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Proof Committee Hansard

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia

(Public)

WEDNESDAY, 16 OCTOBER 2024

MELBOURNE

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Wednesday, 16 October 2024

Members in attendance: Senator Brown and Ms Lawrence

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

To inquire into and report on civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia. The inquiry will have regard to:

- 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;
- 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;
- 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;
- 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;
- social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers; and
- potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

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PATERSON, Professor Jeannie Marie, Director, Centre for AI and Digital Ethics, University of Melbourne

PERFORS, Professor Andrew, Director, Complex Human Data Hub, University of Melbourne

Committee met at 10:34

CHAIR (Senator Brown): I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I welcome representatives of the University of Melbourne. Thank you for appearing here today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would each of you like to make an opening statement?

Prof. Perfors: Yes. As mentioned, I study human reasoning and psychology, so I would like to start by describing the nature of the problem that we're facing here; that is, essentially, the business model of media and social media involves taking advantage of people's cognitive biases, which are biases that are actually very sensible in many other contexts, and human nature, so you just can't get rid of them. I'm very happy to elaborate on what they are because I think it's somewhat relevant but, in the interests of time, I'll note that they're there and note that one of the key biases is our emotions and our emotional needs, which underlie a lot of the harms and issues that we see happening.

Prof. Howe: Along with Andy, I am a co-director of the Information and Influence Hub at the University of Melbourne. This is a collection of academics and DSI and DST researchers across Australia who come together approximately once a month to study the problems associated with mis-, dis- and mal-information in the Australian context. I have four brief recommendations, which I'm happy to elaborate on later, but I would recommend that, as a country, we need much better measures of the health of the Australian information environment; we need to strengthen media and information literacy training, especially in our schools and in community outreach centres to older people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities; and we need improved regulatory frameworks, especially involving transparency and social media companies. There are a whole lot of digital and AI tools in the US for combating mis- and disinformation, in particular with regard to conspiracy beliefs, which we would be well served to import into this country and adapt to the Australian context.

Prof. Paterson: I'm the Director of the Centre for AI and Digital Ethics, also at the University of Melbourne. We have been conducting a project into misleading AI, which overlaps with the work of the committee, I believe. I would pick up the comment from Piers—it was also in the submission made by the University of Melbourne—about the role of legislation in civics engagement and participation, and in responding to misinformation and disinformation. I note that targeted legislative measures can play a role in this space, but I'd also comment that legislation should be carefully designed and targeted so as not to become so unwieldy and unenforceable as to stifle free speech or, indeed, amplify platform power. Where possible, legislative intervention should enhance and enable individual choice rather than remove information or unpopular views from view. Examples of that would be a targeted response, which we have seen developed in Australia, to highly egregious information and misinformation related to scams and the nonconsensual sharing of intimate images, noting that female politicians are often the target of what's colloquially called 'deepfake porn', which is actually synthetic internet image abuse. I'd add that the consideration of obligations before parliament at the moment, in relation to precisely defined illegal or harmful disinformation in the misinformation and disinformation bill now being considered, must be balanced against free speech concerns. As I've indicated, the more precisely that we can define harms to which that legislation responds, the less discretion is given to platforms about how information is shared and the more effective regulatory oversight becomes.

Finally, I'd note an example of an approach that encourages transparency in the provenance of information, so enhancing decision-making and choice amongst individuals, which might be cause for transparency in synthetically created information, which has been proposed and, indeed, enacted in the EU, and initiatives from the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity of information, which are providing cryptographically signed metadata, which provides the provenance of information that is displayed online, which is available to individuals to trace the provenance, which is perhaps a more useful measure than trying to distinguish between synthetic and real information.

CHAIR: One of themes or threads that have been coming through the hearing is about how you actually discern or work out whether something is misinformation or disinformation. What can we do to support people to spot what information is actually disinformation?

Prof. Paterson: That's a really good question because, generally, when we're thinking about information, there's a spectrum of information.

CHAIR: I have a 19-year-old son, and I asked him, and he said that all they do is check whether it's '.org' or something like that.

Prof. Howe: That's hopeless, and this is the problem; we're not teaching them proper information literacy.

Prof. Paterson: The needs for information literacy are changing really rapidly. A year or two ago, we'd be saying, 'Look for that information,' or—

CHAIR: Particularly around scams.

Prof. Paterson: Yes. Particularly around scams, we'd be saying, 'Look at the URL,' and, 'Look at whether the English looks poor,' if it's written work; and, if it's an image, we'd say, 'Look at whether the image is inaccurate,' such as whether it has extra fingers, famously. The problem is—this is the influence of AI—that those things now are no longer indications of misinformation because, of course, AI corrects language; it can tone the language to the recipient's interests, proclivities and even language capabilities; and the images themselves are becoming problematic. So a lot of the discussion now is less on detection of fake information and more on checking provenance, where it comes from, and also this idea of using more than one source of information, so looking for correlation between pieces of information along with, ideally, removing the extremely harmful information.

Prof. Perfors: I think this is where the notions of transparency and providing useful tools comes in. If we start seeing it as our job to decide what's true or false, that's a bad road to go down; rather, we can think of it as our job being to provide tools to people to provide them with the information that they need to decide that, like the provenance of the information, like whether it was AI generated, or even like making visible who agrees with this, who has shared this and whether it is all in a cluster of echo-chamber things or all over. We have work showing that people can use this information if it's provided, but it needs to be visible and easy to see. That kind of thing, going hand in hand with information literacy, is probably much more effective than trying to say, 'Someone is going to decide whether something is true or false,' because it also adapts on the ground to new information.

Prof. Paterson: Or saying that we're going to catch out the fakes. We're not going to catch out the fakes.

Prof. Howe: I think that's a lot of it in this concept of lateral reading and trying to check up. You seem to be indicating a particular website that your 19-year-old might have come across and checking up on the provenance, doing searches to find out, 'Is this likely to be legit, and what do other people think of it?' and knowing enough to access other information sources to get a less biased point of view of a topic or to get better information. The other thing that I would like to raise is that false information isn't the whole problem; there's this real problem with mal-information, which is true information which is presented in a way to intentionally mislead or deceive. There's quite a lot of evidence in the literature that, in some circumstances, malinformation can be a much bigger problem than just false information. In fact, it's pretty much standard practice in disinformation campaigns to try to make as much of the information true information but taken out of context or spun in some way, because that is more believable. A lot of the issue is about not just saying, 'That's false, that's true and that's a scam.' It's about saying, 'That's biased. That's a really bad way of looking at things. Here are other ways of looking at things and other points of view. This is a much more responsible, balanced and informed way of looking at an issue or assessing whether it's a scam.'

Prof. Perfors: I can give an example of that. For instance—and this is a cognitive bias that we all have—if we see something a lot, we're more likely to think it's true and we're more likely to think it's important. That makes a lot of sense in many contexts but, of course, social media can totally skew that. An example of malinformation would be if you're trying to create a campaign scapegoating immigrants. You'd find one example of one immigrant who has committed a crime. Everyone is talking about it now, and it's true, but it's wildly misleading about the scope of the problem. We would advocate providing tools so that people can see that more clearly, either by accessing websites that put that in context or something that says, 'Hey, this is being driven by these sources.'

CHAIR: How do we provide those tools? The other question is: how do we train people to want to go and use those tools?

Prof. Perfors: I can speak to the emotional end. I think what we have to grapple with is that people are active information seekers, but usually we're active information seekers because of emotional needs. Either we want to

find out something for some purpose in our life, or what happens with a lot of radicalisation and extremism is that people seek out information because they want to belong or for it to speak to some sense of emotional threat. I think we have to recognise that this is hard, and it goes beyond the scope of the committee. What are the emotional needs that are being met? That is part of the issue, and that's a whole society-wide thing.

Prof. Paterson: I would just add that this is a spectrum of information, and there's clearly information that is false and can be harmful. We should have targeted responses to that information and responsibility for that information, where it is false and harmful, to be removed or not promoted. Then there's all this other information, which, as we've said, has to be balanced with free speech concerns because interpretations of what's misinformation and what's malinformation start to differ. If we can train and encourage readers to be savvy about checking sources of information, we reduce the impact of that. At the extremes, we're not going to change people's views. If people are determined to believe a particular view—if I'm determined to believe that climate change isn't real or that horse drench is going to cure COVID—probably nothing is going to change that. But we can influence all the people in the middle who perhaps don't hold those extreme views and can be moved away from those extreme views or at least critically assess them. I think the age question is important because the way in which different generations interact with social media differs. This is some of your work.

Prof. Howe: Yes; media and culture. I'm writing a brief for the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet on this issue. There are a whole range of things. Information literacy is a huge one, and adopting it in school—the northern Europeans, especially Finland, do this particularly well—and not just having it as a separate class but putting it in the curriculum. They teach them, 'This is how you create content and this is how you can lie when you create content, so look out for this. These are statistics, and this is how you lie with statistics. This is digital graphics, and this is how you lie with them.' They train their population well. It's also about providing more reliable information sources, supporting independent fact checkers and supporting the debunking websites. Also, there need to be citizen-led information sources. It can't all be top down, from the government, for obvious reasons. Australia is pretty weak on that, and there are clearly things that we could do on that front quite easily which we're not doing.

CHAIR: Yesterday, we got some evidence when we were doing site visits. We went to a number of venues belonging to multicultural communities, one of which was a Sikh temple out at Melton. There was a clear view there that information needed to be provided at the grassroots level. There was discussion about how we get that information out, and not only information that is out there during election times but how you can look for whether information is coming from a trusted source.

Prof. Paterson: One of our colleagues, Professor Shanton Chang, has done quite a lot of work on how the university communicates with its students. Obviously, we have a very diverse student population. Part of his work is questioning people who would like to share information and questioning the way in which different CALD communities use and find information. For example, the university might use one social media source and find that a significant number of our student cohort aren't looking at that social media source; they're obtaining information elsewhere. That idea of user-led design is really important in how we both build information literacy and share important civics information.

Prof. Howe: He also made the point that it needs to be adapted to each individual group's cultural and linguistic context. Each diaspora is probably going to use different social media accounts.

Prof. Perfors: I think key to all of this is trust, in the sense that we have to make the effort to build bonds with these different groups to figure out what is the right language and the right approach. If you look at a lot of malign-influence campaigns, what they're often trying to do is not drive particular narratives but make people distrust in general. It's about doing anything that you can to fight that distrust in general, and that includes transparency and building those links.

Prof. Paterson: Trust is a big thing as well.

Prof. Perfors: All of those things work because they build that trust, and so does the information literacy: 'Here's how you figure out what to trust.' What we really want to avoid is something where you just say, 'Distrust all information,' as that actually feeds into what a lot of these malign-influence groups want.

Prof. Howe: Australia also needs to have much better metrics for measuring the state and health of its information environment, not just for majority communities but also for minority communities, to understand what sorts of information-gathering behaviours these people are doing and what sort of information they're being exposed to. For example, in this report there was a summary of some of the evidence of how certain Indian communities have been targeted by—I'm going to be a little careful here—certain extremist groups, trying to persuade them to adopt certain points of view. They have been effective because they have been using only

certain closed social media platforms and haven't been exposed to more mainstream points of view. Their information environment is particularly poor and particularly biased. It's about trying to work with those communities to improve their information environment. At first, that's just measuring it so that you know there's a problem.

Prof. Paterson: Or ensure that mainstream information environments actually are inclusive of diverse populations. It works both ways.

CHAIR: Are there any government policies, tools or mechanisms that you believe are effective?

Prof. Perfors: Do you mean in our government now or in general?

CHAIR: The Australian government.

Prof. Perfors: I'm going to defer to you guys.

Prof. Paterson: I'm the legal person. The law comes in at the extremes, really. Because we want to have a healthy information environment, the law comes in to temper the harmful extremes. One thing that I found interesting was an OECD report that said that Australians trust in the federal government, and the judicial system was actually quite highly regarded internationally. We do still have trust in those institutions. If we are going to talk about interventions to control the information environment and put limits on the kind of information there is, it is important for there to be trust in the parliament and the courts, which are responsible for those initiatives. I think a lot of the work in this space has been saying that one of the concerns about disinformation, misinformation, deepfakes and undermining of information is that, precisely as Andy has said, we stop trusting any information and we stop believing in those institutions. The maintenance of trust in institutions is really important. Are there government policies that are maintaining trust in institutions?

Prof. Howe: Yes, there are, and the AEC is a prime example. The AEC is very well respected in Australia and around the world. It's doing a very good job of protecting and countering election misinformation, but it has a very narrow remit. The eSafety Commissioner also is doing a pretty good job, but, again, its remit is rather narrow.

CHAIR: Would you want to see any changes in the remit of those two organisations?

Prof. Howe: That's really hard.

Prof. Paterson: We were discussing this before we started. We have a number of regulators and organisations that have responsibility for or a role in maintaining trusted information environments. One of them is the eSafety Commissioner, another is the ACCC and yet another is the Electoral Commission. Do we want them to have broader remits? Possibly we may differ. I think the sectoral-specific response is useful and meaningful simply because it's really important that we retain a healthy debate, healthy freedom of information. If we have one body that looks after the whole information environment, there is a risk or a perception of a risk that's prioritised to a certain—

Prof. Howe: That's one point of view!

Prof. Paterson: I think the jurisdiction is pretty good, noting that there is an inquiry at the moment into the scope of the power of the eSafety Commissioner.

Prof. Perfors: Speaking as an American here, as well as a scientist, and bringing it back to trust, I think the other thing that Australia does well is actually have trusted institutions. It's partly about the information, we're saying, but partly that there is transparency in the institutions and they're better set up. I think a key component is having good communication about those things but also actually being trustworthy. People fall into these extreme things; they seek out this information because they're feeling unlistened to, that the government doesn't represent their interests and all of those things.

Prof. Howe: Australia has adopted a more coordinated approach in response to foreign interference. We've got the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator and the committee to back him up. I know of no Western government which has tried to unify all these, possibly because that would give that organisation too much power over the government, I'm guessing. Singapore has done that to some extent. We'll see how that goes; that's quite a new initiative.

CHAIR: This is your last opportunity to make any statement or speak to one of your recommendations, because, unfortunately, we are running out of time and our agenda is quite full.

Prof. Paterson: We totally understand. I would just underline the importance of careful regulatory design and very targeted legislation. Rather than attempting to control information, I'm interested in enabling people to make use of information and, indeed, refer to trustworthy and trusted institutions.

CHAIR: There is a civics curriculum for high schools; have you had a chance to look at that?

Prof. Paterson: Only through experience with my children. We teach a number of courses on disinformation, misinformation, and digital literacy at the university. I know that is a university population, but I have a great deal of optimism in the ability and passion of young people to respond to information and values that are meaningful to them, and that speak to them.

CHAIR: One of your recommendations is about enhancing media and information literacy; is that not included in the curriculum?

Prof. Howe: Not adequately. Recently, the government put more money—about \$6 million this year—into including it more, but it is still inadequate and much behind places like Finland. For instance, it focuses mainly on media literacy as opposed to information literacy more broadly, and it is still very limited in scope. You have the civics curriculum, but it is not an information literacy curriculum. The amount done by any particular school on information literacy—they all do a bit on media literacy—varies from school to school. It is rather haphazard at the moment.

Prof. Perfors: While all of that is important, it has to go hand in hand with some of the regulatory things and the acknowledgement of how humans work. Just like you need food safety labels, you need information literacy out there. You need to work with people's biases and cognition; we can't individually bootstrap ourselves out of this.

Prof. Paterson: Technology is changing quickly in terms of the information that is available to people. We tend to put a lot of responsibility on schools: 'Schools will fix that.' Schools are part of the piece, but it is difficult even for teachers and schools to keep up with changes in technology and changes in political discourses. This has to be a whole-of-life journey and not: 'We'll fix this in a school system.' The conversation starts there but, by the time children finish primary school, the technology they are responding to in their interactions with social media will have changed.

Prof. Perfors: Think about the debate on social media filters, for example, and whether filters should be banned on TikTok. We may ban filters which can change appearances on social media because of the view that they are contributing to young people's views about body and the like; but by the time those young people leave school in a few years' time, there will be other mechanisms that allow them to change their appearance and move their identity. So this is a responsibility that cannot just be placed on schoolteachers, and that needs to continue. The other thing that came out of Piers's report is that older people also need to be considered. Older people perhaps are less tech-literate than your son or the younger generation, who at least know to look. We are doing well with the education that is happening at the moment regarding responses to nonconsensual innovative image abuse. Generally, young people do know where they go. The problem has not been solved but, increasingly, they know where to go, which is an example of valuable information.

Prof. Howe: It is also an example of what the schools can do when they want to step up and what we could expect schools to do for information literacy.

CHAIR: Working with the regulator.

Prof. Howe: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today and for sharing this information with the committee. If you have been asked to provide any additional information, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday, 30 October 2024. It has been very interesting.

Proceedings suspended from 11:04 to 11:13

HALL, Mr Matthew, National Manager Systemic Advocacy and Policy, Australian Federation of Disability Organisations**STEFF, Mr Darryl, Chief Executive Officer, Down Syndrome Australia**

CHAIR: Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and, therefore, has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Mr Steff, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Steff: I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear here today. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and I extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today. Down Syndrome Australia is a Disability Representative Organisation. We represent people with intellectual disability, with a focus on those with chromosomal variations, such as Down syndrome. As an organisation, we strive for the full realisation of human rights for people with intellectual disability and for people with disability more generally. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss this important issue. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines, in Article 29, the rights of people with disability to participate in political and public life. Australia is a signatory to this convention, and Down Syndrome Australia sees inquiries such as this as being pivotal in ensuring that Australia is moving towards those goals of the CRPD. In our submission, it wasn't possible for us to cover all aspects of the inquiry, and neither are we the experts in all areas of the committee's terms of reference, so our response focuses on three key areas that impact people with disability in Australia, including the over-400,000 people with intellectual disability. These three areas are civics education, the provision of information, and other barriers to electoral participation. I'll touch briefly of each of those and, obviously, then be happy to take questions.

With respect to education, many students with intellectual disability are educated in specialist or segregated settings, particularly in the high-school environment, where adjustments are often made to the curriculum, which we understand can often include less of a focus on civics and citizenship education. Unfortunately, this means that the fundamental understanding of civics education is often denied to them, and we consider that reasonable adjustments should be made to allow there to be participation and learning in this area for all students, and it is not appropriate to simply remove topics and content from the curriculum for some students. On the provision of information, whilst we acknowledge that the AEC produces some information in Easyread, it's really hard to find and limited in its capacity. Also, no major parties produce policy or how-to-vote information in accessible formats for people with intellectual disability; this also goes towards denying the important aspects of being better informed and being able to participate in the electoral system. Thirdly, in terms of other barriers to participation, we consider that urgent reform is needed to the discriminatory and archaic approach that enables people to be deemed to be of unsound mind and removed from the electoral roll, often without consultation with them. These archaic and outdated laws need to change so that people with disability have the same right to a presumption of capacity as everyone else does and as is expected by the UN CRPD.

It would be great if the outcomes from this inquiry were able to address these issues. Our vision as an organisation is for an Australia where people living with Down syndrome and other chromosomal variations are valued, reach their potential and enjoy social and economic inclusion, and we hope that the committee shares this vision. Thank you; that concludes my opening remarks.

CHAIR: Mr Hall.

Mr Hall: On behalf of AFDO and each of the disability-specific and cross-disability communities represented by our membership, I want to thank the committee for including the voices of people with disability in your program of public hearings. If disability issues are not addressed and the diversity of voices of people with disability are not included and listened to, the committee's work will not and cannot promote nor support full electoral participation. AFDO is a Disabled People's Organisation (DPO), which means that AFDO is governed, led and constituted by people with disability and is within a disability rights movement that places people with disability at the centre of decision-making in all aspects of our lives. AFDO is funded under the Commonwealth Disability Representative Organisations (DRO) program, which is administered by the Department of Social Services. It provides extended advocacy for people with disability by promoting understanding of the lives and the rights and dignity of people with disability, fostering full participation in all aspects of Australian life by people with disability and communicating the views, concerns and lived experiences of people with disability to Australian governments.

It's important that you understand that not all Disability Representative Organisations are Disabled Peoples Organisations and that there are important distinctions between representative organisations for people with disability and representative organisations of people with disability, like AFDO. All AFDO members are DPOs and many are also national peak bodies and DROs, representing disability-specific communities; Down Syndrome Australia, also appearing this morning, is a great example of that within our membership. This places AFDO in a position of a national peak of peaks in the disability sector, representing people with disability and having a total reach of over four million Australians.

Electoral inclusion requires both enabling legal frameworks and inclusive voting practices; this, in turn, needs the Australian Electoral Commission to be committed to and be properly funded to deliver the changes that people with disability need in order to participate. Experiences in the European Union demonstrate that dedicated interaction between DPOs and election management bodies, like the AEC, supported by financial means and political will, can deliver meaningful change, and AFDO would be very willing to participate in any similar programs of dedicated funded interaction between Disabled Peoples Organisations and the Australian Electoral Commission.

We encourage the committee to carefully consider the norms, voting techniques and other elements of electoral processes emerging in member states of the European Union for voters with disability. This includes research conducted by the European Disability Forum and the network of Election-Watch.EU for the EDF *Human Rights Report 2022: political participation of persons with disabilities* and the 2024 report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Political participation of people with disabilities - new developments*, and that's where I'll leave my opening remarks.

CHAIR: Mr Steff, in your submission and opening statement, you talked about some subjects being removed or reduced in timetables for students with intellectual disabilities. First, how did you find out about that; and has Down Syndrome Australia had discussions as to why this is happening?

Mr Steff: Unfortunately, there's very little detailed research or evidence that we've been able to identify in this space, so a lot of our comments are based on anecdotal information that we hear through contacts that we have with families of people with Down syndrome and through our member organisations across Australia. We are a strong proponent of reform being needed in the education system. At the moment, what often happens with special or segregated education is that there is no obligation to teach the Australian curriculum; therefore, the education system often focuses on basic literacy and numeracy and a life-skills type of curriculum and approach. It seems that civics education is not considered to be a life skill as such and, therefore, often falls through the cracks. We see that as unfortunate because, obviously, people with disability have as much right as anybody else to exercise their democratic rights and probably more so than the general population. A lot of the supports and services in the environment in which people with disability find themselves in the broader community are dictated by government matters and government policies and so, probably even more than the general population, they should have an involvement in this space, yet they're often denied that right through the segregated education system that we have. So we would encourage more research in that space because I do think it's lacking; but definitely, through the special-school system, that's one of the big challenges.

CHAIR: Is this something that's happening across Australia; is that the feedback that you're receiving?

Mr Steff: I've heard of it from a number of different states and territories. Whether there would be one state or territory better or worse at it than others, I'm not in a position to make a comment on.

CHAIR: Has Down Syndrome Australia had any conversations regarding your concerns about the limits of civics education?

Mr Steff: Not specifically civics education. We approach it from a broader perspective around the fact that people with disability should have the right to the same education as their same-age peers and, yes, it should have reasonable adjustments to enable them to participate. But the starting point should be the same education, whether that's civics education, literacy, numeracy or any of those subjects.

CHAIR: This is a question for both you and AFDO. Firstly, I'd like to get an understanding of your relationship with the Australian Electoral Commission; and, secondly, what improvements would you recommend? Mr Steff, in your opening statement, you mentioned the AEC, so what improvements would you recommend the Australian Electoral Commission could make to its materials and resourcing to provide more accessibility to and understanding of the voting system?

Mr Steff: At the moment, the accessible information that's available, in terms of Easyread documents and even videos and things like that, which are a useful way for people with intellectual disability to access information, is pretty limited. The AEC have a couple of Easyread documents around how to enrol and how to

vote that are not easy to find, so I think one simple solution would be to make them easier to find on their website. They're kind of hidden below the logo, which shows all the different languages and buried with the translations, if you like; whereas if there was a very common Easyread logo and, if that appeared there, it would make those documents more accessible. So I think one thing would be ease of access to the existing resources. Then I think there's the opportunity to create more resources to support people with intellectual disability around the voting process and to consider whom they might vote for. Also, we could think of solutions other than just Easyread. I've mentioned videos. Looking at their website, they do have videos for lots of different languages but, again, some simple videos to help explain some of those processes is also often a good way to get that information across.

CHAIR: Does Down Syndrome Australia have any relationship with the AEC; are you part of an advisory group?

Mr Steff: No, not directly. We have had contact with them in the past generally around election cycles, where we have similar conversations. Unfortunately, we are very limited in resources as to where we can play and exercise our involvement, but we would welcome a conversation with them to push some of these things and to have some advice and consultation with them as to where they could improve their processes. I think, as Matthew from AFDO has mentioned, there is the opportunity for a broader engagement piece between the AEC and the disability community to look at how people with disability could be better supported to exercise their democratic rights, and we would support that.

CHAIR: Mr Hall.

Mr Hall: I will go to your question about the relationship with the AEC. I have to qualify my remarks by saying that I've only been in this role for four weeks, so I don't have a lot of corporate history, but I'm not aware of there being any relationship with the commission. That's my first point. In terms of what improvements could be made, I would certainly agree with and endorse Down Syndrome Australia's remarks around the availability of information in an accessible format, but I would go a little further and say that not only should documents be in Easyread format but also video content should be Auslan and audio captioned. When you look at the information that the commission publish in languages other than English, they have a vast array of languages; they do not necessarily have a vast array of different content, but they have a very long list of different languages for people whose first language is other than English, and there is not a single resource for Australians whose first language is Auslan. I make that point, as I think they could be a lot more inclusive in terms of the provision of that information.

The AEC could also do a lot more in terms of the other participants in the electoral process with candidates and political parties being required to provide information in different accessible formats. Another thing—I don't know to what extent this occurs already, if at all, in the commission—is to provide disability awareness training to their staff, particularly those staff who are at polling booths on an election day, who are interacting with people with disability and who perhaps will have a better understanding of why things might be happening or the reaction of a person with disability, so that they're a bit more attuned to what the issues might be. If that was across the whole organisation, that would also bring about some changes in attitude and culture, in terms of why it is important to provide reasonable conversation or increase the opportunity for people with disability to participate in an election event.

On that point—I don't mean this comment to be about the man personally—I've found it really interesting that the commission is still publicly pushing the line that section 93(8)(a) of the Electoral Act can't be changed because it would affect the integrity of the electoral process. I accept that's what this committee determined in 2012, but it did so without the benefit of the views contained in the Australian Law Reform Commission's 2014 report and its recommendation in relation to the introduction of a valid reason for not voting. Most recently, as at May 2022, as far as I can find, the director of media and digital content—I think that's his title—was quoted on ABC news as continuing that justification for the section. That raises in my mind the concern that—

CHAIR: What is that section about? Did you say section 93(8)(a)?

Mr Hall: Section 93(8)(a) says that, if they're of unsound mind and do not understand why they're enrolling or voting, a person is not entitled to remain on the roll and can be removed from the roll.

CHAIR: Please continue.

Mr Hall: Certainly, the views that have been expressed publicly by the commission are views that haven't been moderated or mediated by a whole bunch of stuff that has happened since 2012, when the question was last looked at, and their position is the same as it was in 2012. That brings to my mind a concern that there doesn't seem to have been any movement in thinking, notwithstanding that there has been a completely different approach to the issue recommended by the Australian Law Reform Commission in the meantime.

Ms LAWRENCE: Perhaps you could explain in a little more detail some of the experiences that people with disability have encountered at the polling booth when they actually receive the paperwork and with their participation in that process. By way of context, at one campaign, there was a young lady who was a first-time voter who burst into tears and was so overwhelmed because she didn't understand who these people were or what their policies were. She suddenly felt the significance of the opportunity to participate in democracy but didn't know what it all meant. For many people, it's an experience of complexity and there is a sense of not understanding how best to place their vote where it matters. I want to understand a little more from the perspective of those with a disability about how they feel about the experience and where there are tangible, actual examples that you can cite about where they've had a less-than-optimal experience at the booth.

Mr Hall: Following on from the example that you have given, there is a lot of anecdotal evidence, certainly about people who are neuro-diverse, and perhaps suffering from psychosocial conditions, who find the whole experience of running the gauntlet of all the volunteers, shoving pieces of paper in your face and saying, 'Vote 1,' for whoever it might be, very confronting and very triggering. It is sensorially overloading for them, which then will perhaps trigger them into responses as to how they deal with that. That's a real issue for people with sensory issues. There are also issues around the actual physical infrastructure, such as people with physical disability having to walk up stairs. It might be less of a problem now, but I live in regional New South Wales and neither of the two polling places that I can vote at have access that is wheelchair accessible into the place where you cast your vote. That sends a message of, 'You're not welcome; why are you here; you're not important,' or 'You're not valued.' I appreciate that's not within the control, necessarily, of the commission, in that they don't build the buildings; but the need to ensure that the physical infrastructure is right is important.

Another issue, certainly that we've heard about, is in terms of the ballot. Certainly, the Senate ballot paper is difficult to understand, even for people who might not have an intellectual disability. Certainly, for people who are blind or vision impaired, there can be issues with understanding or being able to read and cast their vote on the ballot. There are simple things that the commission could do in terms of providing magnifying glasses, the lighting in the room, the degree of contrast on the paper or providing assistive aids, such as sleeves, to help guide someone who's not able to see very well to where they have to mark the ballot paper. They would be the three things that immediately come to my mind.

Ms LAWRENCE: Generally, are the staff equipped with different resources to help people who identify with a particular need? You've described, for example, lighting, and that's obviously of the physical space itself, and an individual polling officer won't be able to control that in the moment. Are there other examples, or is it inconsistent and ad hoc, depending on the location?

Mr Hall: I think it comes down to the extent to which the commission staff member has had any disability awareness training and is alive to those sorts of issues. You might have someone who has undertaken that sort of training and who is in charge of the polling place bring some things in—not officially organised, in a sense, through the commission, but they go out themselves and say, 'We'll set aside this room here for people who might have sensory overload or a panic attack, so that they can sit there and be still and quiet,' and those sorts of things; they might think about those sorts of things. As far as I'm aware, there's nothing within the commission's operating procedures or guidelines on how to manage or conduct a polling place with regard to those sorts of issues.

Ms LAWRENCE: I had one experience where I was an observer at a booth in an aged-care facility. I noticed that, for a couple of individuals, their experience was a little different. They had a support person assisting them with completing the ballot paper, but the interaction with other people around them was perhaps less than desirable, to say the least. Suddenly, a couple of people were looking over and standing near them. What kind of support advice do you have or experiences that you can share with us for support people as well, in order to help us understand things to be mindful of during that moment?

Mr Hall: Certainly, if someone has someone with them, either to provide physical support or even in terms of a supported decision-making process, it seems that the immediate reaction is that is somehow interfering with the integrity of the ballot and the confidentiality of the votes, and that person shouldn't be standing next to the person in the booth and should be removed from there. I think there's not necessarily the right level of understanding of the role of the support person, why they are there and what they are doing. The default reaction will be, 'That's not allowed,' and that can cause all sorts of concerns by the person who is then trying to exercise their vote and having their support excluded or attempted to be excluded.

Ms LAWRENCE: Certainly, in that instance, that's what I observed. I was quite disappointed because I felt that the support person was intimidated and then the person that they were supporting got very confused. It was less than desirable, but I was hoping that it was a one-off.

Mr Hall: No; sadly, I don't think it was. That comes back to the point about the officer's understanding of why support people are needed and how that works. Also, I think that raises the point that we would urge that the committee recommend the repeal of section 93(8) and adopt the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission in its 2014 report. A key part of that is its recommendations in relation to a supported decision-making framework. There would be, I think, a real need to educate people around how it is that someone with a disability can still make a decision based on information and cast a ballot through that supported decision-making framework. It is about not depriving people of that, because that then denies them the support that they need in order to make their decision.

Ms LAWRENCE: I should have asked this at the beginning: statistically, do you know how many people with a disability are no longer on the electoral roll, relative to the population?

Mr Hall: 'No' is the short answer, other than my knowing that, for this committee's inquiry in 2012, the commission gave evidence at those hearings that between 2008 and 2012 something like 28,000 people had been removed from the rolls because of their disability. Relative to the voting population, that's not a large number, but it's still very concerning. What's even more concerning is that we simply don't have any data—I don't know whether the commission keep it, but they certainly don't disclose it—as to how many people since 2012 have been removed. There's no transparency around that. Again, that's certainly something that should be carefully considered. If the process is to deny someone their fundamental human right to vote, there should be some record of that decision having been made and the reasons for it having been made.

Ms LAWRENCE: I'll just follow up there. On postal voting versus in-person voting, do you have any sense of the proportion of people with a disability completing a postal vote versus an in-person vote?

Mr Hall: No, I don't; I'm sorry. People with disability might also choose, to the extent to which they're able to under the rules, to vote early, in a pre-polling booth, but I don't know what the statistics are. I would only hazard a guess that, since COVID, there's probably a greater reliance by people on submitting postal votes than attending a booth in person simply because of the continuing high levels of anxiety around COVID, particularly for people who are immunocompromised.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hall. Just before I ask Mr Steff to respond to those questions as well, I will say that we will ask the Australian Electoral Commission whether they can give us updated figures on people who have been removed from the electoral roll under the unsound mind provision. We'll see what we get. Mr Steff.

Mr Steff: Thank you. It would be good to get that information. I support many of the comments that Mr Hall made in response to the question from Ms Lawrence. I would emphasise three quick things. As Mr Hall raised, disability awareness training amongst the Australian Electoral Commission staff and people manning the polling booths would help a lot with some of the challenges that were described in the previous discussion. Going back to the comment about postal voting and early voting, I think that's an underutilised tool that could address some of the challenges that have been described. If there is anxiety or misunderstanding about people who are handing out the how-to-vote cards and there's anxiety about going into a polling booth, I think postal and early voting can and should be promoted more as a tool to address and remove some of those challenges to voting.

On the discussion about a support person and that broader supported decision-making, again I completely agree with the comments that Mr Hall made. Some of that comes back to disability awareness. It's also worth raising that, amongst family members, support workers or whoever supports people with intellectual disability, there is also a lack of knowledge sometimes about how to most appropriately support that person to vote without being seen to direct or feeling that they are directing that vote. A huge amount of work and training needs to be done in that space.

Voting is one example of it, but the whole area of supported decision-making has been acknowledged by the disability royal commission as a significant area of work—that it needs better investment and better training, not only for disability-specific organisations but also for support people, as well as mainstream organisations. So there's another piece there about how that support is appropriately done to enable someone to exercise that democratic right.

CHAIR: Mr Steff, you answered my question earlier to say that, as far as you're aware, there isn't some sort of advisory group at the AEC that takes into account advice from disability organisations. Mr Hall, on behalf of AFDO—I know that you've only been in your role for a short period of time—are you aware of any advisory group that the AEC has in place that seeks advice from disability organisations?

Mr Hall: No, I'm not. I would think that, if it existed, it would be something that the disability community would be aware of. I'm certainly not aware of it; nor have I heard of it. I think the implementation of something like that, as part of the suggestion that I made in my opening remarks about collaboration between disabled

peoples organisations and the commission, would be really useful. Within local government, I know that every local authority, certainly in New South Wales, has to have an inclusion and disability advisory panel to advise councillors and the mayor on issues that affect people with disability. I'm a member of the City of Sydney's panel on that. It's really useful in identifying things that people without disability don't necessarily think of. It puts a disability lens over every decision and document that comes out. I think that sort of process within the commission would be really helpful to build capacity and understanding, and probably two-way understanding for the disability community to better understand what the commission does.

CHAIR: The Australian Federation of Disability Organisations also has a number of obstacles that you've listed for homeless people.

Mr Hall: Yes.

CHAIR: Are you aware of any work that the Australian Electoral Commission undertakes in terms of outreach for homeless individuals, including in any other states?

Mr Hall: Again, no, not that I'm aware of. There are certainly lots of programs that do reach out to people who are homeless, to do with having somewhere where official pieces of paper can be mailed, collected and those sorts of things, but I'm not aware of any specific engagement by the commission in any of those programs.

CHAIR: Are you aware of any state electoral commissions doing any work concerning homeless people?

Mr Hall: I don't know about electoral commissions. I suspect that it's not seen as a very high priority, either for the people who are homeless or for the people who are providing services to them to help manage aspects of lives that are made more difficult by the fact that they don't have a permanent place of residence. In a very intellectual sense, the right to vote is very important. But when you're sleeping on the streets and wondering where you might get your next meal, and the act of relieving yourself is an offence, with everyone closing up the public toilets and toilets within shopping centres at 5 o'clock or 8 or 9 o'clock at night, and where, essentially, you're being forced to break the law if you urinate in the park, they're probably the more high-level things that they're worried about.

CHAIR: I'll give you an opportunity to make some final statements. You've indicated some recommendations that you would like the committee to have a look at, but I'll just give you this final opportunity, before we finish this session, to go to your priority areas. I also ask you to highlight any barriers or any measure that is going well that we haven't touched on.

Mr Steff: In terms of our high-level recommendations, as we've touched on, more work does need to be done on the curriculum for children who are being educated in special education settings, to ensure that they still have the opportunity to learn about civics education. We've spoken about some of the information and the accessibility side of things. A recommendation on some form of advisory body for the AEC would be a great idea. Echoing AFDO's comments, importantly, we would like to see some resourcing that goes with that, because none of those things happen for nothing and it would need to be backed by some form of resourcing to take action in some of those areas.

CHAIR: Does Down Syndrome Australia run any sort of civics program or information program for when an election is on?

Mr Steff: We do very limited work because of resourcing constraints. We will often share some information, some Easyread information, about elections and things like that. We would love the opportunity to do some of that more grassroots support and information, similar to the comment that you made with the previous witnesses about CALD communities. People go to their trusted organisations in their local communities to understand some of this information. I think that would be a great opportunity to help provide access to information for people with disability. That grassroots avenue would be a great way to go, and we'd be keen to work on things like that.

The final area for us probably echoes many of AFDO's comments around the 'unsound mind' criterion in section 93(8)(a). It is essential that gets revisited and changed. The assessment is made by a medical practitioner. The way it is worded is archaic and discriminatory. Many people with intellectual disability are able to exercise the right to vote; that should be the presumption. There should not be the ability to remove that through a simple process, which can even be done by someone who is not that individual, often without them being aware.

Other submissions to this inquiry noted the generally low understanding of democracy, the parliamentary process and voting in Australian public, yet they are still allowed to turn up and vote at the polling booths. To give you a personal example to this, I have 18- and 19-year-old boys who don't have an intellectual disability, and I have a 14-year-old girl who does have an intellectual disability. She is not voting age yet, but I can sit here now and say I would have absolute confidence that she would have as much ability to cast a vote as my 18- and 19-year-old boys. That is partly a reflection on her ability and capacity, but it is also a reflection on the lack of

understanding of some of the people who have just become entitled to vote—and lack of interest, in many cases. My 14-year-old has a diagnosis that under this act allows her to be removed from the electoral roll; that is discriminatory because other people will turn up and vote on the basis of the colour of a shirt a politician is wearing which they like.

Mr Hall: In May, 2022 an article appeared in a magazine called *upstart*, entitled: 'Common misconceptions. Parties versus presidents'. A young woman wrote that she was knocked off her feet to have been told the week before that she doesn't actually vote for the person who runs the country—she had voted already, in the 2016 election. She commented that she didn't think that she would be alone in thinking that she was casting a vote for the Prime Minister. Another illustration which highlights how discriminatory this provision is, is the definition of 'unsound mind' in the Queensland Mental Health Act, which specifically says that you are not of unsound mind if you are in a state of mind resulting to any extent from intentional intoxication or stupefaction. So I could be out all night drinking before the night of the election, turn up to the polling place completely intoxicated, not have any cognitive faculties at all, and cast my vote. I would not have any understanding of the nature or significance of that vote, but because I am not a person with disability, I am fully entitled to do that, if that is how I choose to exercise my right. But a person with disability is not.

This section conflates legal capacity with mental capacity, where the existence of a cognitive impairment permits a limitation on the exercise of legal agency and on the recognition of legal capacity as a whole. You don't hold out much hope when a recommendation was made in 2014 and no government since then has agreed that it is a good thing to implement. The Law Reform's recommendation says that the capacity is based on the person's decision-making ability in the context of the particular decision they face in a particular election. It is not a status-based assessment. It is having regard to what is happening right now and to the decision-making assistance that is available to support that decision being made. It is: 'Do you have the capacity to make a decision?'—and not whether you should be removed from the roll.

In regard to the national decision-making principles that the commission recommended, I would urge you to also consider the nine best practice principles and the eight best practice elements that the La Trobe University Living with Disability Research Centre identified in its 2023 research report for the disability royal commission as part of a supported decision-making framework to increase the opportunity for people with disability to exercise agency and their right to vote.

CHAIR: Thank you to both of you today for your attendance and for sharing this information with the committee. If you have been asked to provide any additional information, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday, 30 October 2024.

GREEN, Dr Deborah, Secretary, Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (by audio link)

NEOH, Dr Jia Ying, President, Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (by audio link)

SMITH, Dr Bryan, Member of the Executive, Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia (by audio link)

TUDBALL, Dr Libby, Adjunct Associate Professor, Monash University

[12:07]

CHAIR: I welcome representatives from the Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia. Thank you for appearing today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Dr Tudball: My main reason for being here is that for 40 years I have been a member of SCEAA; I am here to answer questions if my colleagues cannot, and also to share in our answers to your questions.

Dr Smith: I am currently a lecturer at James Cook University in Townsville. I am here today in my capacity as a member of the executive of SCEAA.

Dr Green: I am program director at the University of South Australia, but appear today in my capacity as executive secretary of SCEAA.

Dr Neoh: I am a lecturer at the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. I am representing SCEAA today as the president.

CHAIR: Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respected houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Neoh: Good afternoon, members of the committee. SCEAA is a peak national body dedicated to promoting high-quality social and citizenship education. We connect a diverse network of educators, researchers, and professional associations, actively engaged in teaching at all levels from primary schools to higher education institutions. Together we strive to enhance students' understanding of civics and citizenship education across Australia. In spite of our efforts, we have identified two critical issues. First, access to effective civics and citizenship education is inconsistent across various jurisdictions. Many students lack equitable opportunities around civics and national assessments review a concerning decline in proficiency. Less than 50 per cent of year 10 students meet the proficient standard in civics knowledge. Second, civics and citizenship education has not been prioritised on a political and educational agenda for over 20 years. Our research indicates that many teachers have a limited understanding of both the content and effective teaching strategies necessary to engage students with civics issues relevant to their life. This disengagement is particularly pressing amid global and national evidence of rising youth disengagement and declining democratic participation.

To address these challenges, we propose the following: first, the establishment of a national research centre focused on civics and citizenship education. This centre will conduct audits and gather data on teaching practices to ensure that all students receive a robust civics education. We also advocate for national benchmarks for civics and citizenship education that are contextually grounded, ensuring that every student, regardless of location, has equitable access to this essential curriculum.

Second, we emphasise the need for national professional learning programs for teachers. Equipping educators with knowledge and skills to teach civics effectively is crucial for fostering engaged and participatory students. Professional development will enhance teachers' confidence and ability to deliver engaging civics and citizenship lessons, leading to a deeper understanding of democratic principles and civics responsibilities amongst students. Third, we recognise that social, economic, and cultural barriers can hinder electoral participation. It is vital to prioritise outreach efforts that engage culturally and geographically diverse communities, ensuring that their voices are included in our democratic society and decision-making processes.

In conclusion, enhancing civics and citizenship education is not just a matter of curriculum development; it is also essential for nurturing informed and active citizens capable of sustaining our democracy. We urge the committee to consider our recommendation, as we work together to improve civics and citizenship education for all young Australians. Thank you for your time.

CHAIR: Thank you; that was very interesting. You said that we are failing in terms of the benchmarks around civics education. Can you provide the committee with any figures regarding year 10 assessments? The curriculum, as I understand it, is assessed every three years by ACARA. Are you able to give the committee an

understanding of how those assessment figures have been going to SCEAA over the last three assessments? I understand that the current assessment has not been released.

Dr Tudball: The current assessment is being conducted in 2024. The last results we have are from 2021. As Ying has mentioned, there is a decline. Only 50 per cent of year 10 students meet those benchmarks; however, that's overall. It's necessary to go into some detail when you actually look at the national report because the indicators are not all negative. For example, young people show a far greater interest in the rights of First Nations people in Australia. There has been some increase in students' propensity, willingness or disposition to engage but that engagement is mixed. It's a little hard just to pull out one figure here in this moment. However, the concern is that we're at a 'glass half-full' and a 'glass half-empty', where we know that there needs to be far more focus on not only the civic knowledge component but also the citizenship, the propensity to participate civic engagement, membership of community and what that means in action in communities, because other than the NAP-CC every three years, we don't have any rigorous national study that provides us with up-to-date figures on that work.

CHAIR: Once that assessment is complete, and if it's not producing the results that educators would like it to produce, what then is ACARA's role? Do they look at the curriculum and suggest changes? What is it that they do, which you believe a national centre would be better off doing?

Dr Tudball: There has been no action coming out of the NAP-CC report. That report provides all the information and the subsections. There is, if you like, a status quo at the year 6 level. There has been no decline in the year 6 level, but no increase. The report exists as a piece of evidence, but it has not been actioned in any way that I'm aware of—I would like to step back and let my colleagues answer your question as well—to create an opportunity to build better teaching and learning and better opportunities for professional learning in this way. I'd prefer to allow my colleagues to have a chance to answer that question too.

Dr Green: I agree with what Libby has just said. There needs to be action that comes out of the report, but at this stage we have not seen that. I support what she has said.

CHAIR: You talk about a national research centre being established to implement an audit. Is that something that ACARA could do, or should they be given more powers?

Dr Green: I think that they could probably lead that. I don't know that they should be given the power to actually do it. It would be better in the hands of someone else. They could certainly oversee it and lead that up. That would be my thought on that.

Dr Smith: I am not sure I have any specific thoughts about the role that ACARA could play in this, other than to say that I am not convinced that quantitative data in and of itself paints a rich enough picture of the kinds of work that still needs to be done, both in schools and in teacher education. Trying to understand, for instance, why educators have difficulties doing this work or what kinds of anxieties or challenges perhaps impede doing the kind of work that they need to do. I am not sure whether quantitative data can capture that. Whether or not ACARA is involved to generate richer, qualitative data to get at the voices of those on the ground, I suppose is a question that I can't really answer. To come back to the original question about some of the data, I think that we need a richer picture that isn't necessarily just captured in these relatively static moments across relatively long periods of time.

Dr Neoh: I would like to add to that. The first important point is to reiterate what Libby has just said. For many years nothing has come out from the report in terms of the things that we're doing. That's one point that we need to address. The second point, to directly answer your question about whether ACARA should be given more power, is that I certainly value the power that they have, but I also think that there is a need to involve more people working in this area. I echo what Deb and Bryan have said. At this point we currently do not have a lot of research across jurisdictions in terms of understanding about the practice. So while we have papers of research that informs what we know now, there is actually a lot of space and a lot of potential, and a critical need to actually understand what is going on more broadly across schools to be able to better understand the situation and to respond to the needs of the teachers and the students.

CHAIR: My question now goes to what you hope an audit like this would achieve? Is this to have a look at what the different states and territories are actually teaching across their school systems?

Dr Neoh: Definitely. I think that we need more understanding of the local context. Civics and citizenship is something that needs to be understood contextually. We need more data and more information, which we currently do not have. Yes, a research centre would allow and support us to do that; to work together with our teachers and to work together with our students to understand actual situations for us to be able to present findings that are more complete, holistic and contextually grounded.

CHAIR: Do you have any informal data at all—I am not just talking about the straight figures—that you can provide to the committee around this? Are some jurisdictions doing a good job?

Dr Neoh: I will open it up to my colleagues. Individually, we have all done research on different areas. For example, I worked in the context of primary schools in New South Wales. I can offer my research insights on that. I would just like to pass and give my colleagues some time to talk about their research as well.

Dr Green: Ying and I are also working on a project across the different universities to find out the level of self-efficacy that our pre-service teachers actually have. Sadly, many of them come into university not having great experiences in the civics and citizenship area. We're trying to find out what those experiences have been like and almost co-design with them what they would like to see moving forward. For me, a research centre could do that work. It could actually look at capturing it. As Bryan has said, it could look at not only capturing the voices of those on the floor but also it could empower them to help us co-design across the national platform about what they want and what they think could actually work. The research that we're doing, as I said, is looking at the level of self-efficacy that our pre-service teachers have in that area; and certainly when they graduate how confident they feel about taking on this learning area, looking back into what their schooling was like for themselves. That is the research that we're doing in that space at the moment.

Dr Neoh: In terms of the work that we have done, the preliminary findings have actually shown low levels of confidence in teaching civics and citizenship education.

CHAIR: Is there any indication of why they would have low-level confidence?

Dr Green: The preliminary findings are actually showing us what they experienced in their own schooling. Not all of them, of course, but a large number are coming in with low levels of exposure to civics and citizenship and therefore don't feel confident teaching that. We are measuring—'measuring' is probably not the right word—or trying to capture the impact of what we are teaching them is having. But that is one course in a program, whether it's a master's or postgraduate two-year program, or a four-year undergraduate program. It is still only a snapshot in time. It is still only a very small part of it. But a lot of their low-level confidence is relating back to what their own experiences have been.

Dr Neoh: I could add to that with respect to my own research into primary schools in New South Wales. One of the things that has been consistent across the schools is that the teachers are saying that they don't know what civics and citizenship education is about. In fact, many teachers at my interviews actually said that they had to do a Google search on what civics and citizenship is about before coming to my interview. That's one finding. The other finding, which I think is quite important to raise here, is that we need to understand that democracy, civics and citizenship can mean different things to different people. If we are looking to support a more vibrant democratic culture and society there are certain important competencies and knowledges that we need to teach. Currently with the global climate, global national climate and societal climate there is a tendency for teachers to lean towards more of an uncritical engagement with the society and things going on in the world. That's very worrying. It indicates not just the amount of civics and citizenship education but also the nature of civics and citizenship education. That calls for an important need for us to address not only the amount but also the quality of civics and citizenship education in Australia.

Dr Smith: If I may extend that to address some research we have done looking at how teacher education programs are equipped, or not, to do this kind of work to support those often young learners training to be teachers who don't have these knowledge bases and skills. One of the things we found—albeit a relatively small study—is that even teacher educators themselves are unclear as to what this language means and how and what role it plays in the work that they do. We were concerned about this, even in places that might not identify this language as being important like, for instance, with maths, which is tasked, if I can quote from the national curriculum, 'to help students make choices as active and engaged citizens'. For instance, math, teacher education, lecturers don't have that language itself. It becomes a process of reproducing that same problem over and over again.

Dr Tudball: Another thing we have discussed at the executive level of SCEAA is that ACARA has the responsibility to create the curriculum but not the responsibility to provide the pedagogy for the teachers and for the schools. They are not a statutory corporation that is charged with providing professional learning. That's our core work as professional associations working at the state and territory level—across all levels of Australia—even though we're volunteers, as such. One of the critical things that we've noted is that the architecture of the Australian curriculum is not yet being fully implemented. By that I mean that civics and citizenship is one subject within humanities and social sciences, but for young people to be truly active and informed and participatory citizens they need the ethical understanding that is in the general capabilities, the intercultural understanding. They need the personal and social capability, which is another one of the capabilities. But also connections need

to be made with the cross-curriculum priorities, studying First Nations peoples looking at questions of sustainability, which is so pivotal to young people and the things that concern them about their worlds; as well as looking at Asia and Australia's engagement because that's global citizenship.

In work that I have done over the last six months, I have found that teachers actually find it very difficult to make those connections, plan, and look at this as a field of learning, and not so much as silo-ed subject content. In lots of ways NAP-CC really looks at the civics subject and some small elements of citizenship, but not the broader understanding of what it means to be a member of a local, national and global community and how they, as young people, can have their voice and agency represented within that. That work needs to be far more deeply understood and recommendations need to come out of that—the pedagogical approaches, as Bryan, Ying and Deb have all said, that pre-service teachers and practising teachers are lacking, because it is over 20 years since there has been any national emphasis on this.

CHAIR: Do we have any jurisdictions that are doing it well?

Dr Tudball: Victoria has Social Education Victoria. Laura Newman, the executive officer, has presented to the panel. It is interesting that the reason why Victoria has such an active association is because it's funded by the department of education and training in Victoria, so staff can be provided to run professional learning in this space for teachers. As far as I'm aware—and others may speak—that is the only state or territory based professional learning organisation that is active in this field.

CHAIR: Are there any further comments?

Dr Neoh: With regard to your last question, about whether we have examples of states and teachers doing well, certainly, we have colleagues who are doing a great job. I think that civics and citizenship education is so important. Every student has a right to quality civics and citizenship education. It should not be limited to certain states or certain teachers' classrooms.

CHAIR: We have had some evidence given to the committee around accommodating civics education in years 11 and 12. I would like to get your view on that. Some of the evidence that we have received is that it's difficult to be able to put more into an already overcrowded curriculum. Could you go to that point? The other question—I want to get it clear for myself—is about exactly what you believe a national research centre should be doing. Let's say the audit has been completed. What's next? What do you think the national research centre should be established for?

Dr Neoh: I'll stick to the first point about the overcrowded curriculum. This issue has been raised in policy documents, in reviews and by colleagues in the media. It is a very common thing that has been raised. I will open it up to my colleagues to add to later. One of the key purposes of the national research centre is that it will provide that ongoing understanding of what is happening. Coming from a background in education, and returning to what Libby just said, we should not be teaching civics and citizenship in a silo and as something that should be added. Civics and citizenship, if practised and taught meaningfully and effectively, should be a part of our life. It should be part of education. It should be part of school life, a student's life.

We do have solutions and ideas, because our research is based on that; therefore we want the opportunity to be able to share and conduct professional learning programs for teachers to see how we can work with the curriculum to meaningfully integrate it into all key learning areas, and not be seen as something that is added on. The concern about adding on actually reflects a very limited understanding of what civics and citizenship is about. It should not be in a silo. I will open it up for my colleagues to add their views.

Dr Green: I agree with everything that Ying has just said. You hear teachers saying that it is an overcrowded curriculum. We know that civics and citizenship has been followed up under the HASS banner, with history, geography, economics and business. I will go back to the research and the comment I made earlier around confidence and self-efficacy. If I am a new graduate and I don't have a lot of confidence in teaching civics and citizenship, if I move into an area that is taught under a banner of HASS, I'm going to teach what I'm comfortable with. I'm going to teach the areas, probably, of history and maybe a bit of geography, but I won't necessarily teach civics and citizenship, if that's what I'm not confident with and that's not where I feel that I have the level of self-efficacy that I need. Going to the research centre, and capturing that data—I tend to lean towards the co-designed stuff with teachers, to get what they need and want in there—it is about co-designing resources that will support them, so that it is not an add-on and it is not extra work; it's already there for them to be able to implement. I think that is really important.

We also have a national agenda where we are focused very much on literacy and numeracy, to the detriment of civics and citizenship. It's equally as important, as has been said—I think Libby said it earlier—in terms of the general capability and meeting the demands and dreams, if you like, of the Alice Springs Education Declaration.

If we can work as a research centre to be able to develop resources and things that are easy—if 'easy' is the right word—for teachers to be able to feel confident in presenting and embedding within the curriculum, that will certainly be a big help.

Dr Smith: I want to come back to the question of appreciating context. There is a very small body of research that highlights the importance of the context regarding where people are and the influence that has on their political participation. The work that I am thinking of doesn't deal directly with education specifically; I think there is some merit to having a national focus that is also aware of the different contexts in which teachers and students are or are not engaging in political participation. Some of the research that I have come across suggests that people in smaller communities are more politically involved because they can see their actions having more efficacy. I don't know that there's enough, or indeed any, research in education that highlights how different contexts allow for different levels of political participation.

Dr Tudball: Firstly, to address your question about years 11 and 12, it's fraught, because of the ways in which students at that level are making, often, their career choices, their pathway choices into transition. For year 10, the evidence we've had since 2004, again and again, every three years, is that there is no improvement. In fact, there is a decline. It seems to me that there are some pedagogical possibilities for year 10 students and sharing of diverse practice in diverse contexts. First of all, you have to capture that diverse process. The national centre that we envisage would not just be about auditing what is going on, although benchmarking can be very important in its initial stages; it would be about using technology effectively and talking with people in really diverse contexts, as happened in the national values education project in 2000-02, which can capture rich data that can then be acted upon and shared with other contexts that have similarities. I would think that it is almost in the 'too hard' basket.

As all of my colleagues have said, civics and citizenship isn't just about knowing how to be a voter in an election; it's about understanding democracy and your rights and responsibilities as citizens in diverse communities. Back in the early 2000s, we had the Erebus study into the Discovering Democracy project. It is about young people having opportunities to participate in their own school governance—not just in the 'goody two shoes' student councils but in real representation around issues that are of concern to young people in their own communities, through things like student action teams. The work of Roger Holdsworth, from the Youth Research Centre, has been going on for decades. None of my pre-service teachers that I have taught in the last 15 years had ever heard of any of that work.

A research centre can pull out what we can learn from diverse contexts, because we are not a one-size-fits-all nation, and look at whole-school approaches, engagement with communities and engagement with intergenerational citizenship, which is so important—what older people think, and young people, in understanding rights and responsibilities. We need, once again, to do some really solid-action research that involves teachers, teacher voices, student voice and agency on this question. We need to make sure that we don't use the term 'best practice' but that we share diverse practice that is alert to context, that is alert to the group that was discussing this very important area with you before, around diverse student needs, including special needs and so on, in this work. It needs to be re-energised. That would be what I would urge the committee to hear from SCEAA.

CHAIR: Thank you all for presenting today and sharing your information with the committee. I am not sure whether you have been asked to provide any additional information. If you have, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday, 30 October 2024. If there is any research—I know Dr Green particularly talked about her research—or data that you believe would help the committee in our deliberations, please forward it by 30 October 2024. I would appreciate that. We will now suspend the hearing and take a short lunch break.

Proceedings suspended from 12:43 to 13:13

FRAILLON, Mr Julian, Senior Adviser, Australian Council for Educational Research**FRIEDMAN, Dr Tim, Senior Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research**

CHAIR: I now resume this hearing and welcome representatives from the Australian Council for Educational Research. Thank you for appearing today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Frailon: I am one of the authors of the paper that was submitted.

Dr Friedman: I am also one of the authors of the paper.

CHAIR: Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Friedman: Thank you to the esteemed members of this committee for allowing our organisation to make this contribution. My colleague, Julian, and I would like to acknowledge the other authors of the report who aren't present today. They are the lead author, John Ainley, and also Rachel Parker, who made a critical contribution. As you will have read in our submitted paper, ACER has done a great deal of work with large-scale assessment studies concerning civics and citizenship outcomes in Australian schools. These outcomes include students' knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship, their values and attitudes towards civics and citizenship processes and issues and their behavioural intentions regarding future participation in civics and citizenship activities.

Our paper draws on published findings primarily from Australia's National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship, or NAP-CC, which is run by ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. ACER has been contracted to administer this study on a triennial basis since 2004. The latest data available is from the 2019 cycle. Analysis and reporting of data from the 2024 cycle is in progress.

The study provides achievement outcomes for both year 6 and year 10 students, as well as rich data on students' values and attitudes towards, and engagement with, civics and citizenship, via a background questionnaire. We also use data from IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, or ICCS, the only international study of its kind. ACER was the international study centre for the first three cycles of the study, with the data collected from the most recent cycle concluding in 2022.

That study is targeted towards lower secondary students, and it too includes an assessment component and a questionnaire component that provides non-cognitive outcomes data, similar to Australia's national assessment. It should be noted that Australia hasn't actually participated in this study, but it provides valuable international context and benchmarks for civics and citizenship education outcomes. We'd also like to note for this inquiry that there is an opportunity for Australia to participate in the next cycle of this study, in 2027.

Lastly, we included findings from the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment study, or PISA, using data from the 2018 cycle. In that cycle, the study captured outcomes of global competence amongst 15-year-old students. Our report summarised the findings from these various studies, which we hope have been valuable to your inquiry. We would be happy to discuss any aspect of this report and answer any questions you might have about these studies.

CHAIR: Thank you. We just heard from the Social and Citizenship Education Association of Australia their view that we need a national research centre to audit civics education in schools and then have a look at what needs to be done from there. What's your view of that recommendation? Is that something that we need?

Mr Frailon: I would suggest that there is a lack of clear information about what's happening directly in schools with respect to civics and citizenship education. Whether or not the best solution is to set up a research body specifically to look into that, I'm not as certain. I would suggest looking at the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, which is a cross-national study. In 2022, there were 24 countries participating, mostly from Western Europe but also some from Asia and Latin America. That study includes questionnaires for teachers, up to 15 teachers in each school, as well as school principals, from national centres. In fact, that study collects very rich and detailed information about what is happening in schools and in countries with respect to civics and citizenship education. It is standardised across the study so that results are directly comparable across the countries.

In terms of what you are getting—the bang for your buck, for want of a better term—that sort of data collection is potentially richer than a single data collection sourced from within Australia. What you are not getting, in

comparison, is the ability to adjudicate the absolute quality of the education in schools. You get a picture of what types of activities teachers are engaging in, what types of activities students are engaging in, the nature of school approaches and their principles and beliefs about what is important in civics and citizenship education. You then have to make further judgements about the quality of those decisions and the quality of that implementation. It is not as prescriptive. It is a research exercise. What you get is data that is comparable across a broad range of countries. It's not the only option to set up a specific research centre.

CHAIR: Who is invited to be part of this global international research study?

Mr Fraillon: All countries. Are you familiar with TIMSS, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or PIRLS, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study?

CHAIR: Yes, somewhat.

Mr Fraillon: Those studies are administered by the same organisation. The entry criteria are the same. Australia is a member country of the organisation. You don't have to be in order to participate. Any country can apply and say, 'We'd like to participate.' That's it. You apply to the IEA. It's not really an application. There is an international participation fee and then countries are responsible for their own administrative costs within countries. Beyond that, there are no barriers to participation.

CHAIR: What's your organisation's view on how we're going in terms of civics education in Australia?

Dr Friedman: We're looking at data from the 2019 civics and citizenship NAP study. Obviously, the more recent data collection, which unfortunately is not available at this point for this inquiry, would probably provide further evidence. We are seeing quite a substantial proportion of students that are not meeting the expected level of proficiency at both year 6 and year 10 levels. We also see that there are a large number of students who are not necessarily prepared to be active citizens, based on their engagement and their value of citizenship education. There is a lot of work that probably should be done to try to increase the number of students that are not only able to engage but actually want to engage.

CHAIR: Are you expecting the next set of data to be any different?

Dr Friedman: I am not in a position to make a judgement on that. We can only draw on what other studies have shown, such as ICCS. Australia is not participating in that. In other educational assessments that we have seen, there have been changes over time. It is probably too early to make that estimate.

Mr Fraillon: I can expand a little on that. Most recently, we've had the COVID disruption. What we've seen consistently in international studies data published so far, where data collection has taken place before and after the COVID disruption, has been a decrease in student achievement. That has been consistent in all learning areas that have been assessed in international assessment so far. We can't speculate about whether that would be parallel in civics in Australia. Certainly, in the ICCS context, student achievement decreased between the cycles, on average, across countries. Similarly, the US national sample assessment of civics and citizenship, the NAEP program, was not reported in here, but they also saw a decrease in civics over that time.

CHAIR: Which countries do civics and citizenship education well?

Mr Fraillon: The Scandinavian countries. You would look at the Scandinavian countries first in terms of engagement measures. That would be a starting point.

CHAIR: How do they conduct their civics and citizenship education? What is it that they do that we're not doing in Australia?

Dr Friedman: That's a very good question.

CHAIR: I don't know if you know the answer to this, but I am talking about any informal means as well.

Mr Fraillon: Off the top of my head, I can't answer the question about exactly what Scandinavian countries are doing differently.

CHAIR: We have heard evidence about the training of teachers. There's low confidence in teachers being able to actually teach civics and citizenship. We've heard some evidence on that point. We've also heard evidence about the curriculum being applied very differently across jurisdictions and, in fact, in schools as well. The data that we've received also indicates that primary school children, grade 6 children, are doing better in civics than their year 10 counterparts. We will be looking to recommend what it is that we need to do in Australia to increase participation in civics, to enable people to have full participation in Australia culturally and to understand the voting system, to understand what is misinformation and disinformation. It is a very important inquiry. We are trying to work out what is working and what is not working.

Mr Fraillon: To pick up on a few points you made, certainly teacher training is something that needs to be addressed. Yes, beginning teachers often lack confidence in addressing civics and citizenship. There are two aspects to that. One is content, just straight content knowledge and understanding what is in the curriculum, understanding what needs to be taught and how. The second relates to the values, which is a challenge. There's a tension in civics and citizenship education in Australia, which is that if you look at the various declarations by Australian schooling about high-level outcomes, they specify particular attitudes—for example, relating to diversity in Australia or to Indigenous Australia—that sometimes are criticised by some people with particular political beliefs as coming from the Left. There is a challenge in some teachers' minds about how they can address these particular issues without being criticised for promoting their own views—and they might not even be their own views—they are criticised for promoting a particular set of views.

So there's a tension in Australia between what are specified as the outcomes of civics and citizenship education and how they can be separated from particular political viewpoints.

CHAIR: There is some concern that a teacher might be—

Mr Fraillon: reticent to promote—

CHAIR: Or that they could have a discussion about a certain issue because they are seen as being to the left or to the right.

Mr Fraillon: Yes, either way. In addition, one of the things that is clear from the report and from other literature in the area is that students' political socialisation comes from school but is also heavily influenced by out-of-school influences, the home being one of them. There is a tension for teachers knowing that, when they engage in discussions with students, students might take that home and say, 'We talked about this at school.' The parents may not agree with a particular view that has been expressed and may not necessarily have seen it in the context of the classroom, where a range of views might be being discussed. A nervousness has been clearly documented in the US—not as much in Australia, although I would argue it still exists here. That is one of the challenges.

In terms of the curriculum, it is a noble intention to have civics and citizenship as a cross-curriculum dimension. It is completely understandable. In most countries in ICCS it is seen in similar ways. Around the world it typically is seen as a whole-school responsibility. It relates to every subject in different ways. There are expectations that teachers will address civics and citizenship content in different ways. That runs into a challenge in two places. Firstly, it is sometimes hard to find the teacher in the school who is responsible for teaching the explicit content. It gets embedded in activities, or there might be a discussion in science, for example, about civics related action in terms of the environment or something. I am not being critical of teachers here, but a teacher says, 'I am a science teacher, I have done the civics part here and it has been covered as a class discussion' or, 'I have asked someone to mention it in their assignment.' That doesn't necessarily have the same explicit value in the broad comparison of values across the curriculum as mathematics and science. Sometimes it can get lost in the cracks, being a cross-curricular domain.

The assessment of civics and citizenship in schools is relatively limited, as well. A set of statements might be made on a report, but whether they are given the same level of careful thought and planning in terms of assessment as the core learning areas is up for question. Having a clearer assessment of a learning area gives it a status for students, parents, and teachers. If you say, 'We are going to have a test on this' or 'I am going to write a report which will reference these things very clearly' that gives it a higher status relative to, 'We have covered a set of activities, we hope you have thought about this and now we're moving on.' That falling between the cracks and the lack of explicit assessment are two areas that could be considered as well.

Dr Friedman: I refer to your comment about what we can learn from other countries that are performing successfully, such as those in Scandinavia. One of the benefits of ICCS is the rich contextual data that is collected. We not only collect data at the student level from the teachers and the school principals; we also collect a lot of information at the national system level on what is happening with regard to teacher education and with regard to national policies on civics and citizenship. We include a lot of that information in the international report. I am sorry we can't give you a definitive answer right now. We would be happy to do so if you wanted more information. That could be a good insight into what is going on in other countries.

CHAIR: Does your association look at the more informal activities centred around civics and citizenship that are conducted through schools? They have youth parliaments and they may do voting in a mock election. Do you look at those sorts of activities and the benefits of those activities?

Dr Friedman: As part of the student questionnaire in our national assessment, we ask whether the students—if they have an opportunity to do so—participate in activities such as voting for a school captain, and whether

they intend to stand. We have some information there. We explore the percentages and how that associates with achievement, whether the kids who are meeting the minimum proficiency are participating in these sorts of activities.

CHAIR: You keep that data and information?

Mr Fraillon: The data are collected as part of the national assessment. In the national assessment they are collected through the student questionnaire, as Tim said. The students are asked, 'Have you engaged in these activities?' Generally you see a slight positive association between engagement in activities such as running as a candidate to be a class representative on an SRC or a junior representative council, or collecting money for a social cause, and their cognitive test achievement. The international study data that is collected from students, teachers and principals contains richer data about the types of activities that schools engage in. You see positive associations between students' attitudes and the likelihood of their engaging in the future—so their expected future participation as citizens—and their engagement in those activities in school. A good news story is that you see positive associations between student academic achievement on the civics and citizenship test—their knowledge of the fundamentals of civics in particular, but also citizenship behaviour—and the likelihood of their engaging in and having positive attitudes towards things like diversity in Australia and Indigenous Australians. A good news message is that in Australia there is a coherence across the curriculum between what content is being taught and what are being developed as attitudes and values.

CHAIR: ACARA will put out a report about how we're going in terms of their assessment. Can something be done in between the three-yearly ACARA reports? Should some other accountability measure be applied to schools?

Mr Fraillon: The National Assessment Program is not so much an accountability measure for individual schools; it is jurisdictional and national reporting. It is not individual school reporting. It gives you a sense of the health of the programs, for want of a better term, at each jurisdiction level as a starting point and nationally, as well. As a simple measure, for example, a lot of civics and citizenship content that has been developed as part of this program is no longer being used. It could be repurposed to make an online resource that schools would be able to use, both for teachers to understand better what they need to be teaching and how. That could be wrapped up with a professional learning program, but also as a less formal measurement program, a learning and measurement resource that schools could use. They run their civics units and then they say: 'What do you think our kids understand? Where do we go?' They could jump online and have the kids answer a series of questions and get a measure against the known national standards to say, 'My class is doing okay' or 'Maybe I am still missing.'

CHAIR: Would that be useful?

Mr Fraillon: I think it would be enormously useful if it is well promoted and if it is wrapped up with a professional learning program. I have been involved in the national civics program since its inception, but a long time ago I was involved in a civics program in one of the jurisdictions where we created a set of assessment materials and then we workshopped them with teachers and they ran them in schools. The most consistent feedback we got from teachers was them saying, 'Having read the questions and types of things you're asking the students, I now understand what I am meant to be teaching.' Reading a curriculum can be difficult, particularly if you are not well trained in it and if it is not your first area, because it is cross-curricular. Science teachers and phys ed teachers, particularly in primary schools, will be coming to this and being told, 'This is now part of your remit.' It gives some concrete resources for people to start to understand better what they need to be doing. The professional learning program would do two things. It would help people understand the materials better but it also is a promotional exercise. It gets the materials used, rather than just seeing another email coming in saying, 'This is another resource you might want to use.' If you have been engaged in professional learning activities with it, you are much more likely to make use of it. It has a number of benefits.

It would be enormously beneficial potentially. A lot of resource material already exists in the archives that could be the basis. After the material is used, some gets carried over for future cycles and some of it is released—almost released into the ether—but it is still sitting there, still relevant, and available to be mined.

Dr Friedman: I fully agree with my colleague on that. Participating in the international ICCS assessment would in theory give you another data point.

CHAIR: You are saying that Australia doesn't participate?

Dr Friedman: It doesn't participate, no.

CHAIR: Do you know why?

Dr Friedman: I believe proposals have been put forward.

Mr Fraillon: There are a few reasons. The first is that, in order to participate in an international study, all jurisdictions have to agree; that is a starting point. Because the National Assessment Program in civics and citizenship exists, there are some people who say: 'We are already doing this. Do we really need to do it again?' Our suggestion would be yes, because it collects data from grade 8 and so there are more opportunities available. In fact, in a similar study in digital literacy in the same context Australia did participate. We engaged in an exercise where we were able to take the Australian achievement scale—which is described in that area—and match it against the international scale so that you could actually roughly compare grades 6, 8 and 10 against the international standards, which would be feasible as an exercise in ICCS as well. The other thing it collects, as I said, is all of the school related data that is not collected in the national assessment.

I probably misspoke earlier. I don't think this is necessarily an alternative to setting up a research centre. It could be complementary to it. But, relative to the cost of doing it yourself, it's a cheaper way of collecting really high-quality international data; it's already there and available as opposed to having to set something up that is new. It could be complementary to another program as well and providing a rich set of data.

CHAIR: I noticed in your submission you had a section around values and attitudes towards civics and citizenship. You may have touched on it, but how did you conduct that survey in terms of what are the most trusted institutions?

Dr Friedman: Students are asked to indicate their level of trust with different civics institutions.

CHAIR: It's an Australian survey?

Mr Fraillon: It is part of the questionnaire that students respond to. It basically asks, 'How much trust do you have in each of the following institutions?' It goes from 'not much' to 'a lot'—a four point 'like it' scale. The institutions are listed. The students just indicate with each one. The comparisons you see are averages across the students; then you compare.

Dr Friedman: A similar question is also asked in the international study.

Mr Fraillon: It is very similar.

CHAIR: If you have the information in front of you, can you go through the most-trusted institutions. At least the Australian parliament is not last!

Dr Friedman: They are not very trusting of media.

Mr Fraillon: One of the things that is interesting is that media are not very well trusted relatively to the other institutions. Social media is not, yet it has now become the main source of information for young people. They know they don't trust it but they are still looking to it to collect information.

CHAIR: Perhaps they are very confident and able to work out what is misinformation/disinformation, and they look at different sources to determine information that is coming from a trusted source.

Mr Fraillon: If I put on another hat for a moment: I direct an international study in digital literacy. On 12 November this year we will be releasing data. Without giving too much away, I can assure you that students' confidence in their capacity to evaluate the quality of information is not matched by their ability to do so. Keep an eye out on 12 November and you will see some hard evidence.

CHAIR: I will. Thank you.

Dr Friedman: To answer your question: when we asked students about how much they trust these institutions—'completely', 'quite a lot', 'a little bit' or 'not at all'; I can't remember what the other ones were—we found that at both year 6 and year 10 level the students were fairly trusting. Particularly the year 6 students were more trusting than the year 10 students. The year 6 students tend to have the highest level of trust with police and the law. The courts was slightly less, but still fairly confident with the Australian parliament, jurisdiction parliaments and also local government. As we said, lower for the media and social media, and political parties are also relatively lower compared to some of our other institutions.

CHAIR: Did you say grade 10?

Dr Friedman: It was both 6 and 10.

Mr Fraillon: It was grades 6 and 10. Trust has decreased typically at year 10 relative to year 6.

CHAIR: I forgot to actually ask my fellow members if they have some questions. Tania Lawrence, member for Hasluck, has some questions.

Ms LAWRENCE: Thanks, Chair. You actually covered the ground I was hoping to canvass, which was around and understanding active citizenship, and also around social media and the like. Much appreciated. It is an

excellent paper and submission. I thank everyone present for the effort that you have put in. It's really helpful; it is very dense with information. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: I apologise, Tania. Thank you very much for coming along. I thank you for the information you have been able to share with the committee. If you have been asked to provide any additional information, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday, 30 October 2024.

COOK, Ms Pamela, Acting Director of Audio and Language Content, Special Broadcasting Service [by audio link]

O'NEIL, Ms Clare, Director of Corporate Affairs, Special Broadcasting Service [by audio link]

[13:52]

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for appearing today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respected houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would one or both of you like to make an opening statement?

Ms O'Neil: Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today. Thank you for accommodating our remote attendance. We are actually coming to you from the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia Conference, where we're obviously engaging with a lot of our stakeholders up here on a whole range of issues.

For almost 50 years, SBS has played a really fundamental role in supporting civics education, engagement and participation for all Australians, including the more than 5.6 million of us who use languages other than English at home and First Nations peoples. We are the world's most multilingual broadcaster, a key piece of government infrastructure and a unique public policy asset. Each week the SBS network reaches one in two of multilingual Australians.

In 2024 we were also named Australia's most trusted news brand, as well as the least distrusted news brand, according to a recent Reuters and University of Canberra report. That trust is even higher amongst multilingual audiences. Reflecting on some of the evidence you just heard: that same report reflects that about 75 per cent of Australians worry about the accuracy of the information they see online, and more than 60 per cent of young Australians, Gen Z in particular, are using online sources as their primary news source.

SBS's unparalleled reach and trust and its provision of services in more than 60 languages means that we are uniquely placed to facilitate civic and democratic participation, regardless of language or community. Not everyone appreciates that our 53 language services are produced by SBS by our bilingual journalists who speak those languages and who are members of those communities. They create and share Australian news, information and local stories that are important to the community. We don't just translate the news. Some of our larger programs even have talkback segments, like you'd find on mainstream radio, engaging community members in live discussions.

Our teams bring culture, nuance and insight and cover issues relevant to each particular community that translation alone cannot deliver. As part of these services, we produce content with the explicit purpose of enabling informed civic participation, such as the live interpreting of leaders' debates in the lead-up to the 2022 federal election, and we also partnered with the Australian Electoral Commission to provide multilingual explainer videos, as well as a whole range of content that we produce independently.

SBS and NITV are relied upon by many Australians for accurate, balanced and culturally informed information. There is some unrealised potential to further utilise these connections and reach to facilitate improved outcomes in civic participation.

Our submission, which I am sure you've read, sets out the work we do in this space. We welcome any further discussions with relevant agencies on how our services could be more formally and purposefully included in civic education and information activities. In short, as our submission sets out, and I think in particular in relation to that misinformation context that I know has been discussed a little already, we are a critical service. We are more critical than ever. We are seeing overseas that misinformation and disinformation can have a very destructive impact on social cohesion and election processes in particular, so I think it's very timely that this inquiry is occurring. We thank the committee again for the opportunity today and welcome your questions.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms LAWRENCE: I would like to start with the submission that was presented by the previous witnesses around trust in institutions. I don't think it will come as a surprise to you, but the media was regarded as one of the lowest trusted institutions by young people. I know that your submission describes your network as accurate and impartial. I am wondering how you go about ensuring this. What structures and mechanisms have you in place that can point to that accuracy and impartiality?

Ms O'Neil: There is obviously a whole suite of measures. Obviously, we engage in the proactive measures—for example, regular training of our team members and ongoing discussions around editorial practices. I can get

Pamela to talk a little more about the specific work she does with her teams in that space. We also have in place a very robust regulatory framework. We have a Code of Practice as a requirement under the SBS Act for our board to create programming policies that ensure impartiality and balance in all of our news and information services. We have a Code of Practice. We have an independent ombudsman who receives complaints under the code. People can escalate those complaints to the ACMA if they are unsatisfied with the ombudsman's response in relation to broadcast services. We also turn up at Senate estimates three times a year. We are accountable to the parliament as well. I'll hand over to Pam to talk more about the editorial training that goes on. All of our staff are required to complete training on the Code of Practice. There is also regular ongoing training for all our journalists on what balance and impartiality looks like.

Ms Cook: In our SBS audio language services we produce content in over 60 languages. We have thorough ongoing practices not only in terms of training but also in editorial discussion. Often our language services have deep knowledge of issues that they cover as they relate to their specific communities. In approaching content coverage, we engage with them in a dialogue. We make sure that our training materials and our standards as a network are upheld. It is an active conversation. We also engage in continuous content checking. When you broadcast in that many languages, we ensure that we have independent checking across multilingual content, as well as making sure that our translation is sound and accurate. We do a lot of reviewing. That is aided by multilingual staff and also a really solid network of content checking.

Ms LAWRENCE: With TV news, when we have different news channels broadcasting in the language of origin—Japanese or something like that—and there are English subtitles at the bottom, and I appreciate that there might be a bit of a disclaimer at the front or back end, how do we know what is being communicated from other sources? Japanese is one example, but I know that you broadcast from many countries of origin. What is the process there to ensure that things are accurate and impartial, in terms of what is being communicated?

Ms O'Neil: There is a special provision in our code dealing with news services that we source from overseas. There is a framework that we use to select those services, but those services are not covered by the accuracy and balance provisions in our code of practice. There is a disclaimer before and after each service to indicate that this is news from the country of origin and may not reflect SBS standards. With those services, we screen them for material that is inappropriate for Australian viewers—material that might be very graphic or unsuitable for Australian television. That's edited appropriately. In terms of translation and other content of those services, there's not an opportunity for us to check them all. Having regard to the conveyance of timely news for those communities who rely on those services, they come very quickly and there is a very quick turnaround time. We make it clear to audiences, both in our code and on screen, at the time of broadcast that these services aren't covered by the code and we clearly state the origin of the service.

When we select the services that we screen as part of the WorldWatch suite of programs, there are criteria that our news teams take into account when selecting which services to broadcast. That includes that the host broadcaster adheres to a certain set of editorial standards that we think are appropriate.

Ms LAWRENCE: Is there any likelihood that, with the televised broadcasts, it would be possible to include English subtitles, or is it again around the timing, and it is not possible to churn it out?

Ms O'Neil: Historically, it has certainly been about timing and expense. Obviously, there are some great advances in AI that are going on at the moment, so I wouldn't rule it out forever, but it is not something that we currently have on our work plan. With the advent of large language learning models and things it might well be something we could look at in the not-too-distant future.

Ms LAWRENCE: When you decide about a bespoke series, as part of an *Australia Explained*, which I think sounds really fantastic as a concept, how do you envisage that you would best engage across the different communities to ensure that inclusivity? Certainly, with the witnesses we've heard from through this inquiry, it's been quite eye-opening—all of the different communities and pockets that have, to date, felt excluded from being able to inform and shape the education and interpretation of what it is to be Australian. What ideas do you have around that, to ensure that we explain Australia in its fullness?

Ms Cook: When we select languages to be serviced, we analyse the census data. As a starting point, we have a high awareness of the English language proficiency of different communities, which can vary greatly. Also, the more recently arrived that a community is, it means that their needs differ. That's one thing we do take into account. When we select languages as part of the *Australia Explained* umbrella, we do *Australia Explained* content in over 40 languages. When we developed *Australia Explained* we consulted with multilingual experts, as well as multicultural experts. We want to make sure that the people that we feature in the content are diverse, and we would work with peak bodies to inform what are the most topical access points for the audience. We're about increasing access and understanding. When we do something like the bespoke series that we're referring to here,

we would reach out to relevant bodies to find out what are the most topical areas of concern, and that is how we build the content. We also ensure that it is translated across languages. We can select certain communities, knowing they have higher needs in various areas.

Ms LAWRENCE: Another topic that has come up repeatedly throughout this inquiry is around combating mis- and disinformation. Firstly, what is the process that SBS uses to decode what is mis- and disinformation, and how do you see SBS assisting members of the community to fact-check information that they read on social media and from other sources?

Ms O'Neil: More generally, we do pride ourselves on the accuracy of our content. Countering mis- and disinformation is part of our bread and butter across all of our services, first and foremost. We have referred in our submission—and I will hand over to Pam to give a bit more detail—to a service called *SBS Examines* which is purposefully directed towards identifying mis- and disinformation that is circulating, particularly in multilingual communities, on things like social media platforms, and producing a piece of news content that will address that issue and provide an accurate and balanced overview of the matter. That service launched in July, I believe. It has already had over a million views. We're getting a really great response from the community.

Ms Cook: Our *SBS Examines* team looks at issues affecting social cohesion, specifically, in and amongst a community or multiple communities. With respect to how they develop those pieces, we consult with our amazing network of multilingual staff, who are in touch with their communities. They see the news that circulates online. They inform us about what they're seeing, and we can build stories based on that. We independently reach out to people in the sector, relevant bodies, who also have an ear to what's happening in the community. So we are staying as relevant as possible, in terms of the issues affecting multiple communities. In terms of civil issues, we've already produced multiple pieces of content, relating to things like freedom of speech, whether the cost of living is impacting on social cohesion, and explainers of what is mis- information and disinformation. With those in-depth pieces, we're talking about podcasts and social media videos, because we know that most of these things are circulating on social media. It is about making sure that we produce timely, easily accessible social media videos to counter and address the complexity and explain some of these issues. That is the purpose of *SBS Examines* and we continue to do so.

Ms O'Neil: The value that SBS has not only involves this incredible reach and trust with communities. We reach more than 50 or 60 per cent of the Arabic-speaking community in Australia every week. The *SBS Examines* and *Australia Explained* content that we have just spoken about are informed by those bilingual journalists, who are so connected with their audiences that we really do get that nuanced insight. Every community is different. We also conduct a lot of research in multiple languages with our audiences. They have different platform preferences, and different interests in terms of the news or content that is favoured. We are able to utilise those insights to deliver more targeted and relevant services to each community.

Ms LAWRENCE: I appreciate that there is probably a line that is somewhat blurred between news and education, because it seems that you straddle both. Do you see that as part of your formal remit or is it just something that has crept in as a consequence of the communities that you reach to?

Ms Cook: Over time we have done more of what we would call explainer content. That, absolutely, is about increasing people's knowledge and awareness of how to engage in Australian society. One of the remits of *Australia Explained* is to offer really practical advice, and not to presume that the audience knows all of the back story. We want our content to be as practically useful as possible. We don't necessarily classify *Australia Explained* as news coverage. We have news bulletins; we have current affairs features. We want to provide really informative, up-to-date content. When you are newly migrated to Australia—and older migrants as well; we don't just appeal to one kind of audience—our content is about helping you to get into the issues. Especially in the case of elections, it is about making sure that you know exactly how to get engaged in this process. By doing that in your language, that's absolutely part of what we see as our purpose in increasing understanding. We're all about increasing social cohesion, at the end of the day. A better informed citizenry is best.

CHAIR: I want to touch on the work that you do with key agencies, such as the Australian Electoral Commission. Could you explain exactly what it is that you do with the Australian Electoral Commission?

Ms Cook: I'll talk about the work we did with the AEC. Recently, we engaged with them in a partnership to look at how to inform the audience on how to vote, and making the content tackle what people may be seeing online in terms of the voting process. The AEC engage with multilingual members of their team, who also represent to their communities on the voting process. We engaged in sessions with them, explaining communication of these issues. We produced videos in multiple languages across social media. They were tackling those areas of the voting process head-on, with reminders to the audience about being aware of what they're seeing online around the election. That was done in a very timely manner, before the election happened.

CHAIR: Is that the first time that has happened?

Ms O'Neil: No. We have worked with the AEC over a few elections, and recently in the referendum into the voice to parliament. Our language services and NITV have both engaged with the AEC, and in quite bespoke and targeted ways, to ensure that there is accessible information and a good understanding of the various processes involved in voting. It's a really strong partnership. We work together well. It is something that we really emphasise. We would like to grow that partnership, if possible, and amplify it. I would describe it as a strong and effective partnership already.

CHAIR: How would you see that partnership being able to be grown? What would you like to see added?

Ms Cook: We could explore more collaboration with them. In the past we have produced content on how to vote, your voting rights and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. With the AEC, we are able to align, in terms of the appropriate messages, because you interact with the AEC, at the end of the day, when you go to vote and you go to enrol to vote. We want to do more in-language materials. We could really target specific communities with extra content. Some communities have higher needs than others, especially with English language proficiency. We know that if you're at a higher English level you're more likely to engage with this content. It's easier than for a communities that don't have that level. We could do much targeted production of other media or stories with the AEC if we were to extend.

Ms O'Neil: For both us and the AEC—speaking for SBS, we're already a highly efficient organisation, but we do not have limitless resources. At the end of the day, obviously we could do a lot more with additional resources but certainly we're doing a great job with what we have now.

CHAIR: Thank you. The *SBS Examines* program that you talked about earlier—how do you choose the subjects in terms of countering mis- and dis-information? What processes do you have to go through to determine what issues are out there that you need to tackle?

Ms Cook: We consult with our bilingual journalists across our whole team and we ask them what they're seeing, what they're hearing. They're often very much directly in contact with their communities. They reflect their communities and their content. So that's one avenue. We know what's happening in the news obviously. Often you see versions of that in certain communities. So that's our main source of stories to produce. And then, as I said, the team also independently reaches out to industry bodies and people working in communities to hear directly from them. That's an always-on conversation. That's essentially the way that we select the stories.

CHAIR: It's a new program?

Ms Cook: Yes.

CHAIR: How did it come about that the *SBS Examines* program came into being?

Ms O'Neil: We received a grant from Home Affairs, which was basically for us to increase our levels of content that would support social cohesion in the country. We're doing that by tackling misinformation through this *SBS Examines* process.

CHAIR: How often is it on?

Ms Cook: We do multiple kinds of content. We do a podcast every two weeks but that's just one avenue. We do many social media videos and articles. It's essentially a weekly output. And all that content we translate into dozens of languages. You get a very regular output of content and it's all available on our website and on social media.

Ms O'Neil: Just by way of example—there's relevance for this inquiry—recent videos include 'What is mis- and dis-information?', 'Do Australians have freedom of speech?', 'How is democracy perceived around the world?'. That in particular is useful to inform our work around particular cultural backgrounds and perceptions of voting and democracy. There's one that says, 'Is democracy on the decline in Australia?' It really goes directly to some of those key issues that are very topical on this issue.

Ms Cook: Sorry—a correction. The podcast is weekly, not fortnightly.

CHAIR: You also produce the 'Australian Citizenship' series of videos. One of the pieces of information and evidence that have been put to the committee is that there's a lot of anxiety around people that are taking the Australian citizenship test. What was the reason that this series was created?

Ms O'Neil: The Australian Citizenship video series falls under the banner of a sister content piece called 'SBS Learn English'. We service very similar audiences: migrants to Australia who are looking to learn English. Of course SBS Learn English is globally available feed, so people who haven't yet migrated use the service. The team itself has deep understandings of the challenges of being a new migrant in Australia. It came up independently through the team that they thought it was going to be a highly valued piece of content to take

people through the citizenship test and equip them to know the terminology and to explain a lot of the concepts in it. It's been quite positively received. It's available on YouTube and it's quite a user-friendly way to consume that content. We've had a lot of really positive feedback from that. That was just an organic idea that came through the team.

CHAIR: It seems like it's very popular.

Ms O'Neil: Yes, we receive a lot of great audience feedback on it. There are a few comments on the YouTube video, as you can see, about how it's helped people. That's another example of very practical information. In fact SBS Learn English has done a lot of content on words around voting and elections. All the terminology that we like to use every time there's an election, they've even done an explainer on that. We do receive a lot of positive feedback from people who are learning English, and especially around the citizenship series, that it helped them pass the test.

CHAIR: You've talked a bit about and responded to questions about what SBS is doing in terms of supporting civics education and social cohesion. Have you recognised any gaps for new initiatives that should be supported? You do talk in your submission about SBS being considered as an avenue for new initiatives, and I wondered whether you see some gaps where more work needs to be done, or programs could be put together if there were more resources?

Ms O'Neil: I think there's never too much information in this space. The more information that we can get to communities, the better. Anything that can help us grow the amount of content we're outputting, whether that's through *SBS Examines* or *Australia Explained*—or that could be a bespoke civic series. Media literacy is also critical. The previous witness was talking about students being able to identify misinformation. I think we'd love to be able to do more in that space—for example, through SBS Learn, our online educational platform, or through some of our multilingual services—to bring civics media literacy into play in some of that content and as part of some of the broader work that SBS is doing more generally. As I alluded to in our opening statement, we are a genuine government asset in terms of the reach and trust that we have with our audiences. We've been working with a range of government departments and agencies, both federally and state, to explore where there might be gaps in service delivery or gaps in the way they're engaging with communities that we can assist with—obviously maintaining our editorial independence, but for the overall benefit of the Australian public. Any opportunity to grow a partnership with the AEC through increased resourcing or grow the amount of content that we're able to produce and output to our audiences—any increase will deliver great dividends.

CHAIR: In terms of SBS, what platforms do you see young people are engaging with?

Ms O'Neil: I think the latest Reuters Digital News Report flagged that 60 per cent of Gen Z get their news from social media. For linear television and SBS on Demand, we see audiences who are slightly older. I feel comfortable saying that; even I probably fall into that bracket. For a lot of younger people, there's a lot of engagement on TikTok and Instagram. For some communities it's WeChat, Weibo, WhatsApp. We try to be wherever our audiences are, basically. We're producing and outputting content on all those platforms to ensure that we're reaching as many people as possible. As Pamela said earlier, a lot of the misinformation is on social media, and that's where a lot of our focus for *SBS Examines* is—those social videos—because that's the environment that the misinformation is really circulating in, because it's less regulated and a bit more of a wild West environment.

CHAIR: The content that you put on those social media platforms—is that the same as some of the stuff like *SBS Examines* and those sorts of programs?

Ms O'Neil: Yes, that's right. We repurpose our content for each platform. It'll appear on our website. We do a 15-minute cut-down version of *SBS World News* that we put on YouTube, which is another really popular platform with a lot of younger people in particular. We produce content in a multi-platform way so it can be utilised in a range of different settings to ensure we're reaching as many Australians as possible.

CHAIR: That's good. Thank you so much for your time. Are there any last statements you wanted to make before we complete this session?

Ms O'Neil: No. Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to appear. We're happy to share any further information the committee may want to see on the services that we're doing now.

CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you for your attendance today and for sharing this information with the committee. If you've been asked for any additional information, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday, 30 October 2024.

Proceedings suspended from 14:28 to 14:41

NOWELL, Mr Laurie, Media Manager, AMES Australia

TSOPANIS, Ms Maria, Senior Manager, Community Development and Social Participation, AMES Australia

CHAIR: We will restart. I welcome representatives from AMES Australia. Thank you for appearing today. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Nowell: Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. Periodically AMES Australia conducts surveys amongst the communities that we work with to try to understand their issues and concerns and to try to identify areas where we might be able to support them better. Independent of this inquiry and the submission we made, we recently surveyed some of our communities on their engagement with an understanding of the electoral system. So I thought I would take this opportunity to share with you briefly the findings of the survey. Basically it's a focus group of grassroots community leaders. They're people who are active in their communities. They're not people sitting on boards and committees; they're people in touch with grassroots community members. We surveyed them around their perceptions of how connected and how engaged their communities are with the electoral system. I can share some of the results with you, if I might. I do have a draft report and I'm happy to leave it with you. There might be a few typos in it, but it summarises what we found.

CHAIR: That would be good.

Mr Nowell: Basically this group of 32 community leaders from 21 key cohort migrant and refugee groups say that newly arrived refugee and migrant communities have a poor understanding and a low level of engagement in Australia's electoral process. One of the things that came out of it was access to information about the electoral process. That was identified as a major issue, but I guess that was no surprise to anybody. Only six per cent of the respondents believed there was accessible and adequate information; 56 per cent said there wasn't. One of the big things that came out of it was a lack of understanding of the preferential and proportional voting system. Most people said their communities didn't understand these voting arrangements. But most communities were aware that voting is compulsory for those who are registered.

Another thing that came out of it was the cultural barriers that communities feel they face in accessing information and engaging in the electoral process. We heard often that a lot of people are nervous about elections because of the regimes and countries where they may have come from. A common theme was: 'In my country, the government tells us how to vote, and if you don't follow what they say, you get into trouble.' There was also a lack of understanding that in Australia, elections are free and you vote anonymously. Another theme that came through was that often there are self-appointed community leaders who will tell people how to vote and how they should vote. Another issue was ballot papers.

One of the comments we had was that in some elections there can be 80 candidates on a ballot paper which need to be numbered in order of preference. If somebody wants to vote for a candidate who is No. 30, they need to fill in all the other boxes in order of preference, and if you get it wrong, it means the ballot is not counted. I think that's confusing for a lot of people.

Another issue is proportional representation. People talked about how a candidate who gets 40 per cent of the vote could still lose out to one who only got 35 per cent once all the preferences are counted. One or two community leaders said that they had heard conspiracy theories around this, that people thought that this was rigging elections and that there was a lot of confusion about it.

Some of the recommendations that came from it are pretty much in line with what's in the submission that we submitted: a need for more in-language information for communities about how the electoral system works; the tiers of government, which is also confusing for some people; and how you go about voting. There was a call for engagement and education programs, co-designed and led by multicultural communities themselves, that explain how the electoral system works. People talked about identifying community champions or having bilingual workers who are embedded in communities who can spread the word and explain to people how the system works.

Another recommendation was tailored advertising campaigns ahead of elections to explain how to register to vote, the electoral process, and rules around compulsory voting. Then lastly there was also a suggestion that there be material that's in language that explains the language and terminology of elections and voting, which people found confusing and at times impenetrable. I'll stop there. I would be happy to leave some copies of the report.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Nowell. Have you found, in recent years, the needs of the CALD community changing—what they're asking for information on?

Ms Tsopanis: What happens with every wave of new migrants that comes through is that there's always a need for relevant, trusted sources of information. They want simple, they want it audio or visual rather than written; that is what the preference is: short things that can be easily shared on their WhatsApp channels and so on. So in that respect there has been a change in the type of information that they require and how it's delivered. Or very plain infographic style information—so it's more visually represented rather than written material.

CHAIR: Have AMES observed issues that are coming up that are of concern like mis- and dis-information?

Ms Tsopanis: Yes. I was just saying to Laurie before that with the postal votes of the council elections here in Victoria, there is some information going around that the postal voting cannot be trusted and that it can be tampered with. That is something that is doing the rounds, and we need to try to educate people that it is not true.

CHAIR: How is that doing the rounds? Is that on WhatsApp?

Ms Tsopanis: Yes, in chats and on social media. I think it gets reinforced by overseas information coming through from different parts of the world about voting systems. There was even someone saying that you vote through a machine. That's not the way that we do it here in Australia. There's a lot of misinformation. I think it's because of—

CHAIR: Do you engage in terms of providing factual information in those group chats?

Ms Tsopanis: We try to, where we can. We share reliable sources. Just last week the Victorian Electoral Commission shared with us a number of in-language videos. We share with our communities and our client groups those videos and those resources and also get them to go to the trusted sources, which are often websites. That can be a problem too, because digital literacy is often an issue for some of our client communities—not all but some.

CHAIR: Yesterday we did some site visits. There was a strong view that grassroots advocacy is the best way to reach communities. Do you have a view on that?

Ms Tsopanis: What would you say, Laurie?

Mr Nowell: It is, but you need to be careful because you have people who can be very influential communities who will tell people how to vote. So there needs to be—

CHAIR: Accountability?

Mr Nowell: Yes.

CHAIR: How would you build that in?

Mr Nowell: In the past we've had programs where we've had bicultural workers and community champions that go into communities with material and try to educate their community. For instance, we've been running one on gender violence for about eight years where we get volunteers, we train them, we give them material, they go into their communities and they become champions at combating gender-based violence. That's been quite successful. An approach like that might be something worth thinking about.

CHAIR: Essentially, delivering a program on the ground by the trusted community leaders?

Ms Tsopanis: Not necessarily community leaders, but trusted sources of information, because, as Laurie said, sometimes people set themselves up as community leaders. Often we find is that there are what we term in my unit 'active community members', who are often women, who will be reliable sources of information, who are trusted and who can spread the word if they're trained and provided with the relevant resources.

Mr Nowell: A lot of the people in our network, our focus group, are people who run community organisations. There's one in the northern suburbs for Arabic-speaking women who struggle to get out of the home because they don't speak English and they don't have jobs. Those sorts of organisations can be important in penetrating and getting those sorts of messages out. That's what we try to look for.

Ms Tsopanis: Absolutely. The training is very important as well—that you provide to the champion or the trusted informant—and that needs to be regular and ongoing so that the information is current. That is what we've found. We've done this on several occasions, not only with gender-based violence but also with NDIS, raising awareness. It's about ongoing training that not only provides accurate information but also helps to break down some of those stereotypes and stigma that may be associated with, in the NDIS case, disability, but perhaps in this case around the electoral system and the process—that it is fair and that it can be relied upon.

CHAIR: Do you have a relationship with the Australian Electoral Commission?

Ms Tsopanis: We do, and with the Victorian Electoral Commission as well.

CHAIR: Can you explain that relationship?

Ms Tsopanis: The Victorian Electoral Commission—I currently sit on its advisory committee. I've just been recently appointed but AMES has been involved in that for many years with a previous person. She was in the curriculum area, looking at the content of materials that might be a part of the education process that goes out to various schools and/or the adult migrant education providers—that kind of thing.

CHAIR: How about the AEC?

Ms Tsopanis: We've done some work in terms of workshops and information sessions.

CHAIR: Is that ad hoc?

Ms Tsopanis: Yes, it's ad hoc. It's not as regular as the VEC.

Mr Nowell: At the weekend we sponsored a multicultural soccer tournament in Mildura, and we invited the VEC to come along with material, information, free tea towels. All these teams were multicultural, and the council elections are coming up. They came along and they handed out information and were happy with the response they got, I think.

CHAIR: We did hear some information around how the AEC are no longer attending citizenship ceremonies, but we have heard differing accounts about whether they are attending.

Ms Tsopanis: I couldn't confirm that. I'm just thinking about the couple that I've been to recently. I don't think I saw a presence there.

CHAIR: You didn't?

Ms Tsopanis: No.

Mr Nowell: I don't remember seeing them in the last couple I've been to.

CHAIR: It normally is something that they would—

Mr Nowell: They used to be there.

CHAIR: In your submission you talked about ambassadors or champions. Can you explain how employing community members to provide the in-language support prior to voting through the ambassador or champion model would look like?

Ms Tsopanis: If we use a model that we've used in the past, we employ a number of community members who are bilingual and who are proficient in English and understand the concepts that we're trying to impart to the community. We employ them on a casual—depending on the funding source.

Mr Nowell: And some are volunteers. Quite a lot are volunteers. They're passionate about helping their communities and they'll—

Ms Tsopanis: The gender-based violence one—they're volunteers. We provide them with training on a regular basis and then support them with their information to the community. That might be direct through being present at a cultural event, or it might be holding a specific event for that information.

Mr Nowell: In the past we've also empowered them to create videos and graphics and art installations that attract community attention because they're not boring leaflets; they're more engaging platforms. We've done that sort of stuff, and that's been successful.

CHAIR: Does AMES do an audit of what materials, say, the AEC put out for the CALD communities?

Mr Nowell: We don't.

CHAIR: You must pick up something and have a view on—

Mr Nowell: We learned a lot of lessons during COVID about getting information into diverse communities. There's not a one-size-fits-all approach to it. We'll have a refugee from Iraq who's proficient in English, has done his higher education in English, is keen to get involved in the political system and understands what's going on. But then you get someone from a camp on the Thai-Burma border who's not literate in their own language. There's a whole gamut of people who are new to this country who need to be communicated to in different ways. You can't just hand leaflets out, even in language, and hope that people will—

CHAIR: We heard some evidence that in the information that's provided by the AEC, the translation is really not applicable.

Ms Tsopanis: Problematic.

CHAIR: Yes, problematic.

Mr Nowell: Often there are variations of Arabic or—

Ms Tsopanis: That's right.

Mr Nowell: If you're from North Africa and you speak Arabic, it's not the same as if you're from Iraq or Syria. It doesn't—

Ms Tsopanis: Or Egypt. And then the concepts—proportional representation may not be a concept in their culture, so trying to translate that in the written form is very difficult.

CHAIR: You're a trusted source. AMES is a trusted organisation. What do you do? Elections are not everything. It's only a small part of what we're talking about in terms of this inquiry. But what do you do at election time? Do you facilitate town hall meetings and those sorts of activities?

Ms Tsopanis: I'll take the example of the Voice last year, the referendum. We worked closely with the AEC and the Social Policy Group, who had authority from the AEC to deliver in-language information about the referendum—not how to vote. We facilitated a lot of in-language access to communities. We had someone deliver in a church hall on a Sunday and someone out in a community art group. That's the type of stuff we did quite recently around the referendum for the Voice. That posed its own challenge because it was the referendum, a different style of voting. And there was lots of misinformation going around about that, without a doubt, and we had to counter that, or we allowed the people who were doing the presentation, the Social Policy Group, to answer questions about that.

CHAIR: What do you think we could do better? What recommendations do you think this committee should consider in terms of reducing barriers to full participation?

Mr Nowell: I think the whole communications effort needs to be looked at. We learned so many lessons during COVID about what's wrong with the way that the government, at all levels, communicates with diverse communities. It needs to be tailored to specific communities. Having these embedded champions or trusted voices is really effective. That's what I would say.

Ms Tsopanis: I agree totally. I think that's the grassroots. But then I think it needs to be reinforced at different levels of media. You've got your range of ethnic media, print and radio and television. I think that all those different channels should be used, as well as social media. Perhaps the development of something that can be transferable to the different platforms would be not only cost-effective but also useful—some little video or audio clip that could be then transferred. And I think it needs to be done in a timely manner, building up to the election period. Thinking about next year, we're heading into a federal election campaign. Perhaps some of the information should start going out from early in the year. That would be my thought. I'm not a communications expert, unlike Laurie, but that's what I would say: it needs to be constant, consistent and ongoing, and on the different platforms.

CHAIR: What measures do you think are working that the Australian government is providing? Is that too broad a question for you?

Mr Nowell: I get a sense that people see the government trying to communicate. The vibe of the thing is, 'We have a fair system here and we're not empowering dictators.' People like that. Then when you get into the detail, it gets a bit fuzzy and people don't really understand the nuances of the electoral system. But they do a good job of promoting the idea of democracy and everyone having a vote and citizenship, and how it's important that people become citizens and have a stake in the country. I think they do a good of that, but—

Ms Tsopanis: And the rights and responsibilities—I think that comes across in a lot of the educational programs. But also, I think, people like to see themselves represented in the materials and resources that come out of the AEC. That would be something: a diverse range of people represented in those videos or materials and resources.

CHAIR: Ms Lawrence, the member for Hasluck, has a question.

Ms LAWRENCE: It's been really fascinating to hear the discussion. I just want to bring it back to people who are relatively new citizens. If I try for a moment to imagine myself in their shoes coming to a new country, particularly given the client base that you largely work with—people who have come on a humanitarian visa or as a refugee—I would imagine they would be wanting to find information on how to participate in their new country. With all the different witnesses we have heard from, there's a plethora of information out there and not a single source necessarily. We have heard recommendations for a national centre on citizenship and civics. In terms of what you hear from them as to where they're trying to find information, what has been their usual place to find information on how to enrol, how to participate, how to organise, how to run themselves? What do they tell you?

Mr Nowell: Most of them find this information from within their own community. People who've been here longer are seen as the sources of information on all sorts of things. But often that can be problematic for many reasons. I think the idea of having a central source of trusted information or a program that delivers trusted information is a good idea.

Ms Tsopanis: Word of mouth is obviously a very powerful way information is spread and obviously can be unreliable at times. Word of mouth is how a lot of our communities get it, within their own community. There's ethnic radio—not just SBS and the major ones, but the small community ethnic broadcasters—and some of the newspapers. But then a lot of information comes from outside of the country, which obviously isn't always correct or relevant to our situation. I think that's what we're dealing with in this global setting, in a way.

Ms LAWRENCE: Can we work from an assumption, though, that there is an appetite for knowledge or are you finding that, given the circumstances in which they've come to the country, it's a low-order priority?

Mr Nowell: I find people generally—not everyone but most people—are really keen to become citizens. They want to have a stake in the country, develop a sense of belonging. For our refugee cohorts, it gives them a sense of safety and permanence. Voting in elections is a secondary thing. They're interested in it and they want to do it. But that sense of security and place and safety is paramount to them. When you get things like the cost-of-living crisis or kids having trouble at school or something, then the idea of engaging in elections gets knocked down a rung or two for some people in the struggle to settle successfully in a new society.

Ms LAWRENCE: I completely understand. In terms of a gateway to providing information and building knowledge, is permanent residency a point at which it's a better time to start to help people understand what it is to be a citizen and be an active citizen and to understand rights and obligations ahead of the citizenship test itself? I appreciate that many people can be on a permanent residency for six years, 10 years before many embark on the citizenship pathway. Is that a better gateway by which we need to be engaging or is it just too difficult to find and corral that community group, at that point?

Mr Nowell: I think it's definitely worth engaging at that level. And one of the things we found in our survey was that nobody knows that even if you're not a citizen, if you're a permanent resident and you own a home, you can vote in council elections. Nobody knew that.

Ms LAWRENCE: I find that too. As a gateway point, how do we find and reach that community more holistically?

Mr Nowell: It's difficult. When we have refugees who have newly arrived, they get orientation sessions. And part of that is about civics and voting and citizenship. But then it takes four years for them to become citizens, at least. And by then they've forgotten that. Maybe there's something we could do in the community hubs, in schools. We used to deliver sessions for the parents of newly arrived migrants or refugees in school, for the mums and sometimes dads of newly arrived kids in their schools at lunchtimes, talking about all sorts of stuff: how to organise a medical appointment, often about the local council elections or about how to get a job or whatever it is. Maybe there's something that could be done in those networks of community hubs that are based around schools.

CHAIR: How does AMES measure the success of your civics participation programs?

Ms Tsopanis: Good question.

Mr Nowell: It's difficult because we do it when people first arrive, when they're our clients. After a year or two years they're no longer our clients. They've moved on and become independent and have jobs and homes. So, we don't really have an opportunity to talk to them. We do what we can early in the piece. But, as I said, by the time they become citizens they've probably forgotten what we—

CHAIR: But there must be observations that you make.

Mr Nowell: There are.

Ms Tsopanis: Certainly.

Mr Nowell: Attendance figures and—

Ms Tsopanis: And understanding. We survey our students on the programs that they undertake and the level of understanding. But it's not comprehensive.

CHAIR: You do citizenship test programs?

Mr Nowell: No, we don't.

Ms Tsopanis: We used to.

CHAIR: Why did you stop?

Ms Tsopanis: I'm not sure. Our delivery of the Adult Migrant English Program was reduced, so we're perhaps not in that space as much as we were previously.

CHAIR: I have to say I did get some feedback about people being disappointed that program, that information is no longer there. They were very happy with it.

Ms Tsopanis: It was a great program, the citizenship one. Like all those things that go through the Adult Migrant English Program, it's up to the individual teacher to teach or not to teach. It's not mandatory per se. That's probably an issue as well. There's not consistency in delivery.

CHAIR: You would receive quite a bit of feedback from the people that are participating?

Ms Tsopanis: Yes. They find it useful, very much so. Some people ask where they can find that information or where they can do that course, without doubt, and we refer them, but it is limited.

CHAIR: In all the programs that you're doing now, civics education is embedded throughout all those programs?

Ms Tsopanis: In the Humanitarian Settlement Program, in the orientation program, it is. In some of our education programs it will, again, depend on the individual teacher.

CHAIR: Do you believe that there are gaps? Do you think there's more to do?

Ms Tsopanis: I don't think you can make things compulsory, but some aspect that was a requirement of doing the Adult Migrant English Program, say—that would be a stepping stone, at least a consistency of approach across the nation, as well as meaning that people going through it would have the opportunity to be exposed to that information.

CHAIR: Did you tell me that you operate in all states and territories?

Mr Nowell: No. We run different programs in different states. We have the Humanitarian Settlement Program here in Victoria and in South Australia. We have a subcontractor in Tasmania. We run English language programs here in Victoria. We run migrant and refugee employment programs here and in New South Wales. There are a few other bits and pieces, but that's the main array of services that we provide.

CHAIR: I'm from Tasmania. In Tasmania, do you subcontract for civics education?

Ms Tsopanis: It would be part of the Humanitarian Settlement Program, the orientation program, yes.

Mr Nowell: That program is heavily mandated by government, by Home Affairs. They would be required to provide civics programs as part of orientation. That would be audited and measured.

Ms Tsopanis: That is measured.

Mr Nowell: Along with a whole lot of other things.

Ms Tsopanis: The only thing is that people have just arrived in the country. I suppose it's Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You get so much information, as Laurie says. By the time you're going towards citizenship, what information have you retained?

Mr Nowell: And your priorities at the time may not be citizenship and voting in elections. It might be that you've got a sick child or you need a job.

Ms Tsopanis: Or securing long-term accommodation.

Ms LAWRENCE: Just to clarify, your funding is fully through the Victorian government, is it?

Mr Nowell: No, most of it is through the federal government. We run federal settlement programs. A small amount of it is from the Victorian government, but it's mostly from federal government programs.

Ms LAWRENCE: Looking at your website, I note that there's a broad range of offerings, training, work placements and so on that you do. It's quite extensive. I congratulate you: it looks fantastic. You don't specifically identify anything around citizenship and civics. Is that just because it is a small part of the work you do, or is it just integrated across the program?

Mr Nowell: Often the programs don't really align very well. We're delivering the humanitarian refugee program. We're delivering the Skills for Education and Employment Program. But there are different KPIs, different requirements. Sometimes it's hard to slot things together so that we can provide everybody with everything. Civics is one of those things that we try to do when we can, but it's not always embedded in everything.

Ms LAWRENCE: Would it be difficult then to provide any data that you might have collected over the years that would show improvement around civics and citizenship education and knowledge? Do you have any metrics that you could submit that show 'On the back of this information session, we've seen an uptick in participation, or

across these different areas within society, not just in election voting cycles"? Are there metrics that you can provide that show change, or is it more anecdotal evidence?

Mr Nowell: We can try to look for some. There might be something in the HSP people have recorded. We can have a look for that.

Ms LAWRENCE: If it is possible—because you can clearly see the valuable work you're doing, and we need those efforts replicated. Any evidence-based metrics that you can provide that show the change would be fantastic. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you. We're now at our allotted finish time, but I will give you a last opportunity if you want to make a last statement.

Ms Tsopanis: I think we've covered it.

Mr Nowell: I think there's an opportunity for a program that works closely with communities to embed these trusted voices and to try to get these messages across in a way that people will listen to. If there's some way of designing something like that, I think it would be really valuable. It's proved valuable in other areas.

Ms Tsopanis: Yes, absolutely.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance today and for sharing this information with the committee. If you've been asked to provide any additional information, which you have been, please forward it to the secretariat by Wednesday 30 October 2024.

Committee adjourned at 15:22