

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Adequacy of Civics and Electoral Education in Australia.

**Invited submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,
Parliament of Australia**

MURRAY PRINT

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

AND

LAWRENCE J. SAHA

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

2 June 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A healthy, viable and sustainable representative democracy requires the participation of its citizens. It is of utmost importance that such a democracy needs to educate its young citizens in order that they become informed, appreciative and engaged adults, and will continue to participate to maintain that democratic way of life.

Australia's young people are the specific subject of this submission. Our research, comments and data relate to the age cohort from 16-25 years of age. Our concern is the manner, and the effectiveness, by which Australia's youth become active citizens.

Civic education is the formal and informal teaching about Australia's political and social heritage, our system of government, our democratic processes and values, our public administration and our judicial system.

Electoral education, by contrast, is seen as the process whereby citizens learn how to participate in electoral matters, particularly voting.

Based on our research and experience, we submit the following conclusions:

1. The level of knowledge by young people about the Australian electoral system is low on all matters relating to political activities, including voting and elections;
2. Electoral education should be a sub-topic of civic education. Despite the valuable role of the *Discovering Democracy* curriculum package in raising student, teacher and school awareness of democracy and government, the understanding of political issues and of electoral matters were not central to the program;
3. Many factors mitigated against the widespread implementation of the *Discovering Democracy* program in Australian schools.
4. Schools are only one of many sources of political knowledge for young people, as parents and TV also are important. But schools provide the most effective means of intervention for electoral education.
5. Electoral education in schools, universities and TAFE is very important as it represents an opportunity for unbiased learning, and possibly the only source of accurate, national and standardised electoral information for most students before becoming an active voter.

6. Young Australians need to learn about parliament and basic concepts in voting, particularly concepts related to the electoral systems, electorates and representation.
7. Currently electoral education fares even worse than civic education in schools and TAFE. Learning about voting is considered boring by students, and is mostly overlooked by teachers.
8. A wide range of political science subjects is available in Australian universities. Many entry level units are popular and provide a good introduction to politics and electoral education.
9. The question of a beginning age for electoral education is linked with compulsory education and existing curricula. Limited elements of electoral education are found in Years 5-7 across the nation and are supported by teachers and curriculum agencies.
10. Electoral education currently occurs before the end compulsory schooling, which means currently Year 9 / 10, when some form of integrated civics education is provided.
11. A more appropriate age to introduce electoral education is closer to the age of voting.
12. Extra curricula programs are problematic and haphazard for learning about electoral matters.
13. Real opportunities exist in the informal curriculum to increase electoral knowledge significantly. One way to accomplish this is through the experience of student governance.
14. Our limited experience suggests that electoral education for young people of indigenous background was limited.
15. Our research did not address the issue of adequacy of electoral education for migrant citizens directly. Indirectly we note that young people often assisted their migrant parents with voting.
16. The AEC and State commissions have a very important role in electoral education especially with adults and adults with special needs, for example language, through electoral education centres which should be retained and expanded.
17. Federal and State governments should provide agencies with adequate funding to enable citizens to learn about elections and voting. In a context of compulsory enrolment and voting this is essential.
18. The Federal Government should fund a national centre for research and teaching in electoral education, located within a prominent university.

19. School visits to Federal Parliament are a strong feature of indirect electoral education and are well supported by schools. Funding support should be available for students who are within reasonable distance of Canberra.
20. Internationally there are many approaches to electoral education, though whether these are 'creative' and effective is questionable. These are often found in countries with optional voting and where youth turnout is low, such as the United States.

Adequacy of Civics and Electoral Education in Australia.

Invited submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, Parliament of Australia

Introduction

A healthy, viable and sustainable representative democracy requires the participation of its citizens. In particular such a democracy needs informed, appreciative and engaged young citizens who will continue to participate to maintain that democratic way of life. To participate one needs to be informed

Australia's young people are the explicit subject of this submission. Our research, comments and data relate to the cohort from 16 to 25 years of age.

Civic education is the formal and informal teaching about Australia's political and social heritage, our system of government, democratic processes and values, public administration and judicial system. It includes international and global relations and the roles of citizens within these multiple contexts

Electoral education is seen here as the processes whereby citizens learn how to participate in and become informed about electoral matters, particularly voting.

The following are responses to issues raised by the Inquiry's terms of reference and are set in the context of what we know about Australia's schools and our current research project, the Youth Electoral Study (YES).

Knowledge of and responsibilities under the Australian electoral system

Levels of knowledge of young people are relatively low on matters relating to the Australian electoral system, including voting. More specifically:

1. Relatively low levels of civic content knowledge and understanding compared to other countries in the IEA Civics study; Australia came 15th out of 28 countries in civic knowledge (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz 2001);

2. Moderate levels of interpretive skills applied to civic society; Australia came 11th out of 28 countries (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz 2001)
3. Problematic participation rates for a healthy democracy (Saha, Print and Edwards 2005)
4. The evaluation of the *Discovering Democracy* program concluded that only 7% of the teachers had made it an established part of their civics curriculum (Print 2005)
5. Findings from the Youth Electoral Survey in 2004 found that only about 50% of senior secondary school students felt prepared to vote (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004; Saha 2005)
6. The data from the focus group interviews indicated that many young people saw enrolment and voting more in terms of avoiding the penalties or fines, rather than as an opportunity to exercise their democratic rights (Edwards 2005)

In general, from the focus group interviews that we conducted for the Youth Electoral Study, we found that young Australians know little about the following:

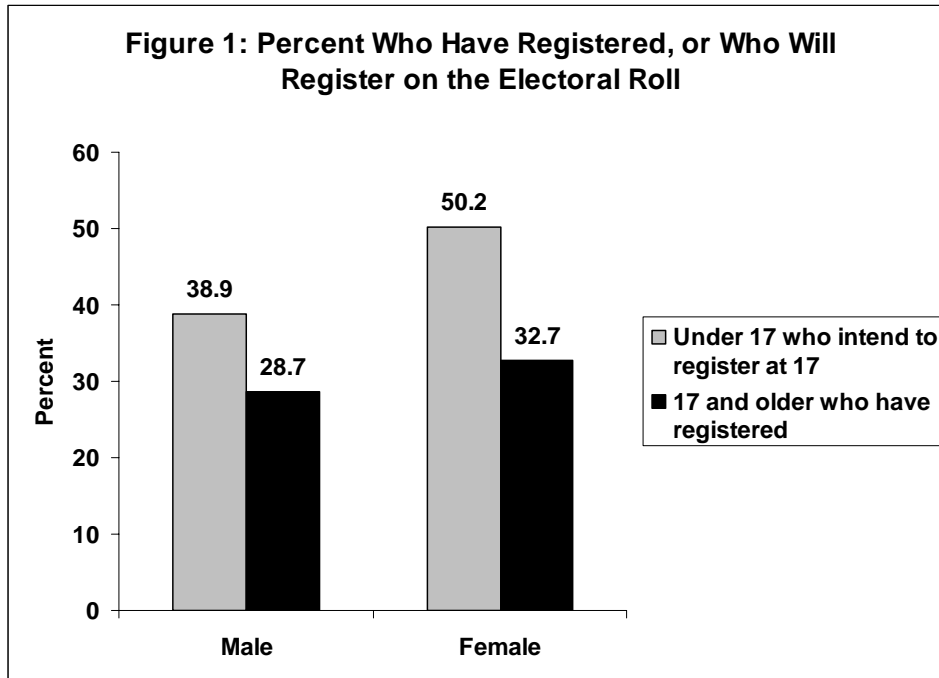
- basic responsibilities for enrolment and voting
- the technical and conceptual aspects of voting
- electoral systems
- electorates and representation
- voting systems
- representative democracy
- parliament

Registration among Australian Youth

Responsibilities under the Australian electoral system are also problematic for many young people in Australia. In 2004 we conducted a random survey of 200 schools, of which over 75% responded. Our data reported here are based on the responses of 4855 students from 155 secondary schools. We included two questions to measure the extent to which a person intended to register, if not yet 17 years of age, or who had registered if they were 17 or older. Students were asked:

- “If you are under 17 years of age, do you intend to register on the electoral roll when you become 17?”
- If you are over 17, have you registered on the electoral roll?

The responses to these questions, given separately for males and females, are found in Figure 1 below.



Source: Figure 1 in Print, Saha and Edwards (2004)

The figure indicates two important findings. First, for both males and females, a higher percentage of those under 17 intend to register on the electoral roll than the 17-and-older students have actually registered. Second, a higher percentage of females both intend to register (for the under 17s) and have registered (for the 17s-and-older) than the males. The differences are statistically significant.

Considering the above pattern, and from our focus group interviews, we conclude that the awareness of enrolling at 17 is extremely low (Print, Saha and Edwards 2004).

The Nature of Civic Education and Electoral Education

All students need to experience electoral education in order to become a competent citizen in a representative democracy. It has become abundantly clear that the family does not, or cannot, provide this educative experience, even though the students in our survey indicated that parents and TV were extremely important sources of political information for them. (See Figure 5 in Print, Saha and Edwards 2004).

In terms of the school curriculum, electoral education could be considered a sub-set of civic education. Research (Niemi and Junn 1998; Finkel 2003; Niemi and Finkel 2006) shows that studying civic education can make a difference to

- Student civic knowledge
- Student civic values
- Student civic participation

In Australia civic education provides an opportunity to learn about Australia's system of government, democracy, rule of law, rights and responsibilities, democratic values, and political issues. Within this some attention is paid to electoral education, mostly in a general sense. Elections could be discussed, but details of voting procedures, voting systems, counting procedures, electorates and the substantial amount of material within electoral education mostly remain untouched. The difference would be the individual teachers who may decide to teach beyond the standard curriculum.

The exception to this generalisation is where specific school subjects address political and electoral matters, such as the Western Australian upper secondary subject *Political and Legal Studies*.

Despite the valuable role of the *Discovering Democracy* program in raising student, teacher and school awareness, and understanding of politics and democracy in primary and lower secondary school, political issues and electoral matters were not central to the program. Indeed they were peripheral at best.

How much of the *Discovering Democracy* program was actually implemented in Australian schools? What subject matter did teachers actually teach? And what subject matter knowledge did teachers have of politics to be able to teach it effectively? Given these variables it is not surprising that little political and electoral content has been taught in schools.

In reality there exist too many opportunities *not* to teach civics and electoral education. An excellent example is found in NSW, where civics was introduced in an embedded form within existing subjects (Geography and History in years 7-10), as it is in many states. However, large numbers of teachers resented the inclusion of civics and citizenship education (CCE) within their subjects, especially some history teachers whose association vigorously opposed the curriculum changes. How much civics and electoral education these teachers actually addressed is problematic. This embedding is a compromise solution to implementing CCE, a decision which weakened the possibility of meaningful student learning the subject matter.

The NSW example is highlighted by the presence of a revised NSW Year 10 School Certificate. One of four sets of tests is called Australian History, Geography and Civics and Citizenship. Given the opposition to the introduction of CCE by many teachers, it would not be surprising if many teachers avoided this subject matter. Because the NSW BoS only reports a single score for this test, we do not know what knowledge year 10 students have about civics and citizenship. But we could. It is simple matter to identify the civics based knowledge items on the test and report them separately. However, the NSW BoS has refused to do so, and hence our best source of annual data is unavailable.

Content and Adequacy of Electoral Education in Schools, Universities and TAFE

1. Schools

The issue here is both about *which* content or subject matter and *who* receives it. Should all students experience electoral education? If so, it should at least be linked with compulsory schooling, i.e. Years 9 or 10. However the flow of students to Year 11 is high, by Year 12 the dropout rate has increased substantially so that about 70% students complete secondary education nationally.

Alternatively electoral education could be compulsory for Year 11 and 12 students, though currently only English is required. In practice many schools make it difficult for students to avoid studying a maths and a science subject.

Electoral education fares even worse than civics and citizenship education. Learning about voting is considered boring by students, and is mostly overlooked by teachers. Given the curriculum this is quite feasible.

In the **formal curriculum** there are opportunities for students to study electoral education through civics and citizenship education. In NSW, for example, there are three main opportunities within the compulsory years of schooling.

Primary school – Stage 3 HSIE curriculum. In the main section of State and Federal Governments, a sub-section on electoral process is included. This should remain. However, we must question how much learning is retained through to leaving school and later voting in elections.

Secondary school – Stage 5 History and Geography. The following sections are taken from the two syllabuses and are part of the mandatory curriculum for students.

Geography Civics and Citizenship

Civics and citizenship education is not a separate entity within the *Geography Years 7–10 Syllabus*. Civics and citizenship knowledge and understanding are embedded in the objectives, outcomes and content in this syllabus. As students engage in learning in Geography they will be equipped with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes for informed and active participation in Australian society and as global citizens.

Knowledge of civics is essential for effective citizenship. Informed and active citizens support democratic participation, foster individual and group involvement in civil society, critically question existing political institutions and social, economic and political arrangements, and facilitate democratic change. Informed and active citizenship means that the individual not only participates through formal political channels but also exercises critical judgment about political issues and participates in decision-making.

Students in Stage 4 have opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of:

- how decision-making processes operate at local, national and global levels
- how they can become involved as individuals in decision-making processes
- how they can exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens
- the roles of individuals, groups and governments in identifying and protecting environments, including World Heritage sites
- the strategies and processes that individuals, groups and governments use to influence change
- the responsibilities and responses of individuals, groups and governments to the community and the environment
- a group involved in reducing global inequalities and/or a group involved in promoting sustainability.

(Geography 7-10 Syllabus, 2006)

History civics and citizenship education

Civics and Citizenship content is a key focus of the *History Years 7–10 Syllabus*.

Students in Stage 4 have the opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of:

- effects of historical events on the culture of peoples and their rights and responsibilities;
- impact of exploration and colonisation on Aboriginal and indigenous peoples
- importance of preservation and conservation of heritage;
- different experiences of being a citizen and forms of government in civilisations of the past.

In Stage 5 History, students have opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of:

- Federation in 1901
- key features of the Constitution
- examples of constitutional change since Federation
- how the Australian political system works in practice
- the changing rights and freedoms of various groups
- events and issues of political significance and their impact on the changing nature of civic institutions and civil society
- what it means to be an active and informed citizen.

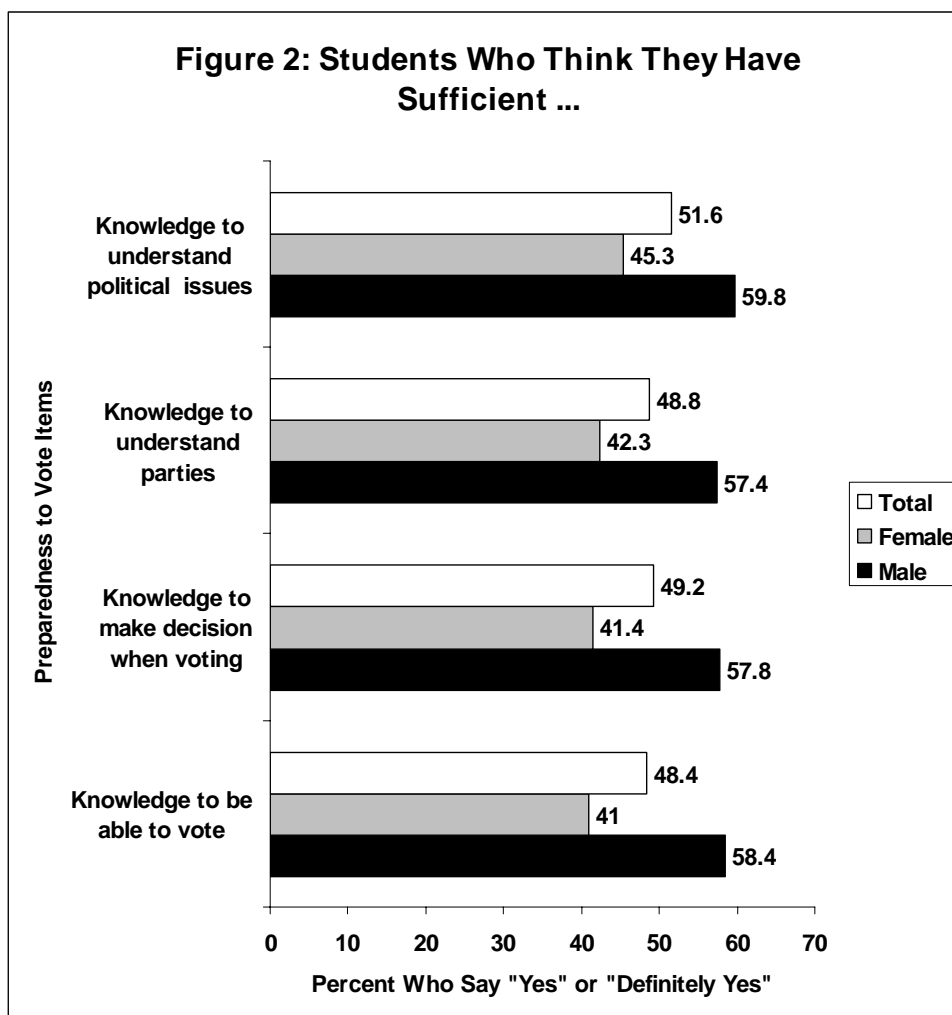
In elective history, students develop knowledge and understanding of:

- events and people in the context of their own time

how people from the past were influenced by different values, attitudes and motives
 thematic studies of crime and punishment, slaves, and women in history.
 (History 7-10 Syllabus)

In both syllabuses teachers could include electoral education. Or they could ignore it.

The adequacy of electoral education in Australian schools could be gauged by student preparedness to vote in federal elections. Overall, our research found that about half of the students in our sample feel prepared to vote. The pattern in Figure 2, which are based on our survey data make it clear that young Australians do not feel that they are prepared to vote. Furthermore, this sense of preparedness differs for males and female students.



Source: From Figure 4, in Print, Saha and Edwards (2004)

The figures clearly show differences between the males and females who think they have sufficient knowledge to vote in a meaningful way. For the females between 41 and 45.3 percent (less than half) thought they had sufficient knowledge on the various items. For the

males, the percent ranged from 57.4 to 59.8 % (Slightly more than half). Males clearly feel more prepared to vote than females, yet young males claimed lower levels of intention to enrol, intention to vote and voting if not compulsory.

A final, more direct, question was asked of the students about voting, namely: “Do you personally feel prepared to vote in a Federal election?” For all students, the percentage who said “Yes” or “Definitely Yes” was 51.9%. For the male students, 56.4% said “Yes” or “Definitely Yes”, while for the females, the comparable figure was 37%. For this direct question, the gender gap in confidence is even greater.

It is not clear at this stage why males should feel more prepared than females, though the pattern of responses is consistent across related forms of knowledge related to voting. We found similar comments in the group discussions which might reflect young males’ views of themselves as more certain, more ‘in command’.

Conversely young females, though less confident of their preparedness to vote, are more likely to vote and are more likely to vote than males if voting was not compulsory.

2. TAFE. Apart from informal learning acquired through participation in student elections, we have found no evidence of electoral education taking place in TAFE institutions. However, our research on TAFE students was limited.

3. Universities. A wide range of political science subjects is available across Australian universities. Many entry level units, for example Politics 100, are popular and provide a good introduction to politics and electoral education. However, these units are studied by only a small proportion of the total student body.

Students participate in student council elections on Australian university campuses and a very small percentage are actively engaged in student politics.

School Age to Commence Electoral Education

The question of a beginning age for electoral education is linked inextricably with Australia’s age of compulsory education and long standing curriculum practice.

On the grounds of maturity, recency and potency related to the first voting experience, we would argue that young people should learn electoral education in schools during Years 10 to 12, that is, the end of compulsory schooling which is currently at the end of Year 10 across the nation.

In all states there is currently some form of integrated civics at Year 9 / 10, largely as a result of previous curriculum practice, the *Discovering Democracy* program, and the MCEETYA agreement. However, electoral education in particular is problematic as there is little evidence of its inclusion.

A more appropriate age to introduce electoral education is closer to the age of voting. Years 11 & 12 offer real value such as the course *Political and Legal Studies* in Western Australia. Students in this course that we met as part of our research have exposure to political and voting systems, were articulate and knowledgeable, and were planning to be active adult citizens.

However, at the upper primary level, Years 5 to 7 depending upon the state or territory, a long standing curriculum practice has been an introduction to Australian government and some basic principles of democracy, including voting. This curricular experience is undoubtedly helpful in the total education of the child, but it is not significant in terms of detailed knowledge and the knowledge base needs re-learning at later ages. Teachers appear to enjoy teaching this content or at least are not vigorously opposed to it. Given that this is well established practice, especially when linked with the Year 5 to 6 'Canberra trip', it should be left alone.

Potential of Extra Curricula Programs

Real opportunities exist within the informal curriculum in schools for young people to acquire electoral knowledge and practice. This potential exists in the form of student elections for representation on student councils and other forms of student government. Our research documented the importance of these student elections. For example, students who had participated in these elections were more likely to say they would vote in Federal elections when they became 18 years old. (Saha, Print and Edwards 2005) To take advantage of this opportunity would require the formalisation of student governance and student elections in terms of perceived importance by educators, school teacher support and recognition by the educational systems.

Extra curricula or programs outside school are problematic due to their voluntary nature and potential for teaching electoral bias. Such opportunities currently exist for young people to participate.

Migrant citizens

The purpose of our research was not to address the issue of adequacy of electoral education for migrant citizens directly. However we spoke with many young people who were the children of migrants. In cases where the latter had not acquired English fluency there were frequent comments from their children about the need to "help my parents vote". This invariably meant informing the parent which candidate to vote for and how to complete their ballot paper.

In some cases the electoral system from where the migrant parent came may have been significantly different from ours. Preferential voting was mentioned by our young people as a complicated approach to voting, especially in upper house elections, for their parents.

This suggests that migrant citizens, particularly with low levels of English skills, could benefit from additional electoral education. Perhaps a short introduction to electoral education could be made part of the citizenship process.

Role of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the States in Electoral Education

A very important role overall exists for the AEC and state commissions to promote electoral education. This should focus on:

1. adults through advertising campaigns
2. adults with special needs, for example language
3. electoral education centres – should be retained and expanded within states so that each state has a centre, possibly linked with a Parliamentary centre where resources are scarce.

Electoral education in schools should be left to qualified teachers. As most electoral staff are not teachers, or lack educational experience with school students, this task is best left to schools and teachers who have experienced professional development in the area.

The Role of Federal and State Governments in Electoral Education

Federal and state governments should provide appropriate agencies with adequate funding to enable citizens to learn about elections, voting, and the electoral process generally. In a context of compulsory enrolment and voting this is important. In the context of declining participation in Australian democracy by young people this is essential.

The Federal Government should fund a national centre for research and teaching in electoral education, located within a prominent university, building upon a network of educators in state systems, schools and universities.

State governments should support state parliamentary education offices especially through subsidizing visits of school students

School Visits to Federal Parliament

The visit by school groups to Federal Parliament is a strong feature of indirect electoral education. Students learn, often not fully aware that they are, about aspects of voting, politics and government. The visit program has been identified positively by educators and researchers in other countries trying to engage their young people.

School experience shows that visits to Federal Parliament are an integral feature of the 'Canberra visit'. Funding should be available to subsidize students who are within reasonable distance of Canberra.

Where students are substantial distances from Canberra and costs consequently higher, the subsidy should be directed to students to enable them to visit their state parliament.

International approaches

Internationally there are many approaches to electoral education, although whether these are 'creative' and effective is questionable. These approaches are found usually in countries with optional voting and where youth turnout is low, such as the United States. Youth turnout in presidential elections in the United States and general elections in Britain is less than 40% of the age cohort. In these situations simply increasing youth turnout by creative means is seen positively.

Most of the approaches are deeply imbedded within civics and citizenship education and are not identified separately or are seen as extra-curricula. For example:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| US | Kids Voting USA, a non-profit, non-partisan group which provides resources and activities to engage young people and encourage them to vote. |
| Canada | Elections Canada encourages youth voting through Student Vote; the Democracy Project and Govote.Ca |
| Germany | Civics education built into the school curriculum, supported by a federal civics education agency with funding (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb). |
| UK | citizenship education is part of the mandatory school curriculum which includes voting. The UK government has funded teacher education programs through universities to prepare teachers specifically for citizenship education. CitizED is organised principally around teacher education in primary, secondary and community involvement contexts with outputs in the form of conferences, seminars, workshops, research papers and practical resources for teaching, working in partnership with a wide variety of individuals and organisations including the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT). |
| NZ | Elections New Zealand encouraged teachers and schools through an award system to use the 2005 election context. They also promote the programs Active Voices, and Hands Up! to engage young people in schools. |

Conclusion

On the basis of our comments above, and from the other findings from our research, we believe that there are measures that can be introduced to improve the awareness and participation of Australian young people in voting and other electoral behaviours. In this submission we have identified a number of issues, and a number of possible strategies that might be considered within the context of electoral education. One of the difficulties of electoral education as it currently occurs in schools is the haphazard manner in which it occurs. We have made a number of recommendations which we think might help remedy this situation.

However, we also believe that there is no single or simple strategy which will instantly improve the electoral awareness and commitment of young people. We believe that schools are very important, and indeed essential, agents in this process. But schools do not exist in isolation, and as we pointed out, parents and the media are also important sources of electoral information for young people. Therefore the consistent and supportive efforts of other areas of society are also important. Yet, attendance at school is the one common factor that all young people experience, and it would be a missed opportunity if a strong electoral education program in schools were not introduced.

References

- Edwards, K. (2005). Force us to be Free! Has Voting Lost its Value? The Motivations of Australian School Students for Enrolling and Voting. Youth Electoral Studies Workshop, Canberra.
- Finkel, S. E. (2003). "Can Democracy Be Taught?" Journal of Democracy **14**(October): 137-151.
- Niemi, R. G. and S. E. Finkel (2006). Civic Education and the Development of Civic Knowledge and Attitudes. Essays on Cultural Change. L. Harrison and J. Kagen (Eds), Routledge.
- Niemi, R. G. and J. Junn (1998). Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn. New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press.
- Print, M. (2005). Civics and Citizenship Education: Learning Political Engagement in Schools? Youth Electoral Study Workshop, Canberra.
- Print, M., L. Saha, and K. Edwards (2004). Youth Electoral Study: Enrolment and Voting. Report 1. Canberra, Australian Electoral Commission.

Saha, L. J. (2005). Are They Prepared to Vote? What Australian Youth Are Saying. Youth Electoral Study Workshop, Canberra.

Saha, L. J., M. Print, and K. Edwards. (2005). Youth, Political Engagement and Voting. Report 2. Canberra, Australian Electoral Commission.

Torney-Purta, J., R. Lehmann, H. Oswald, and W. Schulz (2001). Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen. Amsterdam, IEA.