonstrate the outcomes of the learning program (VanTassel-Baska, 2013) and growth in student learning
- are designed in a range of formats and provide multiple opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement (Linn et al., 1991).

How does quality assessment work for gifted learners?

Learning programs designed for the gifted must provide students with a rigorous high quality experience that readies them to successfully traverse the next level of educational challenge (VanTassel-Baska, 2002, p. xxxii). Assessment for gifted learners should be designed within the framework of this program.

The first step in addressing the learning needs of gifted students is to establish their current level of achievement and determine whether this aligns with their identified level of ability. This can be achieved by using a variety of assessment strategies.

Assessment for gifted learners should also take different forms to ensure that students’ development can be measured and considered from multiple perspectives. These formats may include:
• assessments aligned to the extended curriculum offered to gifted students
• assessments based on applying problem solving skills and solving real world issues
• standardised assessments at and above the students’ year level to minimise any ceiling effect (upper limits of the assessment) and ensure assessment does not limit the performance of these students (VanTassel-Baska, 2005).

Adjustments to the learning program should then be made in response to this information. This may include the use of conceptual frameworks, critical and creative higher order thinking and the addition of advanced content (VanTassel-Baska and Staumberg, 2010).

What are the implications for gifted learners?

The different learning capacity of each gifted student creates unique challenges when considering the best way to assess their learning and progress. Perhaps the most important factor is to use measures that provide visibility of the actual growth that has occurred across a period of time.

Quality assessment for gifted learners involves using measures which allow parents, students and educators alike to see the true academic growth of the gifted learner. This is vital as gifted students may attain high levels of achievement without necessarily demonstrating learning gain or growth.

For example, students may arrive at high school already knowing or understanding the content and/or skills that are to be studied in mathematics in that year. The school may assess the identified gifted students of an incoming cohort using an advanced assessment to measure their achievement. To assess the subsequent learning growth of these students it would be important for them to have an extended and accelerated learning program in mathematics, and then be assessed above grade level. The key understanding to be taken from this example is that assessments for gifted learners should be designed to be able to measure the full growth of these learners in order to communicate more than the attainment of year-level outcomes.

Educators use quality assessment to accurately assess skills, understandings and different types of learning. Without such assessments, the learning growth of gifted students may never truly be measured within the school context. Furthermore, assessments, which are rigorous and appropriately designed for gifted learners, will translate beyond the classroom and into lifelong learning.