

## INQUIRY INTO CIVICS AND ELECTORAL EDUCATION

Submission from Faculty of Education, ACU National  
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### **Summary**

The Federal Government is to be commended for its efforts in promoting civics and electoral education in recent years. Nevertheless, whilst there has been some improvement in civics and electoral knowledge and participation, civics and electoral education must be ongoing to ensure that all citizens understand their responsibilities and rights in a democratic society and to meet the demands of a changing Australia. In particular, special attention must be given to groups such as rural and remote communities, Indigenous Australians and migrant Australians.

Recommendations made in this submission concern:

- the updating of relevant school curriculum materials;
- ongoing professional development for teachers;
- the wider involvement of the Australian Electoral Commission with a variety of community groups;
- improved citizenship ceremonies;
- the use of media such as film, television and radio to promote civics and electoral education; and
- the increased and ongoing need for funding of a variety of initiatives.

### **Preamble**

Civics and electoral education are an integral part of citizenship education that involves the development of people's knowledge and skills and a disposition to become active and informed participants within their community and nation. Whilst civics and electoral education assists with the development of knowledge and the skills of citizenry, the development of a disposition to take action as an informed citizen may be affected by a variety of influences such as family, schooling, community, employment, and access to services. Therefore, the disposition of Australian citizens to be active and informed citizens may involve more than the acquisition of knowledge and the skills of citizenry. In particular, this may be the case in terms of participation of Indigenous and migrant Australians in electoral activities.

### **Comments regarding the following terms of reference**

- the current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system
- the nature of civics education and its links with electoral education

- the access to, and adequacy of funding for, school visits to the Federal Parliament

### Knowledge and Skills of Citizenry

There has been some increase in youth knowledge and understanding of civics and electoral education. This is evident in the number of pre-service teachers who record observations of children demonstrating learning outcomes relating to democratic processes during their professional practice. This improvement may be attributed to recent educational initiatives. A number of excellent initiatives have been put in place to improve the knowledge of young Australians in the area of civics and electoral education. In particular, the “Discovering Democracy” materials are an excellent resource to be used with children in both primary and secondary schools.

However, if improvement in youth knowledge and understanding of civics and electoral education is to continue the following needs must be addressed:

- all materials (content and presentation) need to be updated on a regular basis and electronic items such as CD ROMs need to be reformatted to be compatible with new computer platforms e.g. XP Professional;
- funds are required to provide rural and remote secondary school students with access to the Australian Electoral Commission offices in capital cities; and
- increased funding to support school visits to the Houses of Parliament (especially target schools where family participation rates in voting are low).

### **Comments regarding the following terms of reference**

- the school age at which electoral education should begin
- the potential to increase electoral knowledge through outside school programs

The “Discovering Democracy” materials are designed to allow the development of civics and citizenship education from the beginning of a child’s formal schooling. Children from a young age can be introduced to basic civic concepts of rights, responsibility, co-operation, sharing, rules and participation at levels of cognitive and social-emotional demand. These match their knowledge and understanding of the society they experience. Appropriate content may relate to their membership of groups such as families, classes and friendship groups. Teachers can also draw parallels between classroom and school rules, policies and practices and the structure of government at all three levels. For example, teachers may introduce conventions governing class debates or discussion, and class councils, junior school councils and students’ representative councils may be established.

All teacher education students at Australian Catholic University are introduced to the “Discovering Democracy” materials and several other civics and citizenship resources as part of their Studies of Society and Environment curriculum studies. While new teachers are aware of the materials and use

them in the classroom, further promotion is needed to improve teachers' knowledge of the nature and design of available resources. To ensure the impact of these materials on future adult citizens, certain processes need to continue. Also, schools need access to electoral officers as well as realistic opportunities to participate in the educational activities offered by the Australian Electoral Commission.

Recommendations are that:

- teachers need ongoing professional development;
- the Australian Electoral Commission needs to work with professional associations such as the Social Education Association of Australia (SEAA), the Studies of Society and Environment Association of Queensland (SOSEAQ), Human Society and the Environment Council (HSIE) NSW and the Victorian Association of Social Studies Teachers Inc (VASST) to provide teachers with focused professional development in civics and electoral education;
- State Governments are assisted to support initiatives such as the YMCA Youth Parliament; and
- aspects of the promotion of Values Education Framework be linked to the "Discovering Democracy" materials.

Disposition of Citizenry

As children are provided with the opportunities for development of knowledge and skills to be informed citizens, other social aspects may need to be in place to encourage a sense of belonging as a citizen and a disposition to use their knowledge and skills to be active, change agents in our democracy.

Recommendations are that:

- social aspects may include the provision of equitable resources to families that are disadvantaged or underprivileged in any way; and
- film, television and radio programs and advertisements could be developed to demonstrate voluntary work in our communities as part of our civic lives.

### **Comments about the following term of reference relating to Indigenous Australians**

- the adequacy of electoral education in Indigenous communities

It seems that efforts to increase participation of Indigenous Australians in civics and citizenship are affected by a number of factors. Among these factors that need to be fostered are a sense of belonging, a disposition of citizenry and the knowledge and skills to participate.

Recommendations are that:

- Indigenous Australians may need to have their identity as the original Australians recognized in a formal sense before they feel a true sense of belonging to the electoral processes of the country;
- social aspects that marginalize Indigenous peoples may need attention if their disposition of citizenry is to change e.g. improved funding for

health, employment and education; in particular, funding for education initiatives that build on the particular learning styles of Indigenous learners and their sense of 'community within community' and kinship structures. For example, Australian Catholic University (ACU) provides courses in mixed mode for Indigenous Australians that enable students to learn in small groups with and from each other;

- the Australian Electoral Commission could work closely with Aboriginal Cooperatives and similar organisations to provide education in Indigenous communities and for Indigenous people living in cities; and
- teachers could
  - structure lessons on the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to vote in Commonwealth and State elections
  - include research activities about when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were allowed to vote in elections
  - provide opportunities for Aboriginal Elders to speak to students about what it was like to vote for the first time, what the struggle for suffrage meant to them personally and for the Indigenous community as a whole
  - organise dramatised debates set in the 1950s or 1960s that encompass the views about the right to vote for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Students could script their own parts
  - provide opportunities for students to compare and contrast voting practices for Indigenous people around the world, design a poster or an advertising campaign to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate in voting.

**Comments regarding terms of reference relating to migrant Australians, the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education**

- the adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens
- the role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education

As more migrants, whose cultures and governing processes are markedly different from those in Australia, come to our country, it is important that they are educated about Australian citizenship. While prospective migrants are now expected to attend information sessions in their country prior to coming to Australia, ongoing civics and electoral education must be provided after their arrival.

Recommendations are that:

- in addition to an entitlement to English tuition, migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) be entitled to education regarding Australian electoral practices, law, history and traditions;

- an obligatory component of a 5- minute introduction/ video/ CD Rom presentation regarding the notion of citizenship, voting rights and obligations in Australia be included in each Citizenship Ceremony; this may be produced in other languages or with sub-titles or use images to tell the story;
- electoral officers who attend the Citizenship Ceremonies provide information in a number of languages;
- the Australian Electoral Commission work closely with State and Regional multicultural councils and national cultural organizations to provide ongoing civics and electoral education;
- community education programs that are appealing to young people be developed and include well known Indigenous and migrant identities;
- the Australian Electoral Commission provide information to schools to promote enrolment; and
- Australian Electoral Commission staff be available to visit schools to address students about the importance of enrolling, to distribute enrolment forms and to answer questions, particularly in areas with a high proportion of Indigenous or NESB students.