



## Electoral Commissioner

Our Ref: 15/288

Ms Rebecca Gordon  
Inquiry Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms Gordon

### AEC submission to the Inquiry into Electoral Education

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' (the Committee) inquiry into electoral education.

The Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) submission is structured under the following headings to provide the Committee with an overview of the AEC's current education services as well as other issues impacting electoral education.

1. **Legislative basis for electoral education.**
2. **The AEC's National Electoral Education Centre (NEEC)** which delivers electoral education programs to students visiting Canberra.
3. **The AEC's outreach programs** which support the delivery of hands-on electoral education experiences in the classroom.
4. **Further resources for teachers** that the AEC produces to support electoral education which include online and printed education material.
5. **Other matters impacting electoral education delivery.**

This submission also acknowledges the environmental context, limitations and external factors which have an impact on the effectiveness of electoral education. Constraints affected by the schooling curriculum, comparative differences at the state and territory level in both education and electoral systems, resource limitations and the inherent tension between impartial electoral education and the political sphere, all present ongoing challenges to the delivery of successful electoral education.

Beyond providing information about elections, the AEC's education programs support young Australians to develop a deep and lasting appreciation of the important role that voting plays in a democracy. The AEC's approach to education in this area aligns with the Australian Civics and Citizenship Curriculum, encompassing the development of knowledge, understanding and skills required for civic participation.

Electoral education is delivered at schools and through engagement with the AEC and other education programs as part of Civics and Citizenship. Evidence from Australia and other democracies suggest that all civics learning needs to be ongoing, participatory and meaningful to the learner<sup>1</sup>. External influences such as the media, family and friends, and the political landscape, also need to be taken into account when determining how much influence schools, the curriculum and programs like the AEC's have over young people's motivation to engage with the electoral process.

Despite the challenges, the AEC continues to seek ways to innovate and improve its educational services. Current priorities include working with the education sector and improving access via technology. Under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act), one of the AEC's primary functions is to promote public awareness through education and information programs and, as such, the AEC keenly awaits the findings of the inquiry.

I welcome the opportunity to expand on any matter raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Rogers

/o July 2015

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<sup>1</sup> IEA Civic Education Study Torney-Purta, Schwille, Amadeo 1999.

## **1. The legislative basis for electoral education**

- 1.1 Section 7(1)(c) of the Electoral Act forms the basis of the AEC's role 'to promote public awareness of electoral and Parliamentary matters by means of the conduct of education and information programs and by other means'.
- 1.2 The AEC conducts a range of community engagement and public relations activities to promote awareness of electoral matters in order to meet these responsibilities. In conjunction, the AEC provides education services which are specifically targeted at schools to support the delivery of the Australian Civics and Citizenship Curriculum.

## **2. The AEC's National Electoral Education Centre (NEEC)**

- 2.1 The NEEC provides facilitated education sessions to over 80 000 visitors per year, mostly upper primary students but also secondary students and adult groups. The program runs for 90 minutes and comprises of:
  - a multi-media presentation on the history of voting in Australia;
  - an interactive activity area; and
  - first-hand experience through participation in an election or referendum scenario.
- 2.2 The NEEC is one of four Canberra education venues which qualify schools to receive a government Parliamentary and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) subsidy for their excursion.

### *History of the NEEC*

- 2.3 The NEEC opened in the Senate wing of Old Parliament House in 2001. The purpose-built education facility was funded through a Federation Fund grant. Prior to this, the centre was operated from a school in Lyons, ACT. Similar centres operated in Melbourne from 1991 and Adelaide from 1998. Both ceased operating in 2009.
- 2.4 Since relocating to Old Parliament House the NEEC has operated at near maximum capacity, currently accommodating up to 18 program sessions per day. The Centre operates from 8.00am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday throughout the school year. During the peak periods of school terms 2 and 3, not all school groups wishing to make a booking can be accommodated.

### *NEEC performance*

- 2.5 The AEC has successfully operated the NEEC for 14 years without major change to the educational content or facilities. While visitor numbers and satisfaction ratings remain high - with recent numbers indicating approximately 97 per cent satisfaction - the NEEC is at risk of becoming outdated and thus not as engaging to young people.
- 2.6 During 2014-15 the AEC commissioned research into key aspects of the centre which included:



- focus group evaluation with teachers who have visited the NEEC, conducted by social research firm IPSOS;
  - a contracted education specialist review of the program in terms of curriculum relevance, ability to address different learning needs, logistics and content; and
  - a scoping study to outline options for improving the NEEC foyer, conducted by Thylacine Design Studio.
- 2.7 The research found that while the NEEC continued to offer a valued learning experience, the infrastructure and educational methodology were becoming outdated which negatively impacted the visitor experience.
- 2.8 It is not anticipated that the physical condition of the Centre will reduce visitor numbers, as the NEEC is only one part of the national capital excursion which attracts school groups to Canberra. The connection to the Civics and Citizenship Curriculum and the PACER program also ensure that schools will continue to visit the NEEC. Despite this, the quality of the educational experience and the perception of the AEC created by the current state of the Centre are less than ideal.

*Future direction*

- 2.9 The NEEC requires renewal. Any significant update of the facilities at the NEEC would need funding which is outside the AEC's budget. The AEC's current priorities are the implementation of improved processes for the next electoral event and all available resources must be channelled to this task.
- 2.10 The AEC has committed funding for the development of an online booking system for the NEEC in 2016, in collaboration with other Canberra-based attractions. This will provide a more streamlined service for those planning school excursions to Canberra.
- 2.11 Key NEEC statistics are contained in the tables below.

**Table 2.1 NEEC Visitation by financial year**

|                       | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | 2014-15 |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Sessions</b>       | 2 463   | 2 529   | 2 600   | 2 542   | 2 592   |
| <b>Total visitors</b> | 87 245  | 87 717  | 90 400  | 87 065  | 90 982  |

**Table 2.2 Visitors by group 2014 – 2015**

| Primary school | Secondary school | Adult |
|----------------|------------------|-------|
| 2321           | 264              | 7     |

### 3. AEC outreach programs

#### *Professional learning for teachers*

- 3.1 Professional learning is an important part of the AEC's education strategy. Outreach programs are based on the principle that teachers are best placed to do the teaching. Where possible, the AEC provides face-to-face professional learning workshops for teachers, to enhance teacher confidence and ability to deliver electoral education.
- 3.2 The AEC has conducted professional learning programs since 1992. Until recently the main audience was university students studying to become teachers. In 2010, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers mandated that teachers undertake 20 hours of professional learning each year in order to maintain professional registration. This prompted the AEC to re-examine its delivery of professional learning and in 2014 university workshops were suspended to allow the AEC to refocus on practicing teachers.
- 3.3 In 2014-15 the AEC became a registered professional learning provider in the ACT through the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) and in NSW through the Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES). To date the AEC has provided five two hour professional learning workshops for in-service teachers in the ACT and has four more sessions planned for both the ACT and NSW in the latter half of the school year, with other states to follow.

#### *Future direction*

- 3.4 The AEC will continue to work with education peak bodies and departments in all jurisdictions to have its professional learning workshops offered to teachers. The lack of consistency across educational jurisdictions is challenging and requires the AEC to take a staged approach, engaging with key stakeholders in each jurisdiction one-by-one to work through the most effective way offering professional learning.
- 3.5 The AEC is also seeking to maximise the reach of professional learning workshops within its available resources by exploring options for online delivery of workshops. Relationships with the tertiary sector are maintained so that workshops delivered remotely via technology may also be offered to teaching students.

#### *Get Voting*

- 3.6 *Get Voting* is an online program that provides materials to support primary and secondary schools to conduct authentic elections. Underpinning the program is an emphasis on good process that upholds the core principles of openness, one vote one value, participation and a secret ballot.

- 3.7 Teachers access the *Get Voting* website to download instructions and templates to run their election. Election Equipment Packs (ballot box, seals, badges, posters) are provided to schools for free and a 'help desk' allows teachers to email the AEC for advice or information to support the election.

*Get Voting – history*

- 3.8 Launched in October 2012, *Get Voting* replaced the School and Community Visits Program (SCVP) which was previously undertaken by AEC divisional office staff. This shift in direction was prompted by four factors.
- Recognition that teachers have the expertise to determine the most appropriate way to deliver electoral education to their students.
  - A responsibility to ensure national delivery and consistency of education services. The SCVP was not able to achieve this due to geographical and resource constraints.
  - AEC divisional staff were required to focus primarily on election preparation tasks and did not necessarily have the skills or availability to conduct education sessions.
  - The increasing trend to move education resources online.

*Get Voting – performance*

- 3.9 In 2014-15 the *Get Voting* website received 465 requests for election equipment packs, used to deliver school elections for 57 462 students.
- 3.10 This year an automated feedback process was added so that the AEC can monitor how *Get Voting* is used in schools and identify opportunities for improvement.
- 3.11 Key *Get Voting* statistics are contained in the tables below.

**Table 3.1 Distribution of and participation in the AEC Get Voting program**

|                                   | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | 2014-15 |
|-----------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>Election packs distributed</b> | 374     | 386     | 464     |
| <b>Student participants</b>       | 14 008  | 50 358  | 57 462  |

**Table 3.2 Get Voting usage by type 2014-15**

|                 | Primary | Secondary | Combined | Other | TOTAL  |
|-----------------|---------|-----------|----------|-------|--------|
| <b>Schools</b>  | 312     | 79        | 63       | 10    | 464    |
| <b>Students</b> | 33 206  | 16 422    | 7 396    | 438   | 57 462 |



**Table 3.3 Get Voting usage by state 2014-15**

|                 | NSW    | VIC    | QLD   | SA    | WA    | TAS   | NT    | ACT   | TOTAL  |
|-----------------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| <b>Schools</b>  | 208    | 131    | 43    | 27    | 25    | 14    | 7     | 10    | 464    |
| <b>Students</b> | 24 172 | 14 677 | 4 960 | 3 833 | 3 858 | 2 124 | 1 043 | 2 795 | 57 462 |

#### *Indigenous Education Participation Program (IEPP)*

- 3.12 The IEPP was established to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage in electoral participation. The program conducts a range of community outreach activities, including some education sessions. IEPP makes use of AEC education materials such as *Get Voting* when working with schools.

#### **4. Further resources for teachers**

##### *Website education.aec.gov.au*

- 4.1 The AEC offers a variety of education resources which can be accessed online. In July 2015 the AEC will launch education.aec.gov.au. This will be a new education-specific website bringing together the AEC's services for schools. It will have a visual identity which is more appealing for this audience than the previous online presence within the AEC website.

##### *Online learning modules*

- 4.2 Given the increasing use of technology in the classroom, online delivery of learning tools is a preferred method of access for teachers and students. The AEC developed the *Making a Nation* online interactive modules for secondary students of history. At senior school levels, the opportunity to deliver electoral education as part of the curriculum is limited. Electoral education is briefly discussed in the Year 9-10 History Curriculum during the Development of Australian Democracy component.
- 4.3 As well as being accessible through the AEC education website, this resource is available via the national educators' portal, *Scoutle*. In 2014-15 this resource received an average of 1,500 page views per month.

##### *Democracy Rules*

- 4.4 Originally produced as a print publication and distributed to all Australian schools in 2007, Democracy Rules is a comprehensive resource which includes lesson plans, online interactive activities and enquiry-based learning. In 2016 this resource will be transitioned to online delivery and updated to reflect changes in curriculum and education practice.

### *Resources for teachers*

- 4.5 The AEC has a number of magazine-style publications, DVDs, factsheets and classroom activities also on offer through the website. Currently, the AEC is undertaking a process of review and renewal of these materials.

### *Future directions*

- 4.6 As noted above, the AEC is currently refreshing its education materials. Publications will be consolidated into a single print resource and supported by new online content.

## **5. Other matters impacting electoral education delivery**

### *Relationship to the National Curriculum*

- 5.1 The Civics and Citizenship Curriculum requires a notional time of 20 hours per year in grades 3-10, or 2 per cent of total teaching time.<sup>2</sup>
- 5.2 Electoral education is a very small part of the content within the Civics and Citizenship Curriculum, predominantly covered in years 5-6. This gives electoral education providers like the AEC a very brief window to engage with students. A 90 minute program at the NEEC sufficiently covers all the curriculum requirements of electoral education and thus may be all the learning that some students are engaged in.
- 5.3 The AEC actively contributed to the consultation process with the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) throughout the development of the curriculum in 2012-13. In its 2013 response to the draft curriculum, the AEC was largely positive about the curriculum, however, it noted the ambitious amount of content given the little time available to teach it. In this submission, the AEC also urged the inclusion of electoral education in senior secondary years. Electoral education in primary school is a starting point which needs to be built upon as young people approach voting age. This is unlikely to occur if it is not mandated by the curriculum.
- 5.4 A further challenge for Civics and Citizenship curriculum is that it is not a standalone subject; rather, the curriculum is interwoven into Humanities and Social Sciences. In later school years, these subjects are not mandatory for all students, further reducing opportunities to provide universal electoral education.
- 5.5 The Australian Curriculum in Civics and Citizenship is under review and has not been fully implemented. Its predecessor, the *National Statements of Learning in Civics and Citizenship* which has been embedded in state-based curricula for many years, presented the same limitations.

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority curriculum shaping paper  
[http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/Shape\\_of\\_the\\_Australian\\_Curriculum\\_\\_Civics\\_and\\_Citizenship\\_251012.pdf](http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/Shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum__Civics_and_Citizenship_251012.pdf)



- 5.6 Given the ever-increasing demands on school time, it may not be practical to suggest that Civics and Citizenship education should receive more time. Rather, realistic expectations of what can be achieved within the curriculum have informed the AEC's decision to seek electoral education delivery opportunities outside of the Curriculum, such as with Get Voting.

#### *Cross-jurisdictional differences*

- 5.7 State and territory education departments each have their own operating policies and procedures. This national inconsistency was highlighted to the AEC through the development of the teacher professional learning workshops. The national curriculum and other efforts to bring greater consistency to the education sector may assist in reducing the complexity of providing national education services.
- 5.8 The differing structures and processes of Australian electoral bodies also present a challenge. Educators across jurisdictions, including the AEC, collaborate through an Electoral Educator Network (EEN). The AEC most recently engaged with the EEN as part of an 'Electoral Education Review' undertaken in March 2015. While the EEN provides a valuable point of connection and information sharing, the ability for educators to collaborate is limited due to differences in content created by the difference in voting systems.
- 5.9 The AEC regularly consults with States and Territories on matters impacting the development of communication and education programs more broadly and specifically as they relate to the development of education and communication materials produced for federal elections events.
- 5.10 The AEC has also contributed to a project managed through the State and Territories Electoral Commissions (STEC) group to investigate and analyse the strategies and programs employed by each electoral commission to engage with people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This report, yet to be released, will include a comprehensive review of education-related initiatives developed by electoral commissions designed to inform CALD communities about elections, enrolment and voting.

#### *Effective electoral education and politics*

- 5.11 The "National Electoral Education Centre Program review" conducted by an external education consultant in November 2014 noted the following.

*"To positively influence attitudes to elections as a democratic decision-making process these programs need to discuss attitudes. They should positively model the democratic decision-making process. To do this the programs themselves must become more democratic and invite students to exercise democratic rights."*

- 5.12 To achieve a learning environment which encourages students to develop independent thinking about these issues, electoral education services need to shift emphasis from the delivery of 'facts' to creating opportunities for stimulating real discussions about aspects of the democratic system. This presents a challenge for the AEC which has a statutory obligation to remain impartial.