GETTING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVED IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

A model to boost democratic participation in Belgium

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

STATE OF PLAY OF DEMOCRACY IN BELGIUM

HOW CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING DEMOCRACY IN BELGIUM

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN BELGIUM (AND ITS PROBLEMS)

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FLEMISH COMMUNITY

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FRENCH COMMUNITY

THE WAY FORWARD

THE ENGLISH SYSTEM

THE CITIZENSHIP FOUNDATION: GETTING THE PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVED

RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

REFERENCES

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Belgian democratic system suffers from decreasing electoral participation, unequal access to new forms of participation, low levels of confidence in the judicial system and poor performance of mass media in educating citizens on political issues. The improvement of democracy in Belgium can come about through reactivating civic engagement. Civic engagement, in turn, depends on adequate levels of education: citizens need to know why it is worth to mobilise and how they can do it.

The subject of citizenship education allows schoolchildren to further their political literacy, their critical thinking, and to develop the attitudes and values needed in a pluralist and democratic society. Studies among Belgian teenagers have confirmed that classroom instruction in citizenship education is related to higher levels of political interests and that the participation in school councils was related with higher levels of political participation.

The current system of citizenship education in Belgium differs across the Flemish, the Francophone and the German-speaking communities. Given their bigger size, this paper will analyses the citizenship education systems in Flemish and the Francophone ones. In both systems there seems to be a laissez-faire approach to citizenship education, in which schools are given a lot of freedom when it comes to teaching it – often in a cross-curricular manner. This results in schoolchildren having different levels of access to citizenship education, depending on the school they attend and its socio-economic background.

This paper proposes a bottom-up improvement of citizenship education that relies on the collaboration between the private sector and the schools. This does not mean a change in the school curriculum – which would entail a lengthy bureaucratic process – but additional support for proper education on citizenship issues. The English scheme is presented as an illustration of how this public-private collaboration could be structured. The Citizenship Foundation – our role model – involves law firms, bar associations, NGOs and consultancies in teaching children about the rule of law or the current economic crisis. This model would allow for better civic education programmes, including little bureaucratic work, a better connection with the private sector and the development of corporate social responsibility in Belgium, with positive externalities for society at large.

For this proposal to be implemented in Belgium, public authorities in charge of citizenship education and policymakers are recommended to:

- Establish a neutral, intermediary body between schools and the partners participating in the scheme based on the model of The Citizenship Foundation;
- Draw in corporate partners, leveraging the benefits that are in it for them, such as an enhanced company profile, team building opportunities and employee empowerment;
- Capitalise on Belgium’s particular context, targeting both Belgian and European corporate actors, NGOs and civil society organisations with Belgian headquarters;
- Invest in programmes that develop the concept of corporate social responsibility and promote awareness about its benefits, not only in the corporate sector but also among the public.
INTRODUCTION

Political participation in Belgium is unequal across different municipalities and socio-demographic profiles. This situation is worrisome because civic engagement is key to having a healthy political system in which all voices and backgrounds are taken into account when deciding on policy alternatives. A ‘democracy of the privileged’ in which only some groups vote and mobilise can foster inequality and the permanent exclusion of vulnerable collectives.

Citizenship education\(^1\) can help tackle these problems: informed individuals are more likely to see the purpose of civic engagement and mobilise.\(^2\) However, the decentralised educational system in Belgium makes the current system of citizenship education fragmented and unsatisfactory. Citizenship education is not envisaged as a separate subject in neither the French- nor the Flemish-speaking community, and is taught in a cross-curricular manner. Unsurprisingly – and as emerged from our interviews – schools in privileged neighbourhoods, which usually have more economic resources, find it much easier to include civic education than those located in deprived areas.

Given the high costs of improving a scheme of citizenship education, we propose to bring in the private sector and civil society to contribute to educating the citizens of tomorrow. A partnership between schools and the private sector entails not only requesting funding from private sources, but also using their human capital to come and teach in schools, according to the guidelines previously agreed upon with the school and public institutions. This would enrich the experience of students and, at the same time, reinforce a culture of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Belgium, which would have positive externalities in the society at large.

This paper analyses the Belgian system with regards to citizenship education on the basis of semi-structured interviews with Belgian experts. It then presents the English model, in which private entities have developed a prominent role in the British education system as part of their corporate social responsibility. The main example of this public-private collaboration is the Citizenship Foundation, a body that involves law firms, bar associations, NGOs and consultancies in teaching children topics like the rule of law or the current economic crisis.

The paper finishes with a series of recommendations for the implementation of this model in Belgium, including the creation of an intermediary body akin to the Citizenship Foundation and the promotion of a culture of CSR.

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1. With Citizenship education “defined as educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in decisions concerning society” (http://www.unesco.org/education/tsf/mods/theme_b/intertact/mod07task03/appenadix.htm9).
2. Ibidem
STATE OF PLAY OF DEMOCRACY IN BELGIUM

As in many other countries, the Belgian political system is experiencing difficulties in engaging all citizens to take part in elections as well as in other forms of democratic participation. The *Diagnosis of Democracy in Belgium* (Dejaeghere et al., 2013) illustrates the most important pitfalls. Although voting is compulsory in Belgium, there has been a slight decline in participation rates (from 91% in the 2007 general elections to 89% in 2014). The number of blank and invalid votes is rising at a worrying rate in certain areas: in fifty municipalities, including major urban centres like Liège, Charleroi, Brussels and Namur, the percentage of valid votes was below 80%. People with lower levels of education and those with an immigrant background are less prone to vote. Besides, only some segments of society engage in alternative forms of participation such as petitions and demonstrations.

In parallel to the lack of democratic engagement, Belgians have very little confidence in their justice system. The *Dutroux affair* is much to blame for this decrease in trust, although the length of the judicial procedures and the complexity of the legal language are also reasons for citizens’ aversion to the justice system.

Finally, the media struggles to make politics accessible to citizens. In order to take part in the political channels offered to them, citizens must have a certain level of knowledge and interest. It is increasingly difficult for the mass media to meet this need, given the strong commercial pressure to which they are subject. News bulletins prioritise flashy content over sophisticated political information, a trend that is further accentuated by a decreasing number of journalists having to cover a growing number of issues. Thus, control over political institutions might be further weakened, given that uninformed citizens become passive (Dejaeghere et al., 2013, pp. 18–19).

HOW CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO IMPROVING DEMOCRACY IN BELGIUM

Improving democracy in Belgium will rely on reactivating civic engagement. Civic engagement, in turn, depends on adequate levels of education: citizens need to know why it is worthwhile to mobilise and how they can do it. That is why a renewed approach to citizenship education is needed in Belgium.

Citizenship education can be defined as a subject area designed to ‘ensure that young
people become active citizens, capable of contributing to the development and well-being of the society in which they live. According to the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA, 2012), this commonly includes four aspects: (i) political literacy; (ii) critical thinking and analytical skills, (iii) attitudes and values, and (iv) active participation. Each element is defined as follows:

i. Political literacy: Participation in the democratic channels offered by the political system requires a minimum amount of knowledge about said system.

ii. Critical thinking and analytical skills: Becoming active citizens is not only about knowing the theory of participating, but also about making a choice between competing options. For that, citizens need a critical attitude that allows them to filter the information they receive from the mass media and other channels.

iii. Attitudes and values: Getting along with each other in a pluralist society is a challenging task that can be improved by learning about the values that should guide our behaviour in the community – particularly those that could improve the relationships between members of different ethnic and national backgrounds.

iv. Active participation: Democracy is not only about voting, but also about participating through other channels. Schoolchildren should be familiar with the alternative manners in which they can contribute towards a better society, be it volunteering at their local council or demonstrating or getting engaged for a policy change at their national level.

The main benefit of a strong citizenship education scheme over other types of interventions lies in its ability to reach everyone. When the practice of citizenship is taught uniformly through a school-based system, we ensure that every child (no matter his socio-economic or ethnic background) will have a minimum amount of knowledge and skills to become an active citizen of tomorrow. Previous studies among Belgian teenagers (Dassonneville et al., 2012, pp. 140–150) have confirmed that classroom instruction in citizenship education is related to higher levels of political interest and that the participation in school councils led to higher levels of political participation.

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN BELGIUM (AND ITS PROBLEMS)

Education is not a federal competence in Belgium. Three autonomous national education systems exist as developed by the three linguistic Communities:

- the Flemish Community for education provided in the Flemish Region and Brussels Capital Region;
- the French Community for education provided in the Walloon Region and Brussels Capital Region;
- the German-speaking Community for education provided in parts of the Walloon Region (UNESCO, 2014, p. 1).

This report addresses the two major communities, the Flemish and the French. Schools are run by different school boards (community-owned, subsidized public schools, subsidized free schools, mainly organized by the different religious bodies) that bear the authority to draft their own curriculum. The Flemish education system sets out final attainment targets and developmental objectives, whereas the curriculum in the French system is seen as the reference which the ‘organised body defines in order to attain the competencies laid down by the Government for
a particular year, degree or cycle’ (Geyer, 2009, p. 8; Verstraelen, Bellens and van Damme, 2015).

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FLEMISH COMMUNITY

School boards in Flanders enjoy far-reaching autonomy and devise their own curricula, regulations, educational methods and personnel policies (EPNoSL, no date; UNESCO, 2014). The Flemish educational guidelines do not envisage citizenship education as a separate subject, but since 1997 it is considered as “one of the cross-curricular achievements” (Franken, 2014, p. 255). The only overarching teaching goals related to citizenship education are the following: understand the legal concept of citizenship; be aware of the right to vote; social relational development; and become socially, economically and politically literate. Besides these goals, the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training does not impose a strict method of delivering citizenship education; in fact, the topic is not part of the school's final examinations. Without a specific teacher training for civic education (Hooghe and Claes, 2009, p. 229) and no clear allocation to a particular course, the implementation depends to a large extent on the personal commitment of school teachers and headmasters.

This means that in deprived areas, teachers have very few incentives to provide education in citizenship issues: they instead focus on teaching basic subjects such as mathematics or Dutch. As it emerged from interviews, an additional difficulty is that about 50% of the Flemish students are enrolled in a Catholic school. Catholic schools follow their own curriculum by adjusting the overarching goals of citizenship education to their spiritual and moral understanding. Hence, “the aims of citizenship education are not always reached and Flanders scores below the European average with regard to citizenship education” (Franken, 2014, p. 255).

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE FRENCH COMMUNITY

Similarly to the Flemish community, there is currently no separate subject on Éducation Civique in the French community. The Décret relatif au renforcement de l’éducation à la citoyenneté responsable et active au sein des établissements organisés ou subventionnés par la Communauté française from 12 January 2007 states that schools should implement some citizenship education elements intercurricularly.

Interviews highlighted that the lack of a separate course on citizenship education results in religious or moral education teachers covering the subject without having been trained in doing so nor having to comply with any particular benchmarks. What makes matters even more complicated is that pupils have the right to choose between six recognised religions and non-denominational moral education. Such varied regime makes it very difficult to compare and track the real implementation of some citizenship education elements. There is very little literature or academic publication on Walloon’s citizenship education and only one university (Haute école de Bruxelles) that is offering some seminars for student teachers. As in the Flemish case, this scheme results in diverging conditions for citizenship education across different schools. Again, this is likely to have a particularly detrimental impact on schools located in socially deprived contexts.

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3 Due to a ruling of the Constitutional Court, n° 34/2015, of 12th of March 2015, declaring it as against the constitution that parents had to choose between one of the religious or moral education classes, public schools are obliged to offer a non-denominational class.
THE WAY FORWARD

The weaknesses of the current Belgian scheme of citizenship education are unlikely to be addressed at the institutional level. Modifications of the respective educational curriculums are difficult to implement given the high number of stakeholders involved (Catholic, Protestant-Evangelical, Anglican, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic religions, the community of humanist freethinkers, liberal and public schools; political sectors...). In addition, the issue of citizenship education does not seem to be a priority on the political or in the academic agenda. Changes, if any, would be produced after lengthy negotiations and in the long-term future. The problems of political disengagement described above, however, are pressing and call for immediate action.

A citizenship education programme that respects the current architecture developed at the political level, while facilitating the implementation of new, private initiatives at the school level could offer better solutions for the Belgian context. In particular, a stronger partnership between schools and the private sector could be extremely beneficial for the many schoolchildren that have poor access to quality education on citizenship issues. This partnership would have the advantage of improving the provision of citizenship education with little extra costs for the public sector (since most of the funding would come from private sources) and involving actors with practitioner expertise in particular fields (since it would put workers of the private and civil sectors in direct contact with the students).

This scheme would also help establish a bridge between citizens and non-state actors in a world where our interactions with the markets, the workplace, and the civil society organisations strongly define our behaviour as citizens. Becoming more familiar with the private sector would enrich the students’ view on politics, and the contribution of the private sector would strengthen a culture of corporate social responsibility in Belgium, in a mutually beneficial cycle.

The English system offers a good example.
THE ENGLISH SYSTEM

Similarly to the Belgian case, education is not a national policy area in the United Kingdom. Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland have developed their own curricula and implemented citizenship education in their schools in different ways.

In England, citizenship education was introduced at the turn of the millennium to tackle "worrying levels of ignorance and cynicism about public life" (Crick, 1998, p. 8). As there is no obligation for schools to teach citizenship education in a separate course, the content and quality of civic education very much depends on the personal commitment of the staff. Most schools have followed a light touch approach "that laid down principles and guidelines but left the details to teachers" (Crick, 2007, pp. 85–86). There is proper training available, but only a minority of teachers actually completed civic education training courses. This is an acute problem given that in daily school life, it is more common to simply include some elements of citizenship education in other classes such as history, or merely as part of the school ethos.4

The result of this architecture was not ideal. As in Belgium, the quality of the skills and knowledge children acquired to become good and active citizens very much depended on the school they were attending, the personal commitment of teachers and parents, and even where the school was located (the so-called "postcode lottery"). There is, for instance, an exemplary (and rather exceptional) case in the Colyton Grammar School. This school offered citizenship education in its "PSHE/tutor sessions […] [as well as] some topics in other subjects; assemblies and specific events". The following events are offered for year 8 pupils as part of this programme:

- Mock-Parliament Activity;
- Mock United Nations General Assembly;
- Forum with East Devon District Councillors;5

Yet cases like those of the Colyton Grammar School are rare. Tough competition between schools for achieving the best position in the school league tables lead to a focus on tested subjects. Since citizenship education does not count in these rankings, it has sadly become a 'second-class' subject.

It is in this context that private entities have developed a prominent role in the British educational system. Corporate social responsibility has become a well-entrenched business principle in recent years, and led to a new type of cooperation in the UK that brings together foundations and companies to conduct workshops on civic education. One of the biggest entities involved, the Citizenship Foundation has been our central object of study.

THE CITIZENSHIP FOUNDATION: GETTING THE PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVED

The Citizenship Foundation is an entity funded exclusively with private capital whose mission is to help students understand the law, politics and democratic life. It performs this mission

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4 Results of a small study, conducted from us, by comparing the schools listed as the 100 best schools according to the state school GCSE results.

through the creation of curriculum materials for citizenship education, the put into practice of themed programmes in schools and the exercise of influence over policy-makers to understand the importance of citizenship education. The curriculum materials developed by the Citizenship Foundation have been used by over 80 per cent of UK secondary schools and 50 per cent of UK primary schools. More than a quarter million young people have taken part in their school-based programmes, and the Foundation has so far been successful in keeping citizenship education within the UK school curriculum.

Some of the projects implemented by the Citizenship Foundation in primary and secondary schools are:

**Lawyers in schools**
Established in 1990, the programme seeks to increase the students’ awareness and understanding of the law and the legal system, their rights and duties, and how the legal framework affects their daily lives. Volunteering lawyers are in charge of the implementation of the programme through teaching sessions in specific schools. These lawyers are recruited from the Foundation’s Business Partners (law firms), with a volunteer coordinator appointed at each Business. The Citizenship Foundation provides materials, advice, and training, after which a team of 5 to 6 volunteers works with classes of up to 30 students. This is a mutually beneficial enterprise: the schoolchildren, often from economically deprived backgrounds, get a unique chance to receive legal knowledge from an expert, which they would probably never receive from any other source. Very importantly, the businesses also benefit from their participation: the programme promotes team building and stronger relationships with the community, enhances the company profile and improves the skills of the volunteers.

**Boom, Bust & Crunch**
The Boom, Bust & Crunch programme seeks to give 14-17-year-olds a sense of the financial crisis and its repercussions. Although the main lines of the programme and the materials used have been carefully developed by the Citizenship Foundation, a private consultancy is in charge of its practical implementation: volunteers from FTI consulting work in schools in groups of 4-6 students in highly interactive sessions. The programme and the volunteers do not put an emphasis on a particular narrative of the crisis, but on different elements that allow the students to get into a meaningful discussion of economic affairs and to develop their own opinion on the matter.

**Bar mock trials**
The Citizenship Foundation’s bar mock trials give students, aged 15-18 years, the chance to take on the roles of barristers or advocates, witnesses, court staff, and jurors. This provides them with a real insight of the justice system and the skills to be comfortable in a legal environment. The bar mock trials were also very beneficial for students to develop their critical and analytical skills, the ability to build an argument, to communicate information effectively and to deal with challenging situations. The competition, supported by the Bar Council of England and Wales, the Bar Library of Northern Ireland, the Faculty of Advocates of Scotland, the Circuits and the four Inns of Court, is nation-wide and takes place yearly. Real judges and senior barristers perform as volunteers in order to evaluate the students’ performance. It was often the first time for children from deprived backgrounds to be in contact with a lawyer. Having a female lawyer as a “teacher” can, for instance, be an emancipatory inspiration for young schoolgirls and might result in a nascent career aspiration. This ultimately has a positive impact on social mobility among the most deprived sectors of society.
RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW TO APPLY THE CITIZENSHIP FOUNDATION MODEL IN BELGIUM

The peculiarities of the Belgian educational system make it difficult to replicate the English system. The first and most evident aspect that came up after interviewing experts in both Belgian communities was the vast cultural difference related to private and public sector cooperation. In addition, the concept of corporate social responsibility that is so popular in the UK does not seem to exist in the Belgian corporate world.

Schools in Flanders are seen as a "neutral sphere," as Ellen Claes from KU Leuven stated in an interview. Teachers prefer to visit events or political bodies with their students rather than inviting stakeholders to the school. Inviting corporate actors of big businesses could be seen by parents and the public as an intrusion in this neutral sphere. Claudine Leleux explained that although this public-private divide is more pronounced in Wallonia, the concept of corporate social responsibility is also seen with suspicion in the rest of the country.

These difficulties could be overcome with the appropriate strategy. A fruitful cooperation between private entities, NGOs and relevant public institutions, on the one hand, and schools on the other one could be established according to the following guidelines:

- **Establish an intermediary body between school and companies.** It is advisable to establish a new foundation/separate non-profit organisation that could operate as a neutral, trustworthy intermediary between the schools and the companies it collaborates with. Alternatively, these functions could be taken up by an existing foundation with expertise in the field of citizenship education and with a perception of neutrality among the relevant actors involved. The concerns of neutrality could be additionally mitigated with a high level of transparency and the establishment of a board involving stakeholders from the political arena, the business world and even school representatives. Like the Citizenship Foundation, this entity will host experts in the field of citizenship education and be a source of educational materials in this topic. The entity would also be in charge of finding appropriate partners, seeking funding when needed, giving suitable training to the volunteers from the corporate partners and supervising the development of the projects in the schools. Belgium is a rich arena for private investment. Brussels, in particular, has a high number of law firms, consultancies and NGOs, often attracted by the advantages of being close to the headquarters of European and international institutions. In addition, many of the partners that are already involved with the Citizenship Foundation in the UK also have subsidiaries in Brussels (i.e. Baker & McKenzie, Bird & Bird, Addleshaw Goddard or J. P. Morgan). This would make it easier for the Belgian foundation to get in touch with them and persuade them to take part in a scheme as successful as the English one.
Getting civil society organisations and the private sector involved in citizenship education

- **Show the benefits of this partnership to corporate partners.** The success of the Citizenship Foundation lays in its ability to offer the corporate partner a real incentive to engage in its programmes, that is, a real benefit for the company. This benefit can come in the shape of an enhanced company profile, strong team building opportunities, empowering employees or improving various employees’ skills. The small size of Belgium means that, by engaging in one of the citizenship education programmes, corporate partners could reach a substantial part of the country, whereas in England these programmes remain constrained to certain big-size cities like London. Public powers can sell this as an additional advantage to the corporate partners.

- **Capitalise on Belgium’s domestic international sphere, drawing in the European institutional community and its stakeholders.** Whereas the Belgian population seems to be somewhat averse to the inclusion of the corporate world in the classrooms, to the proximity of the headquarters of many other international institutions means that schoolchildren can still have access to a rich arena of expertise, from European institutions like the Commission, to a big group of NGOs, consumer organisations and other entities from the civil society. These civil society organisations could focus on issues like human rights, consumer rights or environmental protection - issues that, in the end, are also an integral part of citizenship and the political life of individuals.

- **Invest in programmes developing the concept of corporate social responsibility in the private sector and among the public.** CSR is still underdeveloped in the Belgian context. Corporate partners and the Belgian society as a whole need to be aware of how important it is that businesses contribute towards the social good of the country in which they are located. Belgian society also needs to welcome such contributions. Only in such climate can our proposed scheme of citizenship education flourish.

**CONCLUSION**

Belgium’s problems with democratic participation are caused, among other factors, by insufficient levels of civic education. Bringing the private sector and civil society into the Belgian schools to help with citizenship education could provide a cost-effective solution to a pressing problem which institutions are unlikely to solve soon. To this end it is important to establish a neutral foundation that can serve as a connection between public and private actors. On this basis, partnerships with companies, NGOs, public institutions and civil organisations could be built to bring their expertise into the classroom, particularly in times of bipartisanship and funding problems. Engaging a variety of entities in this project would enrich the content of the teaching programmes, relieve doubts about its neutrality and highlight the responsibility that for-profit actors bear towards society at large. We believe this would be a win-win situation in which citizenship education is reinforced and democratic participation reactivated among young people without putting a larger burden on the already strained public budget.
REFERENCES


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ABOUT FUTURELAB EUROPE

Europe has to be a citizen project in order to succeed. It needs fresh ideas and innovative concepts as well as a strong supportive base from its younger generations. In order to enable FutureLab Europe to exist and develop, ten European Foundations, with the help of the Network of European Foundations and the European Policy Centre in Brussels, joined forces. They are assembling experiences, resources and – most of all – their outstanding Alumni. The programme currently has 85 participants coming from 28 countries – EU countries as well as non-EU countries.

FutureLab Europe is a project operated by the European Policy Centre in Brussels and financed by the Network of European Foundations. The programme empowers young voices mainly on the topics of democracy and participation, equal opportunities on the labour market, and European identity. Participants of FutureLab Europe develop their own ideas and positions on matters of European relevance and take responsibility and actions in order to help build the Europe of the future. They share their young perspective on Europe through their blogs, in public debates and through their projects.

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