

***Discovering Democracy National Sample Survey***

**Survey of Year 6 and Year 10 Students  
1999**

**Executive summary of Report to the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs on the National Sample Survey conducted by the Educational Testing Centre to measure civics and citizenship outcomes for Year 6 and Year 10 students.**

## *Background*

These are the results of the first-ever national testing of students' knowledge and skills in civics and citizenship. The testing was according to the learning outcomes set in the Commonwealth Government's Discovering Democracy program

A sample of 6000 students across the nation was tested in year 6 (age 11-12) and year 10 (age 15-16). The testing took place in the first half of 1999 before the Discovering Democracy units had time to be studied extensively. Further testing will take place to monitor students' progress as the program is implemented.

## *The Results*

As expected, students did best on questions relating to political symbols (the flag, parliament house), citizens' rights and obligations, multiculturalism and equality, subjects already regularly taught. They performed poorly on question relating to democracy and forms of government, political processes and institutions, and the meaning of historical events. Students can be expected to handle these questions better as the program is implemented.

Nearly all students in Years 6 and 10 knew what Anzac Day commemorated (Year 6 96% correct, Year 10 98% correct), the voting age (Year 6 92%, Year 10 93%), the Prime Minister as Head of Government (Year 6 81%, Year 10 90%) and principles of a fair trial (Year 6 70%, Year 10 83%).

The national anthem was correctly identified by 80% of Year 6 students, though many were uncertain of the actual words and their spelling. Answers included:

Add vans Australia fair  
Australians all let us reduce  
Advance Australia fear  
A fens Australia ferry

At the other end of the scale, Year 6 and Year 10 students knew little about aspects of Australia's representative democracy such as voting, elections, the role of politicians, the purpose of the Australian Constitution and the role of the Governor-General.

Only 45% of Year 6 students could name one of the Houses of the federal parliament (the House of Representatives and the Senate). Only 28% knew that the federal constitution is changed by referendum.

Year 6 students were very vague about federation. When asked what was the main result of federation, only 40% provided the correct answer ("the colonies formed the Commonwealth"). 20% answered "a nation was divided", 34% "states became self-governing" and 4% "everyone had to speak English".

Year 10 students were asked about the purpose of the Australian constitution. 17% thought it gave more power to local government; 18% thought it increased state powers; 22% thought it provided for one level of government. Only 39% knew that it provided for two levels of government.

Only 34% of Year 10 students knew that the federal government is formed by the party or coalition holding a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. Nor are they well informed about the political parties. So it is not surprising that only 25% could correctly identify the nature of the government that would be formed after an election which gave this result:

Labor Party	70 seats
Liberal Party	63 seats
National Party	14 seats
Independent	1 seat

The terms right-wing and left-wing commonly used to describe political positions are not understood by most Year 10 students. 30% thought communists were right-wingers; 21% thought socialists were. Only 25% knew that conservatives were on the 'right'.

Girls in both Year 6 and Year 10 performed better than boys; students from urban areas performed better than rural students; and the results of students from a language background other than English was equal lowest with rural students in Year 6 and lowest in Year 10.

### *The Test*

The Discovering Democracy National Sample Survey provides baseline data on Year 6 and Year 10 students' knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes of the Discovering Democracy program. The measurement model adopted for the project will allow this baseline data to be compared to the results of future surveys based on the Discovering Democracy scale.

The Discovering Democracy National Sample Survey involved the development and administration of two instruments, one for Year 6 students and one for Year 10 students. The instruments comprised multiple choice items, some short answer items and a written task. The items were drawn from the relevant learning outcomes to be assessed in Year 6 and Year 10 of the Discovering Democracy program. The instruments were developed by the Project team in consultation with the Project Advisory Committee trialed in schools in each State and Territory in late 1998 and administered in the first half of 1999.

A random sample of Year 6 and Year 10 students was drawn from a sampling frame which comprised all schools, in all States and Territories with students in Year 6 and Year 10 in the Government and non-Government sectors. The sample was stratified by State/Territory, rural/metropolitan location and language background other than English. The instruments were administered to a sample comprising 3,254 Year 6 students and 2,865 Year 10 students. Although the sample size fell short of the targeted

sample of 5,000 Year 6 and 5,000 Year 10 students because of the difficulties in persuading schools to participate, it was considered that the size of the group that completed the tests, and the breadth of representation that it provided, was sufficient to provide robust base-line data.

The mean score for Year 6 students expressed as a percentage was 57.8%. The year 10 score was 52.7%. As each cohort completed a different test, the mean scores cannot be directly compared. However, the probabilistic model adopted for the project, which is based on the latest advances in modern test theory, enables scores on the tests to be referenced to the same underlying scale (in this case a Discovering Democracy scale). This enables comparisons to be made of the relative performances of the different year groups even though the students have taken separate tests. The mean scores achieved by the two cohorts indicate that the students had only reasonable knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes of the Discovering Democracy program.

The reliability of 0.7 for the Year 6 test and 0.8 for the Year 10 test are sound, given that the groups are relatively homogeneous because the Discovering Democracy units had not been used widely in schools at the time of testing.

The construction of the Discovering Democracy scale has been governed by a measurement model which can be used to monitor standards of performance over time. A different test could be constructed with a number of items (up to 20 percent) taken from the 1999 survey. This method of linking the tests is known as "common item equating" and is widely used by most of the Australian States and jurisdictions in their statewide testing programs to link Year 3 and Year 5 performance on a common scale, even though the students have done largely different tests. An alternative model for conducting a future survey and representing the results on the baseline scale produced in 1999, is to give a sample of students both papers. In this way it is possible to link the different surveys using "common person equating". This technique is widely used by States and jurisdictions to equate the performance of Year 3 and Year 5 students across years, even though they have done entirely different tests.