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# A Much-needed Reassurance beyond the Syllabus for Gifted Students: Exploring Opportunities and Available Provisions in India

Ketika Kasetwar\* and Ranjna Thakur\*\*

Giftedness is more than just high intelligence or academic success—it's a complex and multifaceted trait that includes exceptional abilities in areas like problem-solving, creativity, leadership, and arts. It's often described as a natural ability to think, learn, or create at a level far beyond one's peers. However, defining giftedness has been a subject of ongoing debate among psychologists, educators, and researchers. While some focus on intellectual giftedness, others emphasise creativity, motivation, leadership, or even a deep emotional sensitivity.

In India, the term 'gifted' is still widely misunderstood. Many people mistakenly associate it with learning difficulties or Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 formally recognising 'giftedness' and calling for provisions to support these students, awareness is slowly growing. Parents, educators, and researchers are now actively seeking accurate and up-to-date information to better support high-ability learners and their unique needs.

Gifted students often exhibit advanced intellectual abilities, intense curiosity, deep emotions, and a strong drive to explore ideas. According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2002), gifted individuals are those who perform—or have the potential to perform—at significantly higher levels than their peers in one or more domains. Traditionally, IQ scores above 130 were used as the primary measure of giftedness. However, modern research shows that gifted individuals are far more diverse in their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. Some display rapid learning and advanced problem-solving skills, while others are highly creative thinkers or natural-born leaders.

It's important to understand that giftedness doesn't look the same in every individual. Some students are profoundly gifted, showing extraordinary abilities at a very young age, while others have what is known as asynchronous development—excelling in certain areas while struggling with social or emotional maturity. Then there are twice-exceptional (2e) students, who are both gifted and have learning disabilities like dyslexia or ADHD, requiring specialized educational support. Cultural and socio-economic factors also play a role in how giftedness is identified and nurtured, highlighting the need for inclusive and flexible support strategies.

Beyond academic intelligence, giftedness takes many forms. Some students are creatively gifted, displaying originality in the arts, writing, or problem-solving. Others possess leadership giftedness, with a natural ability to inspire and guide people. Some excel in psychomotor skills, such as athletics or dance, demonstrating extraordinary coordination and physical talent. However, with these strengths also come challenges. Many gifted students experience heightened emotional sensitivity, perfectionism, or social isolation because they think and process the world differently from their peers. Without proper support, they may become disengaged, struggle with anxiety, or even underachieve.

In India, the absence of a formal Gifted Education Policy means that many high-ability students are unable to receive the support they need. This is why it's crucial for educators, especially in higher education institutes, to understand giftedness in a well-rounded way. By fostering an environment that nurtures not only the high-ability students' academic talents but also their emotional and social development, institutions can help these students thrive, in turn helping them become strong ambassadors of the institutions. Enrichment programs, mentorship opportunities, and flexible learning approaches can ensure that gifted individuals reach their full potential—contributing meaningfully to academia, innovation, and society at large.

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## Approaches to Understanding Giftedness

In the early days, intelligence was mostly measured by IQ tests, and being "gifted" was often equated with having a high IQ score. Giftedness has come a long way from the way we used to understand it. One of the most well-known pioneers in this field, Lewis Terman, conducted a groundbreaking study in the early 20th century, tracking gifted children over several decades. His work reinforced the idea that intelligence was the key factor in giftedness. However, as researchers dug deeper, they realised that giftedness isn't just about being exceptionally intelligent - it also involves creativity, leadership skills, motivation, and even emotional sensitivity.

By the mid-20th century, experts started moving away from a narrow, IQ-based definition of giftedness. In 1978, Joseph Renzulli proposed his Three-Ring Model of Giftedness, suggesting that giftedness isn't just about raw intelligence but emerges when above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment intersect. Around the same time, Robert Sternberg began challenging traditional views with what would become his Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, formally introduced in 1985, which emphasised that giftedness could manifest in analytical, creative, and practical ways—not just through academic achievement. These expanded perspectives helped educators recognise that gifted students come in many forms, not just those who perform well on standardised tests.

Education policies also started shifting as researchers realised that simply pushing gifted students through school faster (acceleration) wasn't enough. While acceleration can help in some cases, gifted students often need more than just speed—they need depth. Differentiation and enrichment approaches gained popularity, focusing on deeper learning experiences, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary studies. Instead of just racing ahead, gifted students were encouraged to

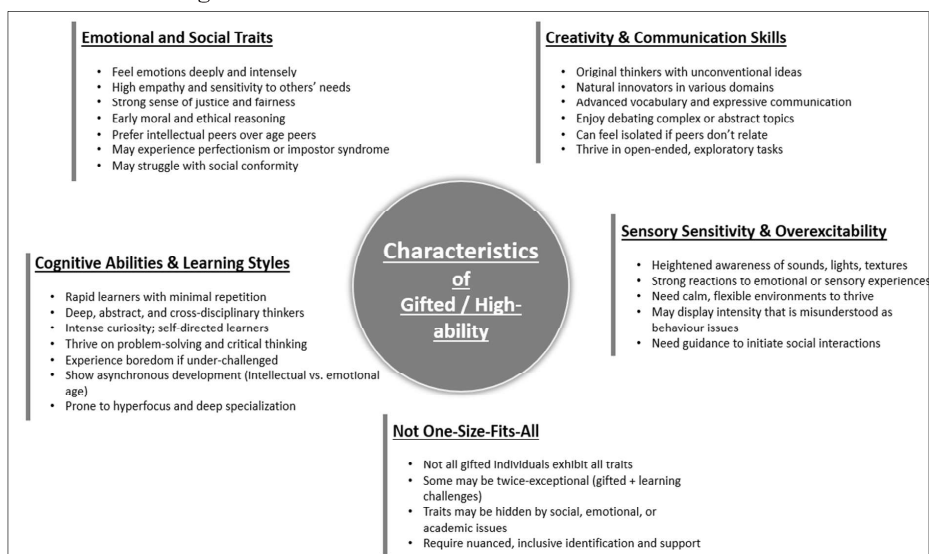
engage with complex ideas, work on independent projects, and think critically about real-world problems.

In 2022, Chowkase and Watve proposed a new approach to gifted education for today's hyperconnected world. They suggested focusing on teaching gifted children to contribute to society's greater good, rather than on individual achievements. Their 3C's framework promotes competence in actions, commitment to tasks, and Concern for others. Competence is the ability to gain necessary skills, task commitment is the drive to complete tasks, and empathy involves perceiving others' needs and helping meaningfully. Concern for others emphasises integrating empathy, compassion, and prosocial behaviour into the educational process. The goal is to develop gifted behaviours that are used for the well-being of both oneself and others, rather than just for personal gain.

## Characteristics of Gifted Individuals

Gifted individuals stand out not because of their academic abilities but due to their unique ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting with the world. Their intellectual depth, emotional intensity, and creative problem-solving skills set them apart, often making their experiences vastly different from those of their peers. Understanding these characteristics is essential for educators, parents, and policymakers to ensure that gifted individuals receive the right support to reach their full potential. Figure 1 gives an idea about these characteristics, though not all.

Figure 1: Some of the Characteristics of Gifted Individuals



To help identify and differentiate a gifted student from a bright student, Janice Szabos in 1989 tabulated the differences between a gifted and a bright child (Table 1).

**Table 1: Differences between Bright and Gifted and Individuals**

<b>Bright Individual</b>	<b>Gifted Individual</b>
Knows the answer	Asks the questions
Is interested	Is highly curious
Is attentive	Is mentally and physically involved
Has good ideas	Has wild and silly ideas
Works hard	Plays around yet tests well
Answers the questions	Discusses in detail, elaborates
Top group	Beyond the group
Listens with interest	Shows strong feelings and opinions
Learns with ease	Already knows
6-8 repetitions for mastery	1-2 repetitions for mastery
Understands	Constructs abstractions
Enjoys peers	Prefers adults
Grasps meanings	Draws inferences
Completes projects	Initiates projects
Is receptive	Is intense
Copies accurately	Creates new designs
Enjoys school	Enjoys learning
Absorbs information	Manipulates information
Technician	Inventor
Good memorizer	Good guesser
Enjoys straightforward, sequential presentations	Thrives on complexity
Is alert	Is keenly observant
Is pleased with own learning	Is highly self-critical

### Profiles of Gifted Individuals

Gifted individuals are often thought of as high achievers, but their experiences, challenges, and behaviours can vary widely. Educational researchers Betts & Neihart (1988) identified six distinct profiles of gifted individuals, each with unique strengths and struggles. Understanding these profiles helps educators, parents, and policymakers create environments that support gifted students in reaching their full potential.

### The Significance of Supporting Gifted Students at the College Level is Crucial

Though limited, many programmes exist to recognise and nurture giftedness at the school level in India - through specialised schools, early enrichment programs, and national talent search initiatives. However, once these high-ability students transition into higher education, they face environments that lack the recognition, flexibility, and support they need to continue thriving. This discontinuity may create a critical gap in the academic journey of gifted individuals, many of whom enter universities with tremendous potential but little structured guidance to navigate the next phase of their intellectual development.

Gifted undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students typically exhibit advanced curiosity, deep intrinsic motivation, and a desire for complexity and interdisciplinary exploration. Yet, they may simultaneously face emotional and social challenges such as perfectionism, impostor syndrome, and difficulty connecting with age-peers. These nuanced needs if not actively addressed in traditional university systems, which prioritise uniform curricula, rigid timelines, and standardised assessments, may lead to many gifted students experiencing disengagement, underachievement, or mental health struggles—not because of lack of ability, but due to a mismatch between their learning needs and the institutional offerings.

Supporting these students requires a shift in institutional mindset and academic design. Tailored mentorship, access to advanced research opportunities, inquiry-based learning models, and peer networks of like-minded individuals can significantly enhance the educational experience of gifted learners. Leveraging digital tools, interdisciplinary coursework, and global academic collaborations can further enrich their pathways, enabling them to innovate, question, and contribute meaningfully. Neuroscience and educational psychology research clearly show that gifted learners process and respond to information differently; acknowledging this diversity is key to unlocking their potential.

When higher education institutions invest in structures that support giftedness - such as mentorships, clubs, internships, discussions beyond curricula, interactions with varied experts and exchange programmes - they do more than support

**Table 2: Profiles of Gifted Individuals**

Profile	Description	Challenges	Support Strategies
1. Successful	High-achievers; responsible, diligent, and perform well in structured academic environments.	Fear of failure, over-reliance on external validation, avoidance of risks.	Encourage creative problem-solving, provide independent projects, emphasize growth over grades.
2. Challenging	Independent thinkers; question authority, resist conformity, and often push back against rigid systems.	Misinterpreted as disruptive or uncooperative; risk of disengagement or misdiagnosis.	Offer flexible learning paths, promote independent study, and pair with mentors who value their thinking.
3. Underground	Hide abilities to fit in socially, especially during adolescence; may underperform to blend in.	Suppressed potential, identity conflicts, and low self-esteem.	Create safe, inclusive environments; use small group learning or peer mentoring; promote acceptance of diverse abilities.
4. Dropout	Seem disengaged; often bored, frustrated, or feel school doesn't meet their intellectual/ emotional needs.	Labelled as lazy or unmotivated; risk of leaving school.	Offer acceleration, interest-based learning, alternative pathways, and early intervention for signs of withdrawal.
5. Twice-Exceptional (2e)	Gifted with coexisting learning disabilities or emotional challenges (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety).	Strengths and struggles mask each other; often misunderstood; risk of academic failure.	IEPs, provide accommodations, use a dual-focus approach supporting both challenges and strengths.
6. Autonomous	Self-directed, intrinsically motivated learners who seek knowledge independently.	May feel isolated; limited by traditional school systems; struggle to find peers.	Encourage project-based and advanced coursework, offer mentorships, and support independent research opportunities.

individual students. They elevate their own academic value proposition. Gifted students, when supported, are more likely to contribute to original research, lead campus innovation, and represent the institution in prestigious academic forums. Their success reflects directly on the institution's reputation, attracting external funding, distinguished faculty, and international collaborations. In this sense, supporting gifted students is a strategic imperative for universities aiming to be future-ready and globally relevant.

***Supporting Gifted Students leads to an increase in the value of HEIs***

Recognising and nurturing gifted students—particularly those with low visibility—offers profound advantages to colleges and universities. These students, who may not always top examinations or stand out in traditional classroom settings, often possess deep intellectual curiosity, high creative potential, and the capacity for original thinking. Gifted students frequently engage with complex ideas early, contributing to research, independent projects, and scholarly publications. By acknowledging and supporting such learners, institutions can foster academic excellence and innovation.

A supportive environment for gifted learners also strengthens an institution's reputation and appeal. Colleges and universities that are seen as nurturing high-potential individuals are more likely to attract quality faculty, research partnerships, and institutional collaborations. Furthermore, programs designed to identify and support gifted students can help secure grants, CSR funding, and philanthropic investments. These benefits make a compelling case for embedding gifted education into the strategic vision of higher education institutions.

Equally important is the role such initiatives play in promoting diversity and inclusion. Many gifted students come from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds and remain invisible in mainstream educational spaces due to systemic barriers. By creating pathways for these students, institutions can uphold the principles of inclusive excellence. This approach is closely aligned with the aims of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes personalisation, equity, and the cultivation of talent across the spectrum.

Special provisions like admissions to professional courses without undergoing the process



of routine competitive examinations will go a long way in promoting these students to professional courses. Gifted students may be selected for the professional courses on the basis of their aptitude and talent, as many gifted students may not be competent enough to succeed in routine competitive examinations conducted in India. Institutions like the Association of Indian Universities, which has expertise in examination reforms, may conduct research and devise tools for assessing the competence of gifted students for entry into different professional courses.

In the long run, the impact of nurturing gifted learners extends well beyond the campus. These individuals often emerge as thought leaders, innovators, entrepreneurs, and agents of social change. Their achievements contribute to the prestige and legacy of their alma mater, reinforcing the institution's influence in academic and public spheres. Supporting giftedness, therefore, is not only a step toward fulfilling institutional responsibility but also a strategic investment in the future of education and society.

### **Existing Initiatives and Provisions for Gifted Students in Higher Education**

Having explored the concept of giftedness and its various dimensions, it is equally important to examine the provisions that exist to support gifted students in higher education institutes in India. Even in the absence of a Gifted Education Policy, there are various institutions that have introduced several initiatives to support talented students, particularly in research, STEM fields, and interdisciplinary learning. And NEP 2020 outlines some recommendations that will cater to academic and intellectual needs of some gifted students. Here's a closer look at these existing initiatives.

#### ***National Fellowship and Scholarship Programmes***

Financial and academic support can make a significant difference in the lives of high-achieving students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. The following scholarship programmes aim to encourage and sustain excellence in higher education:

- **Prime Minister's Research Fellowship (PMRF):** PMRF offers attractive fellowships as well as research grants to PhD scholars in India in the area of Science and Engineering. It's a launchpad for visionary thinkers, daring innovators, and relentless problem-solvers. (<https://www.pmrfin/>)

- **Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana (KVPY) / INSPIRE Programme:** Originally an independent initiative, KVPY has now merged with the INSPIRE program, offering fellowships to students with exceptional talent in science and research. (<https://dst.gov.in/inspire-scheme-innovation-science-pursuit-inspired-research>)

#### **Initiative at the Association of Indian Universities**

**Anveshan, The Research Conventions:** The Research Division of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) organises *Anveshan-Student Research Convention* every year to identify and nurture the young talents and gifted researchers and innovators in the Indian Universities at the national level. In these Conventions, Innovative Research Projects from the disciplines of Basic Sciences & Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology, Agriculture and allied fields, Health Sciences and allied fields, Social Sciences, Humanities, Commerce, Business Management, and Law are invited from the students of HEIs and adjudicated by a group of experts in the field on a well-laid criterion. The best Research Projects are conferred with certificates, awards, Cash Prizes and Gold Medals. From 2025, the international research conventions were initiated. The winners of Anveshan get seats in the best institutes in India and abroad.

#### **AICTE Provisions for Gifted Students**

AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education) has provisions in place to support gifted students in India by providing an educational environment that recognises their unique abilities. This means offering more flexible academic programs, personalised mentorship, and opportunities to engage in specialised activities or research. For gifted students, the goal is to create learning experiences that go beyond the usual curriculum, allowing them to explore their passions and talents more deeply. This approach helps them stay challenged and motivated, while also ensuring they have the resources they need to thrive. Ultimately, the aim is to create an inclusive higher education system that not only supports gifted students but also helps them reach their full potential and make a significant impact in their chosen fields. (<https://www.aicte-india.org/content/gifted-child-scheme>)

Besides the supernumerary seats, AICTE offers several initiatives that may benefit gifted, talented, and academically advanced students, particularly in engineering and technology disciplines:

- **Smart India Hackathon** – This is a nationwide competition where students tackle real-world challenges, coming up with innovative tech-based solutions. It provides a great opportunity for bright minds to apply their knowledge, collaborate with peers, and showcase their problem-solving skills. (<https://www.aicte-india.org/Initiatives/smart-india-hackathon>)
- **SWAYAM** – An online learning platform offering free courses across various disciplines, helping students enhance their knowledge beyond the standard curriculum. Gifted students can use it to explore advanced subjects at their own pace and earn certifications from top institutions. (<https://swayam.gov.in/>)
- **Startup Contest** – A platform that encourages students to present their startup ideas and gain support for their entrepreneurial journey. It helps innovative students access resources, networking opportunities, and potential investors to bring their ideas to life. (<https://www.aicte-india.org/Initiatives/startup-contest-2017>)
- **National Education Alliance for Technology (NEAT)** – This initiative integrates AI-based technology solutions to personalise and enhance learning experiences. Academically advanced students can benefit from adaptive learning tools that match their pace and learning style. (<https://neat.aicte-india.org/>)
- **Student Learning Assessment (PARAKH)** – A national-level assessment program designed to help students understand their strengths and areas for improvement. Gifted students can use it as a benchmarking tool to evaluate their skills and further refine their academic and intellectual pursuits. (<https://parakh.aicte.gov.in/>)
- **AICTE Scholarships and Fellowships:** AICTE offers various awards and scholarships to support gifted students. These initiatives are designed to recognize and support the academic excellence and research potential of gifted students, fostering their contributions to technological and societal advancements. (<https://www.aicte-india.org/schemes/students-development-schemes>)
- **IITs:** While Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) don't have a formal "gifted / talent program", but their rigorous admission standards and focus on research can be considered a setting for identifying and nurturing academically bright students, some of whom may later be identified as gifted students. (<https://www.iitsystem.ac.in/>)
- **NISER and IISERs:** National Institute of Science Education and Research, Bhubaneswar and Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs) located in Berhampur, Bhopal, Kolkata, Mohali, Pune, Thiruvananthapuram, and Tirupati may not have a formal gifted education program, but they naturally nurture talented students through the strong focus on research, mentorship, interdisciplinary projects and hands-on experiential learning—perfectly aligning with NEP 2020's vision for supporting high-ability students. Programs like CoESME, iRISE, STEM Ready, and the Summer Student Programme create an intellectually rich environment where curious minds can explore, experiment, and innovate.
- **Indian Statistical Institute (ISI):** ISI provides rigorous academic environments, catering to students with exceptional abilities in science, technology, and mathematics.
- **Centre for Excellence in Basic Sciences (CEBS), University of Mumbai:** In collaboration with the Department of Atomic Energy, this centre nurtures gifted students in fundamental sciences, offering specialised coursework and research exposure. (<https://www.cbs.ac.in/>)
- **JNU, TIFR, and Ashoka University:** These universities emphasize research-oriented learning, offering mentorship programs and interdisciplinary education designed for high-potential students.
- **Sikkim Manipal Institute of Technology:** It offers an admission scheme for gifted students, in accordance with AICTE's provision for gifted and talented students. (<https://smu.edu.in/smu/about-us/ADMISSION-SCHEME-FOR-GIFTED-CHILD.html#:~:text=AICTE%20will%20appoint%20a%20committee,as%20per%20the%20prevailing%20norms.>)
- **National Board for Higher Mathematics (NBHM):** Set up by the Government of India in 1983 under the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), it currently grants Postdoctoral fellowships, Ph.D. scholarships, MA/MSc Scholarships for research/education in mathematics, along with a

#### Provisions at Institutes of National Importance and Some HEIs

Several prestigious institutions in India have developed specialised programs for gifted students, offering advanced coursework, research opportunities, and mentorship:

research project on higher mathematics. (<https://nbhm.dae.gov.in/about.html>)

### Provisions in NEP ---2020 for Gifted Students in Higher Education

The National Education Policy (NEP)—2020 marks a significant step toward a more flexible and inclusive academic framework, recognising the need to nurture gifted and talented students. Some key provisions include:

- **Multidisciplinary and Flexible Learning:** NEP 2020 promotes an adaptable curriculum, allowing gifted students to customise their education based on their interests and strengths.
- **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC):** This initiative enables students to accumulate and transfer credits across different institutions, supporting interdisciplinary learning and accelerated education.
- **Research and Innovation-Oriented Learning:** The establishment of the *National Research Foundation (NRF)* and university-led incubation centres encourages institutions to foster research-driven environments.
- **Online and Digital Learning Platforms:** Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), AI-driven adaptive learning, and virtual labs provide gifted students with access to advanced knowledge beyond the standard curriculum.
- **Fast-Track and Dual-Degree Programmes:** NEP 2020 supports accelerated learning pathways, enabling high-achieving students to complete their degrees at an advanced pace.
- **Mentorship and Talent Identification Programmes:** The policy emphasizes structured mentorship programs where gifted students can receive guidance from experienced faculty, industry professionals, and researchers.

### Way Forward

India's higher education system has made notable strides in supporting gifted students, but there is still much work to be done. While existing initiatives provide valuable opportunities, many gifted individuals remain underserved due to a lack of sufficient structured talent identification programmes and customised learning experiences. To truly nurture these bright minds, institutions must adopt a multi-pronged approach—strengthening policy frameworks, expanding institutional support, and

enhancing mentorship opportunities. By fostering an inclusive and intellectually stimulating environment, Indian universities can empower gifted students to reach their full potential and make meaningful contributions to science, technology, the humanities, and beyond, both nationally and globally.

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