

## **Establishing a general framework civic competency for European youth**

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### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a project that aims to construct a general framework of civic competency that will help understand civic competence as a blended measure of civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, behavioural intentions and behaviours. By distinguishing between civic potential, civic behaviour and civic outcomes, with empirical datasets from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) on 14 year-old European students, the framework will describe how these constructs are related and measured, and show their impact on future civic competence and active citizenship. In this project, by considering the effect of different social, political and cultural contexts, the framework will accommodate measures of civic dimensions that are common to all societies as well as those specific to particular societies and regions. This will challenge the quest for a universal model for civic competence. Given that cultivating civically competent citizens ready for active citizenship is an important educational outcome for many educational systems, this paper has the potential to expand understanding of citizenship, citizenship education and the relation of the two.

**Keywords:** Civic competency, European youth, citizenship education, civic knowledge

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## Introduction

Active citizenship is an important educational outcome intended in curricula of citizenship education across societies. According Hoskins, d'Hombres and Campbell (2008), active citizenship is defined as “participation in civil society, community and/ or political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy”. In achieving this, students should be equipped with necessary abilities and dispositions to enable them to participate effectively and actively in the societies when they become adults as citizens expected of more responsibility and commitments. In other words, adolescents should prepare to possess civic competency for their active citizenship in the future.

This proposed project aims to construct a general framework of civic competency that will help understand the civic competency of adolescents across societies in Europe. By testing the theoretical adequacy of the empirical results, the field of citizenship education will be moved forward to embrace a general framework for understanding students' civic competency as a blended measure of civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, behavioural intentions and behaviours. It will also investigate methodological approaches that will provide valid and reliable assessment of civic competency in the future. By distinguishing between *civic potential*, *civic behaviour* and *civic outcome*, the framework will describe how these constructs are related and measured. By taking into the consideration of different social, political and cultural contexts, the framework will accommodate measures of civic potentials, civic behaviour and civic outcome that are specific to particular societies and regions, with representations from both common and specific civic dimensions. This will challenge the requirement of large scale assessments for a universal model conceptualizing and measuring civic competencies. From the perspective of comparative citizenship education, given that cultivating civically competent citizens ready for active citizenship is an important educational outcome for many nations, this project, therefore, has the potential to expand understanding of citizenship, citizenship education and the relation of the two to the nation in the European region. This study will draw on the analysis of the datasets from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). The results will provide an empirical test of whether there is support to the notion of a unique European perspective of students' civic competency. Its comparative methodology will highlight the significance of understanding citizenship issues in a comparative perspective.

## Review of literature on civic competence

Researchers in the past decades have attempted to conceptualize the idea of “civic competence”. Since civic competence is a contested concept, however, scholars in different times have used different conceptions and definitions. For example, Hoskins and Crick (2010) adopted a composite concept of competence as a “complex combination of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that leads to effective, embodied human action in the world”. In particular, some went further to define “civic competence” as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enables a person to take part in active citizenship (Hoskins et al., 2008, 2011). Back to the 1960s', in their classic publication *Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba (1963) mentioned the term “civic competence” referring to it as attitudes and norms that individuals have to acquire to be competent and active citizens in the societies. Frateczak-Rudnicka and Torney-Purta (2002) have argued that the requirement of good citizenship varies with the different political regimes, and discussed the notion of “civic competence” with competencies particularly necessary for “democratic citizenship”. Torney-Purta and Lopez (2006) identified “three strands” of civic competencies, that is civic-knowledge, cognitive and participative skills (and associated behaviour), and core civic dispositions (motivations for behaviour and values/ attitudes). This is a similar conception adopted by

Hoskins et al. (2008, 2011) who divided civic competence consisting of four broad domains, which are citizenship values, social justice values and attitudes, participatory attitudes (behavioural intentions) and cognition about democratic institutions. It can be seen that these researchers in general have conceptualized civic competence to include both cognitive and non-cognitive component. Recently civic and citizenship competencies have been linked by some scholars in a broader sense with students' preparedness and competencies in the workplace. For example, Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld (2010) have emphasized the overlapping areas between civic and citizenship outcomes and workplace performance. They outlined how various civic outcomes could be analyzed to inform the workplace competencies in future. Besides their analysis using the IEA Civic Education Study (CivEd; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001) data they linked the relevance of the civic and citizenship dimensions with competencies that adolescents need as they move to the workplace as adults. , There are currently some international studies being carried out linking civic competencies with the "21st Century Skills", such as the *Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills* in 2009, and *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* in 2006.

From a comparative citizenship education perspective, some researchers have already done a comparison of levels of "civic competence" among the countries in the European context (see Hoskins et al., 2008, 2011). They analyzed the data of a total of 22 European countries and created a "composite indicator" to measure the adolescents' civic competence from the large scale assessment of the CivEd. They called such an indicator "Civic Competence Composite Indicator" (CCCI) and have published several works on the measuring and monitoring of civic competence in Europe. In their work, civic competence, in the form of a composite indicator, can be further conceptualized as contribution from four separate domain indicators: citizenship values, social justice values and attitudes, participatory attitudes, and cognitions about democratic institutions. Recently, Hoskins Villalba, & Saisana (2012) did a similar work on the ICCS 2009 (see more details below). Since they have analyzed the data from those European countries cross-nationally, they have shown cross-country similarities and differences on both overall performance and domain-specific scores among these countries, and offer some explanations from the perspectives of education, economic development and political history of the countries.

### **Civic competence or civic competency?**

Occupational Personality Questionnaires used by industrial/occupational psychologists differentiate these two constructs: job competency (now measure) and job competence (lag measure). I think this distinction is also true for studies on youth civic competency. Similar to the concepts of competence and competency in the field of industrial/occupational psychology, "civic competence" and "civic competencies" seem very similar in wording, especially in the current literature they are often used interchangeably by scholars to refer to the same concept. In this project, I would argue they represent very different concepts and should be made clearly distinguishable to make subsequent discussion more meaningful. Civic competence, I would argue, should refer to the actual level of competence as reflected in adolescents' or citizens' performance of civic engagement in the societies, and it should be determined by a pre-set standard of competence against certain satisfying criteria and outcomes. Competency, on the other hand, should relate to the underlying attitudes, values, cognition, motivation and behaviours citizens should possess in order to achieve the desired outcomes of civic engagement (see, for example, Torney-Purta and Lopez, 2006). In particular, for young adolescents, the focus should be on "civic potential" (see details below) to predict what they would be able or would like to perform when they become adult citizens in the future. Civic competence, in whatever period of time or stage; however, civic competency should be regarded as a record of blended attitudes, knowledge, and performance of civic engagement at a particular point of time. In the following section, I shall describe the

three components of the general framework of civic competency, i.e. civic potential, civic behaviour, and civic outcome.

### **Civic potential**

It should be noted that the current conceptualization of civic competency is a blended measure of civic knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, attitudes, behavioural intentions, and actual behaviours. In particular, in understanding behaviour-related measures, consideration should be given to differentiating between behavioural intentions and behaviours themselves. The behaviours and other civic dimensions that the students are currently demonstrating should be understood as civic behaviour whereas the behavioural intentions and other civic dimensions which are about aspiration for civic engagement in the future should be understood as civic potential.

Kennedy (2006, 2007) has indicated that youth are actually preparing to become citizens. Some researchers have also pointed out that in the legal sense they are yet to be citizens since they are not allowed to exhibit voting behaviours, which are the fundamental participatory action of active citizenship (see, for example, TorneyPurta and Amadeo, 2011). Therefore, young adolescents, by its nature and definition, are bound not to be able show their full possible potential of civic competence until they are in their adulthood. Therefore it may be more appropriate to talk about their level of “civic competence” at a later point of time when they have moved from adolescence to adulthood.

In the study proposed here the concept of “civic potential” will be introduced to represent the civic characteristics of youth in their young adolescence, where civic attitudes and civic values are in the formation stage and where some of civic behaviours that are relevant to society can still be exhibited and measured. As some psychologists and sociologists do, Flanagan (2008) showed a consistent view of “adolescents are becoming citizens” by describing the adolescence period as “politically definitive period”. Adolescence is regarded as the time for youth to learn and acquire conceptions that have considerable effect in the future directions of their civic lives.

It should be recognized that in the current literature, in particular in Hoskins et al.’s work (2008, 2011), the domain “participatory attitudes” are constructed as collective measures of the “behavioural intentions” (such as via the students’ expected adult participation in political activities). Some may argue that such “behavioural intentions” measures are not actually measures of actual competency; rather it should be conceptualized as some potential measures or disposition that will have effect on the future civic behaviours. This latter is the main idea behind the concept of civic potential.

The current literature has focused on civic competence of the adolescents who are not existing adults. It does not consider the fact that as the adolescents grow, the social, economic, political contexts they are living do undergo changes rapidly. As Higgins-D’Alessandro (2010) has pointed out “concepts of citizenship, civic engagement, and civic responsibilities are multifaceted and they are understood differently by different generations”, thus it should be expected that when the adolescents grow into adults, they would be living in a society that could have different social, economic, and political contexts that it had in the past. Therefore, as the contexts of the society change, the civic outcome and thus the desired civic competency are also expected to change too. It can be imagined, for example, that a high level of civic competence exhibited in very civically competent young adolescents in a particular society may not necessarily be the same civic competence shown at another point of time. Besides, at a given point of time, it is not uncommon that there are various forms of desired civic competence across different societies.

### **Civic behaviour**

In this proposed study and under the framework, civic behaviour refers to the current engagement and involvement of European adolescents in the community and in school. That may include activities such as participating in activities related to environmental protection in the community, and join in a debate for establishing a student union in the school. These are indicators how much the youth are currently engaged in a civic life in various parts of their lives during the period of adolescence.

### **Civic outcome**

Civic outcome refers to adolescents' future participation as adult citizens in the future. It includes measures such as the adolescents' expected participation in future protest, formal and informal political activities, and electoral-related activities. These measures are important indicators of active participation of citizens in the society. Based on the above descriptions of the three components (i.e. civic potential, civic behaviour, and civic outcomes), Figure 1 shows the proposed general framework of civic competency.

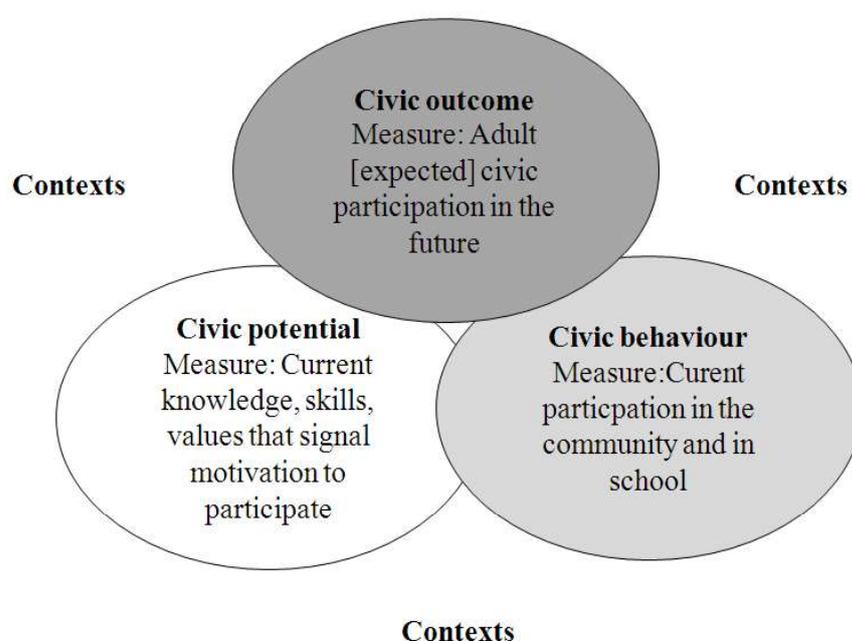


Figure 1. *A general framework of civic competency*

### **The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)**

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) was a large-scale assessment project carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in the years 2008 – 2009 in 38 educational systems (Schulz et al., 2010). It aimed to investigate the ways in which young people are prepared to undertake their roles as citizens across a range of societies. It assessed over 140,000 grade 8 students, of ages around 14 years old, from 5,300 schools from the participating societies. The instruments were created in accordance with the ICCS Assessment Framework to capture four content domains: (1) society and system, (2) civic participation, (3) civic principles, and (4) civic identities. These instruments will be administered in the form of 80 cognitive items (which have correct and incorrect answer) and 121 attitudinal items (which do not have right or wrong answer) (Schulz et al., 2010).

The issue of how ICCS data might be useful to conceptualize civic potential of European adolescents remains an open question, although some attempt was seen recently (see Hoskins, Villalba, & Saisana, 2012). Because of the age cohort of the study, approximately 13-14 years old, ICCS can be seen at the very least as providing indicators of junior secondary students' political and social attitudes. A particularly important feature of ICCS was the inclusion of 24 European societies so that such indicators can be examined in a distinctly European context and may serve as a guide for policy makers in the region concerned with how young people may undertake their future roles as citizens. The benefit of the proposed work is that it can take on a comparative perspective looking both within and across societies. Such further studies will take the form of secondary data analysis that has the potential to provide additional evidence and inform new theoretical perspectives as well (see, for example, Kennedy, Hahn, & Lee, 2008).

Table 1.  
*Sample distribution in the 24 European societies*

Participating countries	Schools sampled	Students sampled
Austria	135	3385
Belgium (Flemish)	151	2968
Bulgaria	158	3257
Cyprus	68	3194
Czech Republic	144	4630
Denmark	193	4508
England	124	2916
Estonia	140	2743
Finland	176	3307
Greece	153	3153
Ireland	144	3355
Italy	172	3366
Latvia	150	2761
Liechtenstein	9	357
Lithuania	199	3902
Luxembourg	31	4852
Malta	55	2143
Netherlands	67	1964
Poland	150	3249
Slovak Republic	138	2970
Slovenia	163	3070
Spain	148	3309
Sweden	166	3464
Switzerland	156	2924

Source: Schulz et al. (2010)

### Sample

In this study, the data were collected from 13-14-year-old students from 24 European societies, which have completed both the International Cognitive Test and International Survey that the students in all the other 38 countries have answered, and the specific questions posed in the European Regional Module. A total of 75,747 of 13-14-year-old young adolescents from 3190 schools in these 24 countries have participated in the ICCS study. The

sample sizes for these 24 European countries range from 357 to 4,852 students for each country. Data were collected in first half of 2009. The sample distribution of the 24 European societies is presented in Table 1.

Among 24 European societies, they share both similarities and differences in terms of political history, economic development, and education systems. The inclusion of a European Regional Module designed for European students only has tapped specific views of European citizenship and created the possibility to investigate empirically European students' conceptions of citizenship, in particular, civic potential in this proposed study.

### **European Regional Module**

By questions that capture some special issues of citizenship that are of interest in the contexts of Europe, the European Regional Module (ERM) consisted of questions that were believed to tap from the European students some of their conception of citizenship that are particularly important in understanding citizenship in Europe, which are not assessed in the international survey. Similar to the questions on the international survey, these eight questions in the ERM were asked in a four point Likert scale. They were asking students questions such as: Students' sense of European identity, participation in communication about Europe, attitudes towards freedom of migration within Europe, attitudes towards equal opportunities for other European citizens, participation in activities or groups at the European level, attitudes towards common policies in Europe, attitudes towards European unification, self-reported student knowledge about the European Union, and attitudes towards further expansion of the European Union.

### **Research questions of the proposed study**

This proposed study has mainly four research questions as follows.

1. What is 'civic potential' and how is it measured among European adolescents?
2. What is the relationship between civic potential, civic behaviour and civic outcome?
3. How is 'civic potential' affected by specific European citizenship values?
4. Is there a "European" citizenship perspective?

### **Expected research outcomes of the project**

In responding to each of the above research questions, it is expected this project will provide research outcomes as follows.

#### *A general framework of civic competency established*

I expect to show how different civic dimensions, i.e. civic potential, civic behaviour, and civic outcome, will contribute to the civic competency and how the latter should be constructed. I shall establish a general framework of civic competency that considers the possible civic dimensions, which integrates both the affective components and cognitive components.

#### *An inclusive framework for assessment that works in different social, political and cultural contexts*

It is suspected that it is difficult to achieve a universal framework for civic competency that fit all the societies equally well. As a consequence, I would construct a framework that allow the possibility of representing measures of civic dimensions that are specific to societies of

particular social, political and cultural backgrounds. This project will test with empirical data to determine the specificity of the civic dimensions that are common in countries in the European region and evaluate the implications of such specificity on the construction of the notion of European's civic competency.

#### *Geographical patterns of level of different civic dimensions*

Hoskins et al. (2008, 2011) evaluated the European adolescents' civic competence and their attitudes towards various important citizenship issues and found some geographical patterns in European identity, support of personal and public citizenship values, and support of civic values. It is expected in the proposed study to observe some geographical trends in levels of overall civic potential and its sub-domains. For example, societies of Eastern Europe, may show differences in domains of civic outcome, such as aspiration for civic engagement in the future, from societies of Western Europe.

#### *Variations of characteristics of civic dimensions accounted for by social, political and cultural context*

Kennedy, Mok and Wong (2012) have demonstrated how adolescents' trust towards political institutions may be accounted for by social, political and cultural contexts across a range of countries. I should expect to see different levels of civic dimensions across European countries affected by socio-political and cultural factors.

### **Implications for the proposed study**

International large scale assessments of student performance have been managed for comparing educational achievement among participating countries. This is one of the useful resources for studies of comparative education. For decades, the discussion on performance of international large scale assessment and its implications have been focused on traditional areas such as science and mathematics. Assessment projects include the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA's) assessments, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and other well-known international assessments such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

One of the major outcomes of these assessment projects is "leagues tables" which offer ranking of the students' performance among the participating countries. The score and rank often have implication for government officials regarding their policy making in the educational area of interest. As described by Rutkowski and Engel (2010), the governments are often confronted with question of "how are doing" when compared with others. Therefore, large scale assessments, as previously demonstrated by projects such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, have potential to become influential tools that have substantive impacts on educational policy through their emphasized scoring and ranking systems. The authors have categorized such assessments as 'hard' measures because they provide governments with the opportunity to realign their education systems as part of the process of seeking 'world class status'.

They further suggested the "shifting" of large scale assessment projects from those traditional subject areas mentioned above to the area of civic and citizenship, in the forms of the Civic Education Study (CivEd) and the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). While PISA and TIMSS have demonstrated the potential of large scale assessment to influence curriculum and pedagogy (Ringarp and Rothland, 2010), ICCS has

the potential to go beyond educational settings to demonstrate how citizenship itself can also be conceptualized as measurable knowledge, skills, and values. In this connection, the project described here has potential to re-orientate ICCS 2009 by introducing students' "civic potential" and "civic competence" as another area educational achievement for comparison among various countries. Similar in other comparative education research, this project, therefore, has the potential to inform educational policies too (Watson, 2001; Mok, 2005).

Given the significant role that Europe plays in economic and political events, the purposes of this project are to evaluate the European students' preparedness to be citizen in terms of measures of civic competency as they become adults in the future. The general framework of civic competency will enable us to investigate the students' conceptions of citizenship from multiple perspectives, compare these attitudes both within the region and beyond, and assess the implications for understanding not only the nature and purpose of civic and citizenship education in European contexts but also the possible influence of such conceptions. The results of this study will provide baseline data on European students' civic competency. It will also provide insights into the way future citizens have prepared in one of the most strategic regions in the world. Importantly, the results will also provide the basis for comparisons with young people in other parts of the world, such as Latin American and Asian countries.

The inclusion and secondary analysis of the ERM will enable researchers to check whether there is empirical data support to the importance of the impacts of the specific attributes (as mentioned above) in building the civic characteristics of youth in Europe. The results will help give response to the research question 3 listed above. Hoskins, Villalba, and Saibana (2012) have worked on ICCS data to establish the CCCI-2 but in their work the questions in the ERM were not included. By analyzing the ERM, this study will therefore advance the current literature on civic competency by investigating the specific Europe citizenship attributes' impacts on European students' civic potential, civic behaviour and civic outcome.

Data analysis will be carried out in accordance with the combinations of the components and indicators in the general framework as illustrated in the Figure 1. Although the results of such analyses are not reported in this article, it is recommended that the quality of data-model fit will be assessed by some rule-of-thumb of statistical analysis test of goodness-of-fit. Results of either good or unsatisfactory fit of the proposed model to specific individual countries' data will be reported on both the overall level and in specific domains of civic potential, civic behaviour and civic outcome.

Along with the 2013 European Year of Citizens for Europe, this proposed project will enable us to take a picture of the European adolescents' (from data in the above countries of ICCS) preparedness of their various civic dimension to see how much they have prepared to be active and participatory citizens in the society.

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