

# AN EXPLORATION OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING HASS

Interim Report

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# Introduction

Humanities and Social Science (HaSS) education plays a critical role in developing understandings that enable young people to engage thoughtfully with the world around them. The HaSS curriculum comprises of history, geography, civics and citizenship education, and economics and business, however in New South Wales only history and geography are integrated. Despite the significance of the learning area, there can be inherent complexity when teaching HaSS, with preservice teachers (PSTs) often reporting challenges with their self-efficacy and confidence in content knowledge, skills and addressing contemporary issues when engaging in curriculum design and implementation. This subsequently impacts what and how they teach HaSS upon graduation.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration advocates for all learners to develop as confident, creative, successful lifelong learners who are active and informed members of the community (Education Services, 2019) which closely aligns to the values underpinning Humanities and Social Science (HaSS) education (Green & Price, 2019). Building on best practice, HaSS education aims to stimulate learner's curiosity, imagination and wonder about the world in which they live. HaSS therefore plays a central role in "harnessing students' curiosity and imagination about the world they live in and empowers them to actively shape their lives; make reflective, informed decisions; value their belonging in a diverse and dynamic society; and positively contribute locally, nationally, regionally and globally" (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2010 to present). To empower learners "to be informed, active and participatory citizens in a changing world" (Tudball, 2018, p. 79), quality teaching and advocacy of HaSS education is necessary within schooling and developed within initial teacher education. Yet, PSTs' own school experiences of the HaSS curriculum are highly variable, impacting on their confidence and self-efficacy in teaching this learning area as graduates. If negative experiences are not addressed, these prior experiences of HaSS and associated pedagogies may perpetuate. This may result in graduates employing similar disengaging approaches that were used during their own schooling and potentially decreasing the future generation's interest and success in learning HaSS. While research has explored PSTs' experiences and attitudes towards teaching and learning in HaSS globally, little focus has been paid on the Australian context.

This report presents interim findings of a research project conducted collaboratively across three institutions: University of South Australia, University of Melbourne and University of Sydney. To understand how PSTs experienced HaSS at school and the potential impact this may have on their self-efficacy in teaching HaSS, this interim report captured PSTs' personal schooling experiences of learning HaSS and its sub-strands, and their perceived self-efficacy in teaching this learning area prior to the commencement of any formal HaSS course work in initial teacher education courses. The findings addressed in this report pertain to phase one of a two-phase study with significant findings related to teaching and learning of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.

# Methodology

Employing a mixed methods approach, PSTs enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate Humanities and Social Science core courses participated in a two-phase project. This project was underpinned by the need to respond to the following research question:

*In what ways has a preservice teacher's schooling experience of learning HaSS impacted on their perceived confidence of teaching HaSS to primary school aged students?*

Following approval from the University of South Australia's Human Ethics Committee and approval from the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney, phase 1 involved a pilot study conducted in 2024 with 183 participants in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching degrees in the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney. Participants completed an online 10-minute pre-course survey and a 15-minute post course survey which were hosted on a Qualtrics platform. These surveys were created by the research team with links emailed to all PSTs enrolled in the core Humanities and Social Science course in the relevant Education Units at the two participating universities. ***This phase forms the focus on this report.***

Phase 2: the main study (to be conducted in 2025) will involve participants completing the same online 10-minute pre-course survey and a 15-minute post course survey. The study will involve participants across the three Universities.

## The Survey

Drawing on Green and Price's (2019) published reflection activity (p. 4), the 10-minute pre-survey asked participants to respond questions aligning to the following themes:

- PSTs' reflections on personal school experiences with learning in HaSS.
- Enjoyment and interest in HaSS, and the reasons behind these preferences.
- Style of teaching PSTs experienced in HaSS.
- Confidence in teaching HaSS and reasons for the indicated level of confidence.
- Practical exposure to teaching HaSS experienced during professional practice/experience placements.

## Data Analysis

De-identified quantitative data were analysed using Nvivo to identify key themes across 183 qualitative survey responses. Reliability of the survey tool was addressed by trialling prior to administering, thus allowing for revision and clarification before implementation.

# Findings

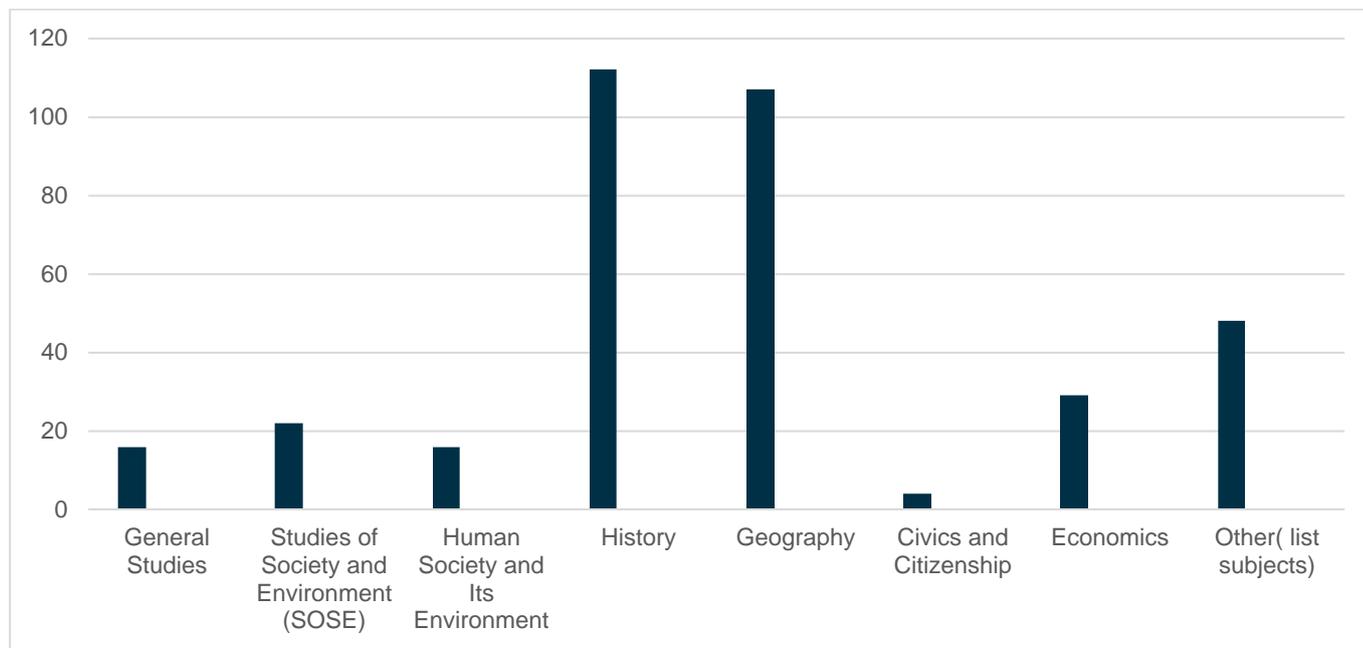
The following presents the preliminary key findings from Phase 1 of the study that relate to Civics and Citizenship education (CCE).

## Exposure to Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) in schooling

Four hundred and ninety-two participants responded to the survey. Out of the 354 participants who responded to this exposure to CCE question, only 1.13% (N=4) reported

that they experienced learning about CCE as part of the HaSS curriculum during their schooling. It is important to note that it is possible that combined subjects such as HSIE or SOSE also incorporated some CCE and in some states such as New South Wales an integrated approach that focussed on History and Geography with no CCE was taught (refer Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1 Names of Humanities and Social Sciences Subjects Recalled from School**



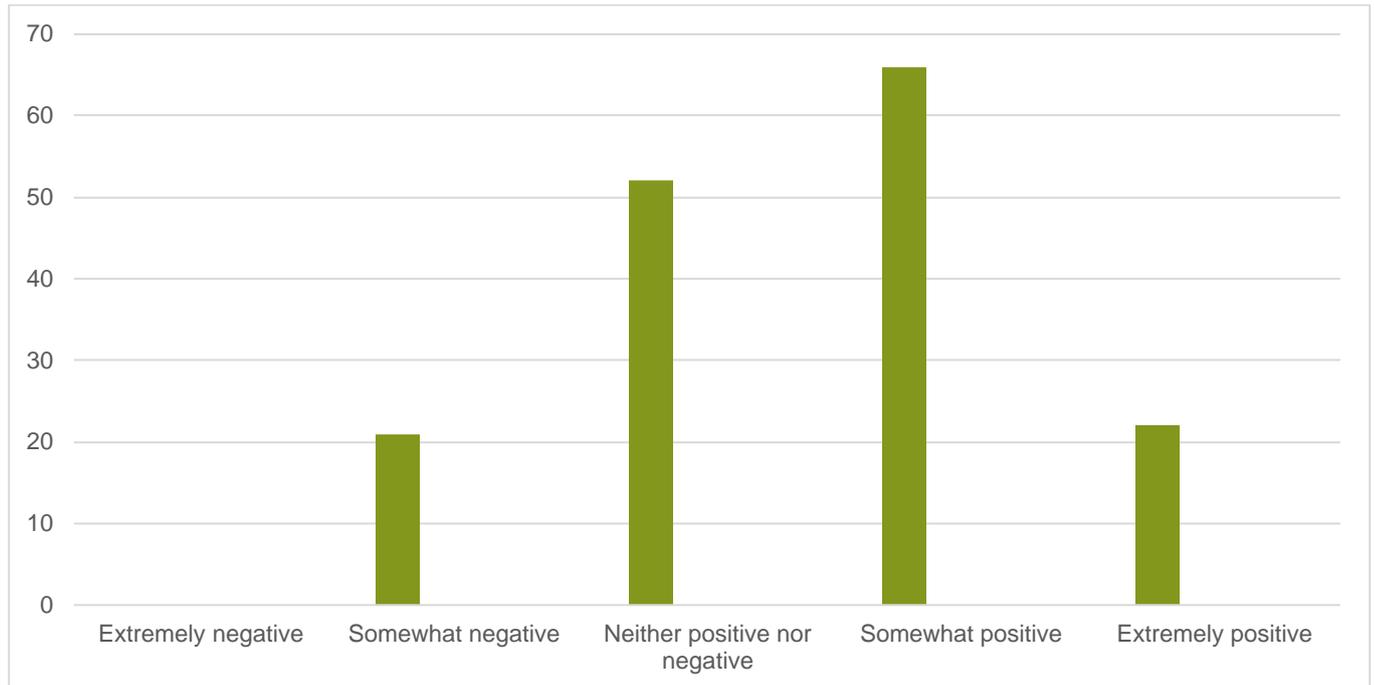
## Attitudes towards HaSS

In response to the question regarding PST's attitudes towards HaSS, out of 161 respondents, 45.34% (N= 73) expressed either 'negative' or 'neither positive nor negative' experiences of HaSS in their schooling years (refer Figure 2). When asked why they had chosen the responses, there were comments such as *I found it boring and repetitive, I was disengaged with the subject due to lack of interest and it did not resonate with me*. Positive reasons included enjoyment of specific disciplines and content being *directly linked to the real world*. Most participants reflected on their experiences in history and geography, with only one specifically elaborating on CCE:

*I preferred the elements discussing history and societal/cultural studies, but I wasn't a fan of economics or civics related studies since I found the content too dry and filled with jargon.*

It is again important to note that in New South Wales the integration of History and Geography forms the HaSS curriculum.

**Figure 2 Reflections on the Quality of HaSS Education Based on Prior School Experience**



## Positive experiences of HaSS

In a follow up question about what subjects PSTs enjoyed learning about the most, history and geography were the most prevalent, with only two respondents (1.24%) out of 161 responded to this question identifying CCE. For the small subset of PSTs who had positive experiences with CCE, the most frequently cited reasons were:

- Engaging and impactful teaching methods.
- Teachers who made a meaningful connection with the material.

## Negative experiences

When asked about the factors that contributed to negative experiences in HaSS, the most common responses included a lack of connection to the real world and disengaging or ineffective teaching methods. Two PSTs specifically identified CCE and stated that:

- *I didn't like learning about Civics and Social Justice because I found it very boring and uninteresting.*
- *Civics and Citizenship. For some reason, it just didn't make sense to me.*

## Opportunities to study CCE

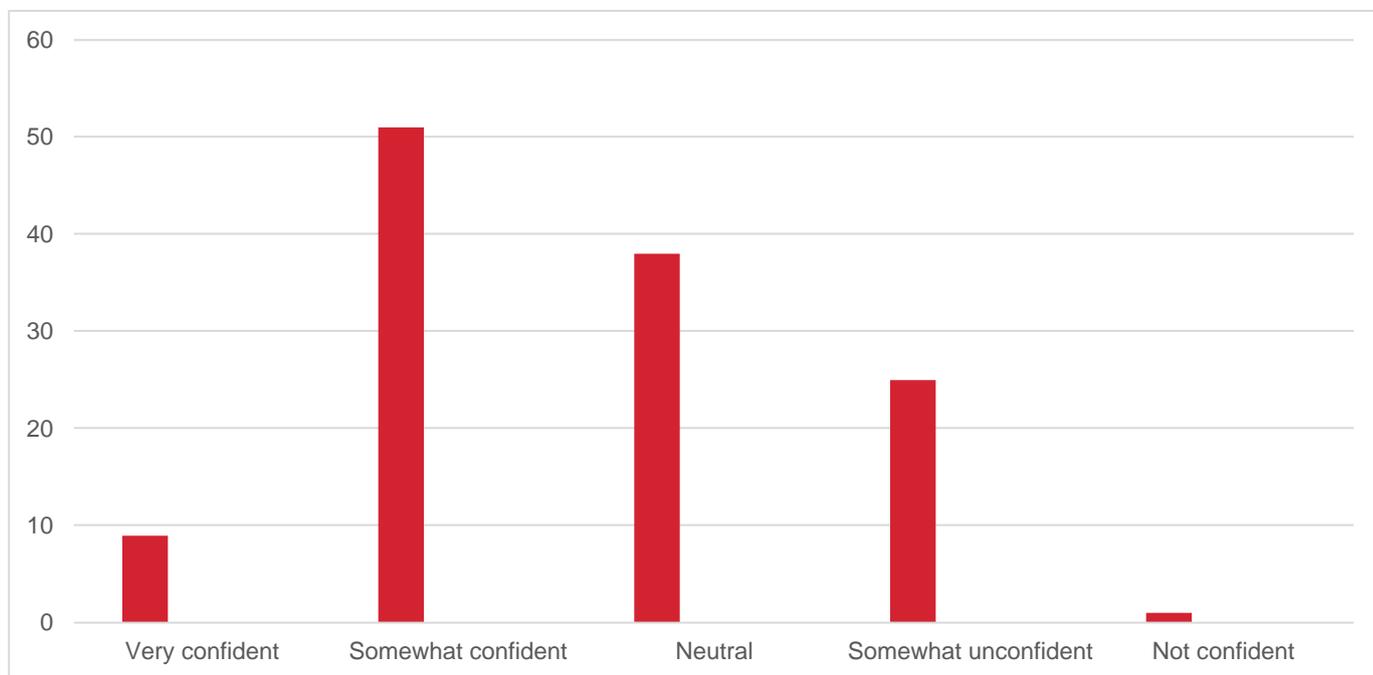
When asked in hindsight, what subjects they would have liked to engage with, but did not have an opportunity to, eight students specifically noted CCE including comments such as:

- *We did not do civics and citizenship or much social sciences.*
- *Civics and citizenship, as well as economics.*
- *I don't recall learning about economics and business or civics and citizenship if at all.*
- *Civics and citizenship and business because they are super important and applicable in the world, and I don't recall learning any of these.*

## PSTs' confidence in teaching HaSS

PSTs were asked about their perceived confidence in teaching HaSS as reflected in Figure 3.

**Figure 3 Confidence in teaching HaSS**



Prior to engaging in HaSS coursework, out of the 124 respondents to this question, 20.97% (N = 26) noted that they did not feel confident to teach HaSS, while 30.65% (N= 38) reported feeling neutral. This accounts for over 50% of PSTs involved in this study not selecting 'somewhat confident' (41%) or 'very confident' (7%); something which could potentially impact on the way they teach HaSS (and CCE) in the future. Among those who indicated some level of confidence, most attributed it to personal interest in the subject, confidence in their subject knowledge, and access to resources. Analysis of the qualitative comments similarly revealed more than half of the participants across both institutions expressed apprehension about teaching HaSS, citing key reasons such as:

- Confidence in certain aspects of HaSS but not in the others
- Possession of content knowledge but not the competencies to effectively teach it
- Lack of content knowledge, with CCE frequently identified as a challenging area
- Fear and worry about making mistakes
- Limited experience as students, impacting their confidence

## Exposure to CCE During School Placements

Among the PSTs involved in this pilot study, out of 127 respondents, approximately 19% (N= 24) reported observing CCE teaching during their school placements. This could be due to where the core HaSS course is situated in the initial teacher education programs and the different approaches to teaching HaSS with New South Wales using an integrated Geography and History approach. It may also be possible that the PSTs' lack of understanding of what CCE is may have impacted on their responses and also placements may not have occurred at a time when the site was implementing the CCE substrand of HaSS. Despite the reason, this finding indicates a lack of opportunity generally for PSTs to observe or engage with CCE in classroom settings while on placement. Across the HaSS subjects that were observed, only one comment related to civics, with none identifying citizenship:

- *Civics in year four, learning about local government.*

Across all HaSS content areas, PSTs most commonly reported seeing history and geography curriculum in schools; something that aligned with their own schooling experiences. Most did not have any exposure to CCE or Economics and Business.

## Recommendations

### 1. Increase support for preservice teachers

Effective teaching in CCE requires effective initial teacher education that builds interest, confidence and self-efficacy in this learning area. This includes increased exposure in preservice teacher education courses and during professional practice placements.

### 2. Ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers

Ongoing professional learning programs to engage and support teachers with Civics and Citizenship curriculum is needed to support the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education goal of fostering "active and informed members of the community" (Education Services Australia, 2019).

### 3. National curriculum audit

Conduct an audit of CCE education in schools, including what and how it is taught, the strengths and challenges within the system in order to be able to target support and professional learning where it is most needed and will have the most impact.

### 4. Raise awareness of CCE

Increased awareness and emphasis of CCE curriculum as a standalone subject and through integration with history, geography, economics and business. Raising awareness of balancing curriculum alongside other learning areas.

### 5. National curriculum resources

Develop quality teaching resources to support teachers and to engage and support learners in CCE.

In conclusion, development and enhancement of CCE is critical for fostering engaged, informed and active citizenship. Addressing current challenges emerging from the findings in this pilot study: including PSTs limited prior experience of engaging in CCE, attitudes towards CCE, and limited exposure in practical placements. These findings highlight the importance of raising awareness in schools of ensuring that CCE is engaging for all learners and employs pedagogical practices that align with the needs and backgrounds of all learners. This is particularly pertinent in the current social, political, environmental and economic climate where there has been a large focus on STEM based subjects. A significant initiative to strengthen the foundation of CCE and HaSS more broadly could inspire confidence and build self-efficacy in current PSTs which could transpire into their future classrooms.

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