

**SUBMISSION
TO
PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION**

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BACKGROUND

Whilst this is a personal submission, it is my experience as a Parliamentary Educator in particular, along with my experience in state curriculum development, classroom teaching and school administration that gives me the credentials to comment on civics and electoral education in Western Australia. In my role as Parliamentary Education Officer I am responsible for the management and the provision of all educational services on behalf of both Houses of the Parliament of Western Australia.

Parliamentary education does much to promote civic and electoral education and to ensure information is easily accessible. It is a daily educative process of communication and making connections across a wide range of ages and backgrounds and all education sectors.

Most modern text books on Parliament identify 'education' as one of the main roles of Parliament. It is noteworthy that the *1992 Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters* reported on 'Parliament and public education' and stated that 'knowledge is a pre-requisite for effective action within our democracy... Parliament should have an important role to play in this educative process. It can do much to ensure the availability of basic information about our institutions of representative and responsible government... and is a significant aspect of the functions of the legislature which, with the enhanced means for fulfilling its responsibilities which we have recommended, its presiding officers and their administration should be encouraged to promote'.

All school programs and resources developed by the Western Australian Parliamentary Education Office are linked to the Curriculum Framework 1998, a policy document defined in law through the Curriculum Council Act 1997.

The Curriculum Framework sets out the knowledge, understandings, skills, values, attitudes and what students should be able to do as a result of the education programmes they undertake in Western Australia from kindergarten to year 12. (See APPENDIX 1)

The perceived downfall of this document is that it is a planning framework not a syllabus and therefore it is left to the schools and classroom teachers to plan learning experiences that meet the particular needs of their students.

The Western Australian Parliamentary Education Office works towards assisting teachers in making connections between the mandated Western Australian Curriculum Framework and curriculum provision within the classroom, with respect to civics and electoral education.

Recommendations/Observations:

- **The nature of surveys conducted into state and national civic literacy should be addressed in order to more accurately measure application of skills and civic participation.**
- **Civics education should be mandatory for all schools in Australia.**

- **Schools should be required to address civics and electoral education as part of their whole school curriculum planning process.**
- **Adequate funding should be provided for joint civics and electoral education initiatives to continue.**
- **Civics and electoral education should form a compulsory part of migrant education courses.**
- **Quality, efficient and cost effective programs should be developed particularly for delivery of civics and electoral education in remote and regional Indigenous communities.**

PARLIAMENTARY EDUCATION

Whilst the focus of this inquiry is on electoral education it is within the broader civics education framework that we approach the acquisition of core knowledge, skills and values necessary for understanding and participating in our representative democracy.

Programs

The Western Australian Parliamentary Education Office has the responsibility for the management, administration, planning and delivery of civics education programs for school and tertiary groups, community groups and for the general public. We also provide a service to members of Parliament and dignitaries. Education programs provide for promotion, awareness, knowledge and understanding of the history, role and function of the Western Australian parliamentary democracy.

This is achieved by:

- Developing and implementing appropriate parliamentary education programs and materials for various groups;
- Providing access to relevant and accurate information relating to Parliament and its processes;
- Providing a collaborative and consultative forum liaising with all relevant organisations and education sectors; and
- Promoting the development of positive and informed views about the function of Parliament fostering active engagement in the democratic process.

Schools

The activities of the Parliamentary Education Office reflect its priorities and the flexibility and professionalism of its staff. Each year many thousands of school students participate in educational excursions through the Parliament of Western Australia, ranging from Year 2 to Year 12. Two of the three education office staff are qualified and experienced educators who use their expertise in curriculum, politics and Western Australian history to provide a meaningful educational experience for the students. The unique locale of the parliament provides the ultimate setting to add depth and meaning to *Active Citizenship*.

The Parliamentary Education Office makes indirect curriculum connections across several learning areas articulated in the Curriculum Framework but the most direct connections are to the Society and Environment learning area that develops students' understandings of *Social Systems* and *Active Citizenship*. We work towards improving the image of civics and electoral education from one that is often thought of as irrelevant and dull to one that is meaningful and exciting.

The materials and activities we develop encourage students to apply understandings and skills to real life, especially to their own lives, and aim to assist them in developing social competence and civic responsibility. Programmes focus on active participation and investigation. Students are encouraged to see themselves as members of a democratic, culturally diverse society. In this way they develop the skills necessary to make sense of and contribute to civic life.

The Parliamentary Education Office augments teachers learning programs by providing relevant and interactive activities such as simulations and role-play, and discussions and debate. Students engage in active learning experiences to develop an understanding of our political procedures and the importance of participatory skills. School excursions to Parliament House model interactive instruction and serve as much as a student learning experience as they do teacher professional development.

Educational visits to Parliament House by primary, secondary and tertiary students are in very high demand and groups must book 6 months in advance to ensure a place. There are four set booking times of 75 minutes daily. We welcome between 90 and 180 students to Parliament House each school day.

Efforts to improve the image of civics and electoral education can be enhanced by focusing on issues-based inquiry, reflection and analyses. To this end we encourage teachers to use the role-play simulations in their classrooms and these are supported by comprehensive teacher's notes explaining the background to the legislation. Learning in this area must value inquiry, discussion and debate.

Tertiary

The Parliamentary Education Office activities extend beyond school education. It also provides quality educational programs for tertiary groups e.g. students from the schools of Politics, International Studies, Law, Business Law, Journalism, Information Studies, and to TAFE students, particularly those from the Adult Migrant Education Programs.

Undergraduate B Ed Courses

In the past we have run a series of civics education workshops for second and third year undergraduate education students.

These workshops introduce pre-service teachers to Civics and Citizenship Education exploring the ways in which citizenship education can be translated into effective classroom practice. Positive attitudes, ideas and strategies for future curriculum development are fostered in the area of Civics and Citizenship Education and pre-service teachers are encouraged to become informed, interested and actively involved in getting Civics and Citizenship Education into the classroom curriculum.

Workshops cover:

- the concept of citizenship education;
- why it is important to have Civics and Citizenship Education integrated into classroom curriculum;
- the principles of democracy (Equal Opportunity, Respect for and from others, Freedom of thought and expression, Dignity of self, Freedom from harm);
- democratic processes and the features of our parliamentary democracy ;
- ways of embedding democratic principles into classroom practice;
- approaches to planning whole school Civic and Citizenship Education curriculum;
- ideas and activities that encourage leadership and active participation in decision making;
- use of learning technologies in Civics and Citizenship Education; and
- learning and teaching strategies that involve students in thinking about their own and other people's values.

Australasian Parliamentary Educators Conference

An Australasian Parliamentary Educators Conference has taken place annually since 1992. Its purpose is to provide a forum in which delegates can report on the parliamentary education programs provided in each State and Territory and discuss the issues and concerns arising from these reports. Each delegate has the opportunity to provide information about parliamentary education programs and materials being developed and implemented. In this way, the conference provides a collaborative and consultative forum for the sharing of relevant and accurate information relating to parliamentary education and for promoting and fostering active engagement of the learner through examples of best practice in parliamentary education delivery.

There is a strong shift towards acknowledging educational outcomes and providing student focused learning. Delegates agree that knowledge about parliamentary process involves the skilled application of information within an active and purposeful learning experience.

It is important that we offer workable classroom strategies that involve students in formulating questions, evaluating answers, problem solving, communicating findings, and working in collaborative teams to address issues.

INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE

The nature of civics education

It is my personal experience as an educator for many years that young people are very concerned about social issues and civic matters. The problem they often experience is finding a mechanism to voice their ideas in a manner that makes them feel they can and do make a difference.

Ask a young person if they are interested in 'politics' and invariably the answer will be "No!" Ask a young person if they are interested in an issue or their democratic rights and almost always they will express an opinion.

What seems to be missing is a meaningful link between the issues and the political process that is powerful and meaningful enough to give students a sense of being able to make a difference.

Civics educators are aware that over decades numerous surveys have been conducted, expert groups established, and resultant reports written about civic literacy in Australia. Despite careful and costly program development and considerable promotion and teacher professional development, subsequent surveys repeatedly find that citizens lack knowledge and a capacity to effectively participate.

Perhaps this is because surveys usually measure factual knowledge that being easier to construct and interpret. Such surveys can give us a fair indication of citizens' knowledge about how our social systems operate. Much more difficult is measuring the application of civic skills and the ability to participate in civic life effectively. Perhaps if we could we would find out why our representative democracy is still such a successful system of government.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **The nature of surveys conducted into state and national civic literacy should be addressed in order to more accurately measure application of skills and civic participation.**

The content and adequacy of civics education in government and non-government schools, TAFE colleges and Universities

The Western Australian Curriculum Framework requires the inclusion of civic education in all our schools; including government, non-government and home schooling.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **Civics education should be mandatory for all schools in Australia.**

The school age at which civics education should begin

I believe that civic education needs to be part of an all-encompassing curriculum. It needs to be integrated across the curriculum and across all phases of development. Ideally, setting the foundations for appropriate civic behaviour should begin in the home and be supported and enhanced throughout schooling.

The kindergarten to year 12 approach of the Curriculum Framework encourages a developmental approach to curriculum planning, teaching and learning. This means that at any of the four phases of development a student should be given the opportunity to achieve the outcomes. The Curriculum Framework provides some guidance about typical curriculum experiences that students might need at each phase to best achieve the outcomes. Because civic education is such an important part of students overall education it needs to be given sustained attention across learning areas and across the phases of development.

By illustrating the holistic nature of the curriculum the Framework intends to demonstrate how students can be provided with *learning opportunities which integrate similar knowledge, skills and values across learning areas*.¹

In this way civics education is integrative and interdisciplinary within the total curriculum.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **Schools should be required to address civics and electoral education as part of their whole school curriculum planning process.**

The potential to increase civic knowledge through outside school programs

Western Australia's vast distances and the remoteness of some communities, particularly indigenous communities, raise the issue of inclusivity. The Parliament of Western Australia in collaboration with the Western Australian Electoral Commission and The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia has established a joint civics education outreach program that supports students unable to take advantage of the educational programs offered to students who can access Parliament House, the Electoral Education Centre and the Constitutional Centre in Perth. The 'Outreach Program' has been designed primarily to take student focused learning programs to the regional areas of Western Australia and thereby establish direct contact between the students, and the members of the Western Australian Parliament. The Parliament of Western Australia employs casual presenters who are resident in the regional and metropolitan districts and who have undergone a merit selection process and an intensive two day training course to deliver the program. Initially we have targeted upper primary and lower secondary students. Students participate in interactive board games and role-play simulating the Constitution, Election and Parliamentary processes. Currently we have presenters delivering the program in Albany, Broome, Bunbury, Dumbleyung, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie, and Merredin in regional Western Australia. Teams of metropolitan based presenters travel to the regional centres where we have experienced difficulty in

¹ Curriculum Framework p41

recruiting local presenters. Metropolitan schools who cannot access the civic institutions in the city can request that the program be delivered in their school.

Teachers are encouraged to use the ideas and activities in the teacher support material as springboards for further studies in democratic process and active citizenship in the classroom. Students may also have the opportunity to meet their members of Parliament from either the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **Adequate funding should be provided for joint civics and electoral education initiatives to continue.**

The adequacy of civics education of migrant citizens

In preparing migrants for democratic citizenship it is crucial that they have an understanding of the values underpinning our democracy, often very different from their own. We provide opportunities for them to develop an understanding of the processes, encouraging critical reasoning and questioning, and engaging them in thinking and doing through interactive role-play which is aimed at stimulating interest at the same time being a tool for learning the basics of democratic processes and representative democracy.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **Civics and electoral education should form a compulsory part of migrant education courses.**

The adequacy of civics and electoral education of Indigenous citizens

The Joint Civics Education Outreach Program recognised that the program that was developed primarily for mainstream students was not appropriate for remote Aboriginal students. To address this shortfall the working party met with Aboriginal liaison officers in the Western Australian Department of Education and Training to discuss possible options for delivering the program in remote Indigenous communities. Under production is a big book story relevant to the students and the story is accompanied by hand puppets. Ultimately we aim to have the story included as part of the Aboriginal Literacy Program in Western Australia.

The Joint Civics Education Outreach Program recognises that learning styles and needs differ for Indigenous citizens. Delivering an effective and economic education program is major a challenge facing civic and electoral education providers.

Recommendation/Observation:

- **Quality, efficient and cost effective programs should be developed particularly for delivery of civics and electoral education in remote and regional Indigenous communities.**

APPENDIX 1

Curriculum Framework in Western Australia

Outcomes identified in the Curriculum Framework are defined in terms of 13 overarching and 8 learning area outcomes and these underpin all learning and teaching programs for every school student in Western Australia.

The overarching statement also outlines seven key principles number one of which relates to an explicit acknowledgement of core shared values including “social and civic responsibility, resulting in a commitment to exploring and promoting the common good; meeting individual needs in ways which do not infringe the rights of others; participating in democratic processes; social justice and cultural diversity”.

Overarching Learning Outcomes

The development of knowledge, skills and values is a lifelong process, and occurs in many places besides school. This section of the Overarching Statement describes the outcomes which all students need to attain in order to become lifelong learners, achieve their potential in their personal and working lives and play an active part in civic and economic life. These outcomes apply across all learning areas and are the responsibility of all teachers. The outcomes for each learning area contribute to the achievement of the Overarching learning outcomes, and each learning area statement includes a description of the links between the learning area outcomes and the overarching learning outcomes. The statement of each outcome is accompanied by a more detailed description of that outcome. Each description includes a number of examples of the ways in which students might demonstrate progress towards the outcome at different stages in their schooling from kindergarten to year 12.²

Overarching Outcome 8 states that:

Students understand their cultural, geographic and historical contexts and have the knowledge, skills and values necessary for active participation in life in Australia.³

Each of the 8 learning areas contributes to the achievement of this overarching outcome, either directly or indirectly.

The learning area called “Society and Environment” makes the most direct and significant links to civic education. The Society and Environment Learning Area identifies the essential knowledge students need to achieve the Society and Environment outcomes and the overarching outcomes.

The Scope of the Curriculum

This section identifies two important elements to be considered when developing appropriate learning experiences for students to achieve the learning outcomes. The first element is the knowledge which is essential for students to acquire, to enable them to achieve the Society and Environment Learning Outcomes. This essential knowledge will be addressed in different ways from kindergarten to year 12. Teachers will make judgments about the particular emphasis they will give, the specific examples they choose, and where the knowledge is placed in the different phases of development. The second element relates to the nature of the curriculum, and the teaching and learning experiences that will typically occur during the four overlapping phases of development from kindergarten through to year 12.⁴

² Curriculum Framework p20

³ Curriculum Framework p19

⁴ Curriculum Framework p 263

Essential Knowledge

The essential knowledge relates specifically to the five learning outcomes that identify what students need to know and understand about their society and environment. It is also essential to the achievement of Overarching Outcome 8, which requires of students an understanding of their cultural, geographic and historical contexts as well as the knowledge, skills and values necessary for active participation in life in Australia.

Programs to achieve the conceptual outcomes will be informed by the processes of the investigation, communication and participation outcome, and within a framework that develops the active citizenship outcome and the associated values of social justice, democratic process and ecological sustainability.

The important perspectives in the treatment of the essential knowledge include:

- the experiences, achievements and contributions of all cultural groups in Australia, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
- gender; and
- the diversity among and within groups.

It is expected that in all years of schooling from kindergarten to year 12 the focus of this essential knowledge will be on Australian society and environment, with particular reference to Western Australia and local settings where possible. Regional and global links will be made where appropriate.

Therefore it is important that students know about the following with the above focus in mind:

- the cultures, beliefs and practices of indigenous groups since human occupation;
- the diversity of and interaction between cultures, beliefs and practices in the past and present;
- the historical origins of diverse peoples, cultures, practices and institutions;
- significant continuities and changes in settlement patterns;
- regional influences on the policies, beliefs and practices of societies;
- the origins and operations of economic systems and their impact on individuals, societies and environments;
- the origins and operations of political and legal systems and their impact on individuals, societies and environments; and
- the origins and operations of religious and belief systems and their impact on individuals, societies and environments.⁵

(Please note that this is not the complete list)

⁵ Curriculum Framework p263

Natural and Social Systems and *Active Citizenship* make up two of the 7 learning area statements in the Society and Environment Learning Area.

Natural and Social Systems

Students understand that systems provide order to the dynamic natural and social relationships occurring in the world.

Active Citizenship

Students demonstrate active citizenship through their behaviours and practices in the school environment, in accordance with the principles and values associated with the democratic process, social justice and ecological sustainability.⁶

⁶ Curriculum Framework p252