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21 May 2024

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
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Dear Committee,

The Australian Council for Student Voice (ACSV) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement and Participation.

In preparing this submission we have consulted with our members, who bring a diverse perspective across secondary school students, educators, school leaders, teacher-educators, academics and other support organisations, in a variety of different educational environments across the country.

In addition to a greater desire for increased support, our discussions have indicated a common viewpoint: both formal and informal mechanisms for civics education, engagement, and participation must meet students where they're at and provide genuine opportunities for voice, agency, and participation throughout the entire process.

## Where are we now?

Young people have both an interest in, and a commitment to participatory democracy.<sup>1</sup> You only have to look at collective actions such as the School Strike 4 Climate to see evidence of students mobilising in civic action. The ACSV sees civics and citizenship education as a crucial component of the Australian Curriculum and supports it being taught from an early stage. We also see it as critical that we have a more consistent approach to civics and citizenship education across Australia. Based on existing evidence, there are concerns that the current curriculum is failing to produce the 'active

and informed citizens<sup>iii</sup> as articulated in the goals of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019).<sup>iii</sup>

We are also concerned that the current curriculum fails to adequately address students' commitment to democratic participation as a central, relevant and achievable outcome. Even when students learn about matters such as voting and bicameral Parliaments, do they believe that they can make a difference in the world, and want to participate democratically within society? Do they see themselves as citizens, rather than as 'citizens in waiting'?

### **Education for Active Citizenship**

Based on a survey of over 4,000 Year 10 students as a part of the National Assessment Program – Civics & Citizenship report from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, just 38 per cent attained a proficient standard in their civics education at school.<sup>iv</sup> The report further found that students had 'less interest in a range of civics and citizenship issues and less confidence to actively engage in civic action than in 2016'.<sup>v</sup> To empower students to be active citizens, we must ensure we are providing young people with both the foundational knowledge of our civic history, institutions and processes, but also with the confidence that they require to be active citizens.

Civics and citizenship education in Australia has improved significantly over the course of its different iterations. To further improve, the priority needs to be not only on developing the content knowledge taught to students about Australia's civic history, but also through opportunities given to students to demonstrate their citizenship through agency in their learning. Students are critical of the reasoning behind why they're learning particular topics. They can be transformed into more motivated learners when the relevance and usefulness of what they're being taught is easily identifiable.

In our discussions, teachers and school leaders, particularly those in regional and rural locations, indicated a strong desire for greater access to practical experiences. They remarked at the engagement on occasions where they had been to visit their state parliament or engaged with the AEC through their programs. The AEC and PEO websites are vital educational tools, particularly for students in regional areas and these should continue to be funded and supported to ensure equity for students who are not able to visit Canberra to experience learning in these organisations in person.

Recently, informal programs such as youth parliaments and youth councils have begun to increase in popularity. Large components of these programs involve enhancing knowledge of democracy and seek to improve engagement with community. These programs highlight a clear willingness for participation from young people, and the capacity of young people through the potential opportunity for reforms posed by these groups. For example, several youth parliaments across the country debate the idea of lowering the voting age – a step that would expand civic participation. These programs are important for expanding students' experiences of civics education and should be better funded and expanded to ensure access from students around Australia.

### **Consistent Approach & Agency in Learning**

The current approach to civics and citizenship education via the Australian Curriculum has resulted in very different approaches across Australian jurisdictions. Despite being framed as a stand alone curriculum area in the Australian Curriculum, in states such as NSW it is taught as a key curriculum 'priority' – integrated across the teaching of subjects such as History, Geography and (elective) Commerce. The curriculum emphasises student acquisition of political and historical content knowledge such as the Magna Carta, the history of our Constitution, the operation of Parliament and the structure of the legal system. Students have shared with us that while these topics are important for them to learn, they are difficult to relate to the typical student and fail to contribute to an engaging experience. Research supports the notion that teachers are not necessarily successful in engaging students in these learning experiences.<sup>vi</sup>

ACSV members reported high engagement from students in civics and citizenship education when this learning is reflected in the school's overall approach to student engagement and decision-making. For example, members shared with us the value of teaching the foundations of democracy by first exploring "how we make decisions in our classroom". This approach to civics and citizenship education emphasises the development of student' rights and responsibilities in relationship to the broader community.

Incorporating the perspectives of young people, particularly those from culturally diverse and migrant backgrounds, in the citizenship and global citizenship education curriculum may provide an opportunity to improve civics education and participation in Australia towards becoming more diverse and engaging across cultures. Moreover, civics education and participation may become more representative and relevant for Australia's multicultural population.

We strongly believe that the curriculum has the capacity to build ‘active and informed citizens’<sup>vii</sup> through a more consistent approach that incorporates students’ willingness and desire to participate.

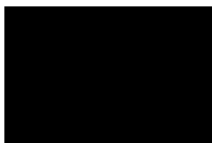
## What changes need to be made?

The ACSV recommends that:

1. The approach to civics and citizenship education across Australia be more consistent, with all jurisdictions encouraged to adopt a genuine application of civics and citizenship learning as a stand-alone subject area.
2. Civics and citizenship education should focus not only on student acquisition of content knowledge, but also on students having opportunities to develop the skills and capabilities of active citizenship, through processes such as democratic decision making in schools, and other methods that encourage greater voice and agency.
3. Any approach to strengthening civics and citizenship education must be accompanied by broader efforts to engage young people through opportunities for involvement and representation in the wider community, including lowering the voting age.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission, and please let us know if we can be of any further assistance to the inquiry.

Kind regards,



**Mr Flynn O'Hallahan**  
Chair  
Australian Council for Student Voice Ltd.

## References

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- <sup>i</sup> Vromen A & Collin P (2010) Everyday youth participation? [\*Contrasting views from Australian policymakers and young people\*](#), *YOUNG*, 18(1): 97-112. DOI: 10.1177/110330880901800107
- <sup>ii</sup> ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) (2015) [\*Civics and Citizenship \(Version 8.4\)\*](#), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- <sup>iii</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council (2019) [\*The Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration\*](#), Education Services Australia, Canberra.
- <sup>iv</sup> ACARA (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority) (2020) [\*NAP Civics and Citizenship 2019 National Report\*](#), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- <sup>v</sup> ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) (2021) [\*National civics and citizenship report released\*](#), ACER Discover, Canberra.
- <sup>vi</sup> Golledge C (2024) [\*Shaping citizens: teachers enacting democratic education in the history classroom\*](#), Curriculum Perspectives. DOI: 10.1007/s41297-024-00239-w.
- <sup>vii</sup> Council of Australian Governments Education Council (2019) [\*The Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration\*](#), Education Services Australia, Canberra.