

SUBMISSION 16

To:
The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

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It is our contention that the first and foremost objective of electoral education should be to encourage all eligible Australians to enrol to vote. Enrolment is also an important motivation for increasing understanding of the electoral system, which is the ensuing objective of electoral education - to ensure that all Australian voters understand the voting processes they are using.

We are addressing most, but not all the terms of reference, and some will have been grouped together.

- **The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education;**
- **The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE and universities;**
and
- **The school age at which electoral education should begin.**

Civics (and Citizenship) Education as it is currently adopted in New South Wales, has been well defined elsewhere, especially in terms of its focus on informed and active citizenship. Examples of such definitions are to be found in the *Whereas the people ...* report (1994) and in the glossaries of NSW Board of Studies Years K-6 Human Society and Its Environment and 7-10 History and Geography syllabuses.

Electoral education we see as including: developing skills and understandings about the role of elections in a democracy; the methodology and process of voting and voting systems in Australia – with particular focus on those systems most relevant to the participants of any particular course; some comparative study of the nature and impact of the range of electoral systems in use in Australia and, to a lesser extent, abroad.

Electoral education is an integral component of civics and citizenship education in a democracy and should not be seen in isolation to the broad aims of civics and citizenship. Electoral education could be taught as a technical process in isolation without reference to the broader civics and citizenship education framework, but is more likely to be effective if educators and programs present it as an important component (but not the only one) in developing informed, participative citizenship - the goal of civics and citizenship education.

Electoral education can begin in some form as early as Stage 1. However, it should be addressed at a range of levels that become more specific and detailed as students approach voting age.

In the current NSW K-6 primary HSIE syllabus, for instance, civics and citizenship education moves incrementally from the person to the broader community as the students' age increases. Stage 1 students learn about roles, rights, responsibilities, rules at school and in the family and may look at decision-making processes. In Stage 2, local government and its processes are addressed, with electoral processes implied or minimally touched on. In Stage 3, however, state government is studied, specifically including electoral processes. Even here, though, as students are still many years away from being voters themselves, the focus should be on the importance of voting and fair electoral systems in a democracy, rather than the processes of voting. However, the latter can certainly be addressed realistically in simulations and in real-life examples, such as school elections.

In secondary school, Stages 4 and 5, with students beginning to approach voting age, several NSW HSIE syllabuses focus on civic history, civic institutions and civic participation, which may or may not include much electoral education, although there are specific references to elections. However, the senior syllabus (Stage 6) has not civics and citizenship education or Electoral education content at all, which we consider to be a serious problem as this is the very age when students move towards enrolment and voting.

Broadly, then, we consider the current civics and citizenship education provision in NSW curriculums, except for Stage 6, to be very satisfactory. However, it is necessary to ensure –

through professional development and availability of appropriate resources - that teachers are able to deal more effectively with the electoral education component.

In addition, students should also have the opportunity to participate in electoral processes through participation in Student Representative Councils and school parliament elections conducted along the same lines as Federal and State elections. The federal and state electoral offices should develop materials and resources to specifically support this as a form of electoral education.

The provision of civics and electoral education in the post-compulsory school years is one that needs to seriously be addressed given that these are the very people who are about to enter into the voting age. Currently there is no requirement or provision for this in NSW and the situation we believe is similar in the other States and Territories. This should therefore be a priority area for electoral education. At the very least, a unit of work could be included in a compulsory course such as English. Ideally, a compulsory one-unit (possibly one semester) course in civic participation or political studies could be developed and implemented perhaps as a joint State and Commonwealth initiative. Provision of Commonwealth funding, as occurred with the recent Discovering Democracy Program - a civics and citizenship education program funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training - would encourage and support State educational bodies to implement this important area. Such a program should include specific electoral education.

Tertiary Education, with some exceptions, we believe to be even less adequately addressed than the post-compulsory school years. Adult English programs in TAFE and other language institutions often seem to include a component of civic and electoral education and some resources are available to support this. However, we know from offering regular courses to such classes, that teachers would welcome additional specific resources and opportunities for classes (and teachers) to participate in programs conducted by electoral educators. Other than these classes, we are not aware of any other civics and citizenship education or Electoral Education offerings in the TAFE curriculums, and yet these represent clear target groups.

In universities, other than Political Science and government courses, no general civics and citizenship or Electoral Education appears to be offered. Some student clubs and groups exist with a specific interest in politics, often aligned with particular political parties. The abandonment of compulsory student unionism will weaken the democratic base of general student bodies, as well as their resource bases, and reduce the stock of practical experience in such community organisations as well as experience of electoral processes. It is important to note that for most people, practical experience of and involvement in democratic practice, comes not from home or work experiences and only to a limited degree from involvement with formal politics. Instead, it mostly arises from participation in clubs, societies and the wide range of community organisations. Experience and confidence in these bodies tends to encourage continuing and wider participation, and many students who first experienced and learned democratic processes and skills in various student organisations, have gone on to make major contributions to Australian society in the community and in politics.

One strategy which we feel could be achieved in tertiary institutions is the distribution of AEC electoral enrolment forms possibly supplemented with some brief additional education material. These could simply be made available at information points including libraries, but ideally they could be included as part of the package of materials given to students at the time of registration.

- **The potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs.**

We take this to mean programs for school-age students conducted outside of curriculum and other programs conducted at school.

The Parliamentary Education and Community Relations Section of the NSW Parliament designs and conducts programs for primary, secondary and tertiary students that foster civics and citizenship education and also include elements of electoral education where appropriate. The Section works in conjunction with electoral bodies such as the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and educational bodies such as the NSW Department of Education and Training. Some examples of these programs are:

- Citizenship Conventions (upper primary and secondary)
- Year 10 Forums – parliamentary type issues debates
- State and National Schools Constitutional Conventions Program (Years 11-12) – AEC already involved in National Convention
- YMCA Youth Parliament
- United Nations Model Assembly and Security Council programs
- Oxfam International Youth Parliament
- Student Representative Council state meetings and camps

There are a number of programs for young people operating in the community or through schools that are essentially about leadership, community involvement and civics and citizenship. Some do – and most could – involve an electoral education component. These are essentially youth leadership programs with a civic focus. These are situations where electoral educators could be more proactive, contacting organisers and offering resources. In addition there are many community programs run by police, local councils, religious organisations, organisations to assist young people with problems or disadvantage (eg Youth Off The Streets), which would also be points at which – at the least – for the distribution of literature and enrolment forms. Many young people who have left school will exist in the area between these extremes. Programs – again with a focus on encouraging enrolment first of all – should be developed to target them also, despite the obvious difficulties. Conventional advertising may have little impact, relative to its cost, but again, literature distribution and promotions at youth-oriented events and sites (concerts, beaches, etc) could be attempted.

Rather than creating new programs, electoral education could be very effectively included in many such existing programs, strengthening them but also gaining impact from its inclusion in already established valid programs, fostering knowledge about the system, encouraging young people to enrol to vote and empowering them to make decisions and participate in society and their community.

- **The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens.**

The Parliamentary Education and Community Relations Section currently runs two series of programs each year for adult students studying English as a second language. Each session involves a two-hour program – one hour parliamentary procedure role play; the other an electoral session and mock election - the latter are often conducted by AEC officers and use a mix of AEC and our resources. This is a successful program which could easily also be offered by other civics, parliamentary and electoral educators working together. However, any real expansion of the program would require increased staff and other resources. Additional resources to assist with such things as child-care and travel, would facilitate participation in these kinds of programs for the students themselves, who often find family and financial considerations barriers to participation. Alternatively, educator teams or individuals could conduct similar programs on-site. Most of the necessary resources already exist, needing simply to be packaged to support such programs.

In addition, while existing multilingual or community language materials are excellent and very effective, there is always room for expansion, especially as the linguistic mix of new arrivals changes.

- **The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education.**

The existing range of AEC electoral education programs and materials and electoral centres are excellent. Obviously additional resources would enable this role to be expanded. Ideally, however, there should be electoral centres in at least each capital city and major regional centres. The option of joint centres in conjunction with the AEC and state and territory commissions should be explored. Joint programs with parliamentary and other civics educators should be explored and encouraged.

The education role of District Returning Officers (DROs) should be supported through professional development and additional resources and through promotion to schools. As well as visiting schools, DROs could run professional development for teachers.

The period leading up to an election is particularly critical, but at such times DROs are fully occupied. Consideration should be given to the employment of temporary education staff (e.g. casual teachers) to continue and accelerate electoral education programs for both adults and students at such times.

Again, in all this, encouraging enrolment should be a top priority, especially given the changes in the federal electoral laws which preclude enrolment changes after an election has been announced. Unless major education programs encouraging enrolment are constantly provided, we fear that this change is likely to have an undemocratic impact, unnecessarily disenfranchising many voters and probably encouraging misrepresentation by voters (eg of places of residence) at polling booths.

In conclusion we support more funding for programs of electoral education for adults across age groups – particularly during election years at both State and Federal levels. Particularly in election years, electoral education programs should be enhanced with educational advertising on TV, radio and in print media.

- **The role of Federal, State and Local Governments in promoting electoral education.**

In responding to previous terms of reference we have addressed formal education programs and the electoral bodies.

Parliamentary Education Officers in Federal and State Parliaments should incorporate a specific electoral education role into their functions as well as providing parliamentary education. At the Parliament of NSW we incorporate electoral education about both state and federal electoral systems in a wide range of school, tertiary and community and teacher professional development programs.

We feel each of the three levels of Government and each part of government has an important role in facilitating enrolment to vote and electoral education – a whole of government approach. Many programs can be shared amongst them and various government departments and institutions at all levels can have a role in supporting electoral education. Its importance to the processes of government is so basic that, effectively all government departments should include some reference to supporting democratic processes in their mission statements or objectives and perhaps also offer electoral education as part of their human resources provisions for employees - encouraging an ethos of active and informed citizenship.

The Federal Government:

- could encourage or require tertiary institutions to provide voter enrolment forms as part of their enrolment procedures;
- could require the Australian Taxation Office to supply enrolment forms when people apply for tax file numbers, ABNs, etc;
- should fund very specific advertising relating to the closure of electoral roles during an election year before an election is called, especially in relation to providing enrol to vote campaigns;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all Government department information centres, especially in Centrelink and Medicare offices.

State Governments:

- could incorporate enrol to vote forms in Driver's licence applications or statements of HSC results;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all schools and clearly displayed in the administration area for students and community members;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all Government department information centres, particularly in administration of public housing given that tenants often move to changed electorates when allocated housing;
- similarly, as housing is a determinant of electorate location and possibly change, voting enrolment forms could be placed with real estate agents in cooperation with the Real Estate Institute of Australia.

Local Governments:

- are uniquely placed to provide information directly to local communities;
- should offer electoral education for their constituents to explain local council election procedures, as well as supporting electoral education for state and federal elections in conjunction with the AEC and state and territory electoral authorities;
- could require enrolment forms to be available in all council offices, local government community and information centres and particularly in public libraries.

- **The access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the federal Parliament.**

We support the current system of funding based on distance for school visits to Federal Parliament and would be in favour of increasing funding for these programs if at all possible. We would like to see the same principal applied for visits to State Parliament by rural and remote communities.