



WESTERN AUSTRALIAN
Electoral Commission

A submission by
The Western Australian Electoral Commission
to the
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
inquiry into
Civics and Electoral Education

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Preface

The Western Australian Electoral Commission (the Commission) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education.

The Commission was established as an independent authority under the 1987 amendments to the *Electoral Act 1907*. Under section 5F(d) of the Act the Electoral Commissioner is given the statutory function of promoting ‘public awareness of electoral and Parliamentary matters by means of the conduct of education and information programs and by other means’.

Following the tabling in the Parliament of Australia of the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, titled ‘Education for Active Citizenship’ on 8 March 1989, the establishment of an Electoral Education Centre in Western Australia was proposed. This centre was established in early 1992 with a focus on the three levels of government – Federal, State and Local under the aegis of the Commission.

The activities of the centre have steadily expanded since that date, with over 19,000 contacts in 2005. The Commission also partners with the Parliament of Western Australia and the Constitutional Centre in a ‘Joint Civics Outreach’ program to the regions of Western Australia, and with the Constitutional Centre in a parallel initiative to the metropolitan area.

Information contained in this submission is the collation of the Commission’s experience, supported by a literature search, teachers’ feedback forms over the years and responses to a questionnaire sent out in the context of this inquiry.

Terms of Reference

In responding to the inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education, the Commission’s submission reflects on 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 content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities;
- the school age at which electoral education should begin;
- the adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities;
- 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; and
- opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

For further information about this submission contact Mr Warwick Gately AM, Acting Electoral Commissioner on (08) 9214 0400 or wgately@waec.wa.gov.au

1 *Executive Summary*

The Commission, through the Electoral Education Centre, provides quality educational and community awareness programs to primary and high schools, as well as tertiary and community groups throughout Western Australia. Its programs are developed and implemented on the basis of specific legislative requirements under the *Electoral Act 1907*, curriculum and customer needs which have been identified through consultation with key customer groups, the conduct of electoral surveys, and from experience in managing enrolment and electoral processes.

In addition to the Electoral Education Centre, the Commission seeks to achieve its electoral objectives through:

- specific election advertising and public relations campaigns;
- electoral publications, brochures, reports and maps, and
- direct consultation with members of the community.

The Electoral Education Centre's focus is in line with other electoral authorities who have traditionally focussed their educational activities on providing services to school age children (particularly in the metropolitan areas). The Commission has extended its educational services in schools since 2003, working with the Parliament of Western Australia, and the Constitutional Centre in the provision of civics and electoral education in regional Western Australia. It is currently seeking to further extend its regional and remote initiatives through this partnership.

Civics and electoral education is receiving increasing attention both in Australia and internationally in the face of increasing levels of disengagement by the younger demographics from the political process. (*Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy, 2004; Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools, 1998; Citizenship and democracy: students' knowledge and beliefs: Australian fourteen year olds and the IEA Civic Education Study, 2001 et al.*)

There has been, however, limited evaluation of school-based approaches to electoral education in the context of subsequent participation in the electoral processes of democracy. In responding to the first Term of Reference, this submission reviews the state of knowledge of young people and electoral education's relationship to participation.

In responding to subsequent Terms of Reference the Commission has sought to provide insight into the issues raised by the terms of reference of the Inquiry. It has sought to achieve this largely through its electoral experiences and first hand accounts of respondents, supported, where considered appropriate, by third party sources.

The Commission is of the view that there are significant gaps in civics and electoral knowledge in many sections of the population. This is particularly so in indigenous communities, with problems compounded in remote indigenous communities, for reasons outlined herein. With this in mind the Commission has made several recommendations for the future.

2 *Response to Terms of Reference*

The current status of young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system.

The then Attorney-General the Hon. Daryl Williams AM QC MP remarked to the Australian Association of Constitutional Law national conference in 2001:

'Polls before the republic referendum showed many Australians have a fairly limited understanding of our constitutional arrangements.'

This statement appears to be borne out by a number of surveys conducted in the classrooms in the last few years. In 2001 a study released by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (*IEA Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen*,) based on surveys conducted in 1999, about one year after the introduction of 'Discovering Democracy,' the Government's civics and citizenship education program, found that in Australia,

- (a) *Only half of the Australian students have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy. They are not strong in their understandings of what constitutes their civil rights.*
- (b) *Australian students do not have a strong grasp of the impact of economic issues in the functioning of a democratic system.*
- (c) *The television news is the preferred source of information for 80% of Australian students, though about two-thirds of them also read about what is happening in this country and in other countries in the newspapers, and 62% of them also listen to the news on the radio.*
- (d) *Australian students do not endorse action by citizens.*
- (e) *Students believe that a good citizen votes and shows respect for government representatives, but they regard knowing the country's history and following political issues in the press and engaging in political discussion as relatively unimportant.*
- (f) *80% of students believe in the importance of a good citizen participating in activities to benefit people in the community.*
- (g) *Only 9.8% of students expected to participate in political activities beyond voting.*

In commenting on the report The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2002) noted that

'In Australia, while civic knowledge was average, students' civic engagement was lower than the international average. The results also indicate a disassociation from, and perhaps a disdain for, political parties and those who represent them in democratic assemblies. Only 47 per cent indicated that they would certainly vote in a national election, while another 39 per cent probably would do so.'

Another study, 'Australian Youth Facts and Stats' produced by the Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies, reported the results of a national survey (a *Youth and Citizenship* study conducted 2002/3 for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.) This study revealed that:

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Of 800 young people aged 12–15 who were surveyed in 2003:

- *50% were taught about citizenship at school;*
- *85% thought that they should have been taught about it;*
- *less than 55% knew that Australia is a democracy (some thought it could not be a democracy because it was not a republic);*
- *nearly 90% wanted to participate in decisions that affected their lives; and*
- *13% believed that governments were responsive to the views of young people.*

At issue in these studies is the question of whether young people's knowledge of, and responsibilities under, the Australian electoral system impacts participation. On this issue the jury may still be out. However, in a Canadian electoral study Paul Howe (2003) in considering the relationship between electoral participation and political knowledge considered differences in political knowledge between each succeeding cohort of young people. He determined that there are increasingly larger gaps of political knowledge with each succeeding cohort, and more significantly *'those gaps have been closing only marginally over time, even as the younger cohorts have aged (what improvement there is seems to come when cohorts are relatively young, after which the knowledge gap more or less stabilizes)'*. (refer figure 1 below.)

He goes on to correlate this with diminishing turnout to diminishing knowledge as follows,

'The pattern is more suggestive of cohort effects – sizable and persistent gaps between those born at different points – than a life-cycle pattern of growing knowledge with advancing age.

This is only one way, however, in which political knowledge is implicated in the cohort effects that have depressed voter turnout in the past several elections. A second lies in the heightened impact of political knowledge on electoral participation among those who have more recently joined the electorate. Breaking down the data for various birth cohorts, figure 1- table 2 (below) reports the gap in voting turnout across a series of elections between those with high levels of political knowledge and those with low levels. The turnout gaps, it would appear, are substantially larger among younger cohorts than older ones. For example, looking at the 1976 to 1982 cohort in the 2000 election, turnout was 46.9 points lower among the least knowledgeable respondents than the most knowledgeable (based on reported turnout of 41.3 percent in the former group and 88.2 percent in the latter). In short, there are two dynamics working together to drive turnout down among younger cohorts: lower levels of knowledge, the effects of which are magnified by the escalating impact of knowledge on participation. The net result is that political knowledge is a critical factor – perhaps the critical factor – underlying cohort differences in voter turnout.'

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Figure: 1 The Canadian study of knowledge deficit and its impact on electoral participation. Source: Howe 2003

Table 1
A Growing Knowledge Deficit, 1984 to 2000

	1984	1990	1993	1997	2000
1939-1954	-4.6	-4.6	-4.5	-4.7	-2.6
1955-1966	-15.4	-11.7	-8.9	-11.2	-10.7
1967-1971		-23.7	-16.2	-14.4	-16.1
1972-1975			-26.2	-19.1	-23.3
1976-1979				-24.0	-26.7
1980-1982					-33.3

Entries represent the difference between the mean knowledge level for each cohort and a comparison cohort (1926-1988), where political knowledge is measured on a 0 to 100 scale.
Sources: 1984, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies and The Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform (1990). Further information on these studies is provided in the Acknowledgements.

Table 2
The Growing Impact of Knowledge on Electoral Participation, 1984 to 2000

Cohort	1984	1990	1993	1997	2000
pre-1926	10.6	9.1	11.9	15.6	4.2
1926-1938	12.5	7.7	9.1	12.3	20.4
1939-1954	8.3	8.4	10.5	12.6	17.6
1955-1966	27.7	19.6	21.4	21.6	24.2
1967-1975		10.5*	31.1	33.8	31.9
1976-1982				35.8*	46.9
Total	18.2	13.8	21.4	23.3	32.3

*N < 20 for high knowledge category
Entries represent the gap in voting turnout between those with low political knowledge and those with high knowledge, each representing roughly one third of total respondents. Some cells are empty because there were no respondents in those cohorts for those years.
Sources: 1984, 1993, 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies and the Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform (1990)

The Hon. Daryl Williams' comments quoted at the beginning of this section would appear to find their roots in classrooms of the nation. However, whilst it is clear that there is a deficit of understanding of the political system in Australia, the relationship between political knowledge and participation is not as undisputed as Paul Howe would suggest. In a paper written in 2002, Ian McAllistair argues that political knowledge has little influence in promoting political participation, stating that *'the relationship between knowledge, and attitudes and behaviour shows that factual knowledge increases political literacy and, to a lesser extent, competence. However knowledge has little effect on political participation, a major goal for civic education among politicians'*.

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The nature of civics education and its links with electoral education.

'In 2001 Australia celebrates a century of nationhood, a period of sustained democracy with democratic freedoms and practices effectively institutionalised. Along the way, Australia has become one of the world's oldest and most successful democracies. So well established is our liberal democratic way of life that many people have forgotten that it was not always the case. Australians have largely ignored the role of education as an important means of establishing democratic citizenship in a fledgling nation'. (Print & Gray 2001)

Civics education in Western Australia primarily falls under the learning outcome 'Society and Environment'. It is taught in schools using a range of learning strategies. The Commission offers schools its electoral education program as a resource in both the public and the private sectors of education. This is done in the context of 'Social and Civic Responsibility'. In particular it finds its context in:

- participation and citizenship;
- community; and
- social justice.

In schools, the program is generally delivered conjointly with the content of a civics program through the joint civics outreach strategy. This sees the Commission partnering with the Parliament of Western Australia and the Constitutional Centre, and seeks to improve students' understanding of the relevance of Western Australia's political and legal systems. It also seeks to raise the awareness of the opportunities that exist for their participation as informed, effective and responsible citizens.

In the Commission's interactive program students have the opportunity to:

- Explore the history and structural basis of Australia's democracy;
- Discover the importance of keeping informed about public issues;
- Engage in activities involving critical thinking and decision making;
- Learn how our system of government works and how it affects all citizens;
- Participate in and understand preferential voting; and
- Examine a citizen's rights and responsibilities.

An Education Resource Kit is supplied to all participating teachers.

Responses received from schools suggest that there is a case for civic and electoral education being a vital and distinct statutory part of the curriculum, an entitlement for all pupils in its own right.

Henry Milner (2002) writing on civic literacy and its links to electoral participation draws on a wealth of data from the US, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand seeking to demonstrate how a population's degree of civic literacy is the single best predictor of its level of political participation. It is from this standpoint that the Commission has espoused the joint civics outreach, and is now seeking to extend the initiative further with a goal of reaching 70% of the students in its target group every two years.

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The content and adequacy of electoral education in government and non-government school programs of study, as well as in TAFE colleges and universities.

A survey was conducted of schools accessing the Commission as a resource in their delivery of the learning outcome 'Society and Environment'. Self evidently, this precludes those schools that may not choose to include electoral education under this outcome.

Of those surveyed, the adequacy of electoral education in the schools was seen to be dependent on such initiatives as that of the Commission in providing a resource in this arena.

Other relevant points raised in the survey are listed below.

- A number of schools suggested that making it a compulsory part of the curriculum would be useful.
- It was pointed out that the students *'know what is taught when it is taught, but do not retain it unless a continuous program is developed and worked on.'* (Primary School Teacher).
- High schools found that an already crowded time-table is an issue. This factor is confirmed in the Commission's marketing of the Joint Civics Outreach initiative to the metropolitan and regional areas of Western Australia. In identifying reasons for a comparatively low uptake by high schools, a consistent reason provided has been a 'crowded time-table' precluded their accessing this resource. This is especially the case in the final years 11 and 12.

The Commission is currently reviewing its electoral education strategies. As part of the review it is proposing to undertake research to identify more clearly the needs of teachers and students involved in civics education in high schools.

The school age at which electoral education should begin.

In the Commission's survey of participating schools there was general agreement that electoral education should commence in primary school year six (ten year olds). In terms of when civics education should commence, there was a greater disparity of responses with a few suggestions that it might commence at an earlier age.

The proposition that electoral education should commence in year six is in line with the Commission's electoral education strategy which delivers civics and electoral education in regional Western Australia to school children in years 6 to 10 with some flexibility to deliver to years 5, 11 and 12.

By contrast the University of Virginia Centre for Governmental Studies in a national symposium report titled 'Civics Education' (2001) stated that "every state must teach civics education through and offer a comprehensive curriculum in grades K-12. It is never too early to learn the responsibilities of citizenship". The report goes on to correlate a decline in young peoples' electoral participation with "the nation's school system not meeting that challenge adequately" in terms of civics education.

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The adequacy of electoral education in indigenous communities.

It is the view of the Commission that electoral education in indigenous areas, especially in remote communities, is deficient. The Commission's returning officers for remote polling in desert communities, in the 2005 State general election advise that the effectiveness of electoral education is limited in part due to such factors as the language barrier, where English is the second, third or even fourth language, cultural barriers, remoteness of the communities, and inadequate funding for both electoral education and enrolment in the period leading up to elections.

This is compounded by the expressed view by many of these remote electors, that what happens at the ballot box is irrelevant to their everyday lives.

There is anecdotally a limited understanding in particular of the following electoral concepts.

- The two house system of government, hence the reason for the two ballot papers.
- The difference between State and Federal government and boundaries "*I had some people try to vote who were from across the border, and they felt there was something wrong with them when they were told they could not vote*" (assistant remote polling place manager).
- The concept of a referendum.
- An awareness of the need to enrol upon changing address "*many of these people are semi itinerant, moving communities for months at a time, sometimes interstate.*" (Returning Officer).

The low turnout in the Mining and Pastoral districts of Western Australia, in the 2005 State general election, illustrated below, is perhaps indicative of some of these points.

Figure 2 Participation rate in the Mining and Pastoral region State general election 2005

Mining and Pastoral Region										
District	Electors	Ordinary	Absent	By Post	In Person	Prov.	Total Valid	Informal	Total Votes	*Turnout
Central Kimberley-										
1 Pilbara	13,380	7,154	1,116	260	171	16	8,717	458	9,175	68.57%
2 Kalgoorlie	12,837	8,207	1,124	312	851	5	10,499	448	10,947	85.28%
3 Kimberley	13,123	7,412	851	277	295	10	8,845	416	9,261	70.57%
4 Murchison-Eyre	14,366	7,510	1,571	544	377	8	10,010	485	10,495	73.05%
5 North West Coastal	14,534	8,968	1,282	352	465	16	11,083	554	11,637	80.07%
Total	68,240	39,251	5,944	1,745	2,159	55	49,154	2,361	51,515	75.49%
Percentage		76.20%	11.54%	3.39%	4.19%	0.11%	95.42%	4.58%	100.00%	

Currently, the Commission adopts an inclusive approach to electoral education. For example, school age indigenous children attending the larger regional and metropolitan schools in Western Australia are included in the education strategy outlined below. There is no existing formal strategy of electoral education specifically targeting adult indigenous people. However, the Commission is working with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) to develop a new initiative targeting these communities using a 'story board' as an educational/motivational tool to be taken to those communities and used to encourage both enrolment and voting.

The Commission recognises that there is a significant problem with respect to the enrolment, electoral education and the participation of indigenous communities and with the AEC is seeking to address this issue. In 2005, an 'Indigenous Reference Group' (IRG) was established after a series of meetings with the AEC. The aim is the improvement of enrolment in remote and regional communities, particularly indigenous communities.

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The IRG was subsequently broadened to include a representative from the Department of Local Government and Regional Development. It has held a number of meetings to discuss how enrolment/voting education can be stimulated and improved, not just in the north of the State, but also in communities in the south-west. The IRG has met with indigenous project managers in the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DIA). Their view was that IRG needs to work with their Community Action Groups (CAGs) who are very important conduits between aboriginal leaders and government agencies. The IRG has written to the CAG leaders to discuss with them individually enrolment/practicalities of remote polling strategies.

The IRG is, in parallel, reviewing the use of telecentres for educating community members in the lead up to the respective elections of committee members.

The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens.

The Commission presents to TAFE citizenship groups, comprising migrant citizens, on a regular basis, but at this point in time does not have the resources to further extend the initiative to ethnic community groups in Western Australia. So, for this reason, adequacy could be considered low because these groups are not targeted.

The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the Western Australian Electoral Commission have a joint role in the promotion and delivery of electoral education in Western Australia. However, with the Commission's significant investment in the Electoral Education Centre, the AEC has adopted a low profile in Western Australia, choosing to support and extend the work of the Commission as described below.

As outlined in the Preface of this submission, the Electoral Education Centre was established in early 1992 by the Commission with a focus on the three levels of government – Federal, State and Local under the aegis of the Commission.

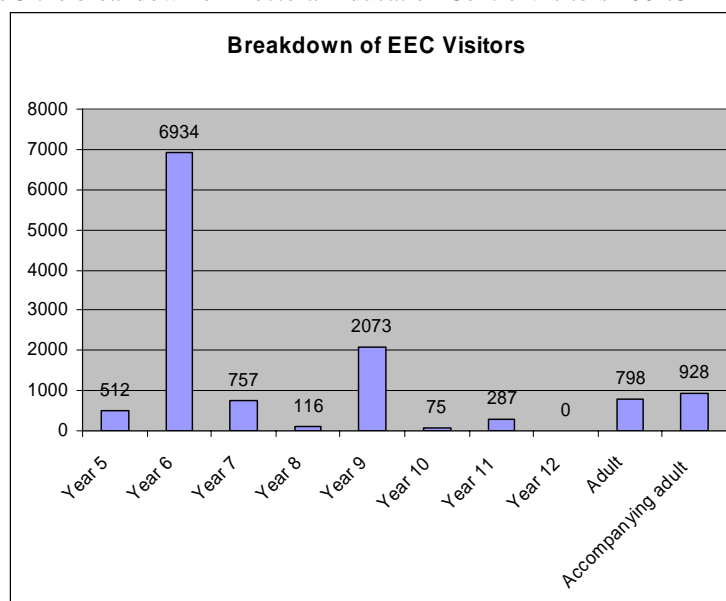
The Electoral Education Centre services include:

- presentations at the centre;
- school and TAFE visits;
- conduct of school elections;
- participation in a Joint Civics Outreach program (JCO), in conjunction with the Parliament of Western Australia and the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia; and
- a youth enrolment program.

In the financial year 2004 – 2005 the Commission made presentations to 12,480 school students and adults at the centre with the breakdown by category as follows:

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Figure 3 the breakdown of Electoral Education Centre Visitors 2004/5



In addition it undertook:

- coordination of 48 school elections involving 9,816 students;
- presentations at primary and secondary schools within the metropolitan area, which involved 1,422 students;
- participation by 4,077 students in the Joint Civics Education program; and
- presentations to 411 TAFE and adult migrant education students.

The JCO program continues to receive strong support from both country and metropolitan schools. As well as continuing to service the south west area of Western Australia, the JCO program is also being expanded to include Broome, Merredin and Geraldton.

This expansion of services to these areas has been made possible by the casual employment of local presenters.

The JCO program will be further adapted for use in the north west of Western Australia and remote communities in the forthcoming financial year.

There is currently an agreement in place whereby the AEC provides \$15,000 p.a. to the Commission as a contribution to the running of the Electoral Education Centre. The funds are used primarily for such items as display upgrades as opposed to operational costs. The Commission and the AEC have recently completed the production of a story board for use in indigenous communities as an educational and motivational tool.

Opportunities for introducing creative approaches to electoral education taking into account approaches used internationally and, in particular, in the United States, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In addition to its presentations on civics and electoral matters, the Commission, through its Electoral Education Centre, actively promotes the conduct of student council elections, under its auspices. It conducted 48 school council elections involving 9,816 students in 2004/5. It is the Commission's belief that such exercises, which can provide a practical demonstration of

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democracy at work, approach, have a stronger and more enduring impact on students than the more traditional educational approach.

This belief is supported in a number of studies and reports here and overseas (e.g. Stroupe & Sabato 2004)

School Council elections are seen by the Commission as a means of enabling students to take part in the decision-making process at a level that is both immediately relevant and empowering. In 1989, the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training produced a report entitled *Education for Active Citizenship*. The Report argued that the lack of political knowledge and interest amongst young people is tied to feelings of powerlessness. The Committee concluded that feeling powerless is a product of political processes viewed by many young people as not responsive to their needs and concerns, nor are they accessible and relevant in ways that allow them to act on their own behalf. The Committee's report therefore emphasised the need to counter the 'ignorance, apathy and powerlessness' amongst young people. This could be achieved partly by increasing levels of knowledge about political processes to help 'people understand and take part in decision-making structures'.

3 Recommendations

- (a) **Recommendation:** That consideration be given to making civics and electoral education a statutory part of the curriculum, along the lines of that now introduced in the United Kingdom
- (b) **Recommendation:** That research is funded to determine the causes for disengagement by young people in the Australian political process.
- (c) **Recommendation;** That a national collaborative strategy be consultatively developed, targeting the indigenous communities of Australia to improve electoral education and enrolment.

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