

Submission to the inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia (the inquiry).

Our submission focuses on the first point of the inquiry Terms of Reference which relates to opportunities to improve the effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia. We make three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Improve the quality, accessibility and national coordination of data about the Australian school system including information on subject offerings and enrolments, staff education and development, and student performance.

Recommendation 2: Consider holistic factors that influence the availability, quality and consistency of elective subjects in senior secondary including policy and funding frameworks, curriculum design decisions and incentives at the state and school levels.

Recommendation 3: Endorse recommendation 1C (iv) of the *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* to boost student achievement by ensuring high-quality social science teaching and learning resources are available in all schools across Australia.

Academy Fellows include Australia's leading experts in electoral law, voting behaviour and youth studies. In addition to this submission, we would welcome the opportunity to connect the Committee with Fellows on broader aspects of the inquiry Terms of Reference, in particular methods to improve the quality of information about electoral systems and limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.

To arrange further engagement or discuss any matters raised in this submission please contact Andrea Verdich, Policy Director on 0438 218 352, or andrea.verdich@socialsciences.org.au.

Social science thinking and knowledge in Australian schools

The [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#) recognised that for the Australia education system to achieve equity and excellence every student must develop broad and deep knowledge across curriculum areas. A high-quality education in the social sciences is critical to democratic participation and understanding the social systems that shape our lives.

For some students, the social science education received in school will be their only formal encounter with these subjects. It is therefore vital that they are provided with the best possible learning experience to gain knowledge, skills and interest in these important domains.

In the Australian Curriculum the social sciences are taught alongside the humanities under the title Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), with Civics and Citizenship from Year 3. In senior secondary, the Australian Curriculum is just a few social science subjects—Ancient History, Modern History, and Geography—but States have authority to set their own curriculum, so the offerings of core and elective subjects in social science vary significantly across states and individual schools.

"In [State], many schools are offering HASS subjects from Year 9 as electives, meaning many students do not do any history, civics, or geography past Year 8." – State of the Social Sciences 2021

The Academy's [State of the Social Sciences 2021](#) report examined the health of social science education pipeline from primary school through to tertiary education. Section 2 (pp. 17- 20) (attached) examined the primary and secondary school system and the findings directly related to understanding the effectiveness of formalised civics education:

- The delivery of social science education varies significantly across schools and there is no guarantee that all Australians will leave school with the high-quality foundation in these important knowledge domains.
- Many social science subjects are offered as electives only from year 9 and schools take various approaches across jurisdictions to timetabling the subject. Increasingly topics like civics are being offered in a cross-curriculum way, integrated in Humanities subjects like English.
- School staffing models often result in teachers being asked to teach outside their expertise, as well as to change subjects' year-to-year.
- There are insufficient incentives for teachers and schools to invest in and develop subject-area expertise in social science.
- Several factors influence the availability and quality of elective subjects in senior secondary, including policy and funding frameworks, curriculum design decisions and high-quality teaching and resources.
- Student performance in Civics and Citizenship is consistently low. Australia's testing system, the National Assessment Program (NAP), offers a limited window into the quality Civics and Citizenship education. The latest round, in 2019, saw only 53 per cent of year 6 students, and 38 per cent of year 10 students achieving proficiency, indicating potential knowledge gaps about core democratic and social systems, principles and institutions.

The report also highlighted there is a lack of high-quality, publicly available data about the Australian school system, such as subject offerings, student enrolments, teaching quality and student performance. Securing equitable access to education is not possible without data and evidence. Data linkage across national and state and territory datasets should be prioritised to inform effective policy making, program design and research at a national scale.

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The need for evidence-based, curriculum aligned education resources

There is an opportunity to improve civics education in Australia, particularly in circumstances where teachers are being asked to teach outside their areas of expertise.

... the failure to provide proper civics education in schools means most people don't feel they have an adequate grounding to embark on making that assessment. Decades of neglect of civics has left us with a population that is insufficiently equipped to fulfil its constitutional role of updating the Constitution – Professor Emerita Anne Twomey AO FASSA¹

A quality learning experience must go beyond superficial knowledge and should provide students with opportunities to form their own opinions based on reputable materials that present fundamental facts related to the civics learning topic.

The *State of the Social Sciences 2021* found that there is a notable lack of high-quality, evidence-based teaching and learning resources to support teachers and student outcomes in social science subject areas.

This finding was echoed in the final report of the *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, which recommended 'investing in and promoting evidence-based and quality assured curriculum resources...' (recommendation 1C iv).

Academy engagement with HASS teachers and curriculum experts has identified Civics and Citizenship as the greatest area of need for teaching resources. Curriculum topics that currently lack quality resources include government systems and structures, youth democratic participation and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

To address this need, the Academy is piloting a social sciences school education program [Seriously Social](#). The program is developing a suite of curriculum resources for secondary schools focussed initially on civil discourse, geography, debating and business and economics. The resources are being written by teachers, reviewed by social science research experts, and tested with a broad range of stakeholders in government, schools and other community and public institutions.

Released this year, the first pilot module on Civics and Citizenship delivered learning materials on [Respectful Civil Discourse: Post-Referendum](#). Fostering the skills and understanding of how to communicate with one another around the challenges of public issues in order to enhance mutual understanding is an increasingly vital skill in democratic societies.

With additional resources, there is a significant opportunity to expand this program across the curriculum, including further Civics and Citizenship modules, with a commensurate level of additional investment.

¹ See [Changing the Australian Constitution is not easy. But we need to stop thinking it's impossible](#). The Conversation (2022)

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