

Universities Australia response to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement, and Participation in Australia

24 May 2024

Introduction

As the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities, Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the Inquiry in Civics education, Engagement and Participation in Australia. UA is committed to enhancing civic education and democratic engagement by leveraging academic freedom and rigorous enquiry, fostering a culture of informed and active citizenship throughout our nation.

Universities play a pivotal role in fostering civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia. Universities are not just places for career learning, skills and competencies development; universities contribute to the advancement of knowledge via the application of intellectual curiosity and rigour in research, education and community-focused activities.

Quality education, with the right policy settings, is strongly correlated with individual and national well-being and prosperity through higher employment, wealth, health, well-being and engagement and participation in civic affairs.¹ For Australia's universities, this correlation is important when responding to issues associated with democratic engagement.² These settings include ensuring Australians, and more specifically, voters, have access to reliable and expert-informed information from trusted sources. They should also ensure that institutions of learning are appropriately equipped to deliver learning and teaching to students and that research can be undertaken that has nationwide impacts on the lives of Australians. A report by the University Partnerships Program Foundation's Civic University Commission, published in the United Kingdom in 2019, highlighted the role of universities as institutions for civic good: "Universities have an irreplaceable and unique role in helping their host communities thrive – and their own success is bound up with the success of the places that gave birth to them".³

In the current era, perceptions about misinformation and limited access to credible information could be hindering civic engagement. Addressing this issue is essential requires utilising institutions that provide individuals with the necessary skills to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources of information. This is crucial for the democratic welfare of Australia, both in the present and the future.

This submission outlines some of the activities universities undertake to address civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. It also identifies some of the challenges to civics education in Australia and what universities are doing to help overcome these issues.

Recommendations

- Support the community-focused, trusted status of Australia's universities to appropriately engage with communities, particularly schools, in identifying how civics education and engagement can be enhanced.

¹ [Van't Land, H et al. \(eds\). \(2021\). *The Promise of Higher Education | Essays in Honour of 70 Years of IAU*](#)

² [Civic engagement, tolerance and trust - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

³ [Civic University Network - UPP Foundation \(\[upp-foundation.org\]\(http://upp-foundation.org\)\)](#)

- Ensuring the right policy settings are in place to facilitate innovative and responsive learning opportunities for students at all levels, from early childhood education through to tertiary education, is a necessary first step in supporting greater civic education and engagement in Australia. These policy settings include flexibility to be community responsive, are place- and mission-based and reflect the necessity of regional and community-origin approaches to effective policy making.

Part 1: How Universities Support Australia's Civic Engagement

Education as a Foundation

Universities serve as the cornerstone of higher education in Australia, offering diverse academic programs that equip students with critical thinking skills, knowledge of democratic principles, and an understanding of civic duties. Through courses in, for example, political science, law, sociology, public policy, history and other fields of education, universities instil a deep appreciation for the importance of civic engagement in shaping a democratic society.

Moreover, universities are designed to help students explore the root of an issue, and be fully informed about the varied perspectives, influences and motives behind these ideas and decisions. This critical engagement is essential for a healthy democracy, helping prevent stagnation of ideas and attitudes, and challenging assumptions and misconceptions.

UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE: 'Australian Electoral Democracy!' course

This politics and international relations course delves into contested topics, historical suffrage, and Australia's pioneering electoral innovations, alongside theoretical and legal justifications for its electoral arrangements. It scrutinises shortcomings and explores themes like compulsory voting, electoral disinformation regulation, indigenous representation, and lowering the voting age. By fostering critical engagement with civics, the course not only educates on citizenship duties but also prepares students for careers in politics, electoral management, and law, emphasising the crucial role of informed and active citizenship in democratic functioning.

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY: Fostering discourse and engagement

Winners of the Excellence in Teaching Award 2023, the Public Law Teaching Team at WSU have been working to build and deliver a unique learning experience for students across Fundamentals of Australian Law, Legal Analysis and Critique and Government and Public Law. A capstone elective subject – 'Law and Public Policy: Referendum 2023 - Engaging in Constitutional Change' – requires a community engagement project designed to inform and engage their local communities on the issues around the referendum. Student projects ranged from discussions facilitated at local Mosques, high schools, and churches, as well as student-led information stalls on campus, social media campaigns and videos, public art, and a submission to the Joint Select Committee on the Voice.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND – Rotary Peace Fellows

The University of Queensland is one of only seven centres globally that are part of the Rotary Peace Fellows initiative³. Each year the Rotary Peace Fellows commence an 18-month program of study at UQ. Fellows are selected from countries and cultures around the globe based on their potential as leaders in government, business, education, media and other professional areas. The Rotary Peace Fellows study for a Master of Peace and Conflict Resolution which includes a compulsory period of Applied Fieldwork Experience working with a range of organisations to advance social and political outcomes.

Research and Scholarship:

Australian universities contribute significantly to research on civic issues, including political participation, governance structures, social justice, and human rights. This research informs public discourse and policymaking, facilitating informed and meaningful engagement with pressing societal challenges.

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY: Integrity and Transparency

In response to the Attorney General's Department inquiry into the Government's public sector whistleblowing reforms, university experts provided a range of recommendations regarding the crucial changes needed to reinforce the Public Interest Disclosure (PID) ACT. These [recommendations](#), based on the whistleblowing research, highlighted the reforming of legal remedies to support substantive justice for whistleblowers; comprehensive, seamless embedding of whistleblower protection obligations; and effective, well-resourced institutional arrangements.

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY - Australian Election Study

The Australian Election Study (<https://australianelectionstudy.org/>), run out of the Australian National University in partnership with Griffith University and the University of Sydney, has surveyed voters for 35 years (since 1987) on voter attitudes towards politics in Australia. It provides insights into what explains voters' choices in elections, and into public opinion on a range of policy issues. The data are publicly available and widely used.

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY - Australian National Internship Program (ANIP)

ANIP is a one-semester research-based internship for academic credit. It is usually a 10-week placement within which domestic or international undergraduate or postgraduate students complete a project within an Australian public institution. Some of these internships may include the Commonwealth, State or Territory parliaments, national authorities and Government Agencies, Diplomatic Missions, NGOs and Think Tanks. Students undertaking an ANIP program are exposed to real-world issues affecting Australian policy and undertake a range of workshops on policy research and professional skills development that allow them to be active participants in pertinent civics-related policy issues.

Community Engagement Initiatives:

Many Australian universities actively engage with local communities through outreach programs, public lectures, and community partnerships. These initiatives promote dialogue, collaboration and active citizenship; encouraging individuals to participate in civic life beyond the confines of academia and root the discussion in the lives of Australians.

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY: Whitlam Institute

Since 2004, the Whitlam Institute at WSU has held the national [What Matters? Writing Competition](#) – receiving 5,000 submissions from across each State and Territory in 2023 alone. Inspired by the Hon Gough Whitlam AC QC's commitment to involving young people in shaping Australia's future, the *What Matters? Writing Competition* is open to school students in years 5 to 12 from across Australia. Responding to the simple question 'what matters?', entrants are free to express their views on any matter they care about. As part of this engagement, the Whitlam Institute has developed a host of [Learning Resources](#) for students – especially classroom resources supporting the exploration of leadership and citizenship.

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY: Pathways in Place, Logan campus

Griffith University is partnering with community-led organisations in Logan, particularly across Indigenous, Māori, and Pasifika communities. This partnership focuses on community empowerment and they partner with grassroots organisations in Logan based on the principles of First Nations First; trust-based philanthropy; direct support to community-led organisations; data sovereignty; sustainability; and capacity building. Current community partners include two Indigenous organisations: Gunya Meta and the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH); a Pasifika holistic community services hub, Village Connect; and a Māori-led organisation, Mozzy Foundation
<https://www.pathwaysinplace.com.au/griffith-university/community-partners>.

Global Citizenship:

As hubs of international exchange and multiculturalism, Australian universities cultivate global citizens who are informed, empathetic, and engaged with issues transcending national boundaries. Through international student exchange programs, cross-cultural dialogue, and global research collaborations, universities encourage a transnational outlook that values diversity, inclusivity, and solidarity. This global perspective enriches civic education by exposing students to a wide range of perspectives and encouraging them to become active participants in global debates and initiatives.

UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE: Study Tour – Inside Singapore: History, Identity, Politics

Inside Singapore cultivates global citizens and supports increased student mobility between Australia and Singapore, and across the Indo-Pacific region in general, by providing students with the opportunity to gain deep in-country insights into the history, politics and identity of Singapore, including its place in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region, and its relation with Australia.

This two-week study tour includes a wide range of activities structured around two major parts: the first focuses on the history of Singapore and its place in Asia and the Indo-Pacific; the second focuses on the internal politics and citizenship dynamics of Singapore.

The study tour has been supported by several rounds of New Colombo Plan funding, enabling over one hundred students to develop a deep regional and global perspective on a wide range of issues, including democracy, citizenship, the rule of law, historical memory, political economy, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

Some of the study tour activities conducted over the years include visits to the National Museum of Singapore; guided tours of the Changi Prison Museum; visits to the Army Museum of Singapore; visits to the National Gallery of Singapore; guided tours of Parliament House; visits to the Australian High Commission; guided tours of the Supreme Court; guided tours of Channel NewsAsia; guided tours of Little India by local NGOs; guided tours and activities run by environmental NGOs; and guest talks from academics, journalists, local activists, business leaders, and Singaporean MPs.

Part 2: Challenges for Civics Education, Engagement and Participation

The Committee noted that democracies across the globe are facing issues in citizen civic engagement due, in part, to a rise in mis- and disinformation and the need to critically inform and engage with Australians to support a strong democratic and electoral demographic.

Addressing these issues requires critically examining the influence of social media and generative AI on freedom of speech, freedom of thought and expression alongside supporting the expression of legitimate and trustworthy information sources.

Universities are central to addressing these issues due to their role as education providers of Australia's future citizens and global alumni, but also as a consequence of their prerogative in critically examining and providing advice on a range of issues affecting constructing democratic engagement.

However, they are only one part of a broader ecosystem of socio-cultural influencers that need to support each other and work together to respond to issues with civics engagement in Australia.

Legitimacy of Information

An informed population is the basis for a strong democracy and a politically energised and responsive population. The basis for being informed varies across demographics; however, a consistent necessity is being able to distinguish between relevant and trusted information and information designed to mislead, confuse or obstruct critical engagement with an idea.

As the inquiry identified, mis- and disinformation has increased with the rise of social media platforms in particular, but also with other socio-political and cultural changes. These same challenges were also highlighted in a 2023 survey of *Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy*, which noted an overwhelming majority of respondents did not trust sources of information or could not distinguish between real and fake information.⁴ These changes include the rise of generative AI, publicly accessible deep-fake technologies, changes in education pedagogy and a proliferation of near-instant information sharing. To the latter issue, verification of information can take time to solidify; however, the rapidity of information sharing across platforms can quickly, intentionally or otherwise, spread incorrect or misleading information. Ensuring the credibility and accuracy of information related to civics and electoral processes has become a key issue in Australia.

How Universities are responding

At the University of Adelaide, the Stretton Institute has fostered and partnered with the Democracy Alliance. Once operational, the Alliance and the Stretton Institute will work with partner organisations to try to achieve several outcomes, including:

- establishing a South Australian First Nations Voice to Parliament
- creating new structures to better engage young people
- facilitating more ways for people to influence government decisions online
- Leverage the insights of migrant communities, who help us to value what our democracy already provides and identify what's needed to make it more inclusive
- exploring the history of experimenting with new forms of citizen participation such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting

Supporting Cultural Diversity

Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) society encompasses a wide range of cultural backgrounds, languages, and traditions. Despite this diversity, historically marginalised or underrepresented communities may face barriers to full participation in civic life and the electoral process. In particular, language barriers can hinder access to information and resources, while cultural differences in political norms and practices may lead to feelings of alienation or disengagement. Critically, a lack of representative voices from these groups in political institutions can perpetuate feelings of exclusion and underrepresentation.

⁴ [Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy \(apsreform.gov.au\)](https://apsreform.gov.au)

Combined with the proliferation of mis- and disinformation on key democratic issues, these barriers can deter these groups from actively engaging in the electoral process and political discussions. This lack of engagement has a flow-on effect on non-Indigenous and non-CALD groups, insofar as a lack of representation and engagement at the political and institutional level can lead to misunderstanding and animosity, which acts as a further deterrent for engagement.

Some institutions have observed a decline in extra-curricular opportunities and community activities that encourage excursions or in-country experiences for students and community members.

How Universities are responding

One initiative undertaken by Australian universities and international organisations is the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) based out of Deakin University. The CRIS is a think-tank consortium that includes Western Sydney University, Deakin University, Victoria University, The Resilience Research Centre (Dalhousie University, Canada), The Australian Multicultural Foundation, The Centre for Multicultural Youth, RAND Australia, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK). This think-tank undertakes research on some of the trickiest challenges facing Australian society – racism, societal division, systemic bias and disadvantage, economic inequities, extremism and discrimination. Some of the projects undertaken by CRIS include a study of Asian Australians' experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic; enhancing resilience and social belonging during the COVID-19 pandemic; hate speakers – following the money; mapping young people's social justice concerns: An exploration of voice and action; and, enhancing digital capacity amongst refugee and migrant background youth.

In addition to addressing social justice issues, universities are also responding to the proliferation of publicly accessible generative AI, and the impact such platforms have on learning and academic integrity. For example, the University of Queensland has formed the AI Collaboratory⁵ which brings together domain experts in co-designing cutting-edge AI solutions to complex global problems, including misinformation management, trust and trustworthy AI in supporting social and public policy, and digital transformation.

Barriers to Participation

Barriers to participation are as varied as there are people in Australia. [Research](#) has shown that the most common barriers to participation include socioeconomic factors, geographic location, background, lack of information, and disenchantment with the political system. These issues are often related to access to reliable and trustworthy information at both the community and national level.

For Low SES individuals and families, non-participation and/or awareness of civics education and engagement can become a compounding issue. As the Australian Primary Principles Association (APPA) reflected, children from Low SES households, being first in the family and/or Indigenous, may often come from a place where their only exposure to someone from university is their school teacher.⁶ However, with significant workforce issues in teaching, principally workload and cultural issues, the ability for teachers to actively engage in civics education may be minimal. Other factors that have led to a deterioration in civics education and engagement could stem from a re-prioritisation of education and cultural values towards specific quantitative measurables that can lack a depth of quality and engaged learning that supports civics engagement. Effectively engaging with civic issues within an extensive curriculum becomes challenging. The density and type of learning material to be covered may not be supportive of effective engagement with some core civics-

⁵ <https://ai.uq.edu.au/collaboratory>

⁶ UA consultation with the Australian Primary Schools Association (APPA), Thursday 02 May, 2024.

related areas.⁷ The effect of this lack of exposure may also be compounded by a lack of community civics engagement too.⁸

This priority shift has flow-on effects on people's participation in civics. The OECD tracks students' sense of belonging, which between 2018 and 2022 has deteriorated globally. In Australia, sense of belonging among students is -0.19 compared to the OECD average of 0. Sense of belonging has a strong correlation with student literacy, numeracy and digital literacy outcomes.⁹ Accordingly, a decline in belonging is having a negative impact on student academic outcomes, not just civics engagement.¹⁰ This result follows Australia's historical engagement with the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which also shows a decline in student sense of belonging from 2003.¹¹

How Universities are responding

In addition to the work universities are already undertaking, supporting meaningful and targeted outreach programs that encourage community engagement and facilitate civics education and participation is necessary for ensuring all Australians, irrespective of background and circumstance, can actively and confidently participate in community and civics activities.¹² This collaborative engagement may include more grass-roots policy development that recognises the key actors involved with civics education (parents, teachers, community leaders and experts), and may involve creating workable opportunities to leverage resources at each of these group levels to make effective change in civics education and engagement. Existing initiatives, such as South Australia's [90-Day](#), seek to align multiple community groups (including parents, teachers and government officials). Such initiatives reflect the core purpose of civics engagement, which is about community engagement and involvement.

Conclusion

Looking to universities as partners in civics education, participation and engagement is a critical step in actively addressing the challenges facing democratic representation and engagement in Australia. University research capabilities can support critical action areas that can reveal important insights into what Australia can do to address civics engagement. For instance, a 2018 survey outlining trust levels in various institutions showed that trust in universities was at 62%, while trust in the military was at 66%, and trust in the police was at 70%.¹³ Additionally, Griffith University recently launched the [Australian Constitutional Values Survey 2023-27](#) to accurately and efficiently measure levels and dynamics of public trust in Australia and beyond. This survey will form the basis for examining how trust and mistrust can impact citizen engagement in public affairs, which is essential for addressing the identified challenges.

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report has set a target for educational engagement for Australia's future generations. By 2050, 90 per cent of 25-34-year-olds in Australia will need a tertiary education. With the right settings in place, these students coming through tertiary education institutions, and in particular universities, have the opportunity to develop critical thinking, engagement and participatory skills necessary to effectively engage as an informed citizen in Australia's democracy.

Therefore, provided that sound and effective policy settings are in place and universities can respond appropriately to their constituents, they have the capacity and standing trust within

⁷ UA Consultation with Independent Schools Australia (ISA), Wednesday 08 May, 2024

⁸ UA consultation with the Australian Primary Schools Association (APPA), Thursday 02 May, 2024.

⁹ [Australia | Factsheets | OECD PISA 2022 results](#)

¹⁰ [What does PISA tell us about Australia's school sectors? \(teachermagazine.com\)](#)

¹¹ [PISA In Focus #69 \(oecd.org\)](#)

¹² UA Consultation with Independent Schools Australia (ISA), Wednesday 08 May, 2024

¹³ Evans, M., Halpupka, M., & Stoker, G. (2009). Trust and Democracy in Australia. In M. Evans et al. (Eds.), *From Turnbull to Morrison: The Trust Divide* (pp. 17-35). Melbourne University Press.

Australia to be effective agents for democratic engagement. Policy settings that recognise the interconnected role between education providers (primary through to tertiary) and local communities in supporting each other are fundamental to addressing concerns associated with civics education and engagement in Australia. Ensuring these settings are conducive to effective community and mission-based programs and engagement strategies is essential to meet the challenges facing current and future democratic representation.