



UNITED NATIONS YOUTH ASSOCIATION OF TASMANIA
SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

PO Box 5002, University of Tasmania LPO, Sandy Bay, Tasmania

This submission was prepared by Michael Cordover, Education Officer of UNYA Tasmania and represents the views of UNYA Tasmania as at 2 June 2006. Enquiries should be directed to Michael by email on taseducation@unya.asn.au or by telephone on 0438 591 479.

Background

Organisation

The United Nations Youth Association is a not-for-profit by-youth-for-youth organisation which exists to promote the work of the United Nations, to educate young people and to represent the views of young people on various issues. UNYA Tasmania works primarily with students in grades eleven and twelve. Our major activity is our annual state conference for such students, a three night residential camp. State conference is primarily a model United Nations conference but also includes a significant educative component. We also run competitions, activities for university students and classes pertaining to international law or the United Nations in schools.

Due to the nature of our activities UNYA Tasmania's membership tends to comprise students who do well academically, know substantial amounts about politics and current affairs, and care about these issues. This will have some impact on the content of this submission. It is, however, unlikely that students not in this category would contribute to any discussion likely to be part of a parliamentary inquiry. This lack of access to the views of young people who are not already involved should be noted by the committee. Regardless, this submission will contain the thoughts of engaged young people on how to engage others.

Consultation Process

Members of UNYA Tasmania vary from 14 to 24 years of age, the majority being in the 15-19 age group. We set up an internet discussion forum for our members to consider this inquiry, as well as holding some discussion at our fortnightly meetings. The internet forum received nearly 30 substantial replies. This submission is a direct result of that discussion process and represents the views of UNYA Tasmania on issues of civics and electoral education.

Structure

This submission will first consider issues identified through consultation and will then describe some proposed solutions to those issues.



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Issues Identified

NB: the experiences here noted are those of Tasmanian students and so apply to Tasmanian curricula.

Schools

Electoral education in schools is insufficient. Civics education in SOSE classes tends to be short and focus on the structure of Australian Parliament and the functions of the legal system. There is very little said about the actual process of voting, the realities of politics, the history of democracy and the reasons why participatory democracy is important. All of these were identified as important to be considered.

Some schools had some student elections run by the Australian Electoral Commission but this was thought to be insufficient to provide any practical education of voting. Students tend to be unfamiliar with the functions of above-the-line senate voting and its operation in Australia. Students were also unaware of the details of the Tasmanian Hare-Clarke system.

An increase in education was seen as students entered grades eleven and twelve. This education was not compulsory and tended to occur in Legal Studies and similar such programs. Support for Tasmanian Certificate of Education (TCE) courses such as Political Studies (a fifty hour supplementary course) tended to be low to the point of preventing the program running in many schools. The education provided in Legal Studies, a more popular course, is generally about the legal and parliamentary system.

There is very little in-school consideration of actual current political issues. At best students consider electoral systems, governmental theory and the structure of the Australian legal system. This does not lead to young people able to make a well-informed decision on political issues, rather to further disengagement as only 'boring' topics are discussed in any class which might be thought to have a political focus.

Australian Electoral Commission

The AEC has a vital role in providing electoral education. Young people are generally unaware about their ability to enrol at age seventeen. It is also an effort for young people to enrol, as they are generally not provided with enrolment forms without asking for them. Active engagement is required rather than passively waiting for young people to express an interest. There was also dismay at the lack of readily available example ballots and practical information on the voting mechanisms used in Australia.



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Parliament House

The broadcasting of parliament on television and over the internet was commended as an effective way of ensuring that young people know what is going on. While a not-insubstantial number of UNYA members regularly watch parliamentary telecasts and webcasts, this is likely a function of their engagement and interest. The newly-developed Live Minutes for the House of Representative was also used as an example of an excellent way to ensure that people are able to access democracy first hand.

A problem of knowledge was identified, with not everyone being aware of the existence of webcasts, Live Minutes etc.

Non-Governmental Organisations

Most UNYA members learnt what they know about the electoral system from non-governmental organisations promoting this awareness. The primary organisation identified in Tasmania for this was the Youth Parliament program. Although NGOs play a vital role in electoral and civics education, it is important not to place the burden of education solely upon them. Better cooperation between NGOs and schools would be beneficial. In this way, NGOs could complement the basic electoral education that is provided to all Australians in their basic education.

Solutions

There is no simple solution to the problem of disengagement and poor electoral education. UNYA has a number of recommendations, however, to solving these problems.

Recommendation 1: Broader enrolment schemes

Young people should be sent electoral enrolment forms by the AEC when they turn eighteen if they are not listed on the roll. The current system of delegating this responsibility to state commissions has resulted in this being unreliable at best, and not the norm.

Recommendation 2: AEC to provide better practical information about voting

Confirmation of enrolment should not be a simple card but should also include information on the practical realities of voting in local government, state and federal elections. This should include examples of completed ballot papers.



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Recommendation 3: Better political education in schools

Students should be educated not just in the theoretical operation of the Australian electoral system but also in the practical realities of parties, voting mechanisms, preference distribution and the like. Bias is unavoidable, though this is likely in all teaching. It may be worthwhile running these sessions as workshops with many biases represented if this fear stands. UNYA does not believe that a fear of bias should impose a substantial impediment to practical political education.

Recommendation 4: Options for practical experience

Young people need some knowledge of the practical realities of voting before they are required to vote. This should include not only how to complete ballot papers, but how preferences are distributed, what the process is for voting along a particular party line and the like. It is important to avoid bias in this. This can be through the use of fictional candidates and parties, for example using Harry Potter characters for candidates and houses for parties. This ensures a light-hearted mood, relevance (especially to early high school students) and a good learning environment.

Recommendation 5: Comprehensive education

Young people should be made aware of the entire electoral process, from the issue of writs to their return, from the point of view of a voter, a candidate and the parliament. This should not simply be theoretical information but should consider the realities of this process for all involved. This can be carried out with the assistance of NGOs.

Recommendation 6: Better awareness of citizenship rights and responsibilities

Young people should be made aware, through school curricula, of their rights as citizens and their responsibilities. This should include information about the importance of voting, the open parliamentary process and similar information.

Recommendation 7: Better education about the reasons for democracy

School students should be taught the relevance of democracy, its origins and why it is used in Australia. More information should be provided to them about the differences between participatory and representative democracy. Information should be provided about different electoral systems, about the preferential voting system and about the reasons for compulsory voting.



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Recommendation 8: Cooperation with NGOs

Non-governmental organisations should be provided with better opportunities for cooperating with schools to supplement the education they provide. NGOs should also be employed to run workshop-style educational events to ensure there is no bias arising from the schools.

Recommendation 9: Support for NGOs

The valuable work of non-governmental organisations in this area should be supported through the availability of funding. Effective civics and electoral education programs should be provided with resources to continue to function or expand.

Recommendation 10: By-youth for-youth educational programs

This may be carried out very successfully in conjunction with NGOs. Students learn best when what they are learning is relevant to them. If young people teach young people then there a much larger proportion of students achieve the learning outcomes. Frameworks need to be developed for both in-school and out-of-school educational activities of these forms. This must be appropriately funded.