



Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (SCEAA) Submission
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation
May 2024

1. **The Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (SCEAA)** supports, promotes, and improves the quality of social and citizenship education in Australia, through the advancement of holistic studies of society that include social, cultural, political, temporal, spatial and global perspectives. See www.sceaa.org.au
2. Our **national committee and members** are engaged in teaching and research in social and citizenship education across all levels of schooling and in higher education institutions. Our members include representatives from schools, initial teacher education providers, as well as other organisations and professional associations across Australia, dedicated to supporting Social and Citizenship Education in Australia.
3. SCEAA is the peak national body for social and citizenship education in Australia, connecting a comprehensive network of people across various contexts and jurisdictions, and is well placed to conduct research and deliver national professional learning programs focused on social and citizenship education, student engagement and participation.
4. SCEAA has published *The Social Educator*, a high quality, peer-reviewed academic journal, bi-annually for forty years. The journal includes articles from leading Australian and international academics, as well as early career researchers and teacher practitioners. *The Social Educator* is widely read by teachers, academics and professional organisations and is accessible via the Informit A+ database.
5. SCEAA has made significant contributions to social and citizenship over many decades. Several members of SCEAA were expert advisors and writers for the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship curriculum subject (Dr Libby Tudball, Dr Deborah Henderson, Dr Ruth Reynolds, and Janine Forbes-Rolfe) and the general capabilities (Dr Deborah Henderson and Dr Libby Tudball). SCEAA has recently contributed to ongoing discussion about the role of civics and citizenship education through:
 - a. Consultation submissions and discussion with ACARA regarding version 9.0 of the Australian Curriculum.
 - b. Hosting our national conference 2024 titled ‘Curriculum Community and Beyond: future directions in Civics and citizenship education’, in collaboration with colleagues at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old

Parliament House, Canberra. This included more than 20 workshop and paper sessions and round tables discussions.

- c. National Executive committee members invited to discuss civics and citizenship education with members of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in 2023.
 - d. Hosting a series of webinars to support teachers in schools with teaching civics and citizenship education, including a webinar to improve understanding of the processes and debates in the Voice Referendum.
6. SCEAA members publish in national and international academic journals, books and texts in relation to the importance and practice of active, informed and participatory citizenship. (**See selected publications in the appendix**).
 7. This submission addresses the Terms of Reference and makes recommendations for the committee to consider.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

- a) **The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement.**

SCEAA response:

The rationale for the Civics and Citizenship (CC) subject (version 9.0) states that, *'A deep understanding of Australia's federal system of government and the liberal democratic values that underpin it is essential for students to become active and informed citizens who can participate in and sustain Australia's democracy. Civics and Citizenship provides students with opportunities to investigate political and legal systems, and explore the nature of citizenship, diversity and identity in contemporary society... The curriculum explores how the people, as citizens, choose their governments; how the system safeguards democracy by vesting people with civic rights and responsibilities; how laws and the legal system protect people's rights; and how individuals and groups can influence civic life'* (ACARA, 2022).

SCEAA concludes that based on evidence we have gathered after extensive consultation with our members, these aims and opportunities are not yet widely available to all young Australians, across all communities. The effectiveness of formalised civics education and broader conceptions of CC focused on engagement and participation throughout Australia is highly variable. There are instances of well-

planned practices and whole school approaches that are highly engaging for students, but these are not thoroughly documented.

There have been no nationwide government funded professional learning programs available to renew teachers' knowledge of CC and capacity to develop engaging practice in this vital area for two decades. **In our response, after our discussion of the scope of CC that follows, we make a number of recommendations in relation to the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.**

8. The Terms of Reference outlined in this inquiry utilise the term '*civics education*'. However, the Australian Curriculum is based on the term '*Civics and citizenship*' that encompasses:

Knowledge and understanding of (i) Government and democracy, (ii) Laws and citizens and (iii) Citizenship, diversity and identity.

Skills in (i) Questioning and researching, (ii) Analysis, evaluation and interpretation, (iii) Civic participation and decision-making and (iv) Communicating.

SCEAA notes that while the terms '*civics education*' and '*citizenship education*' have been used variably in various Australian policy documents across time, it is critical that both terms are connected. It is important that young Australians develop civics and citizenship knowledge *and* skills.

A consistent theme in the nationally agreed goals for schooling over three decades has been the importance of developing 'active and informed citizens' (see *The Melbourne Declaration*, 2008) and 'active and informed members of the community' (*The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*, 2019). SCEAA stresses the important synergy between civics and citizenship education in endeavours to enable the development of informed, active and participatory members of our democracy.

SCEAA also emphasises the importance of making connections between the CC subject and other dimensions of the Australian Curriculum that are vital to comprehensive civics and citizenship education. This includes the general capabilities; Intercultural and Ethical understanding, and personal and social capability, and the cross-curriculum priorities; Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, and Sustainability.

9. Since the inception of the **National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship**, which collects information in selected schools across the nation about students' knowledge and understanding, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors related to civics and citizenship, the results have demonstrated that the effectiveness of formalised civics and citizenship education has not met national benchmark expectations. Year

10 students performing at or above the proficient standard has remained below 50 percent, with peaks at 42 percent (2007), 49 percent (2010) and 44 percent (2013). The 2019 data set showed that only 38 percent of Year 10 students performed at or above proficiency standard, comparable to the 2004 data at 39 percent. The performance of Year 6 students from 2004 to 2019 hovers around an average of 50 percent. **This demonstrates the need for teacher professional learning in CC.**

10. SCEAA is concerned that **limited contemporary large-scale data** has been collected through research in Australia in the last twenty years about CC teaching and learning practices, focused on deepening understanding about the effectiveness of formal and informal civics and citizenship education in schools across the states and territories.

Existing data sets, including NAP-CC and individual research reports, generally present data on specific groups, specific locality and/or specific/sample sets of competencies that are largely limited to civic literacy. This falls short in offering a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and diverse approaches to civics and citizenship education in Australia. **There is a need to capture how schools are successfully developing active, informed, engaging and participatory Civics and Citizenship education and to disseminate these findings widely.**

11. SCEAA members report **varied levels of understanding** of civics and citizenship and **low levels of confidence** amongst both beginning and experienced teachers to teach civics and citizenship education, since many have had **no formal study of the field in their initial teacher education**. Teachers hold diverse conceptions and understandings of civics and citizenship education, often influenced by their personal values and worldviews. While diversity is intrinsic to healthy democracies, **a varying level of commitment to teaching and learning about democracy and lack of understanding about the critical importance of this subject is concerning.**

12. **The implementation of the Australian Curriculum- Civics and Citizenship is variable across Australia.** The Civics and Citizenship subject is not implemented in the state of New South Wales (NSW). The Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) key learning area in NSW does not incorporate the Civics and Citizenship curriculum in grades K-6 and 7-10. Instead, curricular guidance on civics and citizenship education is provided through a separate document offering samples of learning sequences on the NSW government website, distinct from the NESA syllabuses.

SCEAA argues that **Civics and Citizenship should be implemented in all states and territories.** It should be linked to all three dimensions of the curriculum and enriched through whole school democratic practices that model and engage

learners in democratic action. It is important that past, present and future possibilities for active citizenship be learned through all HASS subjects, including history, geography, economics and business.

13. SCEAA members are working with schools, pre-service and in-service teachers, and students, to ensure that connections are made with the **personal and social learning capability (ACARA, 2022) and the community-based nature of civics and citizenship (CC)** that is related to students' wellbeing. Studies have found that opportunities for **youth voice and agency** around local, national and global issues that have authentic connection to young people is vital for learner engagement in democratic citizenship (Hall & Tudball, 2023; Henderson & Tudball, 2016). At the SCEAA conference in Canberra, April 19-20, 2024, pre-service teacher Conor Bowden who is a Tagalaka and Gumatj community man, spoke to participants about 'Utilising First Nations Realities: A modern advocacy approach to engage, inform and develop authentic citizenship education for the future'. His insights will enrich future teacher professional learning programs SCEAA plans to offer to strengthen teaching and learning programs that draw on and value First Nations' knowledge and perspectives.

Also at the SCEAA conference, Professor Melitta Hogarth, Kamilaroi woman and Associate Dean (Indigenous) and Principal Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education worked with us to build understanding of the Ngarrngga Project she directs, which is working towards providing all Australian students the opportunity to engage with the depth, wealth and diversity of Indigenous knowledge through the development of a practical and sustained approach to building educators knowledge and understanding about the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Australian society. SCEAA sees this as vital for effective civics and citizenship education programs.

Also at the conference, Mitchell Sprague, Director of the Australian Council for Student Voice, argued for the importance of bringing leaders and learners from across age groups and communities, who are passionate about student voice, agency, and partnerships, to foster the continual sharing of knowledge.

14. There is evidence of many schools developing **community engagement through whole-school approaches** including making connections to local community organisations and being involved in community events, but **there is scope for this to be increased**. Whole school approaches include engagement of students in school assemblies and opportunities for participation through volunteering in local and global communities using online and face to face modes, **but most importantly, young people should be treated as citizens now, not citizens in**

waiting. This involves engaging them in authentic and purposeful ways in contemporary issues and taking action around issues that matter to them in their lives.

15. Schools who utilise the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) program to facilitate on-site learning about national democratic, historical, and cultural institutions in Canberra, report high levels of increase in learner engagement. But **professional learning programs should also be provided for teachers to be made more aware of how they can access and use the rich online resources of these cultural institutions to build students' knowledge and skills in CC.** SCEAA initial teacher education (ITE) providers regret that the Australian Electoral Commission project that provided face to face workshops on Electoral education across teacher education institutions in the past are no longer offered, since the evidence was that they built the knowledge and confidence of ITE students to teach about voting and elections, run mock elections and explore practical teaching approaches.

16. Some schools conceptualise CC as providing opportunities to **build personal and social capability, citizenship character and values** through an explicit focus on these aspects of learning as well as rights and responsibilities and the promotion of democratic attributes amongst students. At the SCEAA conference (2024), Professor Andrew Peterson, Professor of Character and Citizenship Education at the Jubilee Centre University of Birmingham, spoke of the importance of encompassing the development of a range of personal dispositions including acting for the common good, being involved in social justice programs as well as building personal qualities such as respect, gratitude, responsibility and resilience. This has been widely acknowledged in international literature as an important aspect of student engagement and wellbeing that can be connected to citizenship education (Peterson & Tudball, 2016).

The Personal and Social learning capability in the Australian Curriculum' provides a foundation for students to understand themselves and others, and navigate their relationships, lives, work and learning. Students with well-developed social and emotional skills find it easier to manage themselves, relate to others, collaborate, develop empathy, set goals and resolve conflict. They feel positive about themselves and the world around them' (ACARA, 2022), but the evidence SCEAA has found through its membership is that there has been an **insufficient focus on the general capabilities in teaching and learning programs.**

17. In a search of the Australian curriculum v.9.0 (ACARA, 2024), teachers will find 1365 references to democratic practice, and 1,631 results for social justice. These dimensions are aspired to in the Alice Springs (Mpartnwe) Declaration (Education Council, 2019), the key policy document providing national education goals and directives for the Australian Curriculum. But in discussion with SCEAA members

and with consideration for evidence in the NAP:CC results, SCEAA believes that **an audit and investigation of how these concepts are taught and learned and how they are connected to participatory democracy and learner engagement, requires research.**

18. The extent to which all students have **access to democratic civics and citizenship education, and to develop commitment to values of equity and justice**, varies across regional, rural, and metropolitan areas, as well as among private and government schools, including those within government schools with different ICSEA values. These are influenced by resource availability, teacher knowledge of CC, and varying expectations placed on different student groups based on their *perceived* needs. The study conducted by Dr Jia Ying Neoh (2019) on the *practice of civics and citizenship education in New South Wales primary schools* revealed disparity in CC educational focus. Students from refugee backgrounds are often perceived as requiring civics and citizenship education to understand laws and assimilate into Australian society, while those from perceived privileged backgrounds may be provided with opportunities to actively participate and shape societal decisions.
19. While SCEAA agrees that various barriers exist which make civic participation challenging, paradoxically, there is evidence that membership in a commonly marginalised community can also mobilise people to be actively participatory. For instance, Peucker (2021) highlights how Islamophobia can be both a barrier and motivating factor for active citizenship in the Islamic community. Gates and Hughes (2023) highlight how members of the LGBTIQ+ community are civically engaged, but are also more likely to be or feel lonely. While this work is not specific to educational challenges, it highlights the educational challenge of considering how civic participation, particularly in marginalised communities, needs to involve more than just knowledge building, in order to develop a broader sense of why members of these communities do (or don't) participate and the consequences of such participation for their own communities and the broader Australian community.
20. A key concern in education is teaching civics and citizenship concepts and principles in ways that account for the age and generational gap between educators and students. Research shows us that various temporal factors including generational, age, and contextual factors (i.e., what is happening in the world at a given moment) may influence and shape democratic and civic commitments and participation in the general population (Chowdhury, 2021; Miranti & Evans, 2019). SCEAA suggests that civics and citizenship education and participation requires stronger understanding of how young people may hold both convergent and divergent ideas about democracy and civic participation, relative to those teaching

and making decisions for them.

b. The vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia’s democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanism to improve the quality of information about Australia’s democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system

21. The SCEAA committee notes that there is **limited contemporary research to provide understanding about how young people are engaging through informal mechanisms**, what these mechanisms are, what they are learning from them and how teachers are teaching through/about them. One key mechanism is the role of the media. While there is extant research about young people and their engagement with media, and the role of educational institutions in the development of critical and media literacy, **little of this research is focused on young people and how they perceive and participate in civil society and the democratic process**. There is also **limited research in Australia about the educative potential of these informal mechanisms**.
22. However, some research notes that many people, and especially young people, make use of tools including social media and digital technology for the purposes of news-gathering to the almost complete exclusion of other forms of media, such as print and television. This associated news gathering is often done incidentally, as part of their engagement with more general media. This means that young people may have a haphazard, arbitrary engagement with news and current affairs. **This implies that their knowledge is patchy, varied and incomplete**. It is also **susceptible to influence by various actors** (as discussed in the following term of reference).
23. There are numerous groups and organisations who are active in this space. While often these groups have a particular ideological bent, they often seek to teach consumers of their content about democratic processes. Organisations such as MEG, who run a Global Citizen Student Ambassador Project (see [here](#)) seek to develop the values and attitudes of global citizenship education. In doing so, they encourage civic participation amongst school students. **The challenge that MEG and other groups face is having the resources necessary to scale their projects to ensure all schools have the opportunity to engage with them**. Other groups seek to remain ideologically neutral. **The role that these groups play should not be**

underestimated. These groups include various organisations like the Parliamentary Education Offices in the various jurisdictions, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the Australian Electoral Commission. These groups conduct a range of on and off-site educational programs for schools and young people about the electoral process. **Again, the challenge lies in ensuring that young people in all schools and areas have access to these educational programs.**

c. The mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes

24. As outlined in the response to the previous Term of Reference, young people today are receiving much of their information about their worlds through social media. SCEAA notes that some research has claimed that the ubiquitous access to social media will have a democratising effect upon civil society, while other research has argued that the opposite is true. Certainly, the case seems to be that social media has proven to be fertile ground for the flourishing, dissemination and sharing of misinformation and disinformation by various parties. It is likely that artificial intelligence, both in the form of bots and in false news images and stories will exacerbate the issues that social media sites are facing in terms of assessing the veracity and accuracy of information.

25. There are now numerous cases of how political actors have succeeded in, or attempted to subvert democratic processes through the use of misinformation and disinformation. In Australia, **the Referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament was notable for the large amount of misinformation that was published on social media channels.** It is uncertain how much influence this exerted on people's voting intentions. **Further research is needed in this respect.** Nevertheless, **this growth in misinformation is concerning and should be addressed in CC programs.**

d. Opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation

26. SCEAA notes the generally positive stance in policy and curricular documents towards existence of diversity within Australian communities. A search of the term 'diversity' in the Australian Curriculum displays 983 results. The theme of inclusivity

(324 curriculum references) is emphasised, promoting the celebration of diversity within multicultural Australia. In this way, there are attempts to include diverse communities through their lived experiences of Australian democracy. However, SCEAA also noted barriers to promoting and supporting active participation across diverse groups. These include understandings of the modes of participation in Australian democracy, both through and beyond voting, cultural influences on perceptions about active participation, and as noted in the Terms of reference above, the varied and sometimes limited opportunities available for education on civics and citizenship.

In addition, it is essential to consider the spaces genuinely available within the broader Australian societal and political contexts. This consideration must account for the hegemonic powers of mainstream dominant representations amongst the Australian populace, that **require further research**.

e. Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways government might address or circumvent these barriers

28. SCEAA notes that **more research is required to more accurately identify both the barriers and intersections** with the diverse forms of civic and citizenship participation as a function of place, cultural identity, and feelings of belonging within Australia's diverse multicultural community. **There is currently limited research into understandings of this intersection.**

29. The Smith et. al., (2024) study on Australian teacher educators' perceptions of citizenship and citizenship education, as related to democracy, revealed varied conceptions and practices in initial teacher education. This variability limits the opportunities to support preservice teachers in meaningfully engaging with the dynamism and complexity of democratic civics and citizenship, and thus in gaining the confidence needed to teach CC in schools, and engage the communities in this endeavour.

SCEAA recommends that it is **critical that all pre-service teachers have opportunities to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment opportunities for civics and citizenship education** (Kennedy & Henderson, 2024) as a compulsory core unit in their undergraduate and post graduate courses.

f. Potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation

30. There have been many other reports dating back decades on the importance of civics and Citizenship education in Australian schooling, but the national goals for schooling and various iterations of the current CC curriculum recognise that Australia is a secular democratic nation with a multicultural and multi-faith society, and promotes inclusivity and engaged participation in communities. SCEAA sees strong synergies between this current Inquiry and the *2019 Senate Inquiry into Nationhood, national identity and democracy, that made recommendations in relation to:*

(a) the changing notions of nationhood, citizenship and modern notions of the nation state in the twenty first century;

(b) rights and obligations of citizenship, including naturalisation and revocation, and the responsibility of the state to its citizens in both national and international law;

(c) social cohesion and cultural identity in the nation state;

(d) the role that globalisation and economic interdependence and economic development plays in forming or disrupting traditional notions of national identity;

(e) contemporary notions of cultural identity, multiculturalism and regionalism;

(f) the extent to which nation states balance domestic imperatives and sovereignty and international obligations; and,

(g) comparison between Australian public debate and policy and international trends

SCEAA recommendations:

1. **Establish a national research centre responsible for the implementation of a national audit of CC teaching and learning in schools.** This proposed multi-institutional research centre would be led by leading academics in the field of civics and citizenship in Australia, operating in partnership with professional educational organisations including SCEAA. They will undertake a comprehensive program of research to address concerns raised above in the SCEAA response regarding civics and citizenship education, student engagement and participation.
 - a. **This research centre would be the vehicle for the advancement of civics and citizenship knowledge within the Australian context.** It would undertake a comprehensive program of research focused on the extent to which and how CC is being implemented as part of school teaching and learning and wider school programs across the nation and their efficacy.
 - b. The research will also focus on the informal mechanisms that young people are utilising to source information and how they are using the information to make decisions on social issues, teachers' understanding of the impact of the informal mechanisms, and how they are incorporating the content in their teaching (or not).
2. **National Professional Learning Programs:** The findings from the research will inform the development of comprehensive professional learning programs to build pre- service and in-service teachers' efficacy in implementing civics and citizenship education and learner engagement. This would include a range of programs for in-service teachers and pre-service teachers. Ideally, it would also offer some kind of credential or qualification. The programs will be based on contemporary understanding of effective professional learning that involves building knowledge and practice through participatory action research, that can be delivered through a mix of online and face to face modes.
3. While SCEAA is aware that in our federal system, all states and territories have the right to form their own curriculum and implementation approaches, we would recommend that the Education Council be asked to consider **mandating** the implementation of the civics and citizenship education curriculum in Australian schools. This should include a focus on the core elements related to CC in the HASS curriculum, as well as the relevant aspects of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities of the Australian curriculum that together, can advance the **civic education, citizenship dispositions, engagement, and participatory capabilities of young Australians.**

This submission is made by the SCEAA Executive Team, in consultation with SCEAA members

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