

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Department of House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
committee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Madam/Sir,

I wish to make a submission to the:

**Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters**  
**Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education**

I specifically wish to address the following points of the Terms of Reference, particularly in relation to Electoral Education in Australia:

- **The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education**
- **The school age at which electoral education should begin**
- **The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education**
- **Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.**

**Please note:** *for sake of brevity, I have not cited the studies mentioned – but I am happy to site research if it helps/is needed for my submission.*

**My views and recommendations:**

- There is abundant evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that the ***lack of civic engagement***, civic literacy and political efficacy among many citizens, and youth in particular, is widespread.
- There is abundant evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that civics and citizenship education (***CCE is essential to a healthy democracy***) and is one approach to addressing this civic deficit.
- CCE and the curriculum area of Social Studies or Studies of Society and the Environment (no matter what it is called) ***is therefore one of the threads that holds our democracy together***. CCE results in people understanding and participating in the democratic process. CCE education provides a framework for lifelong participation in building engaged and effective citizens and communities.
- Evidence confirms that ***good CCE programs work*** (ie have the desired effects – ie educate people to become competent, committed, engaged and caring democratic citizens). The characteristics of *good* programs include three essential components that are indispensable: civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. These programs must use participatory methods, and should be used in:
  - ***formal instruction*** in schools and other community programs, and
  - in the ***informal school setting*** or ‘hidden curriculum’ (the informal curriculum refers to the governance of the school community and relationships among those within it). These relationships should embody the fundamental values and principles of constitutional democracy – *“schools should be managed by adults who govern in accordance with constitutional values and principles and who display traits of character worth emulating”*.
- There is abundant evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that ***CCE is a learned and a life-long process*** (that begins at a very early age), and that it occurs inside and outside formal schooling. CCE should start in the early years of schooling (i.e. kindergarten), and should be part of the mainstream curriculum.
- There is abundant evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that ***electoral education (EE) is best conducted in the context of a CCE program*** – EE (one aspect of CCE) is also a life-long process which should start in the early years of schooling, and be continually addressed through the compulsory years of schooling.

- There is abundant evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that innovative ***EE programs that use interactive/participatory teaching strategies*** (these strategies engage students and stimulate their civic skills, thereby improving their sense of efficacy) ***are the most effective*** – far more effective than the production and distribution of CCE and EE materials.
- There is evidence from Australia and overseas that confirms that the ***training of staff who are implementing CCE and EE programs is vital***. Whilst it is tempting for CCE/EE providers to produce ‘glossy’ materials (in an attempt to satisfy the desired ‘outcomes’ of funders & policy-makers) – it is not an effective strategy (and ultimately a waste of money). The intrinsic value of training (and professional development programs) cannot be over-stated.
- There is evidence from overseas that confirms that ***voting is more likely to become a habit if young people are allowed to vote at a younger age***. Mock elections, and more importantly real, meaningful elections should be encouraged. Lowering the voting age in Australia, would most likely increase youth registration and voting (addressing the low voter turn-out rates of young 18-25’s) – but more importantly, would increase political and civic efficacy. There are very compelling arguments for lowering the voting age – including, not insignificantly, that it is a basic human right.
- There is abundant evidence from overseas that confirms that ***EE is most effective when it begins with young children***: “Children who are taught early to read become readers for life. Children who are taught early to vote become voters for life.” Research from America confirms that there is a strong correlation between student’s participation in mock elections (and continual practice in voting in meaningful situations), and their becoming life-long voters. There are many overseas programs and curriculum strategies that address electoral education in the early years that Australia could adopt. One personal anecdote that supports this argument – I conducted an EE session with a group of prep/grade 1 students – comparing the differences between First-Past-The-Post and Alternative (Preferential as it is known in Australia) voting systems – the children all cast valid votes, and grasped the various simple concepts that underlie the casting of a vote using different voting methods.
- There is abundant evidence from Australia that the ***AEC’s EE programs are very effective***. The AEC EE program essentially comprises 3 elements:
  1. an excursion program to one of the ***Electoral Education Centres*** (in Melbourne and Canberra) - which caters for primary, secondary and tertiary sectors (and other adult community groups). Studies confirm their effectiveness. An unfortunate very recent trend by the AEC to target older students rather than the younger students is a worrying development – given the evidence that capturing younger

students is more effective in EE programs than targeting older students *only*.

2. The School and Community Visits Program (**SCVP**) involves AEC staff visiting schools and community groups to present EE and information sessions. The program also includes some activities with an indigenous focus, and often targets other special needs groups. Studies confirm their effectiveness.

3. The teacher professional development program - "**Your Vote Counts**" which comprises of AEC educators conducting one/two day professional development activities to teachers and teacher trainees. This program is effective for many reasons - it addressed the fact that there is inadequate teacher preparation in the area of civics and citizenship education, and it was free! (and more than this, it provided funds to a school to employ a casual relief teacher to replace the teacher who was attending the PD in school hours), and as such it gave an opportunity to teachers who would not otherwise be able to participate in this type of PD. Studies confirm the effectiveness of this program - however, unfortunately, this program been scaled back in recent years by the AEC.

- There is abundant evidence from Australia that the **AEC EE programs are very effective**, and should be continued and strengthened.
- The **various EE program initiatives** conducted by the state and territory election commissions **should be better known and publicised** by the national election commission (AEC) – so that programs (and lessons learned) are shared.
- Excellent work is being conducted in the areas of **values (or character) education** in Australia – which is inextricably linked to good CCE/EE programs. This should continue and be strengthened.

### Summary:

**There is a lot of excellent work in the area of CCE and EE taking place in Australia** – by the various state and territory electoral commissions, the AEC, and state and federal education authorities. **But more work needs to take place:**

- in the area of **promoting CCE/EE programs within schools** and organisations and particularly in the area of improving school governance that complement and support meaningful CCE programs
- in the area of **promoting, broadening and strengthening of EE programs** within schools and in joint cooperation between by the various state and territory electoral commissions, the AEC, and state and federal education authorities - greater cooperation between the above-mentioned authorities should be fostered/coordinated

- **more innovative EE approaches/strategies** and programs that have been proven successful from overseas could be adopted to the Australian context

### Specific Recommendations:

- **conduct an Australian-wide EE audit** and research the innovative CCE/EE programs that exist overseas (such as the “Kits Vote USA” program)
- **increase the ability for civil society** (organisations) to adopt good/effective CCE/EE programs (through grants, etc)
- **mandate (and fund) the AEC** to work more closely with the state and territory election commissions, to provide more EE programs from K-12 (compulsory and post-compulsory schooling)
- **insist that the AEC is mandated and properly resourced to** provide more effective EE programs (broaden their current program of EE) and pay particular attention to the early years of schooling.
- **provide more funds for the AEC** to continue and strengthen the teacher electoral education Professional Development (“Your Vote Counts”) program – one of the most effective EE programs in existence in Australia that has been scaled back in recent years.
- **commission a study of how effective the AEC’s EE program is – and how it can be improved/strengthened.** Ensure that the AEC adhere to their mission/responsibility to “*Conduct electoral information and education programs to promote public awareness of electoral and parliamentary matters*” – ensuring that it conducts *education* and not just *information* programs.
- **lower the voting age** (initially) to 15 or 16 and fund an inquiry into lowering the voting age even further should there be community support for this. If the government of Australia is serious about improving civic virtues and encouraging engaged citizens to maintain our representative democracy, then it should not ignore the problem of youth disengagement – but rather – find innovative ways to combat it.

Yvonne Goudie  
 Civics and Citizenship Education  
 and Election Education consultant