Christine Huebner – written evidence (CCE0221)

Executive Summary of key points

This submission provides evidence on the meaning of citizenship among young people in the U.K. Based on a qualitative study on the meaning of citizenship and civic and political engagement among 15-18 year olds (ongoing research), the following key conclusions are presented:

a. Citizenship has a variety of meanings for young people. Only some young people view citizenship as related to rights and responsibilities. Many young people view citizenship as belonging to a community and acting responsibly and independently for the advancement of that community.

b. The communities young people relate to are not always unique or necessarily local or national; some young people relate to multiple and comprehensive communities, some even to a global community.

c. Some young people feel marginalized as citizens-to-be, for not participating in the labour market or not being given the same rights as adult citizens. In particular political participation gives rise to a two-tier view of citizenship among young people.

d. Young people view current citizenship education as not related to their view of citizenship. Some would like to see in particular more formal education on possibilities for political participation. This should be mandatory for all young people. Others see no need for citizenship education.

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To question 1. The meaning of citizenship

1. There is little empirical evidence on the meaning of everyday citizenship in the UK, in particular among young people. Notable exceptions are studies by Ruth Lister and colleagues (2003) and Pamela Conover (1995).

2. Citizenship is not part of the everyday language of young people, a finding also previously reported by Lister et al. (2003). However, when prompted, young people have a range of opinions on what they think citizenship means. They relate the concept to a variety of issues relevant to their everyday lives.

3. Citizenship has a variety of meanings for young people. Some young people connect citizenship predominantly with rights, such as the right to hold a passport or the right to healthcare in the UK. Others find it easier to think of the responsibilities of citizens, such as obeying the law or acting respectfully towards others.

4. Instead of speaking of concrete rights and responsibilities many young people view citizenship predominantly as belonging to a community and acting responsibly and
independently for the advancement of that community. Conover (1995) finds this so-called relational conception of citizenship to be more prevalent in the U.K. than in the U.S.

5. This relational conception of citizenship is strongly based on identity, social relations and belonging. Some young people describe it as based on an insider status that a citizen takes up in his or her community. From preliminary findings it seems that the stronger young people feel embedded in their communities, the more intuitive they find this particular interpretation of citizenship.

6. While belonging to a community is an important aspect of these young people’s perception of citizenship, the type of communities they identify with does not define their views of citizenship. There are a variety of communities within which young people view themselves: local, regional or national as well as transnational communities. A number of young people identify explicitly as global citizens, connecting the concept to human rights and global challenges. Some young people have multiple and layered identities.

To question 9. Barriers to active citizenship

7. Some young people view economic independence and, in particular, participation in the labour market as an important aspect of citizenship. In their eyes paid labour constitutes a significant contribution to the community. While still in full-time education these young people do not view themselves as citizens, but instead as citizens-to-be. There is a distinct view that education does not count as a respectable contribution to the community.

8. Some young people view themselves as active citizens, through paying taxes, being part of the labour market, or (in Scotland) having the right to vote. In contrast to their self-image, they feel marginalized as citizens-to-be by policies such as the staged National Minimum Wage based on age and the opposition to the lowering of the voting age across the U.K.

9. Few young people mention formal political participation as fundamental aspect of citizenship. When prompted most consider voting as a civic duty, but not other forms of political participation.

10. For some young people, the distinction between voting and other forms of political participation gives rise to a two-tier view of citizenship. While voting is considered a duty for every citizen, further political participation, such as being a member of a political party or campaigning for a particular issue, is considered an activity making someone a “good” rather than just a normal citizen. Other forms of political participation are not considered duties of ordinary citizens, because they are too time-consuming and better left to expert citizens.

To question 5. Citizenship and education
11. In particular those young people who hold a relational view of citizenship do not relate currently available citizenship education to the above conceptions of citizenship. Only young people who view the role of the citizen primarily as participation in the labour market relate to what is taught. For many young people, citizenship education is indistinguishable from PSHE.

12. Some young people see a need for factual education on the political system and the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen. They want, in particular, to learn about the possibilities and procedures of formal political participation, such as how to vote and other ways to get involved politically. Some young people believe that this kind of education on citizenship and politics should be available from an earlier age than current citizenship classes and should be mandatory.

13. Other young people, mostly those who view themselves as citizens, see no need for citizenship education in particular.

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i This evidence submission is based on preliminary insights from a qualitative study on the meaning of citizenship and civic and political engagement among 15-18 year olds (unpublished). The sample of this study is not representative of the general population of young people in Britain; it provides insight into the variety of views on citizenship among young people. Thus, the evidence presented here relates to the views of some young people in the UK. For further information, please contact the author.
