



## **Australian Education Union**

### **Submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into the Delivery of Electoral Education**

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents approximately 190,000 members employed in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult provision sectors as teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff across Australia.

As the providers of civic education to the majority of Australian school students (64%), AEU members are well placed to advise on this matter and we are grateful for the invitation to make a submission to this inquiry.

In preparing this submission the AEU has consulted widely with members involved in the delivery of electoral education.

## **Introduction**

There is strong support across the political spectrum for the concept that students receive a comprehensive civics education, including electoral education.

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians committed to developing active and informed citizens who

Appreciate Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and have an understanding of Australia's system of government, history and culture...(and) are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this agreement, there is a challenge for policy makers and educational authorities to ensure that civics and electoral education receive the priority and support needed to be effective.

Recent discourse around what the priorities of schooling should be has contained great emphasis on learning the 'basics' of literacy and numeracy, as well as the STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects. NAPLAN testing of literacy and numeracy, and the public comparison of schools encouraged by My School, has heightened this focus.

Increasingly, the economic success of individuals and the nation is considered as being linked with proficiency in these areas.

In this context it is important that we don't neglect the broader objectives of schooling, including the development of reflective and socially aware young people who are able to become active citizens. Civics education, of which electoral education is a fundamental part, is vital to achieving this. Unless citizens are aware of the mechanisms through which they can participate, they cannot become active citizens of their polity.

The current inquiry presents an opportunity to reinforce the importance of civics to a broad, well-rounded education. Amid pressure to focus on areas that are subject to NAPLAN tests or seen as having direct economic utility, other curriculum areas need champions. The committee should play a role as advocate for high quality, well-resourced electoral education as part of a comprehensive civics curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008). *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

## Background

Lower levels of voter enrolment among youth are a concern for the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), which targets a lot of its advertising and outreach efforts at 18 to 25 year olds. Youth voter enrolment is stable at around 83% compared to 92% for the population overall.<sup>2</sup>

While youth levels of enrolment and participation are lower than desired, overall levels of enrolment increased between 2010 and the 2013 federal election. This suggests that many of those who aren't engaged politically in their late teens eventually find their way on to the electoral roll.<sup>3</sup>

The 2007 Review of Civics and Electoral Education for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters heard that the young are apathetic and cynical and found that many appear to consider politics unappealing and therefore tend to not want to be associated with it.

More recently, the 2014 Lowy Institute Poll found 33% of 18-29 year olds agreeing that in 'some circumstances a non-democratic government can be preferable' sparking concerns over whether young Australians were losing faith in their political system. (This concern was reduced when the proportion dropped to 23% in the 2015 poll).<sup>4</sup>

Discussion of political attitudes among Australian youth needs to avoid clichés and jumping to conclusions. While some of the above statistics show room for improvement, it is not clear that political disengagement is greater among this section of the population than others, or greater than it has been in the past.

There is plenty of research indicating young people are more likely to take part in non-electoral political activity than older citizens.<sup>5</sup> Growth in activity such as social media campaigns, online petitions and consumer boycotts can be seen as signs of a healthy democracy.

The AEU also counsels against the simplistic view that lower levels of political engagement among young Australians can be solved by more or better electoral education. It is not a simple matter of 'if they knew more, they would be more interested and would participate more.'

A useful survey of the available international research on civic education and political participation of young adults by UK academic Nathan Manning and Kathy Edwards of RMIT University found no relationship with voting behaviour but some positive effect on other forms of political expression. The authors advise that political disengagement among some youth is related to a variety of factors including economic insecurity, unstable living arrangements and feelings that politics is not responsive to their needs and hence holds little relevance for them.<sup>6</sup>

It is essential that young Australians are educated about our political processes and institutions but this will not guarantee they all become active citizens. Maintaining a healthy civic culture in Australia relies on politics being relevant and responsive to the concerns of all citizens, and the greatest responsibility for this lies with our elected representatives.

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<sup>2</sup> The Guardian Australia, 16/8/2013

<sup>3</sup> Australian Electoral Commission *Report on Performance 2013-14*

<sup>4</sup> Lowy Institute, *The Lowy Institute Poll 2015*

<sup>5</sup> Martin, A. (2012) Political participation among the young in Australia. Paper prepared for the Australian Electoral Commission; Manning, N. & Edwards, K. (2014) Why has civic education failed to increase young people's political participation? *Sociological Research Online*, 19 (1) 5.

<sup>6</sup> Manning & Edwards. *op. cit.*

## **Delivery of electoral education**

Around Australia most students receive education on the electoral system in upper primary school years 5 and 6. This can comprise part of a subject studying society and environment or be introduced into general primary classes. In the Northern Territory it is delivered in middle school (years 7-9) humanities classes.

Further electoral education in secondary school varies widely depending on what is included in humanities courses in lower secondary years and whether a student takes upper secondary Australian History or Politics.

The following feedback has been sourced from consultations with AEU members involved in the delivery of electoral education in primary schools.

## **Teaching resources to support delivery of electoral education**

Currently teachers involved in electoral education compile classroom resources from a variety of sources to enable them to deliver effective electoral education. These include those made available through the Australian Electoral Commission and in many cases material that teachers collect and generate themselves.

Teachers are given considerable scope in how they transfer the required knowledge and understanding outlined in curriculum documents of varying levels of detail. Specific mention was made of the value of the New South Wales Board of Studies' Human Society and its Environment (K-6) syllabus document as an effective guide.

Teachers in some states expressed a desire for more detailed teaching resources including lesson plans, activity sheets, and work samples. A number noted the contrast with the period 1997-2004 when the Discovering Democracy project was running and classroom resources specific to electoral education were more readily available.

It is hoped the development of curriculum documents and resources for teaching Civics and Citizenship under the Australian Curriculum will be done in close consultation with teachers involved in its delivery to ensure relevance and usefulness before they are posted on the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) website.

Generally there is praise for material available on the AEC's Teacher Resources and Democracy Rules web pages, although there is some concern about the variability in quality of materials across all areas of electoral education.

Teachers also find useful general information made available online through the AEC such as electorate maps, election results and FAQs. Material is rated as good quality and easy to find. Overall, teachers report being satisfied with the AEC's service, including its response to inquiries and requests for information.

Resources on the PEO website are considered to have a high degree of educational value and particular mention was made of interactive materials on the Kidsview pages which are highly engaging and valuable tools. It appears there is greater awareness and utilisation of AEC material, suggesting the PEO might need to promote its website and services better.

## **School elections**

A very useful service provided by the AEC is assistance to student-run elections for school captains, student representative councils etc. Sample ballot papers and instructions on how to count votes on the AEC Get Voting web page are well utilised by teachers and students. Teachers report that involving students in running their own elections is educational and rewarding. Many teachers have expertise to help with this activity as a result of staffing polling booths located in their schools.

## **Teacher education**

Currently, the experience of students undertaking electoral education is influenced heavily by their teachers' level of engagement with and knowledge of the subject matter. This is particularly so as initial teacher education at Australian universities involves little or no preparation for the teaching of civics. This deficiency was noted in the 2007 report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters review of Civics and Electoral Education.

The AEC's Your Vote Counts initiative, which presents workshops in tertiary institutions to help prospective teachers develop the skills and knowledge needed to teach civics education, is welcome but needs to be put in perspective. In 2013/14 it reached 2000 students in 8 institutions out of 80,000 students enrolled in 48 institutions.<sup>7</sup>

## **Visits to Canberra institutions**

All teachers involved in visits to the political institutions in Canberra rate the educational value highly.

The experience of touring Parliament House is seen to vary considerably depending on whether Parliament is sitting and, importantly, whether a local Member of Parliament meets the visiting students.

The experience at Old Parliament House is commonly described as 'outstanding' and 'excellent' by teachers. The Museum of Australian Democracy and the AEC's Electoral Education Centre are both considered to provide an engaging experience, particularly through the use of interactive displays. Teachers report that students enjoy the experience at OPH and benefit from the tour.

State Parliaments also run educational tours and these are rated as worthwhile experiences, with the tour of the Western Australian Parliament given particular endorsement.

## **Equity issue**

While visits to Canberra can form a valuable part of students' education about our political system the experience is not enjoyed universally. Travel costs are a significant barrier, particularly for schools in locations that necessitate flying to and from Canberra. While welcome, the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate is not of a level to make travel to Canberra affordable for students at many government schools serving low socio-economic status communities.

A suggestion for a more equitable distribution of subsidies for travel to Canberra is to allocate them based on a school's socio-economic status, measured for example by their Index of

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Electoral Commission, *Annual Report 2014*. Teacher education enrolment figures from AITSL, *Initial Teacher Education data report 2015*

Community Socio-Educational Advantage value, rather than their distance from Canberra, or a combination of the two.

Other initiatives to enable more students to experience high quality, interactive electoral education experiences are travelling exhibitions, Electoral Education Centres in state capitals or an enhanced role for the Museum of Australian Democracy at Eureka in Ballarat, serving schools in the southern states.

### **Recommendations of 2007 review**

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral matters conducted a review of Civics and Electoral Education in 2007. This was much more substantial than the current inquiry, involving 11 public hearings, 10 school visits and school forums. As a matter of course, the current inquiry should consider whether recommendations from the 2007 review relating to electoral education were implemented and if so, how successful or otherwise these measures have been.

Recommendations that should be revisited include:

- 3 - That all Year 12 students be emailed a voter enrolment form
- 4 - That the electoral commissions collaborate to develop an electoral education unit aimed at Year 9/10 students and Year 11/12 students to be delivered in all secondary schools
- 5 - That sufficient funds be granted to enable the Australian Electoral Commission to create several electoral education officer positions in each state
- 6 - That the AEC provide statistics regarding the delivery of civics education including both students and teacher training
- 9 - That state and territory education authorities develop induction strategies incorporating the delivery of civics education for pre-service teachers bound for regional and remote communities.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Australian teachers understand the importance of high quality civics and electoral education and take their responsibility to deliver them seriously.

At present most Australian school students receive a basic grounding in the workings of the Australian electoral system in the upper years of primary school. Teachers are given scope to implement curriculum documents of varying levels of detail. To assist with this they use teaching resources made available by the Australian Electoral Commission and Parliamentary Education Office and, in many cases, those that they create and compile themselves.

Teachers rate highly a lot of the materials provided through the AEC and PEO, particularly interactive and audio-visual learning aids. Resources to support teaching of Civics and Citizenship under the Australian Curriculum must be of uniform high quality, building on the best of the materials already available through the AEC and PEO.

As there is very little preparation for civics and electoral education provided as part of initial teacher education, the learning experience can vary considerably for students depending on their teachers' knowledge of and engagement with politics and the electoral system.

Teachers rate the educational value of school visits to Canberra, particularly Old Parliament House, very highly. Given the impression this experience makes on students, efforts should be

made to facilitate the travel of more students to the nation's capital, particularly those for whom travel costs are prohibitive.

Accordingly the Australian Education Union makes the following recommendations:

- **The committee use this inquiry and the impending introduction of the Civics and Citizenship subject of the Australian Curriculum as an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of civics and electoral education to a well-rounded schooling experience**
- **That the preparation of curriculum documents and learning resources for Civics and Citizenship under the Australian Curriculum be done in close consultation with those actually engaged in the teaching of the subject.**
- **That teachers receive adequate professional development at work to ensure the successful transition to Civics and Citizenship under the Australian Curriculum.**
- **That preparation for the teachings of civics and electoral education form part of the initial teacher education of all prospective primary school teachers and all those who may have responsibility for delivering civics and electoral education in secondary schools.**
- **That the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate be expanded and altered to provide additional assistance to schools serving communities of low socio-economic status.**