The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of more than 600 students’ unions, representing more than 95 per cent of all higher education and further education unions in the UK. We also established the National Society of Apprentices in 2014, which now represents over 150,000 apprentices from all sectors and industries in the UK.

Through our member students’ unions, NUS represents the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students’ unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.

NUS is grateful for the opportunity to submit evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. This inquiry is of particular interest of NUS, who have been long term advocates of political education and votes at 16. We have chosen to focus on questions which bear the most direct relevance to live areas of our organizational policy and areas which are of most interest to NUS’ student members. We would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to this inquiry in any way as needed.

**What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?**

1. NUS believes that citizenship and civic engagement in the 21st century means fully participating in and positively contributing to community life. This includes volunteering locally and having involvement with community organisations such as libraries, hospitals, sports clubs, mutual interest groups and faith groups. Engagement in civic life not only includes registering and turning up to vote, but goes beyond this and involves having political literacy and seeing students campaigning on issues that they care about. Civic engagement is fundamentally about students engaging with politics on a local and national level and being effective in making positive change happen.

2. Citizenship and civic life is also about global awareness. This is about students being tolerant, having intercultural awareness and respecting diversity. It is important within any one society to understand that some issues are too big for any one country to deal with and know that actions at home can have wider consequences around the world.

3. It matters that students are aware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens so that they can engage with and influence the issues they care about. NUS has particular interest in, and concern for, this as the rights of students – and citizens more broadly – come under threat through the Great Repeal Bill and loss of the Charter of Fundamental Rights or as Brexit threatens to close down opportunities to study and work internationally.

4. For students, issues of citizenship, civic engagement and identity are inextricably linked. Students are often labelled as ‘apathetic’ when it comes to engaging in formal politics, but this simply is not true. Students have told us time and time again that they have felt disillusioned with a political class that has failed to recognise them. This disillusion has led
to a lack of action at the ballot box, with turnout amongst 18-24s as low as 44 per cent in 2015. In this year’s election, it rose as high as 60 per cent with shock results coming through from student heavy cities such as Lincoln, Plymouth South, Derby North and Canterbury. When students see their identities or their interests reflected in formal politics, they can turn out to vote in force.

Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?

5. NUS believes that limits to the voting age and the existing voter registration process act as a barrier to active political engagement. As a founding member of the Votes at 16 coalition, NUS is committed to securing the right to vote for all 1.5 million 16 and 17 year olds across the UK. We welcome the lowering of the voting age in Scottish local elections in 2015 and the possible future lowering of the voting age in Wales and call on the UK Government to extend this right for all 16 & 17 year olds across the UK.

6. 16 and 17 year olds contribute to and participate in society in many ways and should be able to have a say on the issues that affect them. They can consent to medical treatment, work full time, pay income tax and National Insurance, claim tax credits and welfare benefits, give consent to sexual relationships, get married or have a civil partnership and join the armed forces. These issues fundamentally impact the life of young people and yet without the right to vote, they are denied the opportunity to have a say on them. These issues affect the lives of 16 and 17 year olds in the same way they do for everyone aged 18 and above, so young people should be able to have their say in shaping these issues in the same way. In NUS’ recent report into the experiences of students in FE and technical education, one student echoed this argument “I know 16 year olds who are paying tax, so why don’t we get a vote? At 16 we have access to information. A lot of things affect young people so we should have a say. Votes at 16 should be combined with political education.”

7. A poll run by NUS in summer 2016 found that 76% of 16 and 17 year olds said that they would have voted in the EU referendum had they had the chance. Similarly, the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 saw 109,593 16 and 17 year olds register to vote, with 75% of young people claiming to have voted. Whilst there is no one complete answer to improving engagement in formal politics, voting from an early age can be a catalyst for a route towards individuals understanding their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Getting people involved in politics from a young age can encourage them to stay politically active throughout their lives; 97% of 16 and 17 year olds who reported having voted in the Scottish Independence Referendum said they would vote again in future elections.

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2 https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/eu-ref-16-and-17-year-olds-are-being-denied-a-say-on-their-future
8. The introduction of the system of individual electoral registration (IER) in 2014 presents a further barrier to the active political engagement of students and young people, with the switch knocking thousands of people in the UK, predominantly students who would have previously been block registered by their institution, off from the electoral register. Looking at the 21 regions with the highest population density of students across the UK, registered voters dropped by 181,552 in 2014, nineteen times higher than the drop-off the previous year of 9,727.5

9. In 2014 NUS made clear that any proposal to introduce IER must include a clear and thorough plan as to how the risks to registration levels can be mitigated.6 We recognise that since 2014 campaigns targeted at students have been run locally and nationally in an attempt to drive up registrations. Similarly NUS and students’ unions continue to play a vital role in getting students registered to vote.

10. NUS further recognises that IER has bought with it the possibility for online registration and this is a great benefit for students. NUS believes however that the negatives of IER greatly outweigh the positives for students. Following the 2015 general election the Association of Electoral Administrators reported that “The registration of students and care homes under IER is extremely difficult under current legislative procedures and has resulted in far fewer students and care home residents being registered. A review of how these two groups can be registered more easily should be undertaken, with consideration being given to allowing EROs to directly register people at institutions”.7

11. Through the recently passed Higher Education and Research Act 2017, there will now be an obligation on higher education institutions to do more to support the registration of their students to vote. This is a positive move that NUS called for and supported during the passage of the legislation, and continues to support; however, we – as others have – note that the final legislation did not go so far as to prescribe a specific mechanism for universities and HEIs to implement to improve student voter registration levels. Universities like Sheffield, and elsewhere, have demonstrated remarkable success in increasing their levels of voter registration through integrating voter registration at the point of course enrolment – what is known as the ‘Sheffield model’.

12. With the Higher Education and Research Act now passed, and its voter registration clause at a critical juncture as guidance and advice to institutions is formed, we believe it is imperative that as many institutions are supported to introduce their own variants of the ‘Sheffield model’ to maximise the opportunity that this Act now presents.

13. More widely, NUS urges the government to explore alternatives to IER which make it easier for students – and citizens – to register to vote and remain registered, automatically.

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)

5 http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06764/SN06764.pdf
6 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpolcon/writev/1463/m23.htm
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?

14. NUS believes that education plays a crucial role in supporting students to become active citizens. In 2016 NUS conducted a consultation with FE students which saw us visiting hundreds of students across dozens of colleges throughout England and asked, what is important to them when they complete their education. Students across the country repeatedly identified that they would like to have access to political education to help them become active citizens and develop social & civic skills.

15. NUS believes that all students should have access to citizenship education from primary level through to university. This should enable students to leave education feeling equipped with the skills, knowledge and experience to become active, well-informed, confident members of their local, national and global communities. This means making sure that education covers politics and democratic life, as well as social issues such as sex and relationship education (SRE), sustainability and inequality, critical thinking and holistic understanding of equality and diversity.

16. NUS notes that Citizenship has been a statutory subject on the national curriculum since 2002 and that all secondary schools in England will be required to teach sex and relationships education through the Children and Social Work Bill 2017. NUS believes that the scope of citizenship education is currently too narrow and should encompass wider political and constitutional rights, as well as social issues including global citizenship and sustainability, legal rights and financial literacy, human rights, liberation, and diversity. ‘Active citizenship’ should be given priority and embedded as far as possible across the curriculum.

17. In our 2017 report with GuildHE, NUS outlined six key ways in which higher education institutions can play a role in supporting students to become active citizens. This includes providing volunteering opportunities, encouraging democratic engagement, encouraging sustainable actions, engaging with the local community, developing identities as global citizens and creating the space for self-reflection and personal development. Educational institutions and students’ unions alike play a crucial role in delivering this.

18. Citizenship education shouldn’t just start at HE and in NUS’ recent report on students in FE and technical education we identified that many students are unhappy with the citizenship education they currently receive and would like to see more of a focus on society and politics. One student said “They don’t teach us anything like that [civic education & politics] in school. You get a bit of it here but depends on what course you’re on.” FE students should be taught about formal politics and voting but also about volunteering and community engagement, to provide routes to engaging in civic life beyond typical democratic activity.

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8 https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/expectations-of-learners-in-area-reviews-waves-1-3
How important are levels of English proficiency for first and second generation immigrants and what could be done to increase them, including through support for ESOL classes? Are there particular barriers faced by newcomers to Britain? Could the naturalisation process, including the citizenship test, be improved and if so, how?

19. NUS believes that the ability to communicate in a common language is the bedrock of a shared and communal society. For many UK residents whose first language is not English, ESOL is their way to find employment, enter education, and engage with their local communities and public services. The 2011 census found that 760,000 UK residents lack English language proficiency. This is a barrier to employment, education and social cohesion\(^ {11}\).

20. Despite being an essential lifeline for so many across the UK looking to integrate into society and take up their role as citizens, over recent years we’ve seen extensive and damaging cuts to English language services. In 2008 the Government spent £230 million on ESOL funding and by 2015 this had been cut by 60% in real terms\(^ {12}\). What is more, wider cuts to the adult skills budget have left providers unable to find funding from other sources. NUS notes that in January 2016 the Government announced a £20 million English language tuition fund, however this sum only goes part of the way of recovering funding for ESOL lost over recent years.

21. The impact of funding cuts has meant that ESOL participation has fallen by 22% since 2009, but this is not due to any lack in demand for English language instruction. Rather, 80% of providers have recently reported waiting lists of up to 1000 and 66% said lack of funding was the main cause of this. It is clear that far more than the 140,000 learners currently on ESOL courses wish to take them up\(^ {13}\).

22. In December 2016 the Casey Review into how social integration can be improved across the UK found that community cohesion is being undermined by ongoing funding cuts to ESOL courses. It concluded that: "The government should support further targeted English language provision by making sufficient funding available for community-based English language classes, and through the adult skills budget for local authorities to prioritise English language where there is a need"\(^ {14}\).

23. According to both the 2011 Equality Impact Assessment into ESOL cuts and the 2016 Casey Review into social cohesion, a lack of English proficiency is particularly prevalent among Muslim, Polish, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, while women are more likely than men to not be able to speak English well or at all. This leads to lower wages, lower community integration and less civic participation.

\(^ {11}\) https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census
\(^ {12}\) http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7905#fullreport
\(^ {13}\) http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7905#fullreport
24. If the Government is serious about integration of migrants, ESOL is a low-cost and straightforward solution. NUS recommends that the Government reverses recent cuts and delivers a sustainable public funding settlement for ESOL provision and all UK citizens should have a statutory right to ESOL if required, independent of immigration or employment status.

7 September 2017