



## Geography Syllabus Citizenship in the media Is citizenship controversial?



# Teaching Citizenship

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## The introduction of Civics and Citizenship

The concept of Civics and Citizenship was first introduced into schools in the late 1990s when junior Geography and History became mandatory subjects as part of a Civics and Citizenship education program to encourage active, informed participation in Australian society and its political processes. At the time, there were concerns about a cynicism towards democratic processes and lack of participation in politics, particularly by youth. The Civics and Citizenship program was seen as a way to encourage active participation in political processes.

## Learning across the Curriculum

More recently, with the introduction of the suite of new NSW syllabuses following the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, Civics and Citizenship was again reinstated in NSW, this time as a component of "Learning across the Curriculum". As one of the Learning Across the Curriculum areas it was given the same weighting as the General Capabilities and Cross Curriculum Priorities such as literacy, numeracy, etc.

## Civics and Citizenship

As students engage in learning in Geography, they will develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, values and attitudes for responsible, informed and active participation in Australian society and as global citizens. Students explore ways they can shape their lives, value their belonging in a diverse and dynamic society, and positively contribute at a range of scales. Active citizens support democratic participation, foster individual and group involvement in civil society, critically question existing political institutions and social, economic and political arrangements, and facilitate democratic change.

Students learn to participate in decision-making and to exercise critical judgement about political issues. Comparisons with other civil societies enrich their understanding of the nature of democracy in Australia and in other countries. Students examine the role of citizens in the context of government systems and institutions as well as political and social life in Australia and other countries.

NESA, K–10 Geography syllabus

## Citizenship Content

Citizenship and political involvement have long been part of the Geography syllabus. The previous Geography syllabus incorporated citizenship-related content and teachers regularly included activities related to political involvement. For example, in Year 10 students were encouraged to propose actions to promote sustainability, social justice and equity as part of "Active Citizenship". Letter writing and protests were key features of the course content, and found in most of the text books and online resources at the time.

The current syllabus has explicit links between Geography, citizenship and political processes and emphasises the active role that participants can take. In Stage 4, the Landscapes and Landforms topic allows students to examine the responses of individuals, groups and governments to a geomorphic hazard/disaster. The Place and Liveability topic allows students to conduct an assessment of the role of governments, non-government organisations, communities and individuals in enhancing liveability, but it is a dash point, rather than a dot point is as such not a mandatory part of the topic. In the Water In The World topic, students can conduct an assessment of strategies used to overcome water scarcity and the role of government, non-governments organisations, individuals and communities in sustainable water management. In doing so students can explore the responsibilities of

different levels of government. The topic also includes students proposing individual actions contributing to water management. It also allows students to examine the responses of individuals, groups and government to the impact of an atmospheric hazard/disaster. The Interconnections topic allows students to explain the responses of governments, groups and individuals to minimise the effects of production and consumption.

In Stage 5 in Changing Places, students propose ways for individuals and communities to contribute to a sustainable urban future, and in Environmental Change and Management, students propose how individuals could contribute to achieving environmental sustainability for the environment studied in each country.

What are the causes and consequences of change in environments and how can this change be managed? A key inquiry question in Stage 5: Environmental Change and Management (NESA, K–10 Geography syllabus)

## Biodiversity and climate change



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## Citizenship in the media

Encouraging students to be active citizens can gain positive attention for students and schools when it involves students commemorating, re-enacting or honouring past events, for example student involvement in ANZAC Day ceremonies, and activities closely related to the study of History. However, active citizenship in contemporary issues, more closely associated with the study of Geography, can be contentious and gain negative media attention. There are positive perceptions when students are involved in fairly controlled meetings or focus groups regarding urban change or development, but views can shift quickly when students are involved in council meetings, letter writing campaigns or protests (despite those being in the previous syllabus).

There has been recent media attention regarding teaching of topics typically considered as related to citizenship. In the current political climate these are more likely to be considered as “controversial issues”. This can be seen most recently in student activism related to climate change. Examples of media coverage include when a primary school was directed to remove two sections of their school newsletter which showcased student work. The showcased work was two letters to the Prime Minister regarding climate change. This was reported in the *Daily Telegraph*. Around the same time, *A Current Affair* ran a program where a parent had pulled his child out of school over “brainwashing” of children regarding climate change. Last month, The Guardian reported that the Prime Minister wanted students to be “less activist” in their protesting against climate change. Beyond Australia, the *New York Times* ran an article in 2018, “Should Schools Teach About Climate Change?”

## Controversial issues – Is citizenship controversial?

NSW public schools are guided by the Department of Education’s Controversial Issues in Schools policy and our Code of Conduct policy, while religious/independent schools are likely to also have other policies and guidelines determining what is and isn’t controversial (e.g. religious doctrine). The department policy does not state that controversial issues can’t be covered in class, but does give some guidelines about how to cover them. The policy states that it is a teacher’s responsibility to “... ensure that the delivery of curriculum, school programs and activities, presentations and activities by external providers or other events involving students are age appropriate, relevant to curriculum aims and objectives and consistent with the values of public education and the school’s purpose and goals.”

The department’s policy states that once staff identify a controversial issue that they need to “...ensure balanced and reasonable consideration of various viewpoints occurs in the delivery of curriculum, school programs and activities, in presentations to students by visitors, staff, contractors or external providers and on school excursions.” In other words, when teaching an issue like climate change, or a controversial urban development, teachers are meant to provide a range of viewpoints about the issue.

## Age appropriateness

Recent media attention has questioned whether it is appropriate for students to be studying topics such as extinctions or climate change and related personal actions to address them at primary school. These topics could be covered in multiple places in Geography in



Core values of schools can be embodied in citizenship education.



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## Importance of Citizenship

Over time, public perceptions about teaching citizenship, particularly aspects related to active engagement in political processes and contemporary issues by young people has shifted, and is getting more negative attention from the media and politicians. In any school it is not unusual for there to be regular conversations about what is and isn't acceptable, controversial, sensitive, etc. Different school communities and school systems will have different views on what is acceptable. As well, society and the students we teach are always changing, and what was acceptable some years ago, might not be ok now. Conversely what was considered controversial once, may be central to a syllabus now. Despite this, citizenship is a key component of the NSW syllabuses and has been for many years. Fostering student involvement in democratic processes is a cornerstone of building an active and engaged community with the ability to shape our future communities, cities, country and world.

## ***About the Australian Geography Competition***

- *Open to students from Year 7 to Year 12*
- *Certificates of recognition for all participating students*
- *Major prizes for highest scoring students*
- *16 high performing Year 11 students invited each year to Geography's Big Week Out*
- *Four students chosen to represent Australia at the International Geography Olympiad each year*

***2020 Competition dates: Wed 18 March to Wed 1 April –  
competition entry details and further information at  
– [www.geographycompetition.org.au/](http://www.geographycompetition.org.au/)***