

Institution: University of Liverpool
Unit of Assessment: 21 - Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Improving Youth Political Engagement and Citizenship
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study refers to the research/publications of Tonge on youth civic engagement since 2007, which dovetailed with his government appointment as Chair of the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) in 2008-9. The research agenda examined what citizenship means to young people; considered how to increase young people's participation in politics; assessed how citizenship can be promoted through community and political engagement and led a consultation with young people on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. Of 17 policy recommendations arising from the research, 16 were approved by the government, improving opportunities for young people to volunteer, become politically engaged and receive better citizenship education.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research was developed via Tonge's research agenda and academic publications undertaken following the <i>Governance of Britain</i> Green Paper (2007) on youth citizenship and political engagement, and via the reports and recommendations of the Youth Citizenship Commission, chaired by Professor Tonge. The research involved extensive qualitative interviews with young people and groups attempting to promote youth political engagement and volunteering and quantitative (n2200+) survey attitudinal analysis.</p> <p>The research insights and findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses undertaken between 2007-10 can be <i>summarised</i> as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was acknowledgement amongst young people themselves of non-engagement in formal political activity, reflected in, e.g. only a minority of 18-24 years olds voting in elections since 1997, but that this should not be construed as apathy. • Social class was a significant variable in levels of youth political engagement. • Young people's perceptions of what constituted good citizenship did not normally include political activity, such as voting. Instead, obedience to the law or apolitical volunteering were seen as good citizenship, not political engagement. The research highlighted the need to empower citizenship and develop it to include political activity. • The barriers which exist to the development of youth political engagement are social, institutional and knowledge-deficit based. • There is a particularly low level of knowledge amongst young people of local government. • Most innovations to bolster political engagement have previously been technocratic (e.g. experiments with voting methods) – an approach rejected by young people who are sceptical of experiments such as text voting and insufficiently ideological. • The research found that citizenship education does improve civic engagement and political capacity. Young people respond positively on a range of indicators, provided it is properly taught. The research discovered that citizenship education has been uneven in delivery and content, ranging from excellent to unsatisfactory, since becoming a statutory part of the English curriculum (and taught under other titles elsewhere in the UK). Crucially however, the research found that, controlling for demographic and social class variables, properly delivered citizenship education does have a beneficial impact in terms of political knowledge and engagement, offering a clear rationale for its continuation within the school syllabus. A positive independent effect was yielded by citizenship education in terms of knowledge, propensity to volunteer and likelihood of voting. • Young people (16-17 year olds) are almost evenly divided on whether the voting age should be lowered and the issue is not seen as a priority by many. A majority of 18-25 year olds were opposed to any lowering. Most 16-17 year olds opposed to a lowering felt they had insufficient knowledge to vote. • Non-registration of young voters – as high as 28 per cent of those due on the electoral register

– is an acute problem which needs to be tackled via registration in schools/colleges.

- A programme of National Citizen Service for young people as a means of boosting civic engagement could have utility, provided that it avoided errors highlighted in the comparative examples studied in the research e.g. the privatised ‘poor corps’ United States model and the compulsion and indeterminate ambitions of the German model of civic service. The research highlighted the need for any such programme to move beyond civil volunteering to also adopt civic, i.e. political, knowledge acquisition or engagement.

Overall, the research found that where there was a lack of civil and civic engagement among young people it was often caused not by apathy but by a lack of information or opportunity. This tended to lead to engagement amongst young people being largely confined to immediate social spheres of family and friends and not extending to institutions and political actors. The research found a lack of prioritisation of young people’s civic needs amongst policy-makers, leading to the absence of holistic programmes of reform designed to boost civic engagement. Policy-makers needed to develop new methods of engaging with young people to connect better and to re-orientate institutions to be capable of adapting to the desires of young people, otherwise youth civic non- engagement could worsen.

3. References to the research

- Tonge, J. [‘The Future of Citizenship’](#), in A. Russell and G. Stoker (eds) *Failing Politics? A response to The Governance of Britain Green Paper*, Newcastle, Political Studies Association, 2007, 18-21
- Tonge, J. ‘Revitalising Politics: Engaging Young People’, *Representation*, 2009, 45.3, 237-46. DOI: 10.180/00344890903129418.
- Tonge, J. and Mycock, A. ‘Citizenship and political engagement amongst young people: the workings and findings of the Youth Citizenship Commission’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2010, 63.1, 182-200. DOI: 10.1093/pa/gsp049.
- Mycock, A. and Tonge, J. ‘A Big Idea for the Big Society? The Advent of National Citizen Service’, *Political Quarterly*, 2011, 82.1, 56-66. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-923X.2011.02166.x Winner of the 2011 Children’s Identity and Citizenship European Association (CiCea) – a network of 100 HEIs across 30 European countries - [best research publication of the year award](#).
- Tonge, J. Mycock, A. and Jeffrey, R. ‘Does Citizenship Education Make Young People Better-Engaged Citizens?’ *Political Studies*, 2012, 60.3, 578-602, DOI. 1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00931.x. Fast-tracked after acceptance by all three peer reviewers as important research of clear policy salience. Peer review comments included: “clearly well placed...some interesting data...an evidence based response to what is a key contemporary issue”...“well written, structured and argued...a good addition to the journal”...“an excellent and very timely piece and I strongly recommend its publication”...“It can be published almost exactly as it is”...“Given the topical importance and policy relevance of its findings, ideally the article should be published as soon as possible”.
- Tonge, J. and Mycock, A. ‘The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2012, 65.1, 138-61. DOI 10.1093/pa/gsr053.

Plus the research report and recommendations of the [Youth Citizenship Commission](#) e.g. [Making the Connection: Building Youth Citizenship in the UK](#), 2009. [Old Enough to Make A Mark: Should the voting age be lowered to 16?](#) 2009.

and the government’s positive response: [An Agenda for Youth Engagement](#)

4. Details of the impact

1. In order for the above research to achieve maximum impact, key findings, ideas and recommendations were ‘road-tested’ via a range of potential beneficiaries and stakeholders, such as the British Youth Council, the Prince’s Trust, the Hansard Society and the UK Youth Parliament, to formulate how practical and workable policies could be developed to reflect the thrust of the research. These stakeholders thus met with Tonge to discuss the research and prospective policy outworking. These groups were also involved in dissemination of the

research into the public domain, mainly via websites and forums (e.g. the Hansard Society ran a 'Heads Up' interactive discussion blog in 2009-10, to which Tonge regularly contributed) and helped promote some of the findings to influence adoption by the government. Other processes of dissemination included promotion and discussion of the research and outworking at public events, ranging from ESRC Festivals of Social Science (2008, Sheffield, 2012 Birmingham); via the chairing of local youth councils, e.g. Bridgend's in 2009); and via television and radio programmes (e.g. 'Tell it Like it Is' and 'Dragon's Eye' on BBC Wales, 2009, with the research findings also featured on BBC Radio 4's Westminster Hour in 2013).

2. Research findings have been presented directly to government ministers; Tonge was invited to present research and recommendations to the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Office and to the government's Democratic Renewal Council of senior ministers. Research findings on the value of citizenship education were sent directly to the Education Minister, Michael Gove, in 2012 and the government reversed its initial intention to abolish citizenship education from the school curriculum. Tonge also presented his research to Dail Eireann (the Irish Parliament) and at the National Assembly for Wales. Young people responded to the research in a series of interactive discussions with Tonge in the Hansard Society's Heads Up Forum.

The research has had the following impacts, benefitting stakeholders and young people, evidenced in the **written testimonials provided from government ministers** which show how recommendations arising from the research have been put directly into effect.

A **dedicated Minister for Youth Citizens and Youth Engagement** was established in October 2010 to bolster youth civil and civic engagement and to coordinate youth engagement initiatives, which the research highlighted as hitherto too piecemeal and uncoordinated.

A **youth online hub** was created by the government in 2010, allowing young people to access information concerning citizenship opportunities and funding for youth engagement projects and informational networks, such as the Ministry of Justice's Youth Network programme.

The Children Schools and Families Bill 2011 placed **statutory responsibilities upon schools to give pupils 'voice'**, in line with research recommendations.

The research highlighted that young people were knowledge-deficient in terms of how to interact with local authorities. Consequently, the government placed a **statutory duty upon local authorities to consider permanent arrangements for consultations** with local populations on the delivery of services, reflective of **all ages**, to include permanent advisory and scrutiny panels.

The research made a very clear case for the **retention of citizenship education** and for improvements in the consistency and effectiveness of its delivery. It demonstrated the gains evident in terms of civic engagement, literacy and knowledge of how decisions are made at local and national levels from citizenship classes. Significantly, **the Conservatives moved from a position of opposition to citizenship education prior to taking office in 2010 to one of retention** as the subject was clearly shown to be of considerable value in bolstering citizen engagement, as shown in the [Citizenship Foundation report February 2013](#).

The research **did not advocate a lowering of the voting age** for Westminster elections and the current government has cited its evidence in this respect ([Hansard col 523, 24/01/13](#)). It argued that there was no case in this respect and that public opinion could not act as a clear guide, as the research demonstrated that those aged 18+ strongly opposed change whilst those younger were (marginally) in favour of change. The research highlighted the considerable variation in terms of ages of responsibility. It did suggest that the age of franchise in devolved nations could be determined by the governments of those nations, a feature accepted by the SNP (which commented on the research) in government. The research suggested that ensuring that young people are *registered* to vote is a bigger priority than examination of the voting age and government/Electoral Commission advertising campaigns have reflected this.

A pilot programme of civic service, National Citizen Service, has been introduced, on a voluntary

basis. The research, whilst supportive of the idea in principle based upon existing national and international comparative evidence (USA and Germany), highlighted the difficulties of introducing compulsory schemes (cost issues), privately-run programmes (motive issues) and also stressed the need for clear definition of the purpose of such schemes. Volunteering opportunities have been expanded under the previous and current governments and the expectation is that citizen service, if pilots are successful, will be expanded.

Overall, the significance of the research has been to shift governmental agendas towards a much clearer and far more focused approach towards youth civil and civic engagement. Prior to the research, there were fewer opportunities for volunteering and no national programme, no statutory engagement with young people at local level, no dedicated minister for young people, and a focus on voting age, rather than young voter registration and engagement with the political process. All of this has changed, whilst citizenship education has been retained, as the research advised.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Testimonial from the former Secretary of State for Justice to HM Government corroborates the theoretical and empirical prior research which led to Prof Tonge's appointment as Youth Citizenship Commission chair; the research which underpinned the Commission during its life; the specific proposals for improving youth political engagement and the recommendations on the voting age.

2. Testimonial from the former Minister for Democracy to HM Government (Department of Justice) corroborates the research which led to Prof Tonge's appointment as Youth Citizenship Commission chair; the research which underpinned the Commission and its specific proposals for improving youth engagement and how they made a difference.

3. Testimonial from the former Cabinet Office Minister (Young Citizens/Youth Engagement) to HM Government corroborates the value of the research and the impact proposals developed in respect of improving youth political engagement – in particular the recommendations for institutional change to improve political opportunity structures for young people.

4. Testimonial from the Programme Executive of The Prince's Trust corroborates the evidence-gathering which underpinned the research and informed the proposals; the road-testing of recommendations arising from the research; and the data which underpinned research and recommendations.

5. The Researcher and Project Manager at the Hansard Society can be contacted to corroborate that outcomes from the Heads Up forum had a direct impact on young people's understanding of politics. The forum can be seen [here](#).

6. Publication of the [Government's formal response](#) to the Youth Citizenship Commission report, '*An Agenda for Youth Engagement*' which accepts the research and findings and indicates how the government is implementing its recommendations, overwhelmingly accepted. The original research and report is described as 'informative and challenging' and 'invaluable' and this government report 'focuses on what has been achieved in response' (pp.2-3).

7. Oral evidence given by Prof Tonge to the Joint Committee on the Constitution, Dail Eireann (Irish Parliament), on young people and voting is mentioned in a [Press Release](#) from the Houses of the Oireachtas and cited in the [Joint Committee's report](#) from July 2010 (3.163 to 3.170, pp.79-82).

8. Findings and recommendations from the Youth Citizenship Commission are cited by the House of Commons Justice Committee, [Constitutional Reforms and Renewal](#) (e.g. paras 80-81 p. 26).

9. Direct advocacy of research ideas of empowerment of youth in the joint report of the Local Government Group and National Youth Agency: '[Valuing Young Voices, Strengthening Democracy](#)'. This report cites the Youth Citizenship Commission's (pp. 11, 13, 15, 16, 21) research regarding how to improve political opportunity structures for young people and strengthen links between schools and communities.

10. The School Councils of the UK highlighted the importance of the research regarding school councils in a [School Councils UK blog \(May 2009\)](#).