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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT: ENGAGING OUR YOUTH

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Introduction

According to the theory of Responsible Government, parliaments are required to be ethical in decision-making and responsive to public opinion, while ensuring equality of opportunity by precluding discrimination and meeting appropriate service standards. As such, the parliament and its practices should not only be structured to ensure that the liberties and scrutiny of democratic government are well embedded, but also provide opportunities for public participation and engagement. In Western Australia, there is a further implied constitutional requirement for the Parliament to engage with its community, stemming from its obligation to make laws for 'peace, order and good government'.¹ As a significant sub-group of the community, youth specific engagement forms a vitally important aspect of our Parliament's public outreach.

In 2011, a case study into *Parliaments and Public Engagement* by The Hansard Society employed a definition of community engagement in its broadest sense, which can be easily applied to the engagement of young people specifically:

*It is the range of activities whose primary function is to raise awareness of the Parliament amongst the public and to facilitate a two-way flow of information, ideas and views, between them, requiring both listening and interaction on the part of both the institution and the citizen.*²

Recognising young people as a significant and unique sub-group of the community is essential in order to develop effective public programs which not only contribute to the development of a politically aware youth culture, but increase the connection between the Parliament and its people. Such engagement has formed a particular focus for the Parliament of Western Australia, with a range of activities and opportunities developed to encourage young people to participate in, and gain a greater understanding of, the political and parliamentary process.

Community Engagement Strategy

A clear strategy for youth engagement is essential in order to promote parliamentary participation to young people in a cohesive and effective manner. The Parliament of

¹ Section 2, *Constitution Act 1889*, Western Australia.

² Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement: Innovation and Good Practice from Around the World*, 2011, p8.

Western Australian provides an excellent case study in this regard, as over the past four years the Parliament has significantly changed the way it engages with the community and with young people specifically.

As a bicameral parliament in the Westminster tradition, there was an inherent risk of our community engagement work being fragmented or duplicated, with activities delivered by different parts of the organisation without sufficient coordination or whole-of-Parliament strategic objectives in mind. However, this risk has been minimised through the development of a clear vision for community engagement, which includes well-defined pathways and the capacity and resources necessary to execute that vision.

Having recognised the need to better facilitate the relationship between the Parliament and the public, including young people specifically, this vision included the transfer of the Parliamentary Education Office from the Legislative Assembly to Parliamentary Services, under a whole of Parliament management committee. The Parliament also established a project position of Manager Community and Civic Engagement, tasked with undertaking consultation to inform the development of a Community Engagement Strategy, communication plan and other related documentation to increase public accessibility to information about the Parliament and people's democratic rights, duties and opportunities for participation. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Education Office was also restructured in order to ensure a greater focus on improving Parliament's branding and communication, including the terminology and language used.

This considered and coordinated approach to community engagement, particularly in the context of the challenges posed by the Parliamentary environment, includes the following goals:

- clearly establish whole-of-Parliament strategic objectives and goals across different Parliamentary departments, reduce fragmentation and achieve a coordinated approach to attaining those objectives and goals
- ensure consistency and quality of communications
- partner with, and harness the energy of, the media (media marketing campaign, including mechanisms for communication)
- achieve comprehension amongst the public of what Parliament does in the context of what can sometimes be construed as historic and archaic procedures and processes
- modernise our processes to ensure they are more accessible to the community, particularly young people
- physically open up Parliament House to all ages while balancing the demands of security and preservation of a historical building and materials
- engage with the broader public, organisations, young people and disenfranchised and other hard to reach groups.

Although all these goals can be attributed to youth engagement generally, the final three in particular reference the engagement of young people, or recognise the different approaches which may be required to meet the needs of 'all ages'. In response to these goals, the Parliament of Western Australia had developed and maintained a number of programs and initiatives that have proven highly effective at engaging young people, and which target the full spectrum of age, social and cultural groups encompassed by the term 'youth'.

University partnerships

Parliamentary Research Program

Parliament facilitates an annual 12-week research program for high performing university students, majoring in any university discipline. The program is a cooperative venture between the Parliament of Western Australia and State's universities. Members of Parliament nominate up to two topics for consideration for selection by participating students. Students assume the role of researcher under the guidance of a Member of Parliament.

The program aims to achieve the following:

- provide an information resource for Members of Parliament in the development of policy and legislation (reports that are passed by the University are held in the Parliamentary Library and in the respective university library)
- allow students gain exposure to the roles and functions of Parliament, a Parliamentarian, government and key community and policy issues
- develop students' research skills, particularly critical thinking and analysis.

A new educational session, hosted at Parliament House, has been introduced as part of the program. It involves a panel of members who each provide a speech about their roles and responsibilities as a Member of Parliament, followed by a question and answer session.

Over 300 reports have been produced since the program commenced in 1992, from a very diverse range of topics including the analysis of voting systems, use of renewable energy in the state, child obesity in state schools and the benefits of home ownership.

Murdoch Parliamentary Studies Unit

Parliament has established a partnership with Murdoch University for the delivery of a Parliamentary Studies Unit. The unit involves a series of seminars delivered by Parliament on the Australian Parliamentary model; history and evolution of Australian Parliaments; Parliamentary practice; the Committee system; the future of Parliament in a post-democracy and testing theory and knowledge: an insight tour of Parliament.

University presentations

The Presiding Officers, Heads of Department and Parliamentary Fellows deliver guest lectures to university students at the different universities about the work of the House, followed by a Question and Answer session.

Multi-media project

Discussions are commencing with a tertiary institution regarding a project for the development of animated videos for young people on parliamentary concepts. If successful, the project would be a joint initiative that would aim to achieve the following:

- Provision of a technical learning environment for multimedia students
- Students would learn how Parliament works
- Parliament will benefit from student assistance in scoping how concepts are conveyed to young people. In other words, young people informing young people about Parliament.

School-age programs and resources

Youth Parliament

Parliamentary Education coordinates the delivery of a Youth Parliament once per Parliamentary session. This includes 97 students from year 10 across the state in a three-day program involving educational workshops on parliamentary history and practice and culminating in a youth Parliament held in the Chambers. The Governor of Western Australia, the President of the Legislative Council and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly are all involved in various aspects of the student Parliament.

Curriculum development

With changes to the Western Australian Humanities and Social Sciences curriculum, which has seen the introduction of civics and citizenship concepts, new teachers' notes and student workbooks are being developed by the Parliamentary Education Office.

Workbooks for years 5 and 6, and years 7 and 8, have been finalised. Curriculum links, links to vignettes and Fact Sheets on the roles, functions and procedures of Parliament are included. The workbooks have been used as a foundation for regional outreach programs and as the basis for professional development sessions delivered by Parliamentary Education to teachers.

Additional workbooks are progressively being developed and will encompass an English as a Second Language resource, year 10 (middle school) and 'Politics and Law' students (pre-university students). All workbooks will be available online with the Indigenous workbooks

also available with USB support given connectivity issues in remote communities.

In association with these workbooks, a video on how to set up a classroom for a role play has also been developed. Young children from a local school were participants in the video's production. A template on developing role play has also been prepared.

Indigenous Workbook

An Indigenous student workbook for years 5 and 6 is in the final stages of development and is accompanied by teachers' notes. The development of an Indigenous workbook follows a formal evaluation of a remote outreach program delivered in the Kimberley Region in 2015 (and in other regions across the State since 2009). The evaluation showed that:

- there was a level of disconnect between Parliamentary concepts and the life experience of students in very remote Aboriginal communities
- unfamiliar teachers (Parliamentary Educations staff) were teaching largely unfamiliar concepts to students
- health and literacy issues amongst Indigenous students impeded learning
- there was a lack of integration of concepts over time – the notion that a one-off incursion was not sufficiently effective in ensuring the sustainability of learning of concepts.

It was established that not only did teaching material need to be more culturally centred, and draw upon local examples (particularly around law making), but that it was more likely to be effective if content was integrated within the curriculum and taught by teachers who knew the individual learning needs and capabilities of students. It was also determined that an educational workbook needed to be developed for Aboriginal students from limited schooling or English as a Second Language/Dialect backgrounds. This workbook should be readily accessible to remote and regional schools, and can be used as a basis for teacher professional development.

The Indigenous workbook is aligned to the WA curriculum requirements in 'Civics and Citizenship', has been developed in consultation with an Aboriginal educators' reference group, and been trialled in remote communities as units have been developed. The publication supports school teachers and support staff in catering for the stages of Standard Australian English (SAE) Language Acquisition of Aboriginal students and in building a learning context through connections with people and place in a culturally responsive way.

The student workbook is narrated by past and present Aboriginal Members of Parliament, as well as Aboriginal leadership students, and includes embedded web links to information prepared by the Parliamentary Library on Members, electorates, and voting systems. A series of video productions are included in the educational package, including an Aboriginal Member of Parliament addressing students about her work in the Parliament and the

community.

Regional Outreach Program

Parliamentary Education delivers a Regional Outreach program bi-annually, to a different region in the State. It is an intensive program for year 5 and 6 students across participating schools. In 2016 a decision was made to conduct the program jointly with the Constitutional Centre of Western Australia and Electoral Education Centre of Western Australia, with the concept being a civics day for schools.

Parliament also presents a teacher professional development session so that learning can be integrated by teachers within the classroom and familiarity with parliamentary civics resources is achieved. In 2017 it is intended that the program be expanded to incorporate high school students, including holding a regional student Parliament.

Web conferencing

In line with the development of strategies for engaging regional and remote students (although not limited to that audience), Parliament has formed a partnership with the Education Department's e-learning centre. The Department has agreed to host both static and interactive learning sessions for students across the State (for State and non-government schools). In the future, Parliamentary Education will develop static learning programs drawing on vignettes, animation and chamber footage. Schools will access web conferencing facilities and click on the particular program to fit within the lesson schedule. A live session will also be delivered where students can interact directly with a Parliamentary Educator about Parliament.

A communication mechanism (ask a question option) will be developed to support the static learning tools so school students can have any question considered and answered by the Parliamentary Education Office. Ideally this could occur in real time (during operating hours).

All Ages

Hosted programs for young people

Parliamentary Education cooperatively with the Chamber Departments, is more focused on providing higher level support to youth directed programs, delivered by external organisations, but hosted by Parliament. Each program is formally coordinated internally by an officer from Parliamentary Education. This ensures that the most effective learning environment is provided for students and that any program offered interfaces with Parliamentary Education. This can be through facilitating member participation, teaching organisations about parliamentary protocols, or through formal talks or educational tours of the Parliament. The YMCA Youth Parliament is a central focus annually but Parliament is

seeing increasing numbers of ‘youth-directed’ organisations use the facility.

Vignettes

Video vignettes on the roles, functions, processes and procedures of Parliament have been developed as an educational tool for the community. Vignettes specifically for young people are being developed. One is currently being finalised on Question Time. A further vignette has been produced for Indigenous Students on the introduction of the *Noongar Recognition Bill 2015*. All vignettes are developed in-house using the Parliamentary Broadcasting team and Parliamentary Education, Chamber staff or students.

Open Days

Parliament hosts open days where the community are encouraged to explore the historic parliamentary building and grounds. There is a focus on making these open days a lot more dynamic for young people. For example, in 2014 Parliament hosted a re-enactment parade of ground troops and the 10th Light Horse regiment as part of commemorating ‘Perth at the outbreak of war’, a CBD-wide event coordinated by Heritage Perth. In 2015 a dynamic performance was held in the Legislative Assembly Chamber depicting Western Australia’s first female parliamentarian Edith Cowan and her political life as part of a Heritage Perth theme - ‘People who shaped Perth’.

Conclusion

It has long been recognised that young people participate less than older citizens in most formal political processes, such as registering to vote and elections. This situation challenges the representativeness of the political system and can lead to the disengagement of young people from political and parliamentary systems. Parliament as an institution has an important role to play in combating this disengagement through the investment of time and resources into public engagement strategies that have a particular focus on youth. In the experience of the Western Australian Parliament, such youth outreach is being achieved through the provision of a broad range of youth engagement activities which target different age and cultural groups. Our Parliament has found that programs with the most success are those developed to be as youth driven as possible, where young people are empowered to engage and participate in the parliamentary process.