



Queensland University of Technology

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

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

Contributing members of this submission (listed below) are academics engaged in research concerning civics and citizenship education in formal and informal settings.

We make nine recommendations based on research and experience as civics and citizenship educators, and outline our evidence and supporting arguments below, under the rubrics of the first four Terms of Reference. We make no submission with respect to the fifth and sixth Terms of Reference.

In regard to the first Term of Reference we recommend that:

1. Formalised school-based **civics education, to be effective**, needs to constitute a larger percentage of recommended school-based curriculum.
2. Formalised civics education needs curriculum leader expertise to better **guarantee equitable access to civics education** within the school system.
3. To ensure **equitable access in tertiary settings** any civics education would need to be a core component of all students' learning.
4. Formalised civics and citizenship education for preservice teachers is **an opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education in school and tertiary settings.
5. Higher Education (HE) curricula is an **opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education through tertiary settings.
6. Academic freedom to pursue topics that engage students in formalised civics and citizenship education is **an opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education in school and tertiary settings.

In regard to the second Term of Reference we recommend:

7. A national **civic media literacy approach is an opportunity** to leverage informal mechanisms through which Australians access information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting.

In regard to the third Term of Reference we recommend:

8. Governments can limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes through the **development of national and state quality assurance bodies** that can operate independent of government control and outside the election cycle.

In regard to the fourth Term of Reference we recommend:

9. The Australian government must **support high-quality civic content initiatives that are co-designed with and representative of** culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities.

Supporting evidence

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.

There is an urgent need for the expansion of Civics and Citizenship education in Australian schools. Civics and citizenship education is only explicitly recommended for teaching in Australian schools, according to the National Curriculum, from Year 3 to Year 10. This means that formalised civics education is not a recommendation for school-based education during the key years preceding the voting age of 18 and when future voters aged 16 and 17 can pre-enrol (Year 11 and 12).

Furthermore, within the National Curriculum formal civics education is a minor recommendation within a broader Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) suite. Not only is civics and citizenship recommended as only 25% of time recommended within the HaSS suite, but civics education is only part (half to two thirds) of the Civics and Citizenship content descriptor for each year level. This amounts to approximately 840 minutes of civics education per year or 12 lessons (3-6 weeks depending on how HaSS is timetabled). In a recent HaSS textbook used broadly in Australian Schools (Bedford et al., 2024), Civics and Citizenship education was allocated less than 5% of the pages. Even tangential expert teaching in Civics and Citizenship by a History, Geography or Business teacher is contingent on civics education being managed by HaSS, which it may not be. Research into previous initiatives to support non-expert teachers, such as *Discovering Democracy*, shows that ad hoc approaches to civic curriculum comprehensively fail to achieve their goals (Heggart et al., 2019).

Recommendation 1: Formalised school-based civics education, to be effective, needs to constitute a larger percentage of recommended school-based curriculum.

There are no mechanisms to check whether schools are delivering Civics Education. The National Curriculum is only a recommendation to the Australian States about what should be included as content in school curriculum. What the States recommend is then interpreted by regions and individual schools and Heads of Curriculum. The Heads of the Humanities and

Social Sciences curriculum area are usually trained History or Geography teachers, not Civics and Citizenship teachers. Indeed, civics and citizenship content knowledge does not feature as a part of Humanities and Social Science discipline training for Australian teachers unless the preservice teacher specifically selects it as an elective discipline unit.

*Recommendation 2: Formalised civics education needs curriculum leader expertise to better **guarantee equitable access to civics education** within the school system.*

Some disciplines (such as law, justice, communications, sociology) will by default include content related to civic engagement, democracy, free speech and global issues such as the impacts of interference, AI and mis/disinformation. Approaches for this vary across Australian HE institutions, closely linked to institutional missions and priorities, including their degree of connectivity to local communities and any other 'outward-facing' agendas. These may be seen through institutional learning and teaching strategies, as well as their portfolios of courses and subjects on offer. It is also important to acknowledge that each student will have their own 'personal projects', so the degree to which they choose to engage is also key.

QUT is taking a proactive approach to civic education for all their students. QUT has in-built checks against a set of real-world learning design features across all course re/accreditations. Additionally, from 2024, the introduction of a new 'QUT You' curriculum, to be embedded across all undergraduate courses, sees more explicit introduction of civic-related topics through units of study designed specifically to prepare students for 'a rapidly changing future'. Units therefore focus on developing students' self-awareness, creative and critical thinking skills and digital fluency through real-world issues and themes including 'Living and Working Collaboratively, Ethically and Inclusively', 'Fighting Fake News', 'Artificial Intelligence in the Real World', 'Real Action for Real Change', 'Seeing Me, Seeing You: Skills for a Diverse World' and 'Data Science for in Society'. Collectively, the QUT You units build knowledge and skills for active citizenship through active participation, and dialogue, and critical reflection, and with a number of the units underpinned by social justice pedagogies and a focus on fostering a sense of belonging, connection and resilience.

*Recommendation 3: To ensure **equitable access in tertiary settings** any civics education would need to be a core component of all students' learning.*

Many discipline areas within formal school settings claim to include a form of citizenship education within their philosophy. This is formalised within the National Curriculum through the general capabilities that all disciplines are strongly encouraged to include. These include ethical understanding, social awareness, social management, critical and creative thinking, and intercultural understanding.

The crowding out of civics education within preservice teacher and school-based education means that the 'what' of democratic processes is usually integrated with the 'how' and 'why'. In other words, *what* the practicality of the Australian democratic process involves is integrated with *how* to make good decisions and *why* different groups within Australia think about what it

means to be Australian differently. In other words, formalised civics education cannot be taught without formalised citizenship education, but citizenship education can be (and often is) taught without civics education.

Citizenship is integrated across all preservice teacher education but explicit teaching of both civics and citizenship is not. All preservice teachers are required to learn how to include citizenship qualities within their subject areas (Henderson, 2015) but these citizenship qualities are not explicitly linked to civic processes.

There is an opportunity to include basic civics education within this requirement by explicitly explaining why ethical understanding, social awareness, social management, critical and creative thinking, and intercultural understanding are important for a thriving democracy, but this would need the guidance from civics and citizenship curriculum experts. For example, Barnes is an expert in civics and citizenship and integrates it into her teaching of the History discipline to preservice teachers. She includes training in political dialogue, the origin of the Westminster System and how to interrogate ideals and beliefs which underscore Australian civic values. She has also used these skills to inform teachers and parents about how to talk with their children about online misogyny (Barnes, 2023) and how teachers can talk about ANZAC values (Barnes & Clark, 2021). However, there is no explicit requirement for Barnes to do this work. Most civics and citizenship initiatives are created at their own volition by individual educators who believe such knowledge is important and work to integrate it into their daily practices. There is an opportunity to harness this type of expertise to assist other educators to better integrate civics education into their already explicitly recommended citizenship education.

*Recommendation 4: Formalised civics and citizenship education for preservice teachers is **an opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education in school and tertiary settings.*

Increasing global complexity and the need to better understand the contexts and the impact of individual professions requires education for sustainability, employability, community engagement and real-world learning (RWL). Education for Sustainability encompasses engagement with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) in particular encompass targets related to human rights, global citizenship, inclusive and participatory decision-making and free speech. Real-world learning is often directly linked to skills and knowledge for employability and students' careers, where work-integrated learning and placements are seen as pinnacle activities also offering some 'civic' generic skills. In some instances, RWL offers a more radical stance, encompassing areas like civic and community engagement, sustainability and citizenship education and, as at QUT, also diversity and inclusion and Indigenous perspectives (Meth, 2023). The 2023 Australian Universities Accord Final Report, in reaffirming the dual vision for tertiary education (p.16) as underpinning a 'strong, equitable and resilient democracy' and driving 'national economic and social development and environmental sustainability' to produce graduates who will meet both 'workforce and societal need', aids in strengthening the case for some degree of civic education in HE (O'Kane et al., 2024).

It is important to acknowledge that a multi-pronged approach is needed in HE – this cannot be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ agenda, owing to the multiple stakeholders involved. It is likely that ‘civic’-related skills and knowledge are not always badged as such. A transformational curricular model will strive to balance the needs of the market (for employability and global growth) and society (Meth, 2022). It is overt acknowledgement of the latter that will ensure a basis for inclusion of appropriate content and teaching and learning approaches to equip students for civic engagement, though this should not be to the detriment of students acquiring disciplinary expertise. A more holistic understanding of where such learning is already effectively taking place, and what strategic agendas are driving it across universities, will aid in establishing where effective practice already lies. This might then be shared more widely across institutions, though there would need to be a clear imperative for pushing further development.

*Recommendation 5: Higher Education (HE) curricula is an **opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education through tertiary settings.*

Australian political dialogue is increasingly polarised (Sengul, 2020). Alongside this polarisation have been efforts to limit the academic freedom of HaSS educators at both tertiary (Watson & Barnes, 2022) and school levels (Heggart et al., 2023) to address the controversial issues which are central to that polarisation. The politicisation of civics and citizenship education in the media is a barrier to improvement in effectiveness and access to civics education in school and tertiary settings.

There is a delicate balance to be struck in terms of freedom of speech and space for multiple ideologies. HaSS educators are trained to work at this intersection. Hodson (2014) offers a logical framework of four key elements for such education:

- learning about the issues;
- learning to care about the issues and impacts;
- engaging and managing powerful emotions often generated; and
- taking and evaluating action.

A key part of effective civic education is the freedom to engage with controversial and difficult ideas and make informed decisions about them. Students are more likely to engage with topics that are applicable to their everyday lives (Notley et al., 2017) and efforts to limit the topics available to students of citizenship risks disengagement from politics and the practicalities of civic duty.

*Recommendation 6: Academic freedom to pursue topics that engage students in formalised civics and citizenship education is **an opportunity for improvement** in effectiveness and access to civics education in school and tertiary settings.*

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.

Most Australians receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events and voting via the news. With an increasingly fragmented news environment, civic engagement is difficult to provide outside of formal educational settings. Informal education campaigns are generally grass roots which increase the likelihood of misinformation. While the Parliamentary Education Office, Australian Electoral Commission and Museum of Australian Democracy have good resources that people can access to research issues in Australian civic life, they are niche.

Research by QUT academics has shown that Australian adults who consume online news are 20% more likely to participate in civic activities. In addition, more than half of Australian children aged 12-16 who have high interest in news reported getting involved online in social issues (56%). Furthermore, children who received news literacy education at school reported higher digital civic engagement levels compared to those who did not receive this education.

QUT notes its support for the submission about media literacy citizenship prepared by Associate Professor Tanya Notley (Western Sydney University), Professor Sora Park (University of Canberra) and Professor Michael Dezuanni (QUT).

*Recommendation 7: A national **civic media literacy approach is an opportunity to leverage informal mechanisms through which Australians access information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting.***

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.

Social media mis- and disinformation campaigns have been shown to affect the development of Australian education policy in the lead up to federal elections. Research at QUT has shown that social media campaigns have affected the development of English, History and racial literacy policies in the Australian Curriculum and teacher employment conditions (Barnes, 2021; Barnes et al., 2023; Barnes & Clark, 2021; Barnes & Davies, 2018; Heggart et al., 2023). The ability to track, fact-check, intercept and correct mis- and disinformation needs a consistency that is currently not available in civic processes. This is not a task that can be conducted ad-hoc by the Australian Electoral Commission, schools, tertiary institutions or the national media. The AEC has a seasonal employment cycle, there is no guarantee citizens gain equitable civic education in education institutions and the national media does not have the reach of social media. Scattergun approaches to the problem will not ensure equitable access to legitimate information. There must be a national body that can oversee all aspects of informal civic education that works closely with civic media literacy experts.

It must be a quality assurance organisation, separate from government, to provide a checks and balances system independent from election cycles. It must be guaranteed its funding and employment, to maintain Australia's globally exemplary system of elections that are free and fair.

*Recommendation 8: Governments can limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes through the **development of national and state quality assurance bodies** that can operate independent of government control and outside the election cycle.*

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;

Australian governments have an essential role to play in supporting national efforts to foster citizens' critical engagement with news and high-quality content, via the promotion and implementation of media literacy initiatives. In all other international jurisdictions where media literacy has been successfully implemented on a wide scale, government policy has promoted and enabled media literacy initiatives through policy and funding.

Australia already has a vast array of initiatives focused on civic participation and is a model for other countries to follow. However, political voices in Australia tend to be homogenous, affluent, urban-centric and white – the people for whom barriers to electoral events are low or minor. Targeted media literacy support to vulnerable groups is an important role of government, to ensure people can fully participate in society and to reduce risks associated with media illiteracy such as vulnerability to scams and deception. But these targeted campaigns will risk low engagement if not co-designed with the people with the most barriers to participation.

*Recommendation 9: The Australian government must **support high-quality civic content initiatives that are co-designed with and representative of culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities.***

We trust these expert observations are of assistance to the Committee. We would be pleased to expand on these points in greater detail should that be helpful, including at a public hearing.

We wish you well in your deliberations on these important matters.

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