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YOUTH POLICY
AND EDUCATION

**SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT
STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ELECTORAL MATTERS INQUIRY
INTO CIVICS EDUCATION,
ENGAGEMENT, AND
PARTICIPATION IN AUSTRALIA**

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ABOUT CYPEP

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives. Our vision is for education that creates lifelong and life-wide opportunities for young people and enables them to thrive. Our mission is to connect youth research to policy and practice. We do this by working with policy-makers, educators and youth-focused organisations on research that addresses emerging needs, and that respects and includes young people. Working at the nexus of young people and policy, we raise awareness of the challenges faced by young people today and explore how education can harness the capacity of young people to contribute to building thriving communities.

1. OVERVIEW

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Australian parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation. Government efforts to better connect with and involve young people in the fabric of Australian civic life, such as the recent *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make* (Office for Youth, 2024), are to be commended. This resonates with our research commitment to listening intently to young people about the issues that concern them.

In responding to the terms of reference provided by the JSCEM, we draw upon several research projects conducted by CYPEP in recent years. Chief among these is the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer (Walsh et al., 2023), which surveyed a nationally representative sample of 571 young Australians aged 18–24, and conducted interviews with 30 more, to generate rich insights about young people’s lives. In both the survey and interviews, we explored topics including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation, relationships, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We begin this submission with a brief discussion of civics and civics education in Australia. We continue by presenting a summary of our key recommendations for engaging and involving young people in Australian civic life. We then discuss these recommendations in greater detail, based on three key concerns about young people’s civic and political participation, and how these contribute to addressing the terms of reference provided.

2. CONTEXT

We take civics to involve more than participating in elections. Following Heggart et al. (2019), we understand civics and citizenship as a commitment to improving the community for everyone. Civics education extends beyond providing mechanical explanations of our legal and political systems, to encompassing our identity as a community (Davis, 2003) and emphasising the values that help our community to survive and thrive (Jones, 2009). This involves developing knowledge and understanding of the institutions and processes of civic society, and preparing students to think critically about how they can actively participate in contributing to the common good (Henderson & Tudball, 2017). As we discuss in this paper, taking this broad view is a vital aspect of connecting to and engaging young people across all forms of civic and political participation.

A strong commitment to civics education has a range of proven benefits. As Davis (2003) argues, improving knowledge of civics can result in Australians being more able to meaningfully participate in democratic processes and contribute to Australian society in a more informed and enlightened way. Civics education also encourages active citizenship, and an increased sense of belonging and connectedness with one's community (Peterson & Bentley, 2017).

More broadly, social, civic and political participation has been shown to have a range of positive effects across cultural, social, political and economic domains, such as increased social and human capital (Kragt & Holtrop, 2019; Walsh & Black, 2015), as well as contributing to the wellbeing of neighbourhoods and communities (Mellor et al., 2009). At an individual level, our own research suggests that volunteering, as a form of social and political participation, can play an important role in promoting young people's wellbeing by alleviating feelings of anxiety. At the community level, participation can also promote social outcomes. For example, participation in green spaces (such as community gardening) can enable social interaction, connections, and a sense of community (Kingsley et al., 2020). As such, meaningfully involving young people in civic life can lead to positive outcomes for themselves, their communities, and society.

Despite the many benefits, it can be difficult to engage diverse young people in social and political participation, both in the classroom and beyond. Some young people can inadvertently feel disempowered by their engagement with civics education, a feeling described as being "overwhelmed by an experience of limited agency and power" (Jones & Davison, 2021, p. 190). Young people feel a strong desire to act on what they have learnt, but find that classroom settings offered no avenue for meaningful change. As Trott argues (2021), this points to a need for education that empowers children and young people to think about, connect to, and act on political participation in personally meaningful ways. In addition, young people can face practical barriers such as limited time, energy and money, which hinder them from contributing to civic life (Walsh et al., 2023).

Building from this understanding, we contend that young Australians are deeply concerned about social and political issues and hold strong desires to be involved across many levels of Australian civic life. However, the types of civic and political participation that most appeal to young people may not align with traditional models of understanding, and young people may be finding new and emerging ways to enact their civic and political participation. Further, while some young people may wish to be involved, they may be unable to do so to the degree that they desire. These insights, and how they can contribute to better connecting with and involving young people, are discussed below.

3. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In this submission, we provide our insights into young people aged 18–24 and their relationships to civic and political participation in Australia, drawn from our recent research in this area. This can assist in connecting with young people and engaging them across many levels and forms of participation.

A summary of recommendations is provided below. Further detail and discussion about these recommendations is provided in the following section.

Recommendation 1: Listen intently to young people, without relying on stereotypes of young people as disengaged or uninterested in civic and political participation.

Recommendation 2: Approach civics education with a better understanding of young people’s relationship with formal politics.

Recommendation 3: Acknowledge that young people may have different understandings of what it means to be civically and politically engaged.

Recommendation 4: Respect the differences in how young people approach civic and political participation and strive to engage them on their own terms.

Recommendation 5: Acknowledge that many young people wish to be more involved in civic and political participation but may be unable to do so for a number of reasons.

Recommendation 6: Understand the barriers that can prevent young people from being as engaged in civic and political participation as much as, or in the ways that, they would like.

Recommendation 7: Provide meaningful support for young people to help them navigate the challenges that they face, and to overcome potential barriers to participation.

4. FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH

In the following section, we present three key concerns regarding young people and their relationship to civic and political participation, based on our findings across multiple research projects. These are:

1. Young people have complex relationships with traditional forms of civic and political participation.
2. Young people are interested in non-traditional, informal and everyday forms of civic and political participation.
3. Young people can face a range of personal and external barriers, which may prevent them from being as involved as they wish.

4.1 Young people have complex relationships with traditional forms of civic and political participation.

Young people are often seen as being disengaged from civic and political participation. There is some evidence to support this belief, and low levels of engagement from young people presents a serious concern. In 2016, for example, around half, or 130,000, of Australia's 18-year-olds were not on the electoral roll; in the lead-up to the 2013 federal election, around 400,000 of those aged 18–24 had not yet enrolled (Collin & Walsh, 2016). This follows international trends, which show a decline in civic and political engagement among young people (Goessling, 2017).

However, these figures do not necessarily show that young people are apathetic or disengaged. Rather, this may reflect a more complicated relationship between young people and certain models of participation. Many of the issues that interest and concern young people can be inconsistently represented historically and across different levels of government, which can make it difficult for young people to engage with formal politics (Collin & McCormack, 2019). As such, it is possible that young people are not disengaging with civic and political participation, but with the traditional forms that do not represent their interests or reflect their lived experiences of Australian society.

This need has strong links to the terms of reference provided by JSCEM, particularly:

- *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; and*
- *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.*

The need to understand young Australians' relationships to traditional and formal forms of political participation plays an important role in selecting the most effective approach to civics education, as such education must consider how young people approach and understand politics as it relates to them. Further, the mechanisms to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of electoral matters can be

strengthened by acknowledging and addressing young people's reticence about formal political participation.

Further insight into these matters is provided by our research into how young people perceive formal political participation. While many young people interviewed as part of the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer considered themselves to be politically involved, they remarked that they were not interested in the Australian government or formal political matters. One young person stated:

"Look, I am interested. But do I keep up to date and follow it? Absolutely not. I completely admit, I don't know anything ... I don't even know who's actually running this place right now. Who's our prime minister? No idea." WOMAN, 23, SA

Others expressed a general distrust of political engagement, along with a sense of helplessness:

"I don't think we [young people] can ... The people in power can change it but they don't and that's the problem ... They want to stay in power. They just ... don't do anything radical because they don't want to piss off [their supporters]." MAN, 22, NSW

Importantly, some young people felt that formal political participation was not welcoming to young people, expressing a sense of antagonism against older generations. This frustrated some interviewees who believed that young people were not listened to precisely because they were young:

"I feel like a lot of people don't take young people as serious[ly]. Yeah, I just, I just think young people aren't listened to as much because they're classed as young. So like, we're young, we don't know what we're doing yet. Or we don't have as much knowledge as the older people." WOMAN, 19, QLD

Many young people express a desire to engage with civic and political participation. However, they can encounter challenges when navigating formal and traditional avenues of participation. For example, young people may be interested in engaging with formal avenues of participation, but may lack the knowledge of how to do so (Walsh & Black, 2018a). Further, some young people may wish to participate through formal political avenues, but may lack the financial, cultural, or social capital to be able to effectively engage (Moxon, 2022).

Young Australians can feel left out of formal politics, often believing that this is due to perceptions of them being young and hence uninterested or apathetic. In order to more meaningfully involve young people, these prejudices must be overcome, based on a better understanding of young people's relationship to formal politics.

Based on this, we present the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1: LISTEN INTENTLY TO YOUNG PEOPLE, WITHOUT RELYING ON STEREOTYPES OF YOUNG PEOPLE AS DISENGAGED OR UNINTERESTED IN CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION.

Many young Australians consider themselves to be politically involved. However, they understand this involvement as being different from what they perceived as traditional forms of civic engagement. Young people were less interested in government or formal politics, favouring political engagement in more personal terms and on broader social issues:

“The way I think of it is in more of a modern way. Politics less in the sense of governments and world leaders and everything and more about the politics of how the world’s population is running.” MAN, 20, NSW

It is not appropriate to view young people as apathetic or disengaged. Instead, efforts to involve them must take their perceptions and experiences of politics into account. This can inform a better understanding of how to best engage young people on the issues that matter to them.

RECOMMENDATION 2: APPROACH CIVICS EDUCATION WITH A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH FORMAL POLITICS.

Young people are not apathetic nor disengaged. Rather, their particular relationships with civic and political participation should be acknowledged. For example, rather than asking why young people are not enrolling to vote, we should be asking what young people do care about. Such an understanding can be used to better communicate with and engage young people, by connecting civic processes to the issues that matter to them.

4.2 Young people are interested in non-traditional, informal and everyday forms of civic and political participation

Our research affirms the vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia’s democracy, electoral events, and voting. It has found that young people are ambivalent about the power of social media and are more digitally literate than typically credited. A move away from control paradigms based on adult anxieties should more directly engage young people where they live. While they are not a homogenous group, place typically matters to them, as it is the environments in which they live deeply shape their civic habits and dispositions (Third et al., 2019; Black et al., 2022).

Young people can be deeply engaged with issues they care about. This is because young people are more likely to value authentic, project-based and direct participation around key issues or interests. Young people respond well to issues that matter to them, and to political candidates or parties that are willing to engage them on these matters. Just as young people are likely to feel alienated by policy platforms and campaigns that ignore or patronise them, they feel motivated and mobilised in response to issues that reflect their vision of society.

However, young people are more likely to be interested in non-traditional or informal avenues of civic and political participation. These can include direct, everyday, individualised and networked participatory practices (such as boycotts and sharing political content via social media), interest-based activities (such as contributing to youth mental health service design or starting their own online petition or campaign), and creative and media practices (such as making memes or curating an online presence) (Walsh & Black, 2018b). Often, young people frame these practices as “taking action” on issues they care about.

One such avenue that appeals to young people, which is not often captured by traditional models of understanding, is social media. Data from the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer found that 55% of young people thought that social media helped underrepresented groups amplify their voice, and 53% thought that social media meant that important issues received attention that they might not have otherwise gotten (Walsh et al., 2023).

Such forms of informal participation are reflected in the extant research on civic and political participation. Cho et al. (2020, p. 8), for example, argue that young people are less invested in traditional forms of political engagement, instead favouring a “personalized politics of expressive engagement”. Young people conceptualise activism through daily activities, such as speaking to others, self-research and change, community building, teaching others, being a role model, or giving feedback to peer activists (Liou & Literat, 2020). This relates to what Walker (2017, p. 14) terms “everyday activism”, the “individual and collective efforts to change, adapt, or disrupt one’s own and other’s everyday practices”. While young people are also concerned with public change, these forms of activism are more immediate to young people’s lives and target personal forms of engagement and change (Trott, 2021).

This also raises some considerations for engaging young people through civics education. Tudball and Henderson (2014), for example, argue that one problem that can arise from civics education is that it positions knowledge and skills as something to be used in a future state, as opposed to showing how students can be active citizens in the moment. Based on an understanding of young people as wanting to engage directly in everyday practices of civic and political practice, it may be more expedient for civics education to encourage individual agency, which can allow students to grasp the implications of political actions and allow them to better engage with structures of government and citizenship (Haigh et al., 2014). This can benefit young people by positioning them as being active citizens in their present lives, as opposed to becoming active citizens sometime in the future. Such civics education may better equip young people for engaging in the direct forms of participation that most interest them.

Understanding this approach to young people’s civic and political participation, as well as the forms of civic education that can best facilitate these approaches, has strong links to the terms of reference provided by JSCEM, particularly:

- *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; and*
- *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.*

Specifically, formalised civics education in Australia can be made more effective if approached in ways that seek to engage and interest young people, and directly address the issues that are of importance to them. Such civics education can also be improved by better equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to engage in the forms of civic and political participation that they are most drawn to. Further, given young people’s propensity to engage in non-traditional and informal forms of civic and political participation, informal mechanisms for promoting civic knowledge and engagement may be more effective at reaching and engaging young people. Developing this understanding can aid in linking young people’s participation to traditional forms such as voting in elections, by demonstrating how various models are connected and flow into each other.

Further insight into these matters is provided by our research into how young people perceive and understand civic and political engagement. Young people interviewed as part of the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer pointed to a number of key ways that young people could become politically active and promote change. This included formalised political action, such as protesting, but also encompassed

more informal approaches, such as through education and raising awareness about issues through social media:

“I feel like change for, like, like, poverty and, like, things like domestic violence and such, that’s kind of just, like, if people are educated on it, and they’ve been taught, like, what’s right and wrong and how to help people and they’re not afraid to, like, speak up and come to somebody’s defence or come and help somebody.” MAN, 18, VIC

This connection between political participation and informal avenues such as social media is made apparent in the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, where 47% of young Australians said they had used their social media profiles to participate in social change. Twenty-three per cent used their profiles to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them, 18% participated in an online group related to an issue or cause and 16% updated or amended their profile pictures to indicate support for a particular cause (Walsh et al., 2023).

Some participants spoke about activism and other forms of political action as activities that young people can participate in, with the aim of making a difference in their communities.

“You've got to try and like, I don't know, protest, and, like, communicate with government . . . it's like writing letters, or sending emails, just making sure that the people in power actually know, like, what you want, and what you care about.” WOMAN, 18, WA

Importantly, young people understood this involvement to be different from what they perceived as “traditional” forms of civic participation. Young people were less interested in government or formal politics, favouring political engagement in more personal terms and engaging with broader social issues.

Based on this, we present the following recommendations.

Recommendation 3: Acknowledge that young people may have different understandings of what it means to be civically and politically engaged.

Young people enact civic and political participation in a range of different ways, many of which may not be captured by traditional understandings. The activities that interest and engage young people tend to be more ad hoc and based around specific events or activities rather than happening on a regular basis or with organisations. This is often based on a desire to ‘help out’ and support others:

“I reckon I just love helping people honestly, like, whenever like, in my day-to-day life. Whenever I see an ad, or like a volunteering thing, I always want to help as well.” WOMAN, 20, QLD

Based on this, young people may have a broader understanding of what entails civic and political participation, one which appears to include many forms of community, social, or political engagement, across a variety of forms and mediums. It is vital to acknowledge the forms of participation that young people engage in, and failure to do so risks misinterpreting young people as being uninterested or disengaged. More direct and explicit connections need to be made between the motivations to participate in general and electoral participation specifically. Voting is often framed as a responsibility and duty but could be promoted as a way of “helping people” to shape a better Australia.

This interest in informal participation is a resource that governments and the community might leverage to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system.

This might require more concerted efforts to elevate civics education in school through hands-on practical ways that connect the informal to the formal. Such formal delivery does not need to be confined to a specific curriculum but can arguably be taught in any discipline (e.g. teaching about how votes are calculated in mathematics; taking action on environmental concerns in science). Anecdotally, some schools appear to be doing this, but practical, easy to use classroom resources could boost these productive spaces of learning considerably across education systems. In addition, programs such as ruMAD (which was previously delivered to 300 schools in Victoria and Tasmania) could be revived and refined as they demonstrate hands-on ways that schools can engage issues of importance to young people (Connect, 2005).

Recommendation 4: Respect the differences in how young people approach civic and political participation, and strive to engage them on their own terms.

Young people are deeply concerned with the social and political issues that matter to them. They want to be able to engage with these issues in a meaningful way, and contribute to making change. Further, many young people express a desire not only to be heard, but to hear the opinions and contributions of others:

“I think for each generation to be heard, I think we need to accept one another. So I think there needs to be more discussion around how each generation is different, but is still valued.” WOMAN, 22, ACT

Young people want to be part of the conversation. It is important to meet them on their terms, and to engage them in the ways they wish. By acknowledging, respecting, and reciprocating young people’s desires to contribute, more meaningful engagement can be achieved.

4.3 Young people can face a range of personal and external barriers, which may prevent them from being as involved as they wish

Many young people expressed that there were barriers that prevented them from civically and politically engaged. Some of these are personal and relate to young people’s own willingness or capacity to participate. However, many barriers are structural, and relate to the external factors that can make it difficult for young people to fully participate in the ways they want.

In our survey undertaken as part of the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, 86% of young Australians felt there was something preventing them from being involved in organised activities on issues that were important to them. The most commonly cited reasons were how expensive (33%) and time consuming (33%) the activities were. Just over one-quarter (28%) of young people reported that a lack of interest prevented them from being involved in volunteering. Sixteen per cent of young people said they did not participate in organised activities because they did not think they could make a difference by being involved (Walsh et al., 2023).

Understanding these barriers is vital to any effort to meaningfully engage young people in Australian civic life. Doing so has strong links to the terms of reference provided by JSCEM, particularly:

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

- *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; and*
- *potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.*

Specifically, understanding the barriers that young people face highlights the social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing them from electoral participation, as an important way of being involved in Australian civic life. Further, acknowledging and understanding these barriers may open new opportunities for reaching out and engaging young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, and allowing them to participate in the ways that are most appropriate to their circumstances. Taken together, addressing the barriers that young people face in their civic and political participation may lead to improved participation and engagement outcomes in electoral events and more broadly.

Further insight into the barriers that young people face is provided by our research into young people’s civic and political engagement. Data from the Australian Youth Barometer project showed that only 13.62% of young people in 2023 felt that there were no obstacles to their ability to participate in organised activities on issues that were important to them. Compared with the previous year, young people in 2023 generally reported facing different barriers more often.

These findings were reflected by interview participants, who spoke of three main barriers that prevented them from volunteering or participating in similar activities: lack of support; lack of time or money; and feeling that young people were not taken seriously. These can flow on to electoral activities and voting. The challenge is to foster wider forms of civic participation (such as volunteering) as a basis for developing civic habits that can then be linked to formal avenues of participation, such as electoral activities and voting.

First, young people felt a lack of support when volunteering or participating in similar activities. This largely revolved around emotional support, which young people felt was important in allowing them to effectively participate:

“You need support systems in place. You need to be able to have people that you can talk to about your problems. You need people that you can ask questions in a professional setting that can be mentors to you. I think it takes a village.” MAN, 21, ACT

Second, young people faced logistical barriers, such as time and money, which prevented them from participating to the extent that they wished. This is in line with survey data, where young people thought volunteering could be time-consuming and expensive. Some young people also felt that there were not enough easily available opportunities, and that they lacked the means to effectively participate:

“I would like to be quite a bit more politically involved. I spend way too much time working and I don't have the effort to truly put in as much as I would like . . . I'd like to be more so but there's not much opportunity to where I am.” MAN, 23, NSW

Third, some young people were discouraged by feeling that they were not being taken seriously. Young people engaged in many activities in both traditional and digital spaces, but felt that they rarely received enough attention from governments and agencies, and that their voices were rarely heard. This particular barrier was closely linked to a broadened understanding of young people’s political participation. Without their voices being heard, young people can feel that they are not making a

difference despite being involved. This concern was raised by 15.7% of young people surveyed as part of the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, and was discussed by interview participants:

“I think it's taking a long time for governments and agencies to realise that my generation as such, interact a lot more online and does things differently to how things have been done before. I don't know how to peg that as an issue. But it's just that barrier of communication is blocked, which I think is why our voices aren't coming across.” WOMAN, 24, WA

These identified barriers present a significant concern, and may be preventing young people from participating more effectively or to the extent that they wish. This is particularly important when considering ways to reach out to and engage young people in Australian civic life, such as through electoral participation. A more concerted effort may be required by governments and community organisations to mitigate potential barriers to young people’s civic and political participation, to allow young people to fully engage in the ways that they wish. Doing so will bring positive benefits for both young people themselves and for their communities.

Based on this, we present the following recommendations.

Recommendation 5: Acknowledge that many young people wish to be more involved in civic and political participation, but may be unable to do so for a number of reasons.

As we have discussed in this submission, young people cannot be viewed as apathetic or disengaged. To use an analogy, the great majority of politicians are hardworking and dedicated to making a difference in society, and painting them with broad-brush criticisms that reinforce negative stereotypes does not do them justice. It is equally unfair to reduce young people to passive and clueless individuals in need of compulsory conscription into civic and political participation.

A vital first step is to acknowledge and accept this. Young people are deeply interested and involved in the issues that matter to them. Instead of treating them as being disengaged, it is important to acknowledge that young people may face a range of significant barriers, which may prevent them from participating to the extent that they desire. As such, the onus cannot be laid squarely on the shoulders of young people, and steps must be taken to enable their participation in Australian civic life.

Recommendation 6: Understand the barriers that can prevent young people from being as engaged in civic and political participation as much as, or in the ways that, they would like.

Many young people are deeply involved in politics, in ways that are appropriate and relevant to them. Many more wish to be involved, but face a range of significant barriers which can prevent them from being as engaged in civic and political participation as much as or in the ways that they would like. Some young people express wanting to be more engaged but felt unable to do so because of a lack of opportunities, lack of understanding, clashes with other life commitments or because they felt disregarded due to being young:

“I would like to be quite a bit more politically involved. I spend way too much time working and I don't have the effort to truly put in as much as I would like ... Yes I consider myself reasonably politically involved. I'd like to be more so but there's not much opportunity to [do so] where I am. MAN, 23, NSW

Because of this, it is necessary to better understand the barriers that young people may face, as outlined in this submission. Doing so will provide greater opportunities to work with and engage young people where they live.

Recommendation 7: Provide meaningful support for young people to help them navigate the challenges that they face, and to overcome potential barriers to participation.

Young people need support to be able to participate to their full potential. Many of the barriers that face young people are external, and cannot be overcome on a solely individual level. Some young people, for example, saw civic participation as something that would happen later in life, once their personal situations had become more stable:

“I would, but I would need to wait until I’m a little bit more stable. Like financially and in terms of accommodation as well. But I would definitely get more involved once those goals of mine have been completed.” WOMAN, 22, ACT

Others feel that being young itself can be a barrier to participation, as they and their efforts to engage are not taken seriously precisely because they are young:

“And I think being a young person as well, kind of makes me not want to participate in some of those conversations sometimes because, yeah ... And they say to me, ‘Oh, you’ll change your mind. You know, when you get older, you’ll change your mind.’ It’s always that sort of thing. Like, just because of your age, you’re discredited in a way.” WOMAN, 20, QLD

Understanding these barriers provides a basis for further discussions about how young people might be best supported to engage in civic and political participation, and how best to understand their relationships with these activities. Importantly, support for young people must look beyond immediate actions or quick fix solutions. Rather, these supports will be most meaningful if a holistic approach is taken, supporting young people across different areas of their lives. This will not only provide a base for allowing young people to build and maintain healthy relationships with their own forms of participation, but can also open up a space for them to connect to and engage with voting and other forms of traditional political participation.

Civics education is one important way of addressing this recommendation. However, the federalist nature of Australian democracy provides structural barriers to consistency in the quality and scale of delivery of civics education. There is high variability in 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. As a first step, there needs to be greater visibility nationally of these various approaches and more rigorous evidence-based evaluations of their effectiveness. There is a paucity of quality evidence and evidence use. The evidence we provide in this submission will hopefully assist the Inquiry in understanding the challenges from a youth perspective.

At a wider level, students have inequitable access to civics education. This is particularly the case in government school communities addressing compound challenges arising from disadvantage (e.g. classroom behaviour, school refusal, diverse learners, etc). Consequently, civics education can be relegated further to the periphery of school life. These communities require targeted support that does not add to the administrative burden of teachers. We agree with the Inquiry that there should be 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. Local government is a key arena to engage young people as active citizens, particularly in low socio-economic contexts (Walsh & Black, 2018b).

Conclusion

The findings of our surveys (n=>1500) and interviews (n=90) with young Australians aged 18-24 over the last three years have salience to this Inquiry. Our main observation is that there is untapped interest in civic and political participation that needs to be recognised and fostered. But there are also barriers to doing so. The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) is urged to tap into this knowledge when thinking about how to improve electoral events and voting and civics education in general. Potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation need to target young Australians as future voters where they live. Consequently, we argue that this group needs to be the highest priority.

5. REFERENCES

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