

PARLIAMENTARY EDUCATION AND ITS ROLE IN STRENGTHENING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Why should we care about parliamentary education and what contribution can it make to the level and quality of civic engagement in Australian life? Each Australian jurisdiction has a program of parliamentary education, most commonly offered to school students. These provide information about the role and function of parliament and parliamentary processes and are often immersive, experiential programs that are planned and delivered by professional educators. Some extend to experiences that help young people *do* democracy as they learn about our democratic institutions.

But why does this matter?

Using research from Australian and international scholars, Dr Sarah Moulds and Toni Matulick will argue that quality, accessible parliamentary education can enhance the quality of parliamentary processes and improve citizens' understanding of parliament, and the role and function of the other arms of government. They will explore why good parliamentary education has a role to play in improving trust and engagement in civic institutions, and how it can provide an inoculation against some of the threats confronting democracies. Sarah and Toni will make the case for investing in parliamentary education that equips young people as *citizens now*, not just citizens-in-waiting, so that they can co-design and actively participate in parliamentary processes, civic and democratic life.

Biographical information

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Introduction

Imagine if the world was run by *teenagers*! Of course, those that are teenagers now *will* run the world one day – and so the question for the rest of us is: what are *we doing* to prepare them for the task ahead? How are our young people included in our democracy? What kind of spaces are we creating for young people to connect with our parliaments?¹

Australia is not alone in facing significant challenges to its democratic system.² Around the world, public confidence in institutions, including parliaments, is declining.³ At the same time, rapid technological change has dramatically expanded the ways in which information, (not all of it accurate) is created, shared and consumed. Digital platforms can be exploited to ‘incite social division, reinforce biases, and escalate grievances’,⁴ and can be used to target individuals and communities, including young people. The growing number of social media platforms, combined with the speed at which information is spread, presents a substantial challenge to democratic institutions and systems of government founded on the principle that political power and law-making authority ultimately rests with the people.

Research indicates that young people are particularly vulnerable to disengagement from democratic processes and institutions,⁵ and that their perception of parliaments as relevant and responsive to their lives is steadily diminishing. Indeed, recent results from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) 2024 test conducted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority show that only 43% of Year 6 students across Australia met the proficient standard. At the Year 10 level, only 28% of Australian Year 10 students met the proficient standard. This is the worst result on record.⁶

Connected Parliaments

The challenge confronting contemporary democracy is not simply one of declining trust. Increasingly, it is a challenge of connection. Across many established democracies, young people report lower levels of satisfaction with democratic institutions than previous generations, raising important questions about how democratic systems engage with those who will inherit them. As Foa et al observe:

Globally, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining – not only in absolute terms, but also relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life. There are notable declines in four regions: Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, western Europe, and the “Anglo-Saxon” democracies, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States. In developed democracies, a major contributor to youth discontent is economic exclusion. Higher levels of

¹ Moulds, Sarah, *Connected Parliaments: Reimagining Youth Engagement with Parliaments in Australia*. 2022, p. 7. Accessed at: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/sarah-moulds-sa-2022/>

² Judge, D., & Leston-Bandeira, C. ‘Why it matters to keep asking why legislatures matter’. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 27(2) 2021 p. 156. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2020.1866836>

³ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. *From classroom to community: Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia*, 2025, Parliament of Australia. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/Civicseducation/From_Classroom_to_Community, p. iii.

⁴ United Nations Development Program, *Supporting Asian Countries' Resilience to Violent Extremism in the Digital Space*, August 2025-July 2028. Accessed at: <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/news/undp-unodc-and-eu-launch-new-regional-initiative-prevent-violent-extremism-online-asia>

⁵ United Nations Development Program, *Supporting Asian Countries' Resilience to Violent Extremism in the Digital Space*, August 2025-July 2028.

⁶ O'Malley, K., Kwong, R., Lay, D., & Fallas, J. National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship 2024: Technical report, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2025. Accessed at: <https://research.acer.edu.au/civics/81>

youth unemployment and wealth inequality are associated with rising dissatisfaction in both absolute and relative terms.⁷

These trends matter because democratic institutions derive legitimacy not only from elections, but also from their capacity to remain connected to the communities they serve. When people perceive institutions such as parliaments as distant, inaccessible or unresponsive, they may disengage from formal democratic processes altogether. This can weaken civic participation, reduce trust in public decision-making and diminish opportunities for constructive democratic dialogue.

The consequences extend beyond politics. Disconnection from democratic institutions is often associated with broader forms of social exclusion and declining participation in community life.⁸ At a time when many societies are grappling with growing inequality, social fragmentation and widespread feelings of loneliness, democratic participation can play an important role in fostering belonging, agency and collective problem-solving. As Foa et al note:

[Y]outh disengagement reflects not merely apathy, but also a rising sense of frustration with the ability of existing democratic processes to deliver tangible change. The result of such frustration may be a growing “antipathy” to core liberal ideals such as compromise, consensus, acceptance of political opponents as legitimate and support for third-party institutions.⁹

Seen in this light, restoring democratic trust requires more than encouraging young people to learn about political institutions. It requires institutions to demonstrate that they are willing to listen. The recent *International Parliamentary Engagement Network (IPEN) Guides on Citizen Engagement for Parliaments*¹⁰ emphasise that meaningful engagement is not a one-way process of providing information to citizens. Rather, it involves creating opportunities for genuine dialogue in which participants can contribute knowledge, share lived experience and see how their contributions influence parliamentary work. A parliament that listens is more likely to be perceived as legitimate, responsive and relevant.

This insight is particularly important for young people. Too often, parliamentary engagement initiatives position young people as future citizens rather than recognising them as democratic actors in the present. Yet the policy challenges facing contemporary democracies, from housing affordability and economic insecurity to climate change and technological transformation, will shape the lives of younger generations most profoundly. Democratic institutions are therefore stronger when they create meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in parliamentary processes, contribute to public deliberation and help shape policy outcomes.

For parliaments, the challenge is not simply to increase participation, but to build relationships. A connected parliament is one that understands public engagement as a core democratic function rather than an optional activity. It creates opportunities for ongoing dialogue, welcomes different forms of expertise, and values lived experience alongside technical or professional knowledge. It recognises that democratic legitimacy is strengthened when citizens can see how their voices contribute to parliamentary deliberation and decision-making.

⁷ Foa, R S, Klassen, A, Wenger, D, Rand, A, and Slade, M, ‘Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?’ (2020) Cambridge, United Kingdom, Centre for the Future of Democracy, p. 2.

⁸ Chowdhury, I. S. (2021). Are young Australians turning away from democracy? *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 56(2), 171–188. Accessed: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2021.1899131>

⁹ Foa, et al, ‘Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy’, p. 22.

¹⁰ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Ollard, J. *Youth engagement: Guides on citizen engagement for parliaments*. International IDEA, International Parliament Engagement Network, & Inter Pares, 2025. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.43>

Connecting parliaments through parliamentary education programs

For those of us with responsibility for delivering parliamentary education programs, or in roles that intersect directly or indirectly with parliamentary education, the question for us is what are we doing to create spaces in which young people can meaningfully engage and connect with their parliaments, not only to build their understanding of how parliaments work now, but how they could be shaped and transformed to work in the future to better confront the challenges ahead.

In this essay we examine how Australian parliaments conduct parliamentary education, make the case for caring about this parliamentary education for a number of reasons, and set out to demonstrate why good parliamentary education has a role to play in improving trust and engagement in civic institutions. Parliamentary education should not be merely about teaching institutional facts, but rather a form of democratic infrastructure that enables citizens to understand, scrutinise and participate in parliamentary democracy, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Each state and territory legislature and the Commonwealth Parliament devotes resources to parliamentary education. Importantly these programs are distinct from the executive arm of government, operating under the authority of parliament itself rather than the government of the day.

The importance of this work has been reinforced by the findings of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. The Committee's landmark report, *From Classroom to Community*, was prompted by concerns about declining civic knowledge, falling levels of democratic confidence and growing challenges associated with misinformation and political disengagement.¹¹ The committee concluded that strengthening civics and citizenship education is essential to sustaining Australia's democratic institutions and recommended a significant expansion of civic learning opportunities across the school years.

The Committee recognised that democratic participation requires more than simply understanding electoral processes. Its report envisages civic education as a means of preparing Australians to participate actively in democratic life, engage critically with information, understand governmental institutions, and contribute constructively to public debate. The report's title, *From Classroom to Community*, captures the broader democratic purpose of civic learning: building the knowledge, skills and confidence required not only to understand democratic institutions but also to participate within them.

Viewed in this context, parliamentary education occupies a unique position within Australia's civic learning landscape. Unlike classroom-based civics education delivered through schools, parliamentary education takes place within the institution itself and offers opportunities for learners to engage directly with the practices, people and processes of representative democracy. Through role plays, committee simulations, interactions with parliamentarians and visits to parliamentary buildings, participants are able to experience democratic institutions as living and accessible spaces rather than abstract constitutional concepts.

The Joint Committee's recommendations also underscore the urgency of this work. The inquiry was conducted against a backdrop of declining civics and citizenship outcomes among Australian students and growing concern about the impact of misinformation, political

¹¹ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. *From classroom to community: Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia*, 2025, Parliament of Australia. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/Civicseducation/From_Classroom_to_Community

polarisation and declining trust in institutions.¹² In this environment, parliamentary education can serve as an important form of democratic infrastructure. It helps citizens understand how decisions are made, how governments are held accountable, and how individuals and communities can engage with parliamentary processes between elections. In doing so, parliamentary education strengthens the connection between citizens and their democratic institutions, helping to ensure that parliament remains visible, relevant and accessible to the communities it serves.¹³

This broader democratic purpose aligns with emerging scholarship on parliamentary public engagement. As Leston-Bandeira argues, public engagement is increasingly understood as a core parliamentary function alongside law-making, scrutiny and representation. Parliamentary education is therefore not merely an educational service offered by legislatures. It is one of the ways parliaments perform their representative role, strengthen democratic legitimacy and cultivate informed and engaged citizens.

An examination of parliamentary education programs in Australia indicates that parliaments themselves see their education programs as essential for a number of reasons:

- they can enhance citizens' understanding of parliament and the relative roles of government institutions;
- improve the quality of civic engagement;
- strengthen trust in democratic institutions;
- provide an "inoculation" against threats confronting democracies;
- equip young people to participate actively in parliamentary and civic life now, rather than simply preparing them as future citizens;
- understand how laws are made and governments are held accountable;
- distinguish the roles of parliament, the executive and the courts and therefore understand the separation of powers and rule of law;
- learn how to engage constructively with elected representatives and parliamentary processes;
- develop trust in democratic institutions through informed participation; and
- build resilience against misinformation, cynicism and democratic disengagement.

The rationale for parliamentary education programs is well supported in the literature. Judge and Leston-Bandeira suggest that citizens who are making judgements on trust and confidence in legislatures often know little about how they operate. Consequently, they suggest that legislative scholars and other stakeholders have a responsibility to explain the role and significance of parliaments.¹⁴ The work of parliaments is often opaque to the general public,

¹² O'Malley, K., Kwong, R., Lay, D., & Fallas, J. National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship 2024: Technical report, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2025. Accessed at: <https://research.acer.edu.au/civics/81>

¹³ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. *From classroom to community: Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia*, 2025, Parliament of Australia. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/Civicseducation/From_Classroom_to_Community

¹⁴ Judge, D., & Leston-Bandeira, C. 'Why it matters to keep asking why legislatures matter'. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 27(2) 2021 p. 157. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2020.1866836> See also Leston-Bandeira, C. 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*. 37(2) 2022, p. 8.

with specialised terminology and complex procedures acting as a possible deterrent to participation.¹⁵ Unpacking this complexity and providing an opportunity for young people to understand the purpose as well as the process of parliaments is seen as a foundation for understanding how parliaments work, and the role that they play.

Australia's world leading system of compulsory voting is often invoked as a reason for ensuring that all citizens understand the parliamentary system. If citizens in a representative democracy like ours have what AC Grayling describes as a 'tiring responsibility to engage',¹⁶ then it is attendant on these parliamentary systems to provide, at a minimum, access to quality education to explain how they work and make way for participation.

Citizens need to understand what parliament does, how it works, its role in democracy and, crucially, how they can get involved – not so that they can be in a constant state of engagement, but so that they are able to take action when they want or need to, and not just at the ballot box.¹⁷

So what are these programs and how are they operating? What kind of parliamentary education is available in Australia?

Since 1988 the Commonwealth Parliamentary Education Office (PEO) has been delivering educational programs for students and their teachers. These programs aim to increase citizen understanding of and engagement with parliament through curriculum-aligned programs, digital resources and community outreach. The PEO's programs are delivered under the guidance and direction of the PEO Advisory Committee co-chaired by the Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Deputy President of the Senate, and comprised of government, opposition, crossbench and independent members and senators. In the 2025-26 financial year the PEO delivered 2,130 face to face programs to 76,034 students, 386 digital programs to 8,794 students and ran 15 teacher professional learning programs to more than 200 teachers. The PEO runs several other engagement and collaborative programs with other institutions and has a longstanding partnership to deliver programs to participants in NSW TAFE's Adult Migrant English Program and Career Pathways students. In addition, educators from the PEO conducted outreach programs in Tasmania and Western Australia which included 39 programs to 817 students in 17 schools.

PEO educators assist parliamentarians to undertake their own outreach and community engagement, providing bespoke and customisable resources and support with delivery when this can be accommodated.

Professional educators develop and maintain a modern suite of resources that are aligned with the Australian Curriculum for teaching of civics education, and which cater for students from years 3-12. These resources are publicly available and downloadable for free on the website.

In 2026, the House of Representatives delivered a youth parliament with 150 young people from each Australian electorate participating. Launched in September 2022 and led by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Hon Milton Dick MP, the Parliament in Schools program is a bi-partisan initiative to make civics education accessible to students regardless of

¹⁵ Howlett, R. Online publication and the accessibility of parliamentary information', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 41(1) 2026, p. 114.

¹⁶ Grayling, AC, *For the People: Fighting Authoritarianism, Saving Democracy*. London: OneWorld Publications, 2025 p. 4.

¹⁷ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Ollard, J. *Education: Guides on citizen engagement for parliaments*. International IDEA, International Parliament Engagement Network, & Inter Pares, 2025, p. 5.

their location. In collaboration with local federal members and senators, the Speaker has visited over 200 schools across Australia.¹⁸

The South Australian Parliament supports education programs that have been described as world leading.¹⁹ Through its Community Education Office, the South Australian Parliament develops and delivers programs, resources and events aimed at improving public understanding of parliamentary democracy and supporting informed civic participation. With programs for school students from reception to year 12, teacher professional learning, public engagement activities and regional outreach initiatives, the office seeks to make parliamentary processes more accessible to South Australians.²⁰

The Queensland Parliament delivers a wide range of educational programs including online learning resources, teacher professional learning, virtual programs, on site programs and regional outreach. It has a well-established youth parliament program and in 2026 operated four youth parliament programs: for year 5 and 6 students, at Parliament House in Brisbane for Gold Coast school students, a Junior Indigenous Youth Parliament on Thursday Island and in Bundaberg a Regional Youth Parliament, and for year 11 and 12 students a Legal Studies Youth Parliament.²¹

The New South Wales Parliament runs a range of programs through a dedicated Parliamentary Education and Engagement program. Its activities include school visits, virtual learning experiences, curriculum-aligned teaching resources, student leadership initiatives and public education resources, all aimed at strengthening civic knowledge and engagement with democratic institutions. Materials are curriculum aligned and there are programs for regional and remote schools. In 2023, more than 15,000 students participated in a program.²²

Since 1975, the NSW Parliament has operated a Secondary Student Leadership Program for year 12 students from across New South Wales. It is designed to build practical understanding of the NSW system of parliament and government including the role of the NSW Governor, and the work of members of parliament. The program enables students to travel to Parliament House for the day and engage directly with their local representatives as well as visit Government House as guests of the NSW Governor.

The Northern Territory Legislative Assembly delivers parliamentary education through its Parliamentary Education Services Unit. Programs include Parliament House tours, curriculum-linked legal studies programs, parliamentary role plays, electoral education in partnership with the Northern Territory Electoral Commission, and outreach activities for regional and remote schools. The aim of these programs is to ‘increase civic knowledge and understanding of parliamentary democracy throughout the Territory’.²³

¹⁸ ‘Speaker takes Parliament into local ACT schools’, Parliament of Australia, 7 August 2024. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/About_the_House_News/Media_Releases/Speaker_takes_Parliament_into_local_ACT_schools?utm_source=miragenews&utm_medium=miragenews&utm_campaign=news

¹⁹ Moulds, Sarah. *Connected Parliaments: Reimagining Youth Engagement with Parliaments in Australia*. 2022, p. 6.

²⁰ Parliament of South Australia. Accessed at: <https://education.parliament.sa.gov.au/>

²¹ Queensland Parliament. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/Visit-and-learn/Education/Programs/Youth-Parliaments/Key-Resources>

²² Parliament of New South Wales. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/news/2024-03-08-civics-education-program>

²³ Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. Accessed at: <https://parliament.nt.gov.au/about/parliamentary-education-services>

The Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly delivers parliamentary education through school excursions, classroom and digital incursions, parliamentary role play activities, teacher professional development, adult and tertiary education programs, and online learning resources. These initiatives are designed to improve civic knowledge, democratic participation, and understanding of the ACT's unique system of self-government. The option of a Q&A session with members of the Legislative Assembly provides students the opportunity to ask members about their work and discuss current issues.²⁴

The Parliament of Victoria operates a comprehensive parliamentary education program for students, teachers and schools across the state. Programs are delivered at Parliament House, in schools, online, and through regional outreach visits. They are aligned with the Victorian civics and citizenship and legal studies curriculum for years 5-12 and have a focus on interactive role play programs.²⁵

The Parliament of Western Australia offers a range of education programs for students, teachers, and the community. These programs focus on explaining how Parliament works, how laws are made, and how citizens can participate in democracy. Parliament House tours for students, featuring interactive activities and opportunities to observe parliamentary proceedings, regional outreach programs that bring parliamentary education to rural and remote communities, teacher professional learning and online sessions are available. A youth parliament and tertiary research program is also offered.²⁶

All Australian parliaments offer programs that are free of charge and provide online, virtual options for schools that are unable to travel to the parliament. Several offer youth parliament and tertiary programs. There is no question that each of these programs is focused on improving engagement, knowledge and understanding of parliaments. They are commonly run by professional educators and pay particular attention to ensuring curriculum aligned materials are provided to support effective teaching and learning. Teacher professional learning is widely offered.

All Australian parliaments focus on interactive role plays, experiential learning, and real-world scenarios. Some parliaments target and offer specialised programs for students with disability, First Nations students and provide resources and programs in languages other than English. This work is a valuable foundation for introducing and expanding knowledge, encouraging participation in parliaments, and for maintaining the legitimacy of parliaments as democratic institutions.²⁷ The fact that all Australian parliaments devote this level of activity and resourcing to education shows that it has become an essential and visible institutional activity, pursued to support and enhance the role of legislatures and those assembled within them.²⁸

However, parliaments can do more than this. They can amplify the already good work they are doing by expanding their focus. We argue that parliaments can empower young people by

²⁴ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/visit-and-learn>

²⁵ Parliament of Victoria. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/visit/schools/>

²⁶ Parliament of Western Australia. Accessed at: <https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/WebCMS/webcms.nsf/content/visit-and-learn-education-programs-and-resources>

²⁷ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Ollard, J. *Youth engagement: Guides on citizen engagement for parliaments*. International IDEA, International Parliament Engagement Network, & Inter Pares, 2025 p. 6. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.43>

²⁸ Leston-Bandeira, Cristina and Siefken, Sven T. 'The development of public engagement as a core institutional role for parliaments', *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 29:3, 2023 pp. 361-362.

bringing them and their concerns into parliamentary business itself.²⁹ Doing this would address some of the criticisms of the existing programs and the way in which they are delivered. These criticisms centre on six main areas: they are elitist (catering to young people who already have political ambitions, who are often also from advantaged backgrounds); they are individualistic (focusing on the individual rather than the broader community); they are patronising (distracting from what kind of participation young people will have in the future rather than creating space for them to participate now); they are corrective (focusing solely on educational activities to rectify a knowledge deficit amongst young people who need to be trained to participate in the ‘right’ way); they are limited and limiting (allowing young people to participate only in ‘young people’s issues’ eg education); and they are urban centric (mostly available in urban areas which excludes young people in regional and remote locations).³⁰

Young People as Citizens Now

Australian parliaments already invest significant resources in parliamentary education. Across every jurisdiction, educators, parliamentary staff and members and their staff work hard to create opportunities for young people to learn about democratic institutions, parliamentary processes and civic participation. These programs make an important contribution to civic knowledge and democratic literacy. At a time when public trust in institutions is under pressure and civic knowledge levels are declining, this work is more important than ever.

Yet the challenge facing Australian democracy is not simply one of knowledge. As we have argued throughout this paper, it is also a challenge of connection. Young people need more than information about parliament. They need opportunities to experience parliament as relevant to their lives, responsive to their concerns, and open to their contributions. Parliamentary education can play a critical role in building these connections, but its transformative potential lies in moving beyond learning *about* democracy towards creating opportunities to *do* democracy.

Recognising young people as citizens now also requires parliaments to rethink what meaningful participation looks like in practice. Too often, opportunities for youth engagement are confined to simulations, consultations or advisory processes that sit at the margins of parliamentary business. While these initiatives can be valuable, they risk reinforcing the message that the role of young people is to prepare for future democratic participation rather than contribute to democratic decision-making in the present. A more ambitious approach would create opportunities for young people to experience authentic forms of democratic representation, deliberation and influence.

There are already promising foundations on which to build. Australian jurisdictions invest considerable resources in youth parliaments, youth advisory groups and local government youth leadership programs.³¹ The next stage of reform should focus on strengthening the representative character of these initiatives. Greater use of democratic elections within youth advisory structures, for example, would provide young people with practical experience of representation, accountability and collective decision-making, while strengthening the legitimacy of youth voices within public institutions. As important as creating opportunities for participation is ensuring that participants can see how their contributions influence outcomes.

²⁹ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Ollard, J. *Youth engagement: Guides on citizen engagement for parliaments*, p. 6.

³⁰ Leston-Bandeira, C., & Ollard, J. *Youth engagement: Guides on citizen engagement for parliaments*, p. 6.

³¹ See for example Young Mayors’ Program run by the Foundation for Young Australians. Accessed at: <https://www.fya.org.au/program/young-mayors/>

This points to another important lesson for parliamentary engagement. If democratic participation is to build trust, parliaments must become better at demonstrating that they have listened. Too often, young people contribute to committee inquiries, consultations or petitions processes without receiving meaningful feedback about what occurred as a result of their involvement. Closing this feedback loop is a relatively modest reform, but one with potentially significant democratic benefits. When participants understand how evidence was considered, why decisions were reached and what opportunities exist for further involvement, engagement becomes part of an ongoing democratic relationship rather than a one-off transaction.

This suggests that the future of parliamentary education may depend on moving beyond what might be described as ‘democracy by simulation’ towards ‘democracy by participation’. Young people – and in fact *all people* – learn most effectively about democracy not when they merely observe democratic institutions, but when they experience those institutions listening, responding and adapting to their contributions. Parliamentary education therefore has the potential to be much more than a vehicle for civic knowledge. It can become a pathway into democratic participation, democratic confidence and democratic ownership. If Australian parliaments embrace this challenge, they can help build a generation of citizens who do not see democracy as something that happens to them in the future, but something they are already helping to shape today.

International experience demonstrates that this shift is both achievable and beneficial. For example, across several jurisdictions, parliaments have established youth advisory councils or youth parliaments that maintain ongoing relationships with parliamentary committees and members, allowing young people to shape parliamentary agendas rather than simply respond to them. These initiatives recognise young people as contributors to democratic deliberation and provide structured opportunities for their perspectives to be heard within parliamentary processes.

For example, since 2021 the New Zealand Parliament has ‘flipped the frame’ and worked closely with Rito o te Pāremata, a youth reference group tasked with increasing youth engagement with Parliament, to reimagine what engagement with young people looks like, and what investments are needed to make it meaningful and sustainable:

Rito is the name for the new shoots in harakeke flax. Harakeke grow new shoots from the middle of the plant, protected by the more mature leaves on either side. The rito eventually become the mature leaves taking care of the new shoots. ... The name ‘Rito’ was chosen to symbolise the envisioned life cycle of the group – existing members nurturing new ones.³²

Unlike other youth advisory models employed by government departments, young New Zealanders were directly involved in the design of the Rito o te Pāremata program which recognises the deficits of conventional engagement approaches designed by adults and aims to be authentically co-designed in approach. Members of the Rito team develop and promote a project of their choice, with the aim of increasing youth awareness of, and participation with, Parliament. They also provide feedback on youth-focussed resources that Parliament produces, represent young people in their communities and promote the work of Parliament. Rito team members are also paid and supported to travel to Wellington from regional areas.³³

³² Parliament of New Zealand. n.d. Rito o te Pāremata. Available at: <https://www.parliament.nz/en/footer/about-us/parliament-reference-groups/rito-o-te-paremata/> (accessed 5 September 2026). See also Moulds, S. (2025). Young people are citizens now! Reconceptualising youth engagement with Australian parliaments. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 60(3), 311–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2025.2579923>.

³³ Parliament of New Zealand. n.d. Rito o te Pāremata. Available at: <https://www.parliament.nz/en/footer/about-us/parliament-reference-groups/rito-o-te-paremata/> (accessed 5 September 2026).

Another example can be seen within the Scottish Parliament, which has been internationally recognised for embedding participation and dialogue into its institutional culture, including working closely with the Scottish Youth Parliament and involving young people in committee inquiries and consultation processes.³⁴ This approach enables young people to engage with issues they identify as priorities and to see direct connections between their contributions and parliamentary decision-making.³⁵ Similar practices can be found in Wales, where the Senedd has developed sustained relationships with youth representative bodies and has sought to integrate young people's voices into scrutiny and policy development processes.³⁶

The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies' e-Democracia platform is another example of how parliaments can use digital technologies not merely to explain parliamentary processes, but to enable citizens to contribute to policy discussions and legislative deliberation.³⁷ Such initiatives suggest that parliamentary education and parliamentary participation can be mutually reinforcing rather than separate activities.

These international examples suggest that parliamentary education can be understood not as the end point of engagement, but as the beginning of a democratic relationship. The most effective programs equip young people with knowledge and skills while simultaneously creating opportunities to apply them in real parliamentary contexts. In this way, education, participation and democratic renewal become mutually reinforcing.

This is not simply about increasing participation rates. It is about strengthening democratic resilience. Trust in democratic institutions is more likely to develop when citizens feel heard, respected and able to influence public decision-making. Parliamentary engagement that values lived experience alongside technical expertise can help build relationships between institutions and communities, particularly those who have traditionally been excluded from democratic processes. For young people, these experiences can foster a sense of political efficacy, belonging and democratic ownership that extends far beyond the classroom.

The challenge for Australian parliaments is therefore not whether parliamentary education should continue, but how it can evolve. The next generation of parliamentary education programs should continue to provide high quality civic knowledge and experiential learning while also creating pathways for meaningful participation in parliamentary life itself. This means designing engagement opportunities that are inclusive, accessible and responsive to the diverse experiences of young Australians, including those in regional and remote communities, First Nations young people, culturally diverse communities and young people experiencing social or economic disadvantage:

³⁴ Moulds, S. (2024). *Churchill Fellowship report* [Report]. Churchill Fellowship, pp. 40-44; Moulds, *Young people are citizens now!* pp. 317-318; see also Huebner, Christine. 2021. "How Young People in Scotland Experience the Right to Vote at 16: Evidence on 'Votes-at-16' in Scotland from Qualitative Work with Young People." *Parliamentary Affairs* 74 (3): 563–580. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsab017>.

³⁵ Moulds, *Churchill Fellowship report* 40-44.

³⁶ Senedd Cymru. n.d. Our history. *Youth Parliament*. Available at: <https://youthparliament.senedd.wales/about/our-history/> (accessed 5 September 2026); Loughran, Tom, Andy Mycock, and John Tonge. 2021. Votes at 16 in Wales: Both a Historic Event and a Long-Term Process That Requires a Commitment to Supporting Young People's Democratic Education. *British Politics and Policy* at LSE. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/votes-at-16-in-wales>.

³⁷ See e.g. Rossini, Patricia Goncalves Da Conceicao and Vanessa Veiga De Oliveira, 'E-Democracy and Collaborative Lawmaking: The Discussion of the Political Reform in Brazil' (2016) 10 *International journal of communication* 4620; Bernardes, Cristiane Brum and Cristina Leston Bandeira, 'Information vs Engagement in Parliamentary Websites – a Case Study of Brazil and the UK' (2016) 24(59) *Revista de sociologia e política* 91; Brasil, Marina Valentim and Angelo Brandelli Costa, 'Letters to the Next President: What Do Brazilian Youth Say?' (2022) 54(5) *Youth & society* 788.

The task before Australian parliaments is not simply to teach young people about democracy, but to create opportunities for them to practise it. Young people are not citizens-in-waiting. They are citizens now.³⁸

How might we take the next steps together?

Any discussion of future reform should begin by recognising the substantial achievements of parliamentary education practitioners across Australia and the parliaments that resource and support these achievements. Parliamentary education offices deliver high-quality curriculum-aligned programs, teacher professional learning, regional outreach activities, digital resources and experiential learning opportunities that reach tens of thousands of Australians each year. Many of these initiatives are internationally respected and reflect decades of innovation by parliamentary staff, educators and parliamentarians committed to strengthening civic knowledge and democratic participation.

The recommendations of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' *From Classroom to Community* report provide an important opportunity to build on these strengths.³⁹ The report highlights growing concerns about civic knowledge, democratic engagement and participation, while also recognising the importance of providing young Australians with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to participate effectively in democratic life.⁴⁰ Parliamentary education services are well positioned to contribute to this agenda by strengthening connections between formal civics education, democratic participation and parliamentary engagement.

The next phase of parliamentary education should be informed by what we know about young people themselves. Contrary to persistent stereotypes, young people are not apathetic or disengaged from public issues. They are deeply concerned about questions of economic opportunity, social justice, environmental sustainability and democratic accountability. Young people are political. They want to live in a safe, prosperous, more equal society.⁴¹ Their lives are dominated by versions of the future that are pessimistic, and many experience lower standards of living than older people despite working or studying harder than ever before.⁴² Young people have capacity to develop solutions to policy challenges and contribute to parliamentary lawmaking,⁴³ but must be supplied with sufficient resources, and guaranteed the right to have their views given the same legitimacy as the views of older people.⁴⁴ Participating in activities designed by older people rarely satisfies the need for agency and change.

³⁸ Moulds, Sarah. Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. *Hansard: Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia*. Parliament of Australia. 13 September 2024, p.22. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=committees/commjnt/28390/&sid=0000

³⁹ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *From Classroom to Community: Civics Education and Political Participation in Australia* (Report, January 2025) available at < https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/Civicseducation/From_Classroom_to_Community>.

⁴⁰ Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' *From Classroom to Community*, p. 26-41.

⁴¹ Greenwood-Hau, Joe and Raynee S Gutting, 'Public Support for Votes at 16 in the UK: The Effects of Framing on Rights and Policy Change' (2021) 74(3) *Parliamentary affairs* 542.

⁴² Intergenerational Report 2023 Department of Treasury, Intergenerational Report 2023, Australian Government (2023).

⁴³ Gonzalez-Ricoy & Rey, 2019 Gonzalez-Ricoy, Inigo and Felipe Rey, 'Enfranchising the Future: Climate Justice and the Representation of Future Generations' (2019) 10(5) *Wiley interdisciplinary reviews. Climate change* e598.

⁴⁴ John et al, 2023 John, Ollie et al, 'Cynefin, a Sense of Place', a National, Cultural, Public Education Programme to Ensure Young Peoples Voices Are at the Heart of Decision Making' (2023) 9(S1) *British Journal of Psychology open* S26.

Parliamentary education therefore needs to begin with the recognition that young people are already political actors with legitimate interests in public decision-making, not merely future citizens preparing for participation at some later point in life.

Recent Australian research reinforces this point.⁴⁵ Analysis of more than 20,000 pieces of writing produced by young Australians found that young people are deeply engaged with political and social questions, particularly those relating to economic security, inequality, climate change and the future of democracy.⁴⁶ Rather than expressing indifference to politics, many participants demonstrated a strong desire for political institutions that are responsive, transparent and capable of delivering meaningful change. Similarly, recent scholarship challenges claims that young Australians are uniquely disengaged from democracy, suggesting that levels of democratic dissatisfaction among younger generations often reflect broader concerns about institutional performance rather than a rejection of democratic values themselves.⁴⁷ These findings support a growing body of evidence that young people are not withdrawing from democratic life; rather, they are seeking new and more meaningful ways to participate in it.⁴⁸ For parliamentary educators, this suggests the challenge is less about generating political interest and more about creating opportunities for young people to connect their existing concerns, values and aspirations to parliamentary processes and democratic institutions.

This insight challenges educators and parliaments to think differently about the purpose of parliamentary education. Traditional approaches have often focused on explaining institutions, procedures and constitutional arrangements. While these remain essential, there is growing recognition that parliamentary education should also help young people understand how they can contribute to public decision-making and democratic reform. Young people consistently express a desire to be involved in policy development and law-making, but they are often seeking partnership and allyship from institutions, rather than direction from established leaders. Parliamentary education can play an important role in creating these connections by helping young people understand not only how parliament works, but how their experiences, ideas and expertise can contribute to parliamentary processes.

Elite-led opportunities for youth engagement in parliament or politics (such as youth ministerial councils, selective youth parliament programs and political internships) are well intentioned and can sometimes deliver useful insights into the priorities and experiences of young people. However, they can also exacerbate existing socio-economic and other divides.⁴⁹ Proactive steps must be taken to enable young people to recruit youth leaders themselves,

⁴⁵ Philippa Collin, Azadeh Dastyari, Michael Everitt Hartup and Sky Hugman, 'What Do Young People Want to See in Politics? More than 20,000 Pieces of Their Writing Hold Some Answers' The Conversation (online, 18 February 2025) <<https://theconversation.com/what-do-young-people-want-to-see-in-politics-more-than-20-000-pieces-of-their-writing-hold-some-answers-250062>>

⁴⁶ Philippa Collin, Sky Hugman, Michael Hartup and Ammar Randhawa, What Matters to Young Australians Through Turbulent Times? Insights from the 2019–2023 What Matters? Writing Competition (Report, Whitlam Institute, February 2025) 8–11.

⁴⁷ Chowdhury, I. S. (2025). Explaining the modern gender-generation gap in Australian politics. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 60(4), 369–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2026.2628155>

⁴⁸ See e.g. Ellen Stephenson et al, *Alternative Paths to Politics: How Young People Engage in Politics in Australia* (Report, Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Australian National University, 2024); Jason Bessant, Philippa Collin and Rob Watts, 'A Revisionist Account of the Crisis of Representative Democracy and Youth Participation' in Jason Bessant, Philippa Collin and Patrick O'Keeffe (eds), *Research Handbook of the Sociology of Youth* (Edward Elgar, 2024) 23.

⁴⁹ Shephard, Mark and Stratos Patrikios, 'Making Democracy Work by Early Formal Engagement?: A Comparative Exploration of Youth Parliaments in the EU' (2013) 66(4) *Parliamentary Affairs* 752.

including by enabling young people from marginalised communities to co-design youth leadership criteria.⁵⁰

This does not mean abandoning experiential learning or role play activities, which remain among the most effective features of Australian parliamentary education. Rather, it means ensuring that these activities are connected to authentic democratic questions and real world problems. Research suggests that young people develop stronger democratic efficacy when they are trusted to contribute to genuine decision-making processes and when their views are treated as carrying the same legitimacy as those of older participants. Parliamentary education is therefore at its strongest when it moves beyond simulation and creates opportunities for learners to see how democratic institutions respond to citizen voices.

Future developments in parliamentary education should continue to prioritise accessibility. Australian parliaments have already made significant progress through digital delivery, regional outreach and targeted programs for diverse communities. Building on this work will be essential if parliamentary education is to reach those young Australians who are least likely to see themselves represented in democratic institutions and most likely to feel disconnected from them.

Future reforms should also continue to focus on inclusion. While youth parliaments, leadership programs and advisory groups have generated many positive outcomes, there is evidence that elite-led participation opportunities can sometimes favour young people who are already socially, economically or politically advantaged. Parliamentary education services should continue to expand outreach efforts and work closely with schools, communities and young people themselves to ensure that participation opportunities are accessible to those who have traditionally been underrepresented in public decision-making. Particular attention should be given to co-designing programs with young people from regional and remote communities, First Nations communities and other groups whose voices are not always heard within political institutions.

Finally, while digital technologies will continue to play an important role in extending the reach of parliamentary education, they should not be viewed as a complete solution to democratic disengagement. International research suggests that young people value meaningful interaction with decision-makers and opportunities for genuine dialogue.⁵¹ Digital tools are most effective when they complement, rather than replace, relationships built on trust, responsiveness and accountability.⁵² Parliamentary education therefore remains fundamentally about human connection: helping citizens understand their parliament and helping parliament better understand the citizens it serves.

The future of parliamentary education in Australia lies in building on the strong foundations already established across Australian jurisdictions. The challenge is not to replace existing programs, but to continue evolving them so that they equip young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to participate in democratic life, and create space for them to

⁵⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Global Parliamentary Report 2022: Public engagement in the work of parliament* (2022) Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Parline- Global data on national parliaments Australia* (2023)

⁵¹ See e.g. OECD, *Child Participation in Decision Making: Implications for Education and Beyond* (OECD Education Working Paper No 301, 2023); United Nations Youth Office, *Core Principles for Meaningful Youth Participation* (2025); Australian Government, Office for Youth, *Engage! A Strategy to Include Young People in the Decisions We Make* (2024).

⁵² Beth Simone Noveck, *Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies of Expertise and the Future of Governing* (Harvard University Press, 2015) chs 1, 8; United Nations Youth Office, *Core Principles for Meaningful Youth Participation* (2025); Australian Government, Office for Youth, *Engage! A Strategy to Include Young People in the Decisions We Make* (2024).

meaningfully engage with and shape parliamentary processes. By combining high quality civic learning with opportunities to understand and experience democratic participation, parliamentary education can continue to strengthen the connection between citizens and parliament and contribute to the long term resilience of Australia's democratic institutions.