
Submission in response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia

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The author

Keith Heggart is an experienced leader, research and educator. He is currently a Senior Lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney, where he is the Director for the Centre for Research on Education in a Digital Society (CREDS), and the Course Coordinator for the Master of Teaching (Secondary).

Keith has won international awards for his research and teaching prowess and has specific expertise in civics and citizenship and learner experience design and educational technology.

Keith is an Apple Distinguished Educator and a Fellow of the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Keith is also the Vice President of the Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (SCEAA), and the editor of their journal, *The Social Educator*. Keith was previously a high school teacher and leader and has worked in the government and non-government sectors in schools in England and Australia.

Keith has researched and published widely on the topic of civics and citizenship education. Recently, he has published two books on the topic, *Empowering Teachers and Democratizing Schooling (2023)* and *Activist Citizenship Education (2021)*. He has also been published in *Education, Citizenship and Society*, the *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, *Global Studies of Childhood*, *The Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, *The Social Educator* and *Critical Studies in Education*. He has been cited more than 800 times and has a H Index of 9.

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This submission represents the views of Keith Heggart and not the position of UTS or any of its individual units.

Response

I would like to thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia.

Below I respond to the terms of reference provided by the committee, identifying and explaining suggested recommendations for actions by the committee.

Summary and Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Conduct a comprehensive review across all Australian educational jurisdictions to audit the way that civics and citizenship education is currently being delivered, including the length of time devoted to the study of the subject, the pedagogical and curricular strategies employed to teach it, the assessment design of it, and

the involvement of community partners. Such a review will audit both good practices, but also identify gaps in the teaching of civics and citizenship and the reasons for the existence of those gaps.

Recommendation 2: The information from Recommendation 1 should be used **to craft case studies and examples of best practice of high performing civics and citizenship education practices**, in diverse settings and contexts, which could be used to form the basis for ongoing and accredited professional development for in service teachers.

Recommendation 3: **In service teachers should be provided with the opportunity to undertake comprehensive professional development** in the best practice of teaching and assessing civics and citizenship education. This might be the starting point for the development of a Graduate Certificate in Citizenship Education, for those teachers wishing to further develop their expertise. This would have the added benefit of lending status to teachers of civics and citizenship.

Recommendation 4: Greater attention needs to be paid to civics and citizenship education within initial teacher education. **This should take the form of compulsory civics and citizenship education subjects, or components of subjects, within all initial teacher education programs.** These subjects should begin with teaching students about the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration, and then go on to consider both civics and citizenship topics, as well as related topics as discussed below.

Recommendation 5: More research into the effect of social media on civic participation, especially amongst young people is necessary. To this end, **researchers need to be provided the means, resources and motivation to collaborate to examine the topics of media and social media literacy, civic literacy and civic engagement.** In addition, there is a need to **use this research to better inform teachers so that they can assist students to develop both the critical literacy skills but also the citizenship attributes to deal with topics like mis- and disinformation.**

Recommendation 6: To address the existing educational inequalities, there is a need to **fund research to explore the way that new technologies (such as VR and AR) might be used to deliver experiential learning opportunities for young people to come to better understand the importance of electoral participation and civic engagement.**

Recommendation 7: The recommendations documented above constitute a comprehensive scope of work and will not be completed quickly. To facilitate this being completed in the most timely and efficient manner, it is recommended **that a centre of civics and citizenship education scholarship be established at a leading Australian university** that will have carriage of these recommendations. Such a centre should be well resourced and staffed by the leading civics and citizenship researchers in Australia.

Comments on Terms of Reference

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;

Civics and citizenship education is lacking effectiveness in many parts of Australia, and especially amongst students from rural, regional and remote settings, and students from low socio-economic statuses. This is evident in the results of the NAP-CC assessment, which samples data on the civic literacy of Australian students. This data now goes back twenty years and has shown little improvement (for the most recent, see Fraillon et al., 2019). Roughly half of students assessed in Years 5 and 10 fail to reach the expected level of proficiency. There are a great number of reasons why this is the case, and they include: the unclear nature of civics and citizenship in the curriculum, the lack of teacher expertise and professional development, and concerns by teachers that they will be accused of teaching controversial subjects with the aim of indoctrinating students (Heggart, 2021; Mellor, 2003).

Across the diverse educational contexts in Australia, there is currently a range of curricular and pedagogical approaches in place regarding the formalised civics and citizenship education (Macintyre & Simpson, 2009). The specific approach employed often depends on the educational jurisdiction, but it also depends on the importance placed on the topic at an individual school or teacher level. Thus, it is possible that even schools in the same suburb might have very different student experiences of civics and citizenship education – leading to some students learning about ‘citizenship for survival’, while others learn about ‘citizenship for leadership’ (Print, 2001; Zyngier, 2007).

In most cases, civics and citizenship education take the form of the learning area being integrated into other HASS/ HSIE learning areas, such as History or Geography. This is a concept that has been popular in Australia for a long time (Krinks, 1999) but it should be noted that it’s the topic of some contention (DFEE/ QCA, 1999). In England, a similar discussion resulted in Citizenship being taught as a stand-alone subject. Nevertheless, this means that in Australia, civics and citizenship education is often relegated to the status of ‘poor cousin’, when compared to subjects like History and Geography.

There is also significant curricular confusion about civics and citizenship. In the Australian Curriculum, it exists as its own learning area; that is, it’s part of HASS in the primary years, and then has a separate curriculum in Years 7-10 (although in practice it is normally taught together along with History and Geography). However, in New South Wales, it’s also part of ‘Learning across the curriculum’, which means that it can be taught in other subjects too. This is a good idea, but in practice it means that it’s often overlooked or seen as some other teacher’s responsibility. **This is the reason for Recommendation 1.**

This is further compounded by the fact that very few teachers at the senior school level (and none at all at the primary school level) specialise as civics and citizenship teachers (Mellor, 2003). In fact, there is no possible pathway to become a specialised civics and citizenship teacher. In NSW, for example, this is related to the fact that there is no senior subject related to civics and citizenship education. However, the result is that teachers are not well prepared to teach civics and citizenship education, either in primary or secondary, and this means that

they often lack the basic knowledge required to teach it effectively, which further inhibits the likelihood of inclusion. Too many teachers leave ITE without the most basic understanding of civics and citizenship and hence are incapable of teaching it. ITE providers should be required to document how and where they provide detailed and explicit instruction in CCE as part of their ITE courses. **This forms the basis for Recommendations 3 and 4.**

In addition, teachers are also often concerned about the 'citizenship' part of civics and citizenship education. They are worried that they might be required to address controversial issues, such as the environment, climate change, racism, social justice, global citizenship and so on. Teachers have experienced and are aware that there might be a parental or media motivated backlash against some of these topics, despite the necessity of teaching these topics, as mandated within the Australian Curriculum (especially though the cross-curriculum priorities of Sustainability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures) (Brett et al., 2021).

This often means that teachers seek external parties to teach aspects of civics and citizenship education, or they seek to stay within 'safe' parts of the curriculum – which are necessarily less interesting to the students in the class. Often these external parties provide high quality examples of civics and citizenship education, and making these examples available to teachers would improve the quality of civics and citizenship education across Australia. **This is the basis for Recommendation 2.** The role of external agencies is further discussed below.

TOR2: 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;

TOR3: 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;

My response to TOR2 and TOR3 are presented below.

There are significant sources of information about civic topics in Australia beyond the formal education system. These often work either to address gaps within the education system, or to further develop specific aspects of civics and citizenship education. One sector of particular note is the Galleries, Libraries and Museum (GLAM) sector. These organisations see part of their role to educate members of the public (and that includes school students) about topics that are enjoined to civics and citizenship education. This can include education about the mechanics and institutions of government, such as that performed by the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD), or the various federal and state based Parliamentary Education Officers, or those that seek to teach about the values that are inherent to democracy (e.g. global citizenship education, anti-racism education etc) such as All Together Now or MEG.

The NGO and GLAM sector has an impressive range of offerings, but it cannot reach everyone, and especially not all students in Australia – despite some excellent creative responses from organisations like MoAD and MEG. This has effects upon those groups of society who might most need civics and citizenship education: rural, regional and remote students and those students from low socio-economic statuses. The NAP-CC results bear out this assertion.

Increasingly Australians, and especially young Australians, are making use of digital technologies and social media to gather information about their world and their place in it. This includes consuming news media, in the place of traditional media sources such as television and newspapers but also creation of their own material: a fundamental shift in the way media is engaged with is that young people now see 'speaking back' as a part of their role in society, and they do so via the social media tools at their disposal. Consumption and creation of this media includes information about electoral events and topics, political and related issues, and democracy (and their place within it) itself.

Various news organisations have been proactive in adopting these new forms of media and preparing short-form content in a way that is more amenable to the viewing and scrolling habits of young people. Other organisations with an educative role, such as the Australian Electoral Commission, have also engaged broadly on various social media platforms to fulfill their mission, and to answer questions from members of the public and to make information public.

Social media, and more broadly Web 3.0 platforms offer significant opportunities for immediate engagement and democratisation of the public spheres. However, they also pose risks to the fabric of democracy. The technology itself is no promise of democratic fulfilment, despite some claims to the contrary (Morozov, 2012). One of the challenges inherent in the fact that anyone can publish on these sites – and crucially, from anywhere – is that there are vast amounts of unverified and unchecked information shared on social media. In some cases, this is simply an error in reporting, and can be corrected as such. Other times, however, this misinformation is shared deliberately, in the form of ideologically driven propaganda, with the aim of provoking a particular reaction, or to fool members of the public. Social media sites like X, Tik-Tok and Instagram have proven to be particularly effective at this, as the scale, the scope and ease of sharing that means it's very easy to create and publish information like this. In addition, the algorithm used to promote posts often highlights content that is controversial, which means that sometimes questionable content is 'pushed' into the feeds of consumers – including young people.

Users of social media need to be taught both the skills and the values that allow them to become critical consumers and creators of the media. **This forms the basis of Recommendation 5.** There are many questions still outstanding regarding the literacy and attitudes of young people towards social media and this kind of content; there are also questions related to its role in radicalisation of young people, and how effective it is as a means of organising for young people. The way third party organisations, including foreign actors have used social media's affordances in an effort to sway opinion via mechanisms like digital astro-turfing is also relatively unexplored (for a start, see Heggart et al, 2023). This is an urgent need: social media potentially has the ability to cause a significant loss of faith in our democratic forms of government and institutions; therefore, it is at the heart of civics and citizenship education, and there is a need for research, and, from that research, professional learning and training to be provided to teachers to assist them in addressing these challenges within their classrooms.

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;

TOR 5: social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers; and

My response to TOR4 and TOR5 is presented below.

As stated above, students from low socio-economic statuses and from rural, regional and remote areas perform less well when compared to their peers. This is true in most facets of education, including civics and citizenship education. One reason for this is that students from remote and regional areas often lack the access to the cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Australian Democracy that can have a powerful effect upon their learning about civic and citizenship education. It can often be prohibitively expensive to bring students to Canberra, for example. Many of these institutions have made great efforts to take the museums to the students, via video conferencing calls and so on. This is a good start, but there is more work to be done and there is potential for digital technologies to do this. One such example might be the use of Augmented or Virtual Reality (A/VR) to provide students with a life-like experience of visiting these sites or engaging in the democratic process. Such an example (as has recently been trialled with MoAD, see Heggart & Smith, in press) has a low barrier to entry, allows for repetition and trialling, and has a significant effect upon users' knowledge and attitudes in relation to civic participation. **This is the basis for Recommendation 6.**

TOR 6: potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

I have no comment to make on this term, beyond re-asserting my previous assertion that organisations like the AEC and the various PEOs do excellent work and should have their capacity to do that work expanded.

3 References

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