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

Author background and organisation

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Dr Simon Knight: I am an Associate Professor in the University of Technology, Transdisciplinary School (TD School) and a member (founding Director) of the Centre for Research on Education in a Digital Society (UTS:CREDS). My background draws on degrees combining philosophy, psychology, education, and human-computer interaction. I qualified as a secondary social sciences teacher (including citizenship) in the UK, although this was a short period prior to pursuing an academic career, and thus in most school-related areas I defer to my expert colleagues still in schools or/and with more recent Australian school experience. Prior to moving to Australia in 2015, I was a trustee of Wikimedia UK, an educational charity associated with the Wikimedia movement (from which Wikipedia stems), whose vision “is of a more informed, democratic and equitable society through open knowledge”, a vision to which I continue to subscribe.

I am also an Australian Research Council (ARC) DECRA Fellow (DE230100065) and Discovery Project (DP240100602) Co-Investigator. The former focuses on teaching practices for navigating disagreement and uncertainty, and the latter on participatory approaches to AI governance in education. In both these *participatory* methods are central, that seek to advance scholarly research alongside practice, while respecting the expertise held across both. In both, too, a key concern is in understanding how people navigate complex issues in their everyday lives, including those that might be described as dilemmas, predicaments, disagreements, or controversies. As the summary for my DECRA notes:

“We are facing an epistemological crisis, grounded in changing technologies, fake news, and a distrust of experts. Developing capability to navigate uncertainty, disagreement, and evidence is one of the most pressing social issues of our time in order to develop a sustainable society, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”

This submission represents the views of the author, not the position of UTS or any of its individual units.

Overview of response

The author thanks the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia, particularly with relation to key stakeholders with direct experience, and concerns regarding mis- and dis-information and its impacts on democratic process.

1 Overview of Recommendations

The **Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters** will inquire into and report on civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia including both formal and informal education opportunities, and opportunities and risks with respect to promotion of electoral and democratic processes.

The nature of the challenge means that my responses will respond holistically to the Terms of Reference, rather than to each individually. The first bullet point provides an overarching framing, but I would highlight that the subsequent points should inform any reading (or adoption) of recommendations, particularly with respect to ensuring full electoral and broader civic participation and engagement.

Understand the state of practice

Recommendation 1: Provide support for the review and dissemination of approaches being adopted in schools, recognising the role that Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAM), and other third sector organisations play in the provision of formalised civics and citizenship education throughout Australia.

Recommendation 2: Resource an appropriate body or consortium to co-design and disseminate materials and example cases that can be adapted by individual organisations in their delivery of high quality civics and citizenship education, across diverse contexts, recognising that (1) civics and citizenship education must reflect local concerns, highlighting the importance of expert teacher professional judgement in adapting materials; (2) there are a range of places in which civics and citizenship education is delivered, including embedded cross-curricular, and thus materials suitable for this disciplinary context are important; (3) community needs will vary and must be reflected, for example, misinformation is not evenly distributed in either its effects on sub-populations nor its content regarding them (see next point).

Review policy landscape for democratic engagement

Recommendation 3: Review approaches to public engagement in and with public policy, across levels of democratic participation, and stakeholder groups.

Develop policy context that supports educators

Recommendation 4: Support professional learning for both pre-service and in-service teachers, both as a means to provide learning support to teachers, and to lend status to civics and citizenship and its teachers.

Recommendation 5: Review the policy context that supports educators in navigating and applying strategies for teaching in civics and citizenship education

2 Detailed Response

Below I provide an overview of these recommendations and their context, grouped under three broad themes addressing the Terms of Reference as indicated in brackets:

1. Understand the state of practice (TOR 1 & 2)
2. Review policy landscape for democratic engagement (TOR 3-6)
3. Develop policy context that supports educators (crosscutting)

2.1 Understand the state of practice (TOR 1 & 2)

Context: Australia, as other democracies internationally, has seen significant debate regarding the role and scope of civics and citizenship education over the past decades (Tudball, 2023). There is no consensus regarding the balance of focus on issues of civics (democratic structures and engagement with them) and broader citizenship (active civic participation and engagement), although clearly they are inseparable. Moreover, there is no consensus regarding the status of the subject(s) as 'standalone' or cross-curricular, and in Australia the latter dominates, with themes integrated into other subjects including History and Geography. I will not rehash the issues here, except to note that there is a significant literature on this topic and it is an important consideration in any future proposals.

Other considerations include:

1. The NAP-CC data (Fraillon et al., 2020 see Tables ES 1 and ES 3), which assesses young people's civic literacy via sampling in years 6 and 10 across states and territories, indicates that ~53% of year 6 and ~38% of year 10 students achieve a 'proficient' standard for their age group, figures that have been largely static since 2004, with students at metropolitan schools scoring higher in both age groups.
2. Citizenship education often involves external providers, at a minimum this is likely to always include resources produced by the Parliament of Australia and the Education Office itself, and of course the Museum of Australia Democracy. It is likely to also include local and regional government material, GLAM organisations, and third sector organisations that may provide external resources or speakers to schools, as well as offering resources to local communities. It is important to consider the role of these organisations, and support for them in creating high quality learning experiences in assessing and evaluating the state of provision.
3. Civics and citizenship education may be taught 'standalone', but is also embedded across the curriculum; this integration presents opportunities for highlighting the important role that learning across a range of subjects plays in navigating complex societal problems and policy responses. However, integrated civics and citizenship education also presents risks insofar as it may lead to fragmentation of provision, and poor support for teacher professional learning given it is likely to be outside their core discipline area. For example, in recent work (drawing on helpful discussion with my colleague, Keith Heggart (e.g., 2020)) we discussed intersections of data literacy and issues of justice (and democratic participation), a key feature of which was the nuanced ways these areas may give rise to relatively 'thin' or 'thick' notions of democratic action or justice (Knight et al., 2022). *Examples or case studies* of civics and citizenship materials and strategies will be useful here, applied to a range of disciplines, and within a range of contexts, with clear space for expert educators to use professional judgement to adapt/adopt materials for their context.

Recommendation 1: Provide support for the review and dissemination of approaches being adopted in schools, recognising the role that Galleries, Libraries and Museums (GLAM), and other third sector organisations play in the provision of formalised civics and citizenship education throughout Australia.

Recommendation 2: Resource an appropriate body or consortium to co-design and disseminate materials and example cases that can be adapted by individual organisations in their delivery of high quality civics and citizenship education, across diverse contexts, recognising that (1) civics and citizenship education must reflect local concerns, highlighting the importance of expert teacher professional judgement in adapting materials; (2) there are a range of places in which civics and citizenship education is delivered, including embedded cross-curricular, and thus materials suitable for this disciplinary context are important; (3) community needs will vary and must be reflected, for example, misinformation is not evenly distributed in either its effects on sub-populations nor its content regarding them (see next point).

2.2 Review policy landscape for democratic engagement (TOR 3-6)

Civics and citizenship education – whether in formal learning environments like schools, or GLAM contexts – plays an important role. However, such education is embedded in wider structures that impact perceptions of, and possibilities for, engagement with democratic process. In work with colleagues at the University of Sydney, we have explored approaches to engaging with diverse stakeholders in the context of issues where stakeholders may not have detailed knowledge of the technical detail of issues at stake or of policy processes and possibilities (Gulson et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b). In our case, this work is in the context of Artificial Intelligence in Education and its governance. One of our concerns is to seek to

create materials and processes that support wider participation in, and understanding of, the intersection of the technical-content and governance processes, both because this produces better policy, and because this wider participation is important in its own right. A parallel line of work from researchers in civics and citizenship education connects that CCE curriculum context to models for democratic action within schools, by students.

In broader context, the AEC plays an important role, and for example its Disinformation Register <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-register-ref.htm> is an important and beneficial strategy to foster democratic participation, that should be supported. Of concern is that the effects of misinformation may not be evenly distributed both in terms of its impact on communities (i.e., influences on), and others (i.e., influences about), and indeed ways that information sources such as social media are used may vary by community (see for example, discussion in, Harris et al., 2022). Thus, participation by and representation of diverse groups of people is important in considering new policy directions. The committee will be familiar with the scope of Inquiries in this regard (we discuss some of these challenges in the context of the recent Inquiry on generative AI in education in, Knight et al., 2023). Of course Inquiries are just one means of parliamentary engagement with the public (and public engagement with democratic institutions), however it is notable that while the Victoria Parliament published a research report on “culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)” engagement with parliaments (Fung & Macreadie, 2018), it is not clear if this has influenced subsequent national or state/territory policies, with just one clear reference to the report in a recent NSW Inquiry (NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services, 2022).

Recommendation 3: Review approaches to public engagement in and with public policy, across levels of democratic participation, and stakeholder groups.

2.3 Develop policy context that supports educators (crosscutting)

Teachers face significant challenges in navigating the teaching of civics and citizenship education across contexts:

- it is not an area of specialism for most teachers;
- it is an area that may involve teaching of ‘controversial issues’ or/and issues that combine both technical or scientific knowledge and social concerns (socio-scientific issues) requiring a command of a broad knowledge base;
- aligning pedagogic strategies with the context of such teaching regarding disagreement and uncertainty is complex, and teachers may lack confidence and support.

As Arvanitakis notes (quoting one of his teacher education colleagues): “We teach students how to prepare lessons plans and content...we do not teach them to manage a learning journey. Our students are terrified of expressing an opinion because at high school, this was discouraged. We re-produce these same fears by leaving no space in our own classroom to have complex or difficult conversations or to communicate uncertainty. Our student teachers memorise content and teach their students to memorise content.” (Arvanitakis, 2023, p. 51)

Teachers play an important role in civics and citizenship education, and their professional judgement should be fostered and supported in making decisions regarding appropriate issues to tackle in the classroom and means to do so.

Recommendation 4: Support professional learning for both pre-service and in-service teachers, both as a means to provide learning support to teachers, and to lend status to civics and citizenship and its teachers.

In addition, a range of other policies influence or direct the ways that teachers and learners can and do engage with issues of relevance to civics and citizenship education, including

issues that are ‘controversial’ in nature, or/and where there is a plurality of views. It is worth highlighting here that some of these policies are outside scope for this committee but would include areas such as media plurality and regulation of misinformation, on which topics I would particularly point to the work of colleagues in the Centre for Media Transition <https://www.uts.edu.au/research/centre-media-transition/centre-contributions-policy>.

One policy area that is of direct relevance regards policies for selection of materials (including outside speakers) in schools, and their discussion of the teaching of controversial issues. Participation in democracy requires engagement with issues on which people disagree, and the evidence, values and uncertainties that underpin those disagreements. However, teaching in this space can tend to be overly factual, or provide a “both sides” neutrality (Kilinc et al., 2017), with some evidence of this in coverage of sustainability issues in Australian classrooms (Nicholls, 2017). Recent analysis (Cairns, 2023; Mcpherson et al., 2023) of policies in this space (NT, NSW, Vic, WA, SA) suggests that teachers may not feel supported in navigating the space because it is not clear how to operationalise the policies, and they may feel vulnerable to criticism.

Recommendation 5: Review the policy context that supports educators in navigating and applying strategies for teaching in civics and citizenship education

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TORs

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;

TOR 2: 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;

TOR 3: 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;

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

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