

Civics and electoral education

This submission to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education has been prepared by:

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The Australian Centre for Educational Studies (ACES), Macquarie University, provides a broad introduction to matters of civics and electoral education for prospective teachers. ACES is the Division of the University that conducts pre-service education programs in early childhood, primary and secondary education; postgraduate qualifications in special education; certificates, diplomas and higher degrees via coursework and research in tertiary and general education. The Division comprises four departments: the Institute of Early Childhood (IEC), the School of Education, the Macquarie University for Special Education (MUSEC), and the Institute for Higher Education Research and Development (IHERD).

Research evidence indicates that children form values at an early age and prior to commencing formal education. They are influenced by family and community attitudes and experiences. Therefore it is considered appropriate that civics and electoral education begin in the early years of primary schooling. In recognition of this formative process students should engage in teaching and learning activities in developing a critical awareness of issues related to citizenship and participation in civic life and an understanding of democratic processes.

To address the issues of civics, citizenship and electoral education the School of Education endeavours to provide prospective teachers with a range of intellectual resources that will help them to develop and refine their understandings of these matters. Specific teaching techniques and strategies are also taught in the professional elements of the Teacher Education Program. These general and professional components are outlined below.

All students completing a qualification to teach in primary or secondary schools through the School of Education are required to complete an introductory unit EDUC106 *Education: the social and historical context*. This unit begins with a section that considers the development of education from the time of colonisation until the end of the Second World War. In this section the development of representative government, Federation, the Constitution and States powers are explained, along with discussion of the role of Parliamentary Acts and government decision making. The aim of this segment of the unit is to reveal Australian political institutions as purposive and responsive to

popular interests. The assessment for this section of the unit is by an essay that concerning education's role in the formation of national identity.

A number of students have commented that they found history presented in this way more interesting and relevant than had previously been their experience. Many students found it challenging to look beyond the stereotypical images of national identity, but gained a deeper understanding of Australian society and the roles played by education in its formation.

The second and third sections of the unit concern social and cultural approaches to the study of education. In both these sections a themed approach to issues of social disadvantage is presented. The themes presented include: education in rural settings, education and indigenous Australians, education in multicultural settings, gender and education, disability and education, and youth culture and schooling. In each of these themes historical, political and citizenship aspects are emphasised and the second and third sections of the unit are assessed by requiring students to prepare an essay considering the ways in which education promotes citizenship and prepares students for life beyond school. Students have remarked, after completing this unit, that there are aspects of citizenship that they found challenging and had not considered before.

The purpose of presenting these issues to prospective teachers is to make explicit the role that education plays in the formation of national identity and in producing citizens. By presenting these issues it is hoped that, firstly, students will reflect on their own identities, identity formation and the roles that they play as citizens and secondly, that as teachers they will take a more nuanced understanding of citizenship and civics into their classrooms.

EDUC264 Education: the policy context. This unit deals with a number of matters relevant to the issues of civics, citizenship and electoral education: philosophical perspectives, the dynamics of education policy and the way that power is exercised through the micro-practices of schooling. This unit encourages students with an interest in the link between education and government, the operations of schools, and school leadership and management to examine the processes by which these things operate. The underlying assumption is that members of school communities can be more effective if they have an awareness of these matters.

The units offered in the Teacher Education Program are designed to prepare pre-service teachers to conduct lessons in particular subject areas. In TEP 427 (History in the Secondary School I), there is a strong focus on developing students' understanding of Civics and Citizenship Education since this is a key focus of the *History 7 – 10 Syllabus*. In order for teachers to develop in their students the knowledge and understanding of Federation, 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, including Indigenous Australians and what it means to be an active and informed citizen, pre-service teachers explore these issues in weekly

workshops as well as include relevant aspects of Civics and Citizenship education in their own examples of programs and lesson plans.

TEP421 and 422 (Economics and Business Studies in Secondary School I and II) have a strong focus on both civics and electoral education. Civics and electoral themes are imbedded within the 'learn to' and 'learn about' statements of the NSW Stage 4/5 Commerce Syllabus as well as the cross curriculum content. During weekly workshops in TEP421 students are required to design resources and develop teaching/learning strategies that address these key components of the syllabus. There is a strong emphasis on the development of tasks that build knowledge of the operations of government, as well as an understanding of commercial and legal issues. The aim is to help students develop their skills as both active and informed citizens. A key component of these tasks is the development of an action plan to influence the decision-making process for an important community issue.

As a component of their course work in TEP421, students are also involved in the development of units of work which involve class research into the roles and responsibilities of the various levels of government, the rights of individuals within the electoral system, methods of political action taken by individuals and groups and the impact of decisions made by various organizations on specific ethnic communities in Australian society.

In the above mentioned professional units pre-service education students are directed to a range of resource materials including materials prepared for the Commonwealth government, such as the *Discovering Democracy* kit and materials prepared for the New South Wales Board of Studies. In addition to these, prospective teachers taking education programs at Macquarie are encouraged to explore a wide variety of strategies for developing an understanding of civics and citizenship.

Student teachers are encouraged to discuss practices and teaching approaches to civics education with teacher supervisors during school experiences and are encouraged to develop a teaching unit appropriate to the student stage of development and the school context.