Turnout for European elections is low across many EU countries, and especially so in Britain where only 34 per cent of people voted in the recent 2014 elections. Voting rates amongst young people are even more worrying - just 29 per cent of 18-24s voted in the 2009 European Parliament election.

The public’s lack of knowledge about European institutions, policies and citizenship is believed to be one of the key reasons that they do not vote in European Parliament elections. Providing more information through schools would seem to be the obvious answer, and European institutions have for many decades encouraged their individual member states to provide a ‘European dimension’ to their school curricula. A recent review of citizenship education found that all EU member states now include information about the history, culture, institutions and languages of Europe in their citizenship education.

Does education work?
But does educating people about Europe ‘work’? Does knowing more about Europe mean that you are more likely to support European policies such as the free movement of goods, services and people around Europe? Will knowing more make you more likely to vote? In a newly released book, Education for citizenship in Europe: European policies, national adaptations and young people’s attitudes, LLALES researcher Dr Avril Keating provides answers to these questions. Her research shows that things are not as simple as they seem, and that education is not a ‘cure-all’ remedy for Europe’s problems. The book explores what European citizenship actually means, how European institutions have sought to convey the idea of European citizenship to people through education, how individual countries have responded to these efforts, and what impact education on European issues has had on young people’s attitudes.

“The findings present us with a problem, as EU citizens deserve to be informed about their rights, how EU institutions work, and how they can seek to influence those institutions.”
Dr Avril Keating

What is European citizenship?
To see how European institutions have defined citizenship, Dr Keating analysed policy documents written by the European Union and Council of Europe between 1949 and 2010. She found that there have been three key phases in the development of education policies on European citizenship.

First phase: 1949-1970
In the first phase, citizenship education was led by the Council of Europe. The education policies created at this time emphasized the idea of a nation of Europe that demanded loyalty and patriotism from its citizens. European countries were bound together by the idea of a ‘common cultural heritage’ and ‘common roots,’ as well as shared principles such as human rights.

In the second phase, the European Union took a more active role in education policy. Policies
emphasised the shared values of ‘democracy, social justice and respect for human rights,’ but continued to define European citizenship as a community bound by a common history and cultural practices. The policies emphasised the importance of belonging to ‘Europe,’ rather than explaining how to participate in the European Union political process.

Third phase: 1990s-2010

In the third phase, both the Council of Europe and the European Union made efforts to promote citizenship education. In contrast to the first two phases, modern European education policies do not portray citizenship as being linked to shared cultural practices and historical ties. Instead, both European institutions emphasise universal and civic values, active participation in civic life, and knowledge about political institutions.

How schools have taught European citizenship

All member states now include a European element in their national curriculum. Over the course of their education students can learn about how the European institutions work, as well as about the economics, politics, history, culture and identity of Europe. Dr Keating found that the form that this European dimension takes in different country’s national curricula tends to vary considerably and tends to be highly ‘nationalised’. For example, contemporary citizenship education texts in Ireland which she examined tended to frame European citizenship exclusively in relation to Irish citizenship, and the benefits of European integration were predominately presented in terms of how it would benefit Ireland. This led Dr Keating to conclude that preparing young people to be citizens of their own country is still the overriding purpose of citizenship education, and that European citizenship has merely been absorbed into this.

However, the data also revealed that these young Europeans were not, for the most part, active, engaged or informed. Like their adult peers, the participants typically demonstrated only modest levels of knowledge about the EU, and had little interest in European politics. Dr Keating’s research showed that student support for European integration was not universal, and that many young people were concerned about some of the economic, cultural and demographic implications of European integration.

To get to the bottom of whether or not the attitudes of young people were actually being affected by their education, Dr Keating looked at the type of citizenship education provided in EU member states that participated in the ICCS survey. She looked at

Young people’s attitudes

Dr Keating looked at data from the 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), part of which gathered information about students’ attitudes towards European integration and their knowledge about the EU across 24 European countries. The data provided a mixed picture of young people’s attitudes towards European citizenship. The students felt a strong sense of attachment to Europe, supported European values such as freedom of movement and integration, and trusted European institutions.

However, the data also revealed that these young Europeans were not, for the most part, active, engaged or informed. Like their adult peers, the participants typically demonstrated only modest levels of knowledge about the EU, and had little interest in European politics. Dr Keating’s research showed that student support for European integration was not universal, and that many young people were concerned about some of the economic, cultural and demographic implications of European integration.

To get to the bottom of whether or not the attitudes of young people were actually being affected by their education, Dr Keating looked at the type of citizenship education provided in EU member states that participated in the ICCS survey. She looked at
the number of opportunities that children’s schools provided them to learn about Europe, what type of citizenship messages children were receiving from their schools, and whether the attitudes of the children’s classmates towards matters such as immigration had any effect.

She found that although young people are more likely to report positive attitudes towards European identities and values if they have had more opportunities to learn about Europe at school, education about European issues made little or no difference to students’ intentions to vote in European Parliament elections in the future. In addition, having increased opportunities to learn about Europe did not appear to increase students’ knowledge about the EU. Young Europeans tended to have high awareness of the basic principles and symbols of the EU, but far more limited knowledge of EU institutions and policies.

“The findings present us with a problem, as EU citizens deserve to be informed about their rights, how EU institutions work, and how they can seek to influence those institutions.”

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