Mr Craig Bateman, President, Durham University Model Westminster Society – written evidence (CCE0050)

Durham University Model Westminster Society is an award-winning, new student group at Durham Students’ Union. Model Westminster Society aims to empower students to have a meaningful voice in public and social policy making through a series of inclusive debates, workshops and addresses on issues pertaining to British local and national politics. The Society also aims to contribute towards the development of civil society by encouraging students to volunteer and fundraise.

Model Westminster Society was officially ratified by Durham Students’ Union on 9th May 2017, making it one of the newest student groups at Durham Students’ Union. The Society is led by a driven team of student leaders who are passionate about political education and social policy. Model Westminster Society is unique in the sense that it aims to empower student voice in social policy making through its outreach programme with the local community, as well as its research outlet which publishes a series of ‘briefing notes’ to governmental and community agencies, departments and organisations.

The Society is also committed to Step up to Serve’s six principles of meaningful youth social action, which include ensuring that our programmes are (1) youth-led; (2) socially impactful; (3) progressive; (4) embedded; (5) reflective; and (6) challenging.

Our Submission to the House of Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement:

Methodology:

We have developed a two-stage research approach for our submission to the House of Lords Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. Firstly, our online survey, the findings of which are included in this report, was launched on social media and promoted over several weeks with Durham student groups. Each of Model Westminster Society’s student leaders were responsible for sharing a link to the online survey within their networks. We were very pleased that 100 respondents completed our survey.

The second stage of our research, which we will deliver in Michaelmas term in time for the later deadline, is to hold a series of focus groups that aim to draw out a more qualitative feel of how students understand citizenship in the 21st century. The Chair of Model Westminster Society, Kyle Kirkpatrick, will lead these focus groups, and we hope to reach out to more members of minority groups.

Executive Summary:

A. 100 individuals participated in our survey. 95% of these were students at Durham University. 40% reported they were in the third year of undergraduate studies. 71% reported they were aged 19 – 21 years old. 54% identified as female.

B. 84% of respondents defined citizenship as voting in elections; 83% defined it as making a difference in the community. Only 14% identified citizenship as taking part in online surveys and polls.

C. 55% of respondents felt that citizenship and civic engagement were somewhat important today. Only 1% of respondents felt that citizenship was not important at all.
D. 60% of respondents felt that citizenship in the 21st century is different than in the 20th century. The most popular reason was globalisation and successive migrant crises.
E. 55% of respondents felt some forms of citizenship are bound to the boundaries of one’s own country and other forms are not. Only 3% felt that citizenship was confined to national boundaries.
F. 40% of respondents felt the legal voting age should not be lowered to 16. Many cited that 16-year olds are not knowledgeable enough; lack experience; and/or are easily influenced by others.
G. 82% of respondents felt that students should have a meaningful say on social policy issues.
H. Only 6% of respondents felt that the current education system enables young people to be active citizens. Many respondents felt that political education should be made more impartial, widely available/accessible, and even compulsory.
I. 75% of respondents claimed that knowing how to get involved was the top barrier to active citizenship.
J. 72% of respondents felt that diversity and integration can be increased together.
K. 77% of respondents felt that social media both enhances and challenges democracy.

Section One: Demographic Profile:

Question 1:

Are you a student at Durham University?

- Yes: 95%
- No: 5%

100 individuals participated in our survey. 95% of our respondents reported that they were students at Durham University (our target audience).

Question 2:

Which year group are you in? (95 responses)

- First Year (Undergraduate): 11.06%
- Second Year (Undergraduate): 12.06%
- Third Year (Undergraduate): 28.04%
- Masters: 11.06%
- Postgraduate: 7.04%

The majority (40%) of respondents who attend Durham University reported that they were in their third year of undergraduate studies.
Question 3:

Which College do you attend? (97 responses)

Most respondents were a member of the College of St Hild and St Bede (37%), with the second largest proportion from St Chad’s College (26.08%).

Question 4:

How old are you? (97 respondents)

Almost ¼ of our respondents reported that they were 21 years old. Most respondents (71%) reported that they were aged 19 – 21 years old. 17 respondents reported that they were 24 years old or more. This shows that it is likely some mature students took part in our survey. 1 respondent preferred not to disclose their age.

Question 5:

Most respondents were a member of the College of St Hild and St Bede (37%), with the second largest proportion from St Chad’s College (26.08%).

Almost ¼ of our respondents reported that they were 21 years old. Most respondents (71%) reported that they were aged 19 – 21 years old. 17 respondents reported that they were 24 years old or more. This shows that it is likely some mature students took part in our survey. 1 respondent preferred not to disclose their age.
Most respondents (54%) reported that they identified as being female. The second largest proportion (44%) reported that they identified as being male. 2% identified as other when asked about their gender.

Question 6:

Most respondents (84%) defined citizenship as voting in elections. 20% related citizenship with national identity. Only 14% chose online activism.
Question 8:

How important do you feel citizenship and civic engagement are in today's society? (100 responses)

- Very important: 37%
- Somewhat important: 55%
- Irrelevant: 2%
- Not very important: 5%
- Not important at all: 1%

The majority (55%) of respondents felt that citizenship and civic engagement were somewhat important. Only 1% of respondents felt that citizenship was not important at all, and 2 respondents felt that citizenship was irrelevant.

Question 9:

Would you say that citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st Century is different than in the 20th Century? (99 responses)

- Yes: 60.06%
- No: 6.01%
- Yes and No: 33.03%

Most respondents (60.06%) felt that citizenship in the 21st century is different than in the 20th century. Only 6.01% felt that citizenship in the 21st century was not different than in the 20th century. The second largest proportion (33.03) thought that citizenship in the 21st century had both similarities and differences within citizenship in the 20th century.

Question 10: In what ways would you say that citizenship in the 21st century is different than in the 20th century? (68 responses)

A. Almost half of respondents (33/68) claimed that globalisation has led to a new level of international connectivity where people feel ties to multiple countries and patriotism has declined within popular discourse. One respondent claimed that “the modern world is a global village now”, with others citing the rise of global cities such as London as shaping – and in some cases, blurring – modern identities.

B. 25 respondents claimed that social media has reframed citizenship between the two centuries. Many respondents drew on how this dualism between globalisation and technological connectivity has structured and sustained a new form of global citizenship, which is shaped and made aware by non-direct social media networking sites.

C. 9 respondents specifically referred to individualism, with the majority of these illustrating how social divisions have become more “volatile” and subjective, especially when it comes to voting patterns. One respondent argued that citizenship has become “less nationalistic but also more individualistic”, with political activity becoming an individual rather than group undertaking.
D. 9 respondents referred to how social values have changed between the two centuries. For example, some claimed that the enfranchisement of women in 1928 had made the word ‘citizen’ become a “sexless” term. Others argued more generally that shifts in social values had made citizenship activities more available to a broader category of individuals – not just the privileged.

Question 11:

Is citizenship confined to national boundaries? (100 responses)

- Yes, citizenship is co...
- No, citizenship goes b...
- Some forms of citizens...

Most respondents (55%) felt that while some forms of citizenship were confined to national boundaries, others were not. Only 3% of respondents felt that citizenship was confined to the boundaries of one’s own country, its law and liberties.

A close majority of 40% of respondents felt that the legal voting age should not be lowered to 16, with 32% of respondents feeling that 16 and 17-year olds should be able to vote. 28% of respondents felt that votes at 16 depended on other variables such as political maturity and/or education.

Question 12:

Should the legal voting age be lowered to 16? (100 responses)

- Yes
- No
- It depends

A close majority of 40% of respondents felt that the legal voting age should not be lowered to 16, with 32% of respondents feeling that 16 and 17-year olds should be able to vote. 28% of respondents felt that votes at 16 depended on other variables such as political maturity and/or education.

Question 13: What do you think about lowering the legal voting age to 16?

A. Most (24) respondents claimed that 16-year olds are (a) not knowledgeable enough (b) lack experience and/or (c) are easily influenced by their parents and others in their social groups such as peers. They felt this made young people “ill-equipped voters.” Two respondents felt that votes at 16 was “gimmicky” and failed to be anything other than a simple vote-winner.

B. 17 respondents claimed that votes at 16 should be complimented by an accompanying policy in schools to educate young people, including a “full and rigorous” education in citizenship that is balanced and unbiased. 3 respondents felt this should be compulsory, with one respondent feeling that this should include “substantive civic, historical and economic education.” One
respondent claimed this should include resources on who/what they are voting for, and ways to get involved.

C. 14 respondents claimed that votes at 16 would give young people a “vested interest” in who runs the country, and would “encourage” young people to take citizenship seriously, enabling them to become more “socially and politically conscious”. Two respondents identified that university fees and other matters such as paying taxes apply to 16-year olds as much as they do to older people.

D. 6 respondents claimed that votes at 16 was either (a) unnecessary, (b) arbitrary, (c) that 16-year olds were more concerned with other issues such as passing exams or (d) that 18 was a good cut-off point for voting eligibility.

E. 4 respondents claimed that votes at 16 should only apply in major situations where there are “long-term ramifications” such as in the case of Brexit and Scottish independence. 1 respondent argued that votes at 16 should apply to local elections but not to national elections.

F. 2 respondents identified a democratic deficit in allowing older and not younger people to vote. They believed this created an imbalance where younger people depended on older people to help them, with one claiming that this doesn’t always favour young people, such as the EU referendum.

Question 14:

Do you feel that students should have a meaningful say on social policy issues? (99 responses)

- Yes, students should b... 82.08%
- No, students are still... 16.02%
- Sometimes when there a... 1%

Most respondents (82.08%) felt that students should have a meaningful say on social policy issues, with 16.02% claiming that this should be restricted to issues which specifically affect them. Only 1% felt that students should not have a say on social policy issues.

Question 15:
Question 16: What could be done to encourage more young people to be active citizens?

A. Many respondents (39/65) believed that political education that was (a) impartial, (b) more widely available/accessible, and in some cases even (c) compulsory would encourage more young people to be active citizens.
   a. 13 respondents claimed that political education should be especially practical, and focus on how government works, the histories and standpoints of political parties, and what civil society is in the UK as well as in other nations.
   b. 4 respondents claimed that political education should be compulsory and/or mandatory at secondary school level.
   c. 2 respondents specifically mentioned that citizenship education should continue at universities, with elective modules in politics and modern foreign languages.
   d. 2 respondents claimed that political education should also focus on ‘information literacy’, and help manage and assess the “non-stop deluge of information”, including digesting party manifestos.
   e. 3 respondents claimed that political education should also include studies in historical, philosophical, moral and civic issues too. For example, one respondent thought that political education should extend to case studies such as the history of the Second World War, Hitler, Holocaust and different interpretations like Carl Schmitt, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt.

B. 15 respondents claimed a sense of “feeling listened to” by MPs and others would encourage young people to be active citizens. This included showing young people are “wanted” in society, taking their investigations and projects “more seriously”, and placing issues that are pertinent to students and young people higher on the agenda. For others, this included depoliticising the public arena and instilling a sense of community cohesion that encourage genuine, fair and unbiased debate.

C. 14 respondents believed tangible participatory experiences would help more young people be active citizens. Respondents believed this should include creating and promoting opportunities to get involved in the community through intergenerational projects such as community gardens. One respondent claimed additional funding for schools that commit to extra-curricular leadership opportunities should be available too. Some respondents mentioned programmes such as Model UN, Model Westminster, the European Youth Parliament are important and teach young people to be “critical and analytic”.

Most respondents (73.05%) felt that the current education system only sometimes enables young people to be active citizens. A minority of respondents (6.01%) felt that the current education system enables young people to be active citizens.
D. 5 respondents felt that digital technology had a prominent role to play in helping more young people to be active citizens, including using this to “amplify” the voices of minority groups.

E. Two respondents said that there should be more awareness of what being an active citizen involves.

Question 17:

What, if any, do you feel are the top barriers to active citizenship? (98 responses)

- Time: 75.05%
- Money: 33.07%
- Knowing how to get involved: 40.08%
- Feeling supported in citizenship: 50%

Most respondents (75.05%) claimed that knowing how to get involved was the top barrier to active citizenship. 50% of respondents claimed that time was the top barrier to active citizenship.

Question 18:

Can diversity and integration be increased together? (100 responses)

- Yes, they can: 72%
- No, they can't: 4%
- To a certain degree: 24%

72% of respondents felt that diversity and integration can be increased together. Only 4% felt that they could not.

Question 19:

Most respondents (75.05%) claimed that knowing how to get involved was the top barrier to active citizenship. 50% of respondents claimed that time was the top barrier to active citizenship.

72% of respondents felt that diversity and integration can be increased together. Only 4% felt that they could not.
Section 3: Our Recommendations:

1. An educational framework together with a proactive, open and transparent political institutional consultation where public institutions have a responsibility to inform and educate others about their work in the community.
   A. There should be taster sessions, critical thinking lesson starters such as ‘news reviews’, and politically themed deep learning days to draw attention to current political issues. Special classes during elections to inform and educate everyone.
   B. Political education should be embedded and integrated across the curriculum, especially within the humanities, including history, ethics, and citizenship.
   C. There should be a focus on research, critical thinking and interpersonal skills, with schools and universities being financially recognised for their efforts to develop social action opportunities.
   D. An undergraduate citizenship short module should be introduced, where students can debate current issues to develop critical thinking skills. Universities should also be encouraged to offer more elective modules in politics and modern foreign languages.

2. Using digital technology to interact with decision-makers, cross cultural and social divides, exchange ideas, and grow campaigns.
   A. A dedicated, youth-friendly, unbiased, concise website with useful tools, tips and information for getting involved, digesting information, and knowing who to contact for specific enquiries should be created and made widely available.
   B. Digital technology should be used to amplify the voice of minority groups within social policy making. This could include an online network where members of minority groups can voice their opinions on current political issues to decision makers and political leaders.
   C. There should be investment in internet connectivity so that more people can access information.

3. Creating and funding tangible opportunities for young people to experience politics first hand.
A. More should be done to support and grow participatory programmes where young people can develop diplomacy and negotiation skills, such as provided through Model Westminster, Model United Nations, and the European Youth Parliament.
B. Information on opportunities to get involved with politics, social action and community projects should be more widely available, using digital services where possible.
C. Public investment should be made to drive initiatives that empower young people, and especially university students to lead positive social action in their communities.

4. Leading a cultural shift in attitudes – politicians and political leaders should be encouraged to take student voice more genuinely.
A. An institutional shift in attitudes should be encouraged in how government agencies, departments and representatives engage with, and consult students and young people.
B. More should be done to equip workers in the public and voluntary sectors to incorporate events for students as part of their outreach programme, especially university students. This should include time, money and resources.
C. More opportunities for students and young people to communicate and exchange ideas with policy makers, advisors and academics should be made available, such as national alternative careers fairs.

Model Westminster Society wishes to thank all of those who took part in this online survey. Disclaimer: the views and opinions expressed in this submission are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Model Westminster Society, its partner organisations, agents, or associates.

3 September 2017