Submission of evidence in response to question:

5. What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

Response:

As liberal democracies are not ideologically neutral but are founded on a set of basic civic values, such as tolerance, equal treatment, respect for the law and political engagement, schools have a role to play in fostering these values. Schools can do this in a variety of ways. Evidence from existing research suggests that both citizenship education and ‘learning by doing’ or participatory approaches are effective in fostering these values. Citizenship education traditionally aims to transfer and debate political knowledge and terminology that young people need to understand the political system. It also trains them in the skills to navigate and participate in the political process. Learning by doing approaches essentially mimic the democratic political process in order to foster the skills and values such as negotiation, communication, efficacy, a sense of engagement, belonging and ownership among students. Such approaches include creating student councils and holding elections, as school activities that have been shown to have lasting effects on student political engagement, and facilitating a climate in which sensitive political and social issues can freely be discussed. Such a climate has been found to not only cultivate political knowledge and participation in general, but also to mitigate social disparities in students’ political engagement. Citizenship education and learning by doing approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive. They complement one another and citizenship education can incorporate learning through practice pedagogies.

Citizenship education should be made available in the final two years of lower secondary (i.e. Key Stage 4) and in upper secondary (i.e. in Sixth Form and in Further Education), because mid to late adolescence is a crucial period for the formation of political identities and dispositions. Late adolescence is such a politically defining period because young people at this age begin to turn to society as a source of exploration after having examined family membership and questioned parental authority in early adolescence. Young people are therefore likely to be particularly receptive to educational influences on political dispositions during this life stage. But curiosity about society is not synonymous with political/civic engagement (indeed, this link is what citizenship education tries to establish). This means that not all adolescents will self-select into citizenship classes, even though they are likely to be curious about society. Therefore citizenship education should be compulsory as this ensures that everybody will benefit from the lessons. Making it an optional subject will only lead to the already engaged students, who as a rule are from middle class backgrounds, signing up for the programme. Voluntary programmes therefore risk not serving the disengaged groups. Having citizenship education as a compulsory programme makes all the more sense as existing research has found that students from disadvantaged
backgrounds benefit more from citizenship education in terms of political engagement than their peers from more privileged backgrounds. Citizenship education is thus able to compensate for missing parental socialization.

The most important change that needs to happen in the current education system is the introduction of citizenship education as a compulsory course in upper secondary. The existing system of 16 to 19 education is characterised by a rigorous separation of the academic (A levels) and vocational (NVQ/Btech) track. The vocational track only offers training for specific professions rather than general courses. Citizenship education is altogether absent. It is therefore not surprising that existing research has found track attended to have an independent effect on students’ political engagement, with students pursuing A levels having significantly higher levels of political participation (both in terms of voting and protest activities) than their peers studying for NVQ or B-tech qualifications, controlling for pre-track levels of political engagement. As students of disadvantaged backgrounds, who as a rule are less politically engaged, are disproportionately assigned to vocational education (since their GCSE results do not allow them to do A levels), the existing tracked system of upper secondary education only exacerbates social disparities in political engagement.

Other countries acknowledge the importance of education for active citizenship in upper secondary vocational education. France and Sweden already have citizenship education as a compulsory programme in all tracks of 16-19 education, and The Netherlands has recently introduced it in the vocational track. The highly esteemed system of vocational education in Germany includes a school component with general courses such as citizenship education. Sweden has even standardised citizenship education across the various tracks in upper secondary. The UK would do well to learn from these examples.

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