



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

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Ms Kate Thwaites MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: em@aph.gov.au

Dear Chair,

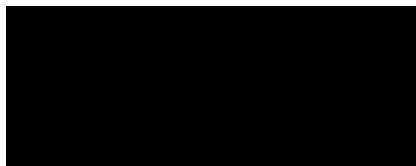
The University of Sydney is pleased to make the attached submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

The submission recognises the importance of strong civics and citizenship education as a foundation for a stable and vibrant democracy and recommends the development of a nationally coordinated approach to its inclusion in the Australian curriculum.

We also call on the Committee to support dedicated programs and funding for civics education, such as our proposed *Democracy Academy*, which would support Australian teachers to establish or update their civics and citizenship knowledge.

I note that there are several other submissions made by University of Sydney scholars, including Professor Emerita Anne Twomey and Professor Murray Print. I would encourage the Committee to draw on their significant expertise in your public hearings.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Mark Scott AO
Vice-Chancellor and President



The University of Sydney, submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia, 24 May 2024

1. Executive summary

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to engage with the JSCEM's inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia.

Successive Commonwealth, State and Territory governments have for decades recognised the importance of strong civics and citizenship education as foundational for a stable and vibrant democracy. However, the research evidence suggests that the community's level of trust in our democratic institutions is declining, while school students' levels of understanding about democracy are also low and showing no signs of improving.

The 2023 Voice referendum and the ongoing debate regarding the conflict in the Middle East have exposed fault lines in civic discourse in Australia, prompting reviews of the adequacy of hate speech, social media and privacy laws. Rapid advances in artificial intelligence technologies, shifts in the way citizens – especially young people - receive news, and the rise of deep fakes and other sophisticated forms of misinformation, bring urgency to the need for a renewed commitment and action from government to strengthen the nation's approach to civics and citizenship education.

In March this year, we put a proposal to the NSW Government to help us establish a *Democracy Academy* to improve NSW school students' levels of civics and citizenship knowledge and understanding substantially over the next decade. As we discuss in this submission, we believe the need for interventions like our proposed *Democracy Academy* is clear. A long-term solution is urgently required - one that draws on existing expertise and resources - to build capacity and engage young people to want to act as democratic citizens.

We trust our submission assists the JSCEM with its inquiry and propose the following five recommendations for its consideration.

2. Recommendations

The University of Sydney respectfully requests that JSCEM's final report include recommendations that the Australian Government:

1. Lead the development of a nationally coordinated approach to the teaching of Year 7-10 Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship (ACCC), to ensure that active teaching of civics education occurs in all Australian schools.
2. Increase the level of Civics and Citizenship Education required in Australian Curriculum to where it stood in 2013, as a separate school subject.
3. Engage with State and Territory curriculum authorities to ensure sufficient curriculum content on Australian democracy is included in the formal curriculum in each jurisdiction.
4. Support Australian teachers to establish or update their civics and citizenship knowledge and teaching skills through dedicated programs and funding, including to support initiatives like the University of Sydney's proposed *Democracy Academy*.
5. Work with experts in civics and citizenship from across Australia's schools, universities and other public institutions to initiate a national public and school education campaign about our democracy and key principles such as freedom of speech, the rule of law, tolerance, social cohesion, and the importance of civility and disagreeing well in public and online.

3. The problem

Australian governments are well aware, and have been for decades, of the importance of educating young people about democracy, especially Australia's particular form of democracy.

Every national declaration of education since 1988 has acknowledged that schools should educate '... active and informed citizens'. The highly influential Melbourne Declaration (2008), for example, set a goal that 'All young Australians become ... Active and informed citizens... (who) ... are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice and participate in Australia's civic life'. (Goal 2) ([MCEETYA, 2008](#)).

Similarly, the most recent – Alice Springs Mparntwe national education ministers' declaration - set out a new vision for Australia's education system, which included a commitment to developing 'active and informed members of the community who... 'have an understanding of Australia's system of government, its histories, religions and culture', 'are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations' and 'are informed and responsible global and local members of the community...' ([Mparntwe Declaration, 2019](#)).

The problem is that, despite this awareness, teaching about democracy and civics education has remained highly problematic across Australia's school system. This phenomenon has been clearly articulated for some time through multiple sources. For example, respected University of Sydney constitutional law expert emeritus professor Anne Twomey has argued that that 'decades of neglect of civics has left us with a population that is insufficiently equipped to fulfil its constitutional role of updating the Constitution.' ([Twomey, 2022](#)).

Former Chief Justice of the Higher Court, the Hon. Robert French AC, has also raised concerns about the state of civics and citizenship education in Australia. For example, he has recently argued that civics education has a very important part to play in reversing declining levels of public trust and confidence in our institutions, which according to the available data is most pronounced in Gen Z (born mid-to-late 1990s to early 2010s):

'People are less likely to trust institutions whose workings they do not understand or of which they are ignorant. Civics education attainment in our schools is below par as indicated by NAPLAN assessments issued by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). In my role as Chairman of the Constitution Education Fund Australia, I have become increasingly conscious of the importance of a basic understanding of our democracy by the people whose choices determine its government.'
([French, 2023](#))

The Years 7-10 Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship (ACCC), while considerably less that originally developed, addresses three strands for students to study:

1. Democracy and government
2. Law and citizens
3. Citizenship, diversity and identity. ([ACCC](#))

Given Australia's compulsory voting requirement, all three strands should be essential learning for any young person to become an active and informed citizen in Australian democracy. Yet the ACCC is largely denied to Australian students because, simply put, it is difficult to study and teach democracy in Australian schools, with the challenges greater in schools serving lower socio-economic communities.

This regrettable situation has produced a generation for whom there is unequivocal evidence that they possess low levels of understanding about our democracy. For example, according to the most recent figures on civics proficiency among Australian Year 10 students, only 38 per cent reached an acceptable level of understanding about the foundations of our democracy, including its key principles, institutions and the rights and expectations of citizens. ([National Assessment Program in Civics and Citizenship, 2019](#) (NAPCC)).

4. Our proposal for a Democracy Academy

In our [March 2023 submission to the New South Wales Government's pre-budget consultations](#) we urged the State Government to provide seed funding to help us establish a *Democracy Academy*, modelled on our successful [STEM Teacher Enrichment Academy](#).

The goal of this *Academy* would be to substantially improve levels of civics and citizenship knowledge amongst NSW school students over the next decade. It would do this by convening and coordinating expertise from across the education system and other bodies develop and deliver teacher professional development programs in person and online, to lift the workforce's capacity to deliver the civics education, especially in schools serving communities where students' civics knowledge are lowest or known to be declining most rapidly.

As discussed above and our responses to the terms of reference below, the need for a *Democracy Academy* is clear. Over recent years, the decline in understanding, trust and confidence in democracy in Australia, and internationally, has become increasingly evident. A long-term solution is required, one that draws on existing expertise and resources, to build capacity and engages young people to want to act as democratic citizens.

As a vehicle for a rich and rounded approach to educating active, informed citizens for Australian democracy, a *Democracy Academy* convened by the University of Sydney would be globally *unique*.

The research evidence indicates that both students and teachers need opportunities to acquire knowledge and values through an entity like our proposed *Democracy Academy*. This may be achieved through:

- **Developing teacher professional learning programs** focused on building teachers' understanding of democracy and their capacity to collaboratively integrate democracy into the school *formal, informal and extra curricula* activities for students. Separate programs would be offered for primary schools and secondary schools.
- **Providing teacher education support** to ensure that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs enable student teachers the opportunity to learn about Australia's democracy.
- **Working with curriculum agencies**, such as ACARA and NESA, to enhance opportunities for students to learn about Australia's democracy through school curricula.
- **Researching** more effective ways to engage young Australians with their democracy including through program evaluations and PhD research programs.
- **Strengthening university – school partnerships** by supporting a national network of civics and citizenship collaborations between schools, vocational education providers and universities.

5. Responses to the inquiry's terms of reference (ToR)

ToR 1. The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement.

Two components are evident in terms of the effectiveness of formal civic education in Australia, the formal school curriculum and equitable access to it.

Formal school curriculum

Analysis of the Australian Curriculum as well as State and Territory school curricula, reveal it is difficult for students to study civic education through the formal curriculum (school subjects). The Australian Curriculum has addressed civic education from its initiation. In the Australian Curriculum (V9.0) for example, Civics and Citizenship Education is addressed through multiple content descriptors, though no specific subject location is required and consequently the content is unlikely to be addressed by schools and teachers. In NSW, for example, the formal curriculum provides students with minimal access to civic education in Years 5 and 6 Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) / Humanities and Social Science (HASS) and negligible opportunity in History 7-10. That may also partly account for the poor performance of Australian Year 10 students in the NAP-CC mentioned above.

Equitable access

Extra curricula activities such as those offered by the Australian Electoral Commission, parliamentary education offices and the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) all contribute positively. However, these organisations have specific agendas and serve voluntary groups of students.

While many students experience the programs offered by these groups many, many more do not. Although the federal funding program for Parliament House visits is helpful ([Parliament and Civics Education Rebate \[PACER\] program](#)) it is far from generous and the costs exclude many students.

As noted above, the 2019 NAP-CC data showed only 38% of Australian Year 10 students were at or above the proficient standard. These results are nothing new. Results of NAP-CC Year 10 civics proficiency since 2004 (ACARA, 2020) reveal a low, and declining, level over the past decade and a half:

	2019	2016	2013	2010	2007	2004
Percentage of Year 10 Students at or above the proficient standard (an expected level of student knowledge and achievement for that age group)	38%	38%	44%	49%	42%	29%

ToR 2. The vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia’s democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system.

An array of informal mechanisms exists within Australia to support enhancing Australians’ knowledge of, and participation in, Australian democracy through the electoral system. In terms of school systems, the informal mechanisms are haphazard, uncoordinated and affect only a small number of Australians. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has, as part of its charter, a requirement to educate young Australians about the electoral process. The AEC has consistently reduced its education offerings due to financial limitations. The MoAD has a commendable program for schools and adults, however it has two limitations (i) student participation is limited by multiple factors including cost and (ii) we are not aware of research on the effectiveness of the MoAD’s educational programs on student learning over time.

ToR 3 The mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.

For schools, the mechanisms to consider these issues would be located in the formal curriculum as well as the informal curriculum such as student council elections. These could address key issues facing younger Australians, such as the impact of AI, social media, disinformation and the like, but again the curricula response is limited and haphazard. Many schools address issues of social media though rarely in this context. This is a lost opportunity to address pressing needs as the ACCC is, in reality, not applied in schools yet it is the exact source for students to learn about AI, foreign interference, social media effects, and the like.

ToR 4. Opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation.

The school curriculum, such as the ACCC, when applied, provides opportunities for culturally diverse, geographically diverse and remote communities to gain access to relevant, appropriate and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting.

The key question is do students in these categories receive the ACCC? If the states and territories do not provide direct access to the ACCC it is unlikely that students in these categories will access suitable information on Australian democracy.

ToR 5. Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers; and potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

Please see our *Democracy Academy* proposal, set out above, which if supported would have a strong focus on lifting civics and citizenship education in schools serving NSW's communities with lower socio-economic profiles.