Students at the centre

An engaging way to teach the Victorian Curriculum Civics and Citizenship is through focusing on current issues of interest to students, to enable them to understand how government, democracy, laws and citizenship can have an impact on them. This pedagogical approach develops students’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities as ‘citizens now’, rather than being ‘citizens in waiting’ (Cutler and Frost 2001). This research underpinned the student-led Civics and Citizenship resources the VCAA developed in collaboration with VicSRC in 2021. An engagement with issues that are relevant to students’ lives and connected with their lived experience can show them that citizenship rights and responsibilities are not limited to voting.

Research, both in Australia and internationally, has considered the importance of student voice in schools, and this can be connected to the Civics and Citizenship curriculum as well as the development of Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Capability, Intercultural Capability and Personal and Social Capability. According to Mitra (2009):

‘Student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions of problems and potential solutions, to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools, to youth taking the lead on seeking change.’ (p. 1834)

Holdsworth (2005) emphasises the importance of linking student voice with action, arguing that ‘authentic’ student voice should not just provide information for adult decision-makers, but should encourage young people’s active participation in shared decision-making and taking action on issues.

The *International Civics and Citizenship Education Study* (Schulz et al. 2016) argues that civic engagement at school and within the community can provide the impetus for promoting civic and citizenship education, as a means of enabling young people to become more conscious of their role as participating citizens. Modelling democracy through classroom practice can be an important way for students to learn and understand how they have voice and agency and that citizenship participation goes beyond voting rights (Subba 2014).

In 2021, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) released the results of the *2019 National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship* (NAP-CC 2020), which demonstrated that 53 per cent of Year 6 students achieved at or above the proficient standard and only 38 per cent of Year 10 students achieved the proficient standard. While many young Australians have expressed interest in contemporary issues, many are unsure how Australia’s system of government works and believe they might not have the skills to participate confidently in the political process (Ghazarian et al. 2020).

The 2019 NAP-CC included a student survey that gave an invaluable snapshot into student attitudes towards Civics and Citizenship issues (2020). It indicated that there was little variation between 2010 and 2016 in terms of the proportion of Year 6 and Year 10 students who thought that it was important to learn about political issues. By 2019, however, there was a significant drop for both year levels in the proportion of students who believed that it was important to learn about issues from the media and about what is happening in other countries. Younger students (Year 6) also reported that they perceived conventional citizenship to be less important than in previous surveys. Promisingly, the report also found that experiences learning about and participating in civic issues were positively associated with achievement in Civics and Citizenship.

Students reported being concerned about a range of problems affecting Australia, particularly pollution, climate change and water shortages (NAP-CC 2020). Students responding to the survey showed a growing appreciation of Australia’s cultural diversity and support for a culturally inclusive society. Support for Indigenous Australian cultures and issues has remained high across the last few iterations of the study, driven in Year 10 by higher positive responses from female students than male. Students also reported a distrust of social media for their news while also identifying this as the major avenue where they get their information about Civics and Citizenship issues. This implies an appetite from students for media education and a need for scaffolding from teachers in how to analyse the sometimes confusing messages they are consuming. To delve into this issue, explore Module 6 of this resource, which focuses on critical media literacy. The 2019 NAP-CC report suggests broad areas of interest for students in terms of issues you could study, and, alongside understanding the interests of students in your class, can help you to select issues that are relevant to your students.

Considering this research, Civics and Citizenship teachers can give students opportunities to explore contemporary issues that are of relevance and interest to them and their communities, and to discuss how young people can contribute as reflective, active and informed decision-makers. Teachers can also link this to student understanding about the role of civic institutions in Australia’s democracy in responding to contemporary issues and contributing to change.