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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Experiences of citizenship education at school and perspectives on citizenship amongst social science undergraduates

Paul Watt, Chris Gifford and Shirley Koster
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College (UK)

Introduction: citizenship education in England

It is eight years since the publication of the *Education for Citizenship and Teaching of Democracy in Schools* Report (the 'Crick Report'; QCA, 1998) and four years since the implementation of citizenship as a statutory component of the national curriculum for 11-16 year olds in 2002 (QCA, 1999). There has also been significant work in the post-compulsory education sector in developing a citizenship curriculum for 16-19 year olds (QCA, 2004). Young people in England are now leaving school and going into employment or onto further study with substantial experience of citizenship education. However, as Kerr (2005) has argued, despite the extensive literature on citizenship education, empirical studies on young people's views about such education are limited. This paper offers evidence on this issue with reference to survey research on social science undergraduates at a higher education institution (HEI) in the south of England. The paper discusses their previous experiences of citizenship education at school and college and examines their attitudes towards and practices of citizenship more generally. Traditionally, social science students have been regarded as political 'radicals'. However, there is also considerable mass media and governmental disquiet about young peoples' mooted lack of political and social engagement ('apathy') in the UK, even if the research evidence offers a more nuanced and complex picture involving dissatisfaction with politicians and conventional political organisations rather than apathy *per se* (see *inter alia* Fahmy, 2003; Grundy and Jamieson, 2004; Henn *et al*., 2005).

Despite the progress that has been made since the publication of the Crick Report, it would be misleading to argue that longstanding conflicts between left and right, traditionalists and radicals, have disappeared from debates on citizenship education. The former Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead, spearheaded the Conservative Party's 2005 election proposals on education and launched an attack on citizenship education, calling for a return to a traditional subject-based curriculum. On the other side of the fence, the focus of the radical critique has been the failure of citizenship education to seriously challenge established power relationships within British schools and society (Cunningham and Lavalette 2004).

In relation to the implementation of citizenship education in schools, OFSTED (2005) concluded that provision for citizenship was unsatisfactory in one quarter of schools, marginalised in one fifth of school curricula, and was the worst taught subject at Key Stages 3 and 4 of the national curriculum (Bell, 2005). Such stark findings tended to eclipse the more positive aspects of the OFSTED Report which also indicated considerable progress being made within a large number of schools over a relatively short period.

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It is essential that the debate on citizenship education in England draws upon and extends the national (Kerr, 1999) and international (Torney-Purta *et al*., 2001) evidential base on citizenship education that has been emerging in recent years. Notably, an eight-year Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) has been set up to measure and evaluate the extent to which effective practice is developing in schools in England (Kerr, 2005). Results from this study may begin to shift some of the focus on citizenship education away from rather generalised debates on definitions and delivery and towards a thus far 'missing dimension', i.e. 'evidence about students' experiences of, and attitudes to, citizenship education and wider citizenship issues' (Kerr, 2005: 79). Preliminary findings from the Longitudinal Study, as discussed by Kerr (2005), are illuminating. A considerable proportion of the initial results confirm the existing evidential base, including the following: that citizenship education is often 'traditional' and teacher-centred; however, students see the classroom environment as a space in which they can express opinions and raise issues; while there may be opportunities for extra-curricular 'citizenship' activities these are often not taken up by pupils; and there is a clear link between citizenship knowledge and home literacy (ibid: 86). While it is early days, the CELS and OFSTED Report have highlighted some key issues that are likely to dominate the progress of citizenship education in England for the foreseeable future.

The research

The data in this paper is taken from a joint research and teaching project examining the implementation of citizenship within the undergraduate social science curriculum.[1] The project was based at two higher education institutions in the south of England, although we are only concerned with one of these in this paper. Social science undergraduates at this HEI learnt about citizenship in a first year ('level') 'Citizenship and Identity' module, as well as a third level 'Teaching Citizenship' module discussed elsewhere (Gifford et al., 2006). Students on all three years of various social science degree programmes completed a questionnaire examining their attitudes towards citizenship, their citizenship-related activities, plus their experiences of citizenship education prior to entering the HEI. A total of 255 students completed the questionnaire, representing 77% of the total social science degree enrolment.

This paper looks at the results from those 115 undergraduates who were beginning the first year of their degrees rather than the second or third year students who may well have been influenced in their views on citizenship by their higher education experience. Hence the findings allow us to examine perspectives on citizenship among a cohort of undergraduate students at the point of entering higher education, some of who had previously experienced citizenship education at school or further education college.[2] The first year students were enrolled on a variety of social science degrees, the main subjects being Psychology, Policing, Sociology and Criminology. The majority (59%) were aged

[1] The project, *Working with Schools: Active Citizenship for Undergraduate Students*, was funded by C-SAP - LTSN Centre for Learning & Teaching: Sociology, Anthropology and Politics. Thanks to Wayne Clark (BCUC), Judith Burnett (University of East London) and David Woodman (Roehampton University) for their contribution to the project.

[2] A minority of social science undergraduates enter the HEI via further education colleges rather than directly from schools and they may have experienced citizenship education at such colleges.

18-19, 21% were aged 20-24, whilst 'mature' students aged 25 and above made up 20% of the total. Seventy per cent of the first year students were female and 73% were white.

Studying citizenship at school

When asked about previous citizenship education, 22% (25) of undergraduates answered that they had studied citizenship at either school or further education college. Twenty three were aged 18-19 years and as such they represented around one third of the 67 respondents in this age band. Given that citizenship education has been compulsory in schools since 2002 for 11-16 year-olds, we had expected this proportion to be higher. When asked how interesting they had found learning about citizenship at school or college, 60% (15) found it 'quite interesting'. Another two students found it 'very interesting', whilst four found it 'not interesting' and four didn't know. The fact that the majority found learning about citizenship interesting, at least to some extent, challenges the potentially 'dull' and conformist image that it can have (Gifford *et al*., 2006). The students were asked an open question to explain their response. Amongst those who found citizenship interesting, there was an emphasis on content rather than teaching method, for example:

> We studied citizenship and contemporary issues as part of Public Services. It was quite interesting as we learnt about people and things which we were not used to. (S2)

Given that different cultures and ethnic groups has been a prominent topic in the school curriculum, as Kerr (2005: 80) found, it is surprising that only one student emphasised this dimension of citizenship education:

> Citizenship was just being introduced at the school at the time so I did not get to learn much. However what I read and learnt about was really interesting especially when it came to different cultures. (S85)

Two students who described citizenship education as 'very interesting', commented that it enabled the expression of opinions, which reflects one of the positive aspects of citizenship education in schools, as highlighted by Kerr (2005): 'I would say that the issue of citizenship enables others to discuss their individual thoughts and feelings not just in the UK but all over the world' (S101). Only one respondent who had found citizenship interesting made explicit reference to teaching style: 'I found it quite interesting because we took the time to study it and got involved in group activities' (S26). Instead it was those students with negative or indifferent views who tended to highlight deficiencies in teaching methods reflecting the negative criticisms levelled at citizenship teaching in the OFSTED (2005) Report, for example:

> Method of teaching uninteresting. Difficult to understand the subject – very boring compared to my other lessons such as health and fitness and dealing with accidents. (S37)

Knowledge of citizenship

Given that the vast majority of first year undergraduates who had previously studied citizenship were in the youngest 18-19 year age band, we focus on this age group in the remainder of this paper. Nearly half (48%) of the 18-19 year olds had previously attended comprehensive schools, 26% went to secondary modern schools, 9% went to private fee paying schools and 8% attended grammar schools. In the CELS in England, school students were presented with eleven common definitions of citizenship and asked to tick those they found most relevant (Kerr, 2005: 80). However, the undergraduates in our survey were asked an open question ('what do you understand by the term citizenship?'), arguably a more valid way of establishing meaning than the use of closed questions. Their answers have been clustered into several discrete categories as in Table 1. A large minority (27%) provided no answer at all for the question, whilst four respondents didn't know what citizenship meant.

Table 1. 18-19 year-old undergraduates' views on citizenship by whether or not they studied citizenship at school/college

	Studied citizenship	*Not studied citizenship*	*Total*
Society/social behaviour in general	2 (9%)	10 (23%)	12 (18%)
Contributing to society	4 (17%)	6 (14%)	10 (15%)
Social rules and normative behaviour	2 (9%)	5 (11%)	7 (10%)
Rights & responsibilities as member of a country	5 (22%)	2 (5%)	7 (10%)
Belonging to a country	2 (9%)	4 (9%)	6 (9%)
Social difference	0 (0%)	3 (7%)	3 (4%)
Don't know	0 (0%)	4 (9%)	4 (6%)
No answer	8 (35%)	10 (23%)	18 (27%)
Total	23 (100%)	44 (100%)	67 (100%)

The definite responses could be clustered under six main themes. Of these, the most common (18%) was that citizenship was related to society and/or social behaviour in the most vague general terms: 'I think it is about people in society and their relationships with each other' (S99). The second most common response (15%) was far more precise and involved the notion of making a positive contribution to society. This illustrated themes of 'active citizenship' and helping others, as in the following example:

> How people fit in society, how they work together to help the 'unfortunate' groups of people e.g. disabled, children. People working to help others and the community – selfless? (S80)

Of the ten respondents who described citizenship in terms of making a contribution to society, only two saw it explicitly in terms of political involvement, for example:

> People who respect others and feel responsibility for them and the area surrounding them and have an active interest in council and political behaviour,

> structure or plans to the extent where they may have an active effect upon goings on. (S23)

Seven students (10%) saw citizenship in terms of following social rules, legal and normative:

> The study of society and the behaviour of people. Citizenship could be defined as society's unspoken rules of behaviour (S5).

Whereas the above 'active contribution' cluster emphasised 'making a difference', this normative cluster was more concerned with 'fitting in' to established social frameworks. Another seven students referred explicitly to 'rights and responsibilities' with reference to belonging to a country:

> Citizenship means living in a country and having freedom and rights of that country, as well as being a loyal citizen to the country. Citizenship determines what rights you have as an individual. (S2)

Six (9%) respondents also referred to belonging to a particular country, but that was the only thing they mentioned, for example, 'It's what makes you a member of a certain country' (S42). The smallest category was three students who gave answers that included notions of social difference: 'how people feel about themselves within society, what they do, their lifestyle. Aspects of religion, culture, age, gender, region, ethnicity apply to citizenship' (S59). No one among the 18-19 year-olds discussed citizenship in terms of formal political processes, such as voting or government, and these issues were also the least selected definition of citizenship among school students (Kerr, 2005).

To what extent do differences exist between those undergraduates who had studied citizenship at school/college and those who had not? Whilst the numbers are very small, it is noteworthy that the largest response category (22%) amongst those who had studied citizenship was rights and responsibilities, which was also the topic that year 10 and 12 school students in the CELS reported learning most about (Kerr, 2005: 80). Furthermore, it is also amongst those who had not previously studied citizenship that the most vague responses, society/social behaviour, were found.

Participation in citizenship-related activities at school

The undergraduates were asked about a series of citizenship-related activities that might have previously occurred at their school or further education college. They were asked whether or not such activities took place and also whether or not they had participated. The results are presented in Table 2 below. Two findings stand out from this table. First of all, the 'mature' students (those over the age of 25) were consistently least likely to have experienced such activities at their schools or colleges. This is indicated not only by the low percentages that participated, but also by the high percentages for whom the activity had never occurred. Whilst such a difference is easily understandable given that some of these activities are only relatively recent educational phenomena, such as school councils, this is less the case with those activities that are by no means educationally

novel. For example only 5% of the over 25s had visited Parliament or local council, and only 10% had talked to or heard a talk by a politician.

Table 2. Social science undergraduates' participation in citizenship-related activities at school/college, by age and whether studied citizenship at school/college (%)

	18-19 - studied citizenship	*18-19 - not studied citizenship*	*20-24*	*25-49*
Learn about human rights				
Occurred and participated	74	50	57	30
Occurred but did not participate	4	7	4	10
Not occurred	9	14	22	40
Don't know/remember	13	29	17	20
Voluntary work in the community				
Occurred and participated	61	39	61	40
Occurred but did not participate	22	26	17	10
Not occurred	17	26	13	45
Don't know/remember	0	9	9	5
Visit to Parliament or local council				
Occurred and participated	32	9	22	5
Occurred but did not participate	18	26	30	5
Not occurred	45	48	30	71
Don't know/remember	5	17	17	19
Talking to or hearing talk from politician				
Occurred and participated	59	21	35	10
Occurred but did not participate	18	12	26	10
Not occurred	23	46	30	55
Don't know/remember	0	21	9	25
Mock elections				
Occurred and participated	44	19	13	10
Occurred but not participated	14	12	22	5
Not occurred	32	51	43	60
Don't know/remember	9	19	22	25
Collect signatures for petition				
Occurred and participated	50	38	43	35
Occurred but did not participate	9	19	22	20
Not occurred	27	31	22	40
Don't know/remember	14	12	13	5
School council				
Occurred and participated	35	16	22	11
Occurred but did not participate	39	74	39	21

Not occurred	13	2	26	58
Don't know/remember	13	7	13	11

The second major finding from Table 2 is that it was the 18-19 year old undergraduates who had studied citizenship at school or college who tended to be most likely to have had the opportunity to experience such activities as well as actually participate in them. This was in comparison to the older respondents, but perhaps more importantly in comparison to those in the same age group who had not previously studied citizenship. It is striking that the participation/non-participation ratio for school councils was nearly 1:1 for those who had studied citizenship, but only 1:4.5 amongst those who had not. Around three fifths of those who studied citizenship had undertaken voluntary work in the community and spoken to/heard a talk from a politician. Half had collected signatures for a petition and 44% had participated in a mock election as opposed to only 19% of non-citizenship education students. Exactly which social processes are significant in relation to explaining these findings is difficult to state. However, it would seem that there are links between formal citizenship classes and student engagement with a range of citizenship-related activities at school and college. Certainly in some cases, such as learning about human rights, the very high level of participation (77%) is very likely to be directly linked to citizenship lessons.

Views on citizenship responsibilities

The undergraduates were asked how important they thought it was that an adult citizen either took part in or had knowledge of a range of activities/issues. The results are shown for the 18-19 year olds in Table 3 below. Obeying the law was by far the most prominent issue with 94% saying this was very important for adult citizens. Being able to speak the country's language was also prominent, as was respecting other people's cultures and religions. In contrast only 27% thought that voting in every election was very important whilst another 41% thought it was quite important. Protecting the environment was important for nearly three-quarters of the sample, but only 15% said that it was 'very important'. The majority thought that it was important to respect government representatives and follow political events in the media, but only 37% thought it was important to peacefully protest against unjust laws.

Using crosstabulations, the majority of attitudes regarding adult citizenship were positively associated with previous citizenship education in the sense that there was a higher percentage of those who thought such issues were important amongst those who had studied citizenship at either school or college.[3] For example, half of those who had previously studied citizenship thought that voting was very important compared to only 15% amongst those who had not. Over 70% of those who had studied citizenship thought that discussing politics was either very or quite important, compared to only

[3] However, the chi square statistic could not be meaningfully calculated because of small cell counts.

23% amongst those who had not studied it. 77% of citizenship-educated students thought that following political events in the media was either very or quite important, compared to only 43% of the non-citizenship students. The former were not only more likely to support state institutions, such as elections and government representatives, they were also more likely to consider peaceful protest against an unjust law. The majority of 'don't know' responses in the crosstabulations were given by those who had not previously studied citizenship, suggesting a greater likelihood of non-awareness of many citizenship issues amongst this group.

Table 3. Attitudes towards adult citizenship among 18-19 year-old social science undergraduates (row %)

Important that an adult citizen …	*Very important*	*Quite important*	*Not important*	*Don't know*
Obeys the law	94	6	0	0
Is able to speak country's language	74	23	3	0
Respects other people's lifestyles and cultures	73	24	3	0
Respects other people's religions	72	26	2	0
Votes in every election	27	41	28	4
Takes part in activities to protect the environment	15	56	24	5
Know about country's history	14	60	23	3
Takes part in activities to benefit people in the local community	14	52	31	3
Takes part in activities promoting human rights	12	45	31	12
Respects government representatives	9	46	32	12
Follows political events in the news media	9	45	42	3
Considers participating in a peaceful protest against a law believed to be unjust	9	28	48	15
Knows about the history of other countries	5	35	51	9
Engages in political discussions	3	35	57	5
Joins a political party	2	14	77	8

Political and social interest and engagement

The undergraduates were asked whether or not they were interested in a range of social and political issues linked to citizenship, for example human rights, poverty and discrimination against minority ethnic groups. They were also asked a series of questions designed to test their socio-political allegiances. There is not space to discuss the results in detail here (see Watt *et al*., 2006). However, two major findings stand out. Firstly, that levels of interest amongst first year students, including the 18-19 year-olds, do not by and large lend credence to the notion that young people are socially and politically

apathetic, as Grundy and Jamieson (2004) also found. Secondly, that the students could not so much be described as left-wing radicals in terms of state-led redistributionist politics, but rather as liberals whose main concerns were respecting the rights of others.

What is interesting for our purposes here is that the undergraduates were asked whether or not they discussed social and political issues with their parents, other family members, friends and teachers. Those 18-19 year-olds who had previously experienced citizenship education were more likely to discuss such issues with all four groups than their age peers. For example, 50% of students who had studied citizenship at school/college often discussed such issues with parents, as opposed to only 19% amongst those who had not, whilst the equivalent percentages for discussions with teachers were 44% and 14%. In the case of both parents and teachers, the associations were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

In terms of political engagement, the students were asked about whether or not they had *ever* taken part in a number of activities ranging from signing a petition to going on a protest march. Table 4 below shows that 86% of the youngest undergraduates had signed a petition, a much higher percentage than the 58% in Fahmy's (2003: 4) research on 15-19 year olds. A majority (71%) had also worn a wristband for a campaign, which may well be a reflection of the recent high-profile *Make Poverty History* campaign which was characterised by the wearing of wristbands. Nearly half of the students had bought Fair Trade goods, again a campaign that has grown recently. E-democracy also seems significant since over one quarter had taken part in an Internet protest. However, the other political activities were only taken up by small minorities, and in this sense are close to the findings from Fahmy (2003). For example, only 6% had attended a protest meeting and the same percentage had sent a letter to an elected politician. Interestingly 9% had taken part in protests against the War in Iraq. When the activities were crosstabulated with whether or not the undergraduates had taken part in citizenship education at school/college, no clear or strong patterns emerged. Thus the students who had attended citizenship classes were more likely to have signed a petition and worn a wristband, but the students who had not studied citizenship were more likely to have boycotted companies and taken part in protests against the Iraq War.

Table 4. 18-19 year-old social science undergraduates' participation in political activities (%)

Signing a petition	86
Wearing a wristband for a campaign	71
Buying Fair Trade goods	48
Protesting via Internet	26
Protest march	12
Boycott against companies	11
Iraq War protest	9
Sending a letter to elected politician	6
Protest meeting	6
Sit-in	6
Sending an email to elected politician	5
Strike	5

When it came to membership of political organisations, 9% were currently members of a political party, a higher figure than would be expected for this age group. The students were asked whether or not they had been members of a range of political and leisure organisations during the last five years. Membership of organisations such as Amnesty International and the Anti-War Coalition was non-existent, whilst only small minorities were members of the World Wildlife Fund (8%), Friends of the Earth (5%) and the Countryside Alliance (3%). Given the small percentages involved, differences due to previously studying citizenship were not calculated.

Finally, the undergraduate students were asked a series of questions regarding elections, including whether or not they had voted in the 2005 general election. As we saw above, a majority of 18-19 year old students thought that it was either very or quite important that adult citizens voted in every election, and there is some indication that they were more likely to participate in elections than their peer group as a whole (Henn *et al*., 2005). Excluding those who were ineligible to vote because they were too young, 74% of the 54 students who could vote did so. Moreover, this was a quite remarkable 90% among those who had studied citizenship at school/college compared to 64% who had not.

Conclusion

This paper has examined social science undergraduates' prior school and college experiences of citizenship education. There was a widespread view that learning about citizenship was fairly interesting and some of the students indicated that it could be challenging and allowed them to express opinions, as Kerr (2005) found. However, several students also stressed inadequate teaching, as highlighted in the OFSTED (2005) report.

When asked to define citizenship, around half of first year 18-19 year old undergraduates either didn't know what it was, gave vague general answers or didn't answer at all (see Table 1). Among those who had a more definite view, issues of rights and

responsibilities and active citizenship seemed important, but not formal political processes (cf. Kerr, 2005). Those undergraduates who had studied citizenship were more likely to have engaged in a variety of citizenship-related activities at schools and colleges in comparison both with their age-peers and older students. The former were also more likely to engage in discussions about citizenship-related topics with significant others, notably parents and teachers. In terms of attitudes relating to adult citizenship, again differences emerged, for example on the importance of voting and political discussions. Furthermore, the findings indicate that young students generally are far from politically inert or apathetic, as is commonly suggested. Moreover, these social science undergraduates also seem more engaged than studies of young people generally indicate (cf. Fahmy, 2003; Grundy and Jamieson, 2004; Henn *et al*., 2005). It is worth reiterating that the students were enrolled on particular degree courses, for example Policing and Sociology, that may well attract certain kinds of civic-minded young people.

Given the small size of the sample in this research, plus the difficulties of inferring causality from association, it would be premature to say that studying citizenship at school or college has definitively resulted in certain impacts amongst young undergraduate students. Nevertheless, it is clear that those who had previously studied citizenship had also been more engaged in citizenship activities at school or college. Exactly what the longer term effects of citizenship education might be for those entering higher education requires further research on present and future cohorts of young people.

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