

## DRAFT SUBMISSION ON CIVICS EDUCATION

An informal survey of about 150 first year Political Science students at the Australian National University revealed an uneven picture in civics education at secondary school level.

Students from Victoria seemed to have the greatest exposure to elementary teaching about the electoral system and parliament.

More than half the students didn't have any civics or electoral education. Those who did study such matters were not impressed. They studied politics and civics briefly in history classes, and a few suggested that this was well before they could vote (often in year 9) so that they weren't really interested.

Other points to emerge:

- Many students had learnt about the Australian Parliament in Year 6 and many had travelled to Canberra with their school to visit Parliament House that year.
- A number had come to Canberra on trips and met the local MP. They seemed to find this pretty tedious.
- Most students who responded felt that they were inadequately prepared for voting in elections. A number of them had voted while they were in Year 12 and were disappointed that their schools offered them no information on how elections work etc.
- Nearly everyone said there should be more politics/civics in Schools. A common theme was "if it is compulsory to vote there should be proper education about the political system."
- One student said - and there was a lot of agreement - that civics/politics in School wouldn't be enjoyable but it would be good for them!
- Another said that if driver education is taught in schools, then a similar case could be made for "political/civics education."
- Students who had done Legal Studies in Year 11 and 12 generally felt that they had a good understanding of the Australian political system, how bills became law and so forth, although they still felt they lacked an understanding of Australian political history.
- Many students expressed the view that year 11 or 12 would be the best time to learn about voting because younger students would not be able to see the relevance of learning about politics. Some suggested that electoral education could be given in a one day workshop - some personal development/health topics

are currently presented in that format to students in their final years of high school. A few students were concerned that students who left school at 16 would miss out if electoral education was only provided to final year students.

- Students were concerned that if their teachers were asked to teach politics they would use this opportunity to give students biased information - this view was particularly expressed by students who had been educated at schools with a religious affiliation. They were more keen on the idea of getting written information produced by the AEC or getting a chance to talk to AEC staff.
- There was a general concern of such programs being a bit heavy handed/propagandistic. They suggested that young people should be taught about some of the practical issues (voting, parties etc) and then given some 'deliberative' space to discuss issues – rather than focusing on inculcating values.
- One student suggested that any teaching of values should include multicultural values.
- A student from Norway said that before elections party representatives would go to schools to present and debate issues and that students found this very engaging. The other students thought this a good idea.
- In general the refrain (except for the Victorians) was "we knew next-to-nothing before we enrolled in this course. We are now learning some relevant stuff. Just think how little is known by students who are NOT doing Political Science."

Tutor's observations:

Generally, it has been apparent that those students who have some political knowledge have been stimulated more by family environment than learning environment.

A grasp of basic political history is sadly lacking. For example, very little is known about the issues involved in Federation. Most students are hard pressed to name more than three or four of Australia's 25 prime ministers.

Recommendation: That a nationally-devised program combining political history, democracy, institutions and the electoral system be introduced as a means of strengthening civic culture through a better informed electorate.

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