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Case study

Australian Electoral Commission – National Electoral Education Centre

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This case study was developed in early 2020. Since this time, the AEC has made significant further advancements in electoral training and civic and voter education. The Case Study is part of an International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) project focusing on Training and Education in Electoral Administration.

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Case study

1980 – 2020: Electoral education in the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)

Cate Thompson October 2019, Australian Electoral Commission

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has exhibited a commitment to electoral education over many decades. Since the 1980s the delivery of electoral education for an external audience (voters and other stakeholders) is delivered in Australia within the legislative framework of compulsory enrolment and voting.

Historical context and legislative basis for electoral education in the AEC

The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* is the primary legislation under which the AEC functions, following its establishment as an independent statutory authority in 1984.¹

Paragraph 7(1)(c) was inserted by the *Commonwealth Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 1983*, which came into force on 21 February 1984 (the AEC's birthday²) and instructs the AEC to *promote public awareness of election and ballot matters, and Parliamentary matters, by means of the conduct of education and information programs and by other means; ...*

However, the AEC embraced public education even before this legislative change. Prior to the early 1980s the then Australian Electoral Office (AEO) undertook very limited electoral education activities. Some publications were produced including an early schools resource kit and there were also some unrecorded educational visits to schools by AEO staff.

When the AEC was established in 1984 there was a dedicated Information and Education Branch where the seeds for the growth of the first Electoral Education Centre (EEC) were planted. The AEC developed a kit for divisional staff to use in school presentations and also provided a round of training in how to deliver education sessions in schools for regional AEC staff. This activity resulted in a marked increase in school visits by AEC staff – reaching a total of 47,000 student participants nationally in 1987/88 – but quickly shrinking to annual totals between 12,000 and 18,000 students over following years.³

During the 1980s and 90s the AEC also engaged in the production of major resources for the education sector, linked to curriculum and including voting kits, teacher resources and lesson plans for schools. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints and a change in focus, the AEC was unable to effectively update and maintain those resources.

The clear lesson to be learned is that the design and delivery of such materials will always require maintenance of content to ensure accuracy and currency. It is vital when producing educational electoral resources to schedule and fund review, update and ongoing production of these resources to meet a changing environment.

¹ AEC website: https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/index.htm

² p.20 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* Authorised Version C2019C00103 registered 12/03/2019

³ A brief history of AEC Electoral Education, Paul Anderson, Director Education AEC, August 2000

Creation of Electoral Education Centres (EECs)

In June 1986 the AEC's very first EEC opened in Canberra at a former primary school facility following eighteen months of planning and preparation. The EEC was part of the Information and Education Branch within the AEC's National Office structure, reflecting a traditional attachment to the AEC's communication function in the legislative framework.

The EEC was designed to provide lessons on the electoral system to students who visit the Nation's capital each year on organised school tours. The EEC also provided limited resource material for schools and supported AEC staff in their education activities through delivering professional development assistance.

The EEC, through three distinct teaching areas, aimed to increase knowledge and awareness of the federal electoral system amongst participants:

- a theatrette where the historical context of electoral events is set;
- an interactive room, where students engage in learning about the current electoral processes in Australia; and
- a polling place, where students experience voting in and counting of an election using a full preferential voting system.

This program structure remains in place and is successful to this day. Using experiential learning to engage and inform, an AEC educator leads participants through the 90 minute program. The focus is on the why and how of voting and the stages of an election, along with federal representation. Educators can tailor program content to suit different learning levels and areas of interest including House of Representative elections, Senate elections and referenda. In particular, extension programs can be requested for secondary students of politics or legal studies.

Attendees to the Canberra EEC quickly rose in 1998 to more than 50,000 participants per annum⁴ and today is almost double that number.

Additional EECs

During the late 1980s / early 1990s consideration was given to opening EECs in Melbourne and Brisbane. The Melbourne EEC opened in 1991 while, for a range of time-bound reasons, the Brisbane EEC did not go ahead.

In 1992 the Western Australian Electoral Commission⁵ (WAEC) opened an EEC in Perth and the AEC initially provided a small amount of funding, resources and equipment. The EEC is still in operation and supports the conduct of various public education and awareness activities by the WAEC.

The AEC opened an EEC in Adelaide on 7 August 1998 and in its first year of operation it had 6,927 visitors.⁶

⁴ AEC Annual Reports 1998/99 and further

⁵ The Western Australian Electoral Commission (WAEC) is a state electoral management body responsible for maintaining the electoral roll and the conduct of state parliamentary elections and referenda, local government elections and other statutory and non-statutory elections for Western Australia.

⁶ AEC Annual Report 1998/99

“Overall, all three EECs provide an extremely high level of educational service that is appreciated by teachers and students across all educational sectors. The level of satisfaction and praise that is consistently given in the immediate post-visit feedback (evaluation sheets) at all centres has been confirmed by the ‘delayed post-visit’ feedback provided by the user survey. It is also evident from the very high level of repeat visits.”⁷

However, despite overwhelmingly positive feedback from users, continually reducing government funding⁸ over a number of years eventually led to the closure of Melbourne and Adelaide EECs in 2010/11 and a change in the model for delivery of all AEC education services.

Creation of the National EEC

The celebration of the centenary of Australian Federation in 2001 presented an opportunity for the AEC to partner with Old Parliament House (OPH, *Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts*⁹) to apply for a significant Federation Fund grant. Transferring and recreating the Canberra EEC to a much higher profile, centralised site in an historic building deeply linked to the history of Australian democracy, with the possibility for the development of a renewed program and modernised interactive technology, drove the proposal. Success saw a new and improved Canberra EEC designed and constructed, opening in Old Parliament House in 2001 and continuing to this day.

The Canberra centre was renamed the National Electoral Education Centre (NEEC) in June 2009 and celebrated a record visitor attendance of 82,631 for the 2008/2009 financial year.¹⁰

“Teachers are convinced that a significant amount of electoral knowledge is transferred to participants in EEC sessions. Indeed, many teachers with previous experience of the EECs deliberately leave this aspect of the curriculum to be presented by the ‘experts’. There is also much evidence that, both in the short-term and the long-term, students are highly motivated by their EEC visit and take on board the personal issues relating to enrolment and voting. The evidence is very strong that, after an EEC session with its highly participatory mock election, the great majority of students would have very positive feelings towards the processes of enrolment and voting.”¹¹

NEEC: effectiveness, demand and supply

Research by the University of Canberra's Centre for Tourism Research, published in *Size and effect of school excursions to the national capital, 2010 in May 2011*, confirmed that the NEEC's many visitors are happy with the services they receive, and that the centre plays an important role among educational tourist attractions in the Australian Capital Territory and the surrounding region. For example:

- *Of all school students who visited the Australian Capital Territory and region, 56.1 per cent attended the NEEC.*

⁷ Review & Evaluation of AEC Electoral Education Programs—Beckmann & Associates—August 2000

⁸ The AEC is wholly funded through the Australian government's yearly, federal, cyclical budgetary process with funds issued through the *Commonwealth Department of Finance and Administration*.

⁹ The Museum of Australian Democracy (MOAD) is now an entity within the *Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet*

¹⁰ AEC Annual Report 2008/09

¹¹ Review & Evaluation of AEC Electoral Education Programs—Beckmann & Associates—August 2000

- *In a comparison of levels of satisfaction with attractions for school excursions in Canberra the NEEC was ranked:*
 - *second in terms of the proportion of teachers who were satisfied or very satisfied with their visit, at 98.1 per cent of respondents, and*
 - *equal first in terms of how satisfied participants were, with a rating of 4.83 out of a possible 5.*
- *Teachers who participated in the survey said that:*
 - *'The Electoral Education Centre made it easy for the students to understand how an election is run.'*
 - *'The Electoral Education Centre was brilliant and the guide was great at connecting with the kids and making it incredibly interesting.'*
 - *'The Electoral Centre visit was great. The instructions were very explicit and well explained.'*
- *Of all the school groups that visited the Australian Capital Territory and region, 12.4 per cent named the NEEC as a standout component of their visit.*¹²

Consolidated focus by the AEC on the NEEC means continuing success, praise and increased numbers of participants continuing into its third decade of operation. The NEEC is the AEC's most visible public education program and has been recognised by winning categories of the *Canberra and Capital Region Tourism Awards*. Additionally, in 2014 the NEEC welcomed its millionth visitor.¹³

The NEEC has increased capacity to meet demand multiple times. The expanded opening hours allow the NEEC to conduct 18 sessions each week day, commencing at 0800 and concluding at 1800. Staff are rostered over varying shifts to meet demand throughout the day, with two management support shifts to oversee delivery. The majority of schools can be accommodated, however, during peak periods (the winter season) the NEEC is often booked out two years in advance. Further increasing the capacity of the NEEC is limited by both the physical construct of the building and the ongoing challenge of securing sufficient funding and staff.

Demand for the NEEC's programs remains consistently high. Visitor numbers have significantly increased since opening and in 2018/19 the NEEC, operating at full capacity, delivered 2,773 free education sessions to 95,944 visitors from all 151 electoral divisions in Australia.¹⁴

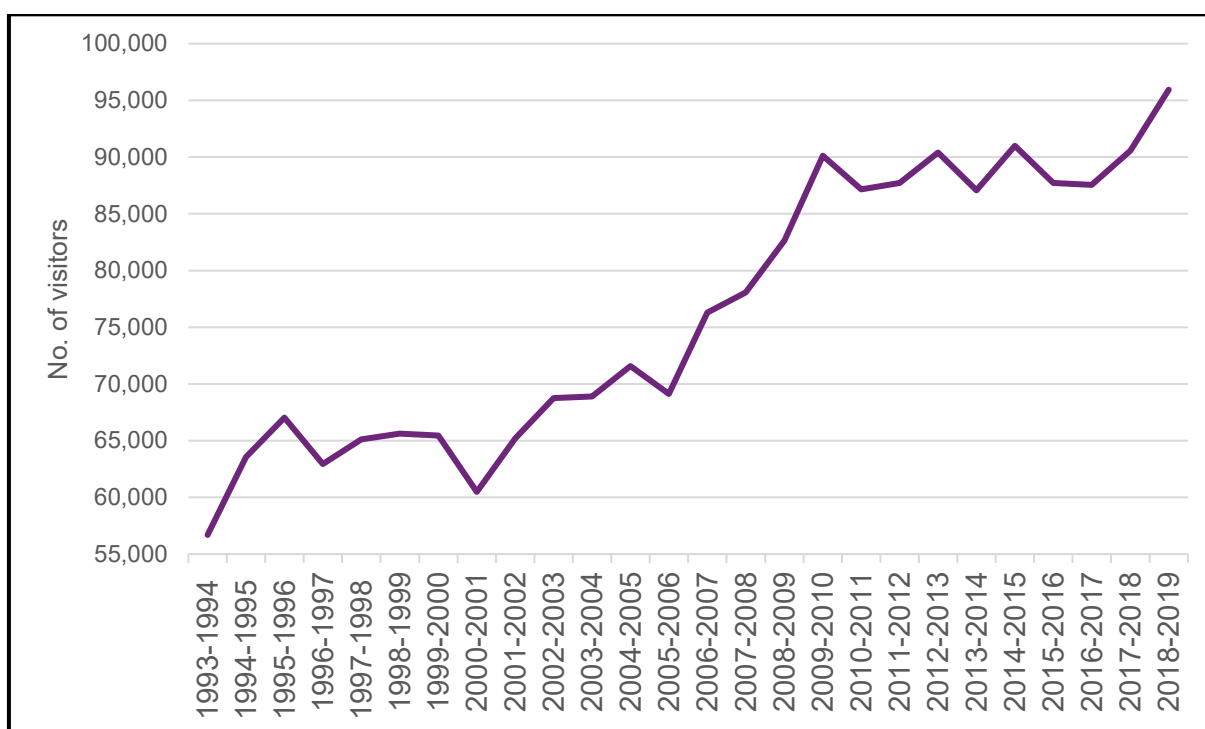
¹² AEC Annual Report 2010/11 – Case Study

¹³ AEC Annual Report 2013/14

¹⁴ AEC Annual Report 2018/19

The below graph demonstrates trends 1993-2019.

Trends in National Electoral Education Centre visitor numbers, 1993-2019



Commencing February 2019, schools have been able to view availability up to two years in advance and book sessions immediately online through *Book Canberra Excursions*.¹⁵ The site has a waitlist function and schools unable to book immediately are offered sessions when cancellations occur. The online booking system has resulted in more school requests being accommodated and limits the impact of cancellations. It has increased staffing efficiency through minimizing administration time. In the peak winter season demand for programs still exceeds the capacity of the NEEC and schools are strongly encouraged to book early or travel in the off-peak season.

The NEEC regularly meets, and sometimes collaborates with, sister educational institutions in the national capital along with the National Capital Educational Project (NCEPT)¹⁶. These institutions include the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD)¹⁷ and the Parliamentary Education Office¹⁸. Students travelling to the national capital engage in themed excursions focussed on topics such as 'representative democracy'. Institutions work together to provide the best services possible that ensure consistency of content with curriculum intersections of study understood and current relevance of each institution's learning delivery model.

¹⁵ <https://www.bookcanberraexcursions.com.au/app/#/browse-attraction/5>

¹⁶ <https://canberraexcursions.org.au/about-us>

¹⁷ <https://www.bookcanberraexcursions.com.au/app/#/browse-attraction/6>

¹⁸ <https://www.peo.gov.au/>

NEEC: maintaining a successful funding model

Funding and maintenance of the NEEC is both a core challenge and a priority. Initial funding for the relocation and redevelopment of the NEEC was secured in 2000 through an external, one-off, multi-million dollar grant. However, ongoing funding for accommodation costs in Old Parliament House, ongoing and temporary staff and supplies required to deliver programs and maintain and develop the resources of the NEEC are found from within the AEC's annual operating budget.

The AEC is an independent statutory authority that is wholly funded through the Australian government's yearly, federal, cyclical budgetary process with funds issued through the *Commonwealth Department of Finance and Administration*.

Replication of EECs internationally

The AEC's International Services Section contributes to the AEC's objectives through its networking with a variety of international partners, by deploying AEC officers overseas or hosting international counterparts visiting Australia. Visiting international delegations from many and various countries throughout the Asia Pacific have repeatedly visited EECs over decades as part of that work.

In the late 2000s, the Election Commission of Thailand developed a Democratic Education Center¹⁹ based on the NEEC and the Election Commission of Nepal was supported by Australian aid funding and the AEC to develop an Electoral Education and Information Centre²⁰ in Kathmandu using many of the strategies employed at the NEEC. The Centre opened in 2012.

The NEEC in action



¹⁹ https://www.ect.go.th/ect_en/news_page.php?nid=1881&filename=

²⁰ <http://www.election.gov.np/election/np/electoral-education--information-centre-25.html>

Other AEC education services and programs

The AEC's education section has provided outreach services and programs to external audiences through a variety of mediums outside the delivery of programs at the NEEC. In various iterations, this has included a School and Community Visits program, printed resources and a variety of education physical and online tools and kits for use in classroom or community settings.

A major external review of electoral education was undertaken during 1999/2000. This review provided ample evidence that the AEC's education programs and resources are very high quality in most areas and all very well received by both education systems, teachers and participants.

*The NEEC, run by the Australian Electoral Commission for school students, is one great example of success in educating, inspiring and empowering our next generation of voters.*²¹

Further reports and reviews over decades²² continue to highlight the excellence and suitability of AEC electoral education programs whilst making positive suggestions for change.

In the mid 1990's a national government funded project '*Discovering Democracy Civics and Citizenship Education*' commenced, with the aim of developing national curriculum for schools. The AEC provided expert input and feedback to the materials being developed and has continued to provide support materials. Concurrently in the AEC, a national working party of curriculum consultants was formed in 1992 with the aim of developing activities and resources for teachers. This culminated in the *Your Vote Counts* program of one-day workshops for practising teachers and the *Teachers' Resource Folder* – both well regarded by both teachers, and education authorities.

Your Vote Counts activities quickly rose to between 20 and 40 training sessions annually for up to 30 teachers per session. *Your Vote Counts* was further modified to provide a two-hour session to trainee teachers. This program ran successfully until 2014.

In 2016 the AEC developed an online, curriculum-linked professional learning module called *Voting in the Classroom*. This one-hour program allowed teachers to undertake learning at their convenience and provided direct links to other AEC education resources. In addition, the AEC also re-introduced free, face-to-face professional learning sessions for current upper primary and secondary teachers and two-hour face-to-face workshops delivered in universities for pre-service teachers.

In 2000 the *Teachers Resource Folder* was reviewed, updated and replaced by the *Electoral Education Resource* (2002) and *Democracy Rules* (2007). Each of these hard copy resources were provided to every school in Australia at the time of publishing.

Importantly, a reinvigorated focus on education in recent years within the AEC has also led to increased delivery through a variety of means including a dedicated Education website <https://education.aec.gov.au/>. *AEC for schools* provides free educational resources and programs for teachers and students. Since 2012 this includes the comprehensive *Get Voting* program which resources teachers to teach civics education from enrolment to result, in their classroom through an authentic election experience.

²¹ JSCNET Canberra Institutions Report 2019

²² NEEC Program Review 2014; IPSOS NEEC Research Report 2015; Nap CC Report 2016

In the 2018-2019 financial year, AEC education programs reported:

- approximately 19,000 unique users went to the *Get Voting* website
- more than 520 election packs were sent to schools through *Get Voting*
- around 60 educators completed the *Voting in the Classroom* online learning module
- 15 professional development sessions were provided to over 237 in-service teachers
- seven (7) universities were visited to talk to 1,095 pre-service teachers
- five (5) civics education conferences were attended and workshops were provided to over 75 participants.²³

NEEC: contextualised within the current AEC organisational structure

The increasing success of the NEEC and the broader AEC's education programs broadly coincided with the recent creation of the National Training and Education Unit (NTEU) within the AEC in 2018.

Within the AEC structure, the former Learning Coordination Unit and the Public Education and Awareness function (including administration of the NEEC), were brought together to create the NTEU. The NTEU is responsible for centrally led and coordinated training and education activities, embedding compliance, electoral integrity, professionalism and capability building across the AEC with a focus on driving best practice outcomes. The newly established NTEU also contains an agile pool of staff (including NEEC staff) which will encourage greater opportunities for cross-skilling across the NTEU staff, while also enhancing and professionalising training and development across the AEC for both internal and external audiences.

To support an Australian community that is well informed about electoral matters, the AEC delivers national training and education, community engagement and communication activities.

All Australian citizens aged 18 years and over are required by law to enrol and vote. Ensuring Australians know and understand this right and obligation requires the AEC to engage with the community and provide information and advice to all eligible voters.

The National Training and Education Unit (NTEU), established in early 2018 as part of the Organisational Design Review, centrally-leads and coordinates AEC internal training and electoral education to external audiences. Schools can visit the National Electoral Education Centre (NEEC) in Canberra for electoral education programs and the AEC for Schools website provides free educational resources and programs, including election materials to run school elections. Professional learning is provided to teachers to encourage electoral education in primary and secondary schools.

The AEC places strong importance on providing information and advice to voters, with consideration for those with diverse needs. Education and communication initiatives are in place to meet the needs of Australians with disability, and the AEC's Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP) aims to increase electoral knowledge, enrolment, turnout and vote formality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.²⁴

²³ AEC Annual Report 2018/19

²⁴ AEC Annual report 2017/18