

**Discussion Paper prepared for the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO
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The typical paraphernalia of protest was all present: witty signs, bullhorns, an enormous crowd. As the protestors charged onto the Parliamentary forecourt, their slogans echoed off of the marble facade. But they had suddenly gone silent. Out of the crowd stepped four people, and they began to tell their stories. Relentless feelings of inadequacy, the ceaseless pressure of depression, a close call with suicide - they were stories we don't usually share.

It was a mental health rally organised by 'The Wait is Over' campaign, a student-centric campaign that burst into being at Victoria University of Wellington in 2018. Literally sick of waiting for the mental health support which so many students desperately need, hundreds of young people marched on Parliament to share common experiences and demand action. Thousands others around the country reached out to their elected representatives to agitate for change.

It worked. Mental health is now one of the coalition government's biggest focuses. One of its five Budget 2019 priorities is, "Supporting mental wellbeing for all New Zealanders, with a special focus on under 24-year-olds." New mental health support programs have been announced for the Wellington region, with more on the way nationwide.

There are two conclusions to be drawn. The first is that youth are very much aware of and engaged in their civic environment. The second is that when they turn out and organise they can have an immense impact.

Yet when we as a society talk about the civic behaviour of young people, we tend to assume the exact opposite. Older citizens often assume that young people are apathetic, and young citizens often assume that they are unable to have an impact on formal civic decisions. Neither of these

myths are true, and both are stifling our national discourse about how best to approach global citizenship education.

Let's consider that first myth - that young citizens are apathetic. The easy stereotype is that young people are 'slacktivists', satiating their appetite for change by shouting into the social media void. It has a seed of truth. Young people really do use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to share the issues important to them. But that can be quite impactful. In the same way older generations discussed issues around the watercooler at work, younger generations are building communities of interest focused on a certain issue. And from there, their 'slacktivism' can become quite tangible.

Consider the work done by ActionStation, an advocacy organisation popular among young people. [Between 2014 and 2016](#), more than 250,000 took action on issues they care about through ActionStation by signing petitions, donating money or signing up to volunteer. 30,000 of those called their MPs or made personal contact. 10,000 made individual submissions to parliamentary select committees. These are tangible ways of communicating with elected representatives and making change.

This is unsurprising. For most people, 'slacktivism' is not the end-stage for engaging with an issue - it is the beginning. Recent studies, such as '[Sharing beyond Slacktivism](#)' by University of Michigan academics Daniel Lane and Sonya Dal Cin, [show that](#), "Participants who shared a video about a social cause publicly were more willing to volunteer than those who shared anonymously... demonstrating that publicly showing support for a social cause through sharing can increase—not decrease—commitment to taking further action." We saw that in mid-March, when climate fervour swept through young students on social media - inspiring many to take part in the #SchoolStrike4Climate movement, leading to thousands-strong protest marches in cities around the country.

Recent data is difficult to find, but the 2008 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) showed that New Zealand young people ranked among the highest out of 38 countries for

community volunteering, donating, fundraising and participation in cultural and social groups. There is no reason to imagine that has changed in the intervening years.

We also know that young people are pursuing political change in more conventional ways too. Organisations like JustSpeak, Generation Zero and New Zealand Alternative were all founded by young New Zealanders, and continue to be run by them. Their policy and advocacy work has had very tangible consequences on our political discourse. For example, Parliament will soon begin considering the Zero Carbon Bill, an innovative and ambitious climate policy which came out of Generation Zero.

Understanding the unique and impactful manner in which young people are turning social discourse, both digital and in-person, into social change is crucial to building an effective program of civics and citizenship education. By building on the existing strengths of young people, such a program can have a much greater impact.

But the myth of a ‘slacktivist’ generation endures, and means that any discourse we have about civics and citizenship education revolves around transforming young people into a more conventional style of citizen, one familiar to older people. One reason the ‘slacktivist’ myth endures is that younger generations have lower levels of engagement in formal civic institutions (like voting and involvement in political parties), which is much easier to quantify than informal methods like protesting.

With all this in mind, two questions confront us. First, what is inhibiting the participation of young people in our formal democratic institutions? By addressing that challenge, we can combine older models of civic engagement with the more modern approach of young people. Second, how can we facilitate and support existing youth civic engagement through global civics and citizenship education?

The answer to the first is straightforward. Young people often perceive our formal civic institutions, such as Parliament and local government, as part of a system which is biased against them and captured by private interests. While local research is difficult to come by (which may be

part of the problem), [research from the UK](#) has shown that while youth are very much interested in political issues, they perceive the formal political system as out of touch and dominated by self-interested older politicians. Assuming this is also true for New Zealand youth, which is not unreasonable, this is hardly an unfair perception. Despite the fact that those under 30 make up more than a quarter of the population (approximately 1.7 million people), just 2% of MPs in Parliament are under 30.

When young people view the political system in such a uniformly negative manner, it is entirely unsurprising that they refuse to engage in it. The solution to this is again relatively simple. If young people view the political system as unrepresentative, we must introduce pro-democracy reforms to convince them otherwise. Changes such as eliminating MMP's 5% threshold for list-party entry into Parliament, introducing election-day or automatic voter enrolment and building participatory democratic mechanisms like citizens assemblies would all help build confidence in a system which youth currently see as exclusive and deliberately inaccessible.

Young people also feel excluded from our formal civic institutions because they have never been properly introduced to them. This is where a comprehensive system of global civics and citizenship education can play a role.

Our national curriculum mandates that students in the early years of high school receive citizenship education. This is done in a cross-curricula manner, meaning that they receive aspects of that education in all their different subjects. At first glance, it works. The ICCS showed that 12 and 13 year olds (Year 9s, in high school parlance) in New Zealand had higher-than-average civic working knowledge and were “generally well-prepared for their roles as citizens in the 21st century compared with many other countries participating...”

But a deeper examination of those results shows there was a significant gap between high and low achievers, with Māori and Pasifika performing much lower in levels of engagement and understanding than more advantaged groups like Pakeha. That inequality of engagement is indicative of a disparity in the quality of civics and citizenship education between the more and less privileged parts of New Zealand society.

Moreover, the civics and citizenship support which our education system provides drops off once students reach the upper levels of high school. Once students reach Year 11, civics education becomes optional. Relatively few students choose to undertake achievement standards which relate to civics education - in 2015 just 5000 students took the 'personal social action' standards, which teach students about effectively reflecting on and engaging in social issues. As a result, by the time most young people graduate from high school, any good civics and citizenship support they received early in their education has been forgotten or dismissed.

The first step towards an effective system of global civics and citizenship education in New Zealand is making our existing civics and citizenship curricula more comprehensive and consistent across age and socio-economic groups.

The second step towards an effective system of global civics and citizenship education is making sure that we expand on the approach our education system currently takes. Civics education around the world often means rote learning of facts and dates, testing students on history or law. As important as those things can be, they are meaningless if they aren't accompanied by opportunities to practically engage in formal and informal civic activities.

Our existing 'personal social action' standards provide a good model for what this could look like. Professor Bronwyn Wood, a senior lecturer in the School of Education at Victoria University of Wellington, [explained how](#), "Students took social action on a wide range of social issues at school, community, national and global levels. Their actions commonly included creating awareness (72 percent), fundraising (71 percent) and letter writing (56 percent). In Year 13, students worked to influence policy, often resulting in close engagement with local and national political representatives and democratic processes, such as submitting to a select committee."

Most importantly, Professor Wood found that, "the real life community engagement the standards required and actions such as emailing and letter writing to newspapers and Members of Parliament, interviewing and surveying people, and meeting with community members, led to the development of many citizenship and life skills."

It is clear that introducing an effective system of global civics and citizenship education in New Zealand is no simple task. It must be introduced in tandem with pro-democracy reforms to our formal civic institutions in a show of good faith. It must also provide practical and tangible opportunities for supported social change-making, to provide a sort of civic apprenticeship. But New Zealand has always been a social laboratory for democratic change. If any country can introduce a truly effective system for global civics and citizenship education, it is us.

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