

The Hansard Society – Y Vote Mock Elections

The Electoral Commission established the New Initiatives Fund to support and promote new ways of raising awareness about voting and democracy. We have awarded grants to local, community and national organisations working with different target audiences across the whole of the UK.

This evaluation report provides information about the Hansard Society's Y Vote Mock Elections project funded by the New Initiatives Fund. In the report we highlight the aims, objectives and achievements of the project, and lessons learnt by the Hansard Society.

Introduction

The Hansard Society is an independent educational charity that promotes effective Parliamentary democracy.

The project was accessed through a website: www.mockelections.co.uk which was organised into four sections: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. From the site, teachers could download two resources: a Mock Election Pack containing a step-by-step guide to organising an election and a Pre-Election Activities Pack. Schools that registered were then sent a Y Vote Mock Elections wall chart, and 'do politics' posters. A dedicated student section allowed young people to get information on elections in bite-size pieces and meant student candidates could research their parties' standpoints on various issues.

The results of each school election was fed into the website, and compiled on a constituency basis, hosted on the website and displayed in an A3 poster sent to each registered school.

Aims and objectives

The objectives of Y Vote Mock Elections were to work in partnership with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and The Electoral Commission to run an online Y Vote Mock Election for all UK schools, alongside the 2005 general election.

Funding

We awarded them a grant of **£16,218**, towards a project that cost £67,186 in total (DfES was the major funder). The project ran from January to July 2005.

Target outcomes

The target outcomes of the project were as follows:

- register 1,400–2,800 schools across the UK;
- 10 statutory and voluntary youth organisations to run mock elections;
- 56,032 hits to the website during 2004 mock elections and 13,695 unique visitors to the website;
- 2,500+ downloads to the teacher portion of the site;

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- 40% of students involved to increase their knowledge of the electoral system; and
- a number of visits and downloads by students.

Commission in-kind contribution targets:

- secure a media partner and issue 20 press releases during the project;
- 100 local and national press articles, 20 media interviews by Hansard Staff and Electoral Commission staff, high-profile launch events for mock elections; and
- 10% of participating schools to download resources from the website to help them do their own local publicity.

How successful was the project?

Students participated from both primary and secondary schools and ranged in age from 5 to 18 years (2,124 schools registered and over 800,000 students took part in the elections).

The project's objectives were achieved. The number of schools anticipated to register was met, all proposed activities were completed and the project appears to have been well managed. Turnout among the schools who participated in the evaluation of the project was very high at 88%.

The partnership with the Commission was successful, and media attention was high with coverage across both local and national media including BBC TV and radio.

An independent evaluator was hired to assist in developing the

research questionnaires and to analyse the results. Over 200 schools responded to pre-election and post-election questionnaires and the Hansard Society analysed 30 sample schools (made up of a cross section representing the whole of the UK and including both private and public schools). They also conducted three in-depth case studies.

Responses from students in the 30 chosen schools shows a large proportion had a good knowledge of the electoral system, and an interest in voting before the project began. A large proportion (77%) said that they would vote at a general election if they were 18. Before the election 81% of students said they would participate in mock elections. Actual turnout for these students was 88%. An average of 53% of students stated they were more interested in politics after participating in the mock elections and 35% of students said participating in the mock elections had changed their opinions about participating in real elections.

The website was not used by the majority of students. In particular, primary students had difficulty using it, because the content of the site was not specifically targeted to them.

Responses from teacher evaluation forms demonstrate they felt the project was very worthwhile. The resource pack was used by more than 70% of teachers, the majority of whom rated it as either good or very good. All teachers felt the project had improved their students' knowledge and

understanding of politics and elections.

The website resources were used by at least half the teachers. These were rated as ok to good, slightly lower than the resource pack. On average schools devoted 14 to 20 school days to the mock elections.

All teachers felt the project had a positive impact on student interest and knowledge about politics. However, some areas for improvement were identified, such as resources for primary students, and teacher resource materials, which assumed more staff resources were available than was actually the case.

Good practice

- The project was able to adapt to additional requests for information, for example a young offenders institute (YOI) contacted them. Young people in YOIs are not allowed access to the internet, therefore a copy of the site was developed for CD-Rom that enabled them to be involved (the CD-Rom will be promoted more widely in the future).
- A partnership with BBC Newsround enabled registered schools to take part in an online poll where they could vote on a selection of issues including the environment, crime and immigration to discern what issues were most important to young people.
- The range of information available meant that schools could participate in different ways and to different extents depending on their needs.

Lessons learnt

Projects of a similar nature can learn from the following lesson:

- The design and content of the website could be improved for use by primary school students by making information clearer and more targeted at their age range.

Further information

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Further information about the New Initiatives Fund and the wider work of The Electoral Commission can be found at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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