

# Defend citizenship!

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Over 1,000 students, including those at Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College in Darlington, are following A-level Citizenship courses as part of their overall A-level programme.

This is to be welcomed by all those who want to see a 'politically, economically educated electorate' in the second decade of the 21st century.

Yet the government quango, Ofqual, has suggested that the subject be deleted from the 16 to 19 programme. Nothing could be more foolish or short-sighted at a time when policy experts are telling us that as a nation we are experiencing a 'crisis of democratic engagement', with fewer people turning out to vote in elections or joining voluntary associations. As the top American don Bob Puttman notes in his classic book *Bowling Alone*, people are more likely to watch the sitcom *Friends* than to make them! Rather than Citizenship Studies being scrapped, it should be made mandatory, with students sitting the 'Life in the UK' test at the end of it, or, for more advanced students, the full AS/A-level.

One major feature of citizenship education is a grasp of political, legal, economic and social processes. For instance, politics is concerned with power in our society. It affects nearly every part of our lives. Decisions not only have to be taken in national, local and European settings but also need to be taken within day-to-day social relationships. In short, this is what politics is all about.

To participate effectively within the various decision-making

processes, it's vital that adults are suitably equipped with the relevant civic knowledge, skills and understanding.

The last four decades have seen the rapid development of society, with the result of more centralised political decision-making, despite devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and some regions of England. Centralised power has reduced the ability of citizens to actively influence decision-making, let alone understand it.

More alarmingly, in the last ten years a huge chunk of the populace feel 'alienated' from the democratic process. Only 66 per cent of those registered actually turned out to vote in the 2015 General Election. In other words, about a third didn't vote! If this is bad, consider voting among young people. Only 43 per cent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted – down on the 2010 election. Despite the efforts of the Independent Electoral Commission and localised campaigns run by local councils, five million people in the UK were not registered to vote.

Lack of knowledge about current issues and people's own role in implementing change are clearly major factors in accounting for this 'disillusionment'.

Citizenship education in our sixth forms and colleges can help to create an active, informed, engaged and empowered electorate. The maintenance of a successful, mature liberal democracy is dependent on people exercising a choice between political parties and their policies. Civic education can provide an awareness and deeper

understanding of the 'rights and responsibilities' of citizens. It's important that young people by the age of 19 understand how parliament works, what the various parties stand for, what an MP, MEP or local councillor does, and how the legal system and business operates. Furthermore, they need to be encouraged to volunteer in a local branch of a charity, such as Cancer Research or Oxfam. Classes in citizenship can help combat voter apathy and low levels of civic participation, and create a mature population.

At A-level, Citizenship Studies is no soft option. Students are expected to acquire a solid level of knowledge and understanding of how our democratic, judicial and economic systems function in a post-modern society. At AS level, learners have to produce a short project demonstrating their involvement in the local community or a campaign group, which requires research and skills of critical analysis. Contrary to popular belief, most universities are quite happy to accept the subject as an additional A-level.

Students following vocational programmes could benefit from a two hour citizenship lesson each week to prepare them for the 'Life in the UK' test. We expect migrants and those who seek to acquire UK residency to pass this test, which covers British values, customs, history and current issues. So why not our own indigenous population?

In an era of rapid change and declining participation in public affairs, the need for citizenship education in the post-16 curriculum could not be greater.