Changemakers: working with young people aged 16-24 to develop a resource about making political and social change in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that young people in the UK are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy and less likely to participate in formal politics, although they may participate in other forms of political life. Education in politics, democracy, and citizenship is key to engagement. However, research also suggests that there is a need for young people to receive a better grounding in political/citizenship education that supports their engagement. Using Wales as a case study and working with young Welsh citizens aged 16–24, the Changemakers project explores what they know about UK political institutions and making political/social change, and the type of resource(s) they need to improve their understanding, enabling active citizenship. This article discusses the key findings of this research, focusing on the creation of a multilingual educational resource (an interactive website). Findings reveal significant gaps in political understanding, particularly around devolved governance and who is responsible for tackling political concerns, highlighting the need for nation-tailored information. This paper presents a youth-centred approach to political information that integrates digital engagement and multilingual accessibility. For practitioners, the research underscores the benefits of developing educational tools with young people.

Keywords: citizenship education, political information, changemaking, young people, wales, resource design

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Introduction

Patterns of UK-wide youth political behaviour have attracted attention in the last few decades, as research into political engagement, such as voting, party membership, and civic responsibility, consistently suggest that young people are turning away from formal political processes – defined as political participation connected with institutions (Norris, 2011; Furlong and Cartmel, 2012; Henn and Foard, 2012). Indeed, House of Commons research shows that young people in the UK are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy and less likely to participate in formal politics, such as voting and joining a political party, although they may participate in other forms of political life (Uberoi and Johnston, 2022). Recent research resonates with this, citing 'information gaps' as being barriers to voting (Moore, 2023), which can vary according to the quality of political education received at school and growing up around family invested in politics.

One way to respond to this is through better education and information. Indeed, research suggests that exposure to citizenship education has an impact on engaged citizenship (Weinberg and Flinders, 2019). However, in the UK, despite the potential for innovative citizenship education (and the many excellent 'local' examples in practice), different and changing policies/curricula, inadequate and non-specialist teacher training, and the challenge of competing resources and lack of space in curricula/schools, have contributed to 'asymmetric' delivery across and in the four UK nations (Jerome et al., 2022: 14). Indeed in Wales, the focus of this paper, the 'Curriculum for Wales' (introduced from 2022) has been criticised by some for a lack of specific focus on political/citizenship education[1] (Moore et al., 2022), with calls for it to be a required topic and distinct subject (Mathias, 2020), rather than following the principle of subsidiarity.[2]

1 Although the terms 'citizenship education' and 'political education' are frequently used interchangeably in common parlance, they denote distinct concepts. Citizenship education encompasses a broader scope, aiming to develop individuals' knowledge, skills, and values necessary for active participation in democratic society. In contrast, political education is more narrowly focused on fostering an understanding of political systems, processes, and modes of political engagement.

2 Wherein schools can decide the curriculum content (within the overarching Curriculum for Wales framework) while taking into account local needs.

Research suggests that improving political understanding among young people requires resources that are not only informative, but also co-designed, accessible, and relevant to their lived experiences (Biesta, 2011; Bessant et al., 2016; IFES, 2024). When young people are actively involved in shaping educational tools, the resulting materials are more likely to reflect their needs, enhance engagement, and support meaningful participation in democratic life (IFES, 2024; CESIE, no date). 'Changemakers', a research project at The Open University (OU), addresses this by focusing on Wales and young Welsh people aged 16–24 as an initial case study. The project uses a variety of research methods, including online surveys and focus groups, to capture how they feel and what they know about UK political institutions and making political and social change, and the type of resource(s) they need to improve their understanding, empowering them to become active citizens.[3] This paper outlines the key findings of the research so far, discussing how we worked with young people to develop the final resource, a multilingual interactive website about making political and social change in Wales for use by 16–24 year olds.

Literature and policy review

Political participation in context

Since the enactment of devolution in Wales in 1999, powers and responsibilities in Wales have been divided across three levels: local authorities (micro/local level), the Welsh Parliament and Welsh Government (meso/national level), and UK Parliament/UK Government (macro/UK level). Education, youth, and democratic engagement have been a key focus of the Welsh Parliament in various ways post-devolution. For example, following the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Act in 2020 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act in 2021, the voting age in Welsh Parliament and local elections was lowered to 16.

Despite the lowering of the voting age and the Welsh Parliament's policy focus, research suggests young people in Wales are not always clear on how the various

3 Active citizenship is the idea that someone can be an active political citizen; they can actively try and make change (or indeed prevent it).

strata of local, national, and UK-wide political institutions work/intersect. Indeed, research by the Electoral Commission (2022) suggested young people in Wales need more education and support to engage in local and national politics, with participants reporting that they felt they did not know enough about local candidates, the parties, or the democratic process in general. Subsequent research by the Electoral Commission (2025) also revealed that less than a third of young people aged 11–25 (31 per cent) say they know a lot about what the UK Government does, and knowledge of the devolved parliaments is even lower at 15 per cent for the Senedd (note, this was a UK wide study, rather than just Wales). The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) Education Multi-cohort Study, which focused on secondary school pupils in years 7, 9 and 11, suggests most Welsh young people have an ambivalence towards politics and voting, with gaps in knowledge about politics (Foster et al., 2022). This study also notes that only 37 per cent of Year 11 pupils eligible to vote voted in the 2021 Welsh Parliament elections (the first year eligible). Indeed, despite the voting age being lowered to 16, in 2021 only around half of Welsh 16 and 17 year olds were *registered* to vote (Dhesi, 2022; Foster, 2021).

It's important to note that voting rates have been decreasing, overall, across the *whole* of the UK, not just Wales, since the 1990s (Uberoi, 2023). The same is true in the national parliamentary elections of other European countries (Kuzina, 2024), as well as EU Parliament elections (although voting rates for the latter have increased since 2019 (Europa, no date)). It's also important to recognise that UK youth turnout worsened sharply overall in the 1990s and has remained persistently lower since (Chrisp and Pearce, 2021), and in the UK the disparity between the old and young is particularly pronounced compared to many other European countries (Birch et al., 2013). The deficit in engagement from young people in the most recent national elections in Wales therefore needs to be understood in this wider context.

Interestingly, though, voter turnout for Scottish Parliament elections is much higher overall than Welsh Parliament elections (typically 12–18 percentage points) (Uberoi, 2023). In relation to young people, Scotland has also achieved substantially higher youth voting rates than Wales, both immediately after lowering the voting age to 16 and in the medium term. Reasons for this include political salience (i.e., the impact of the 2014 Scottish independence election), habit formation, and subsequent democratic embedding (Huebner, 2021).

In terms of recent Welsh elections, there was a total electorate local election turnout of 38.7 per cent in 2022, which was 4 per cent lower than in 2017 (Moss, 2024). While total turnout for the last Welsh Parliament election in 2026 was the highest ever at 51.6 per cent, this still means, as the Welsh Parliament notes in relation to the previous election that half of people who could vote do not (Moss, 2024). The engagement varied across the country, but the overall picture suggests devolved elections that have failed to engage much of the electorate, including young people.

Education and political engagement

A report into the votes-at-16 impact in Scotland (which the author goes on to relate to Wales) notes that key to political engagement is improvement in citizenship education, including an emphasis on informal spaces, alongside more specific civic teaching, to share socio-political views and experiences (Huebner, 2021). Andreouli et al. (2024) also note the importance of discussion in relation to the Curriculum for Wales,[4] with time/space for student discussion, connecting to young people's day-to-day concerns, and opportunities for young people to engage with policy makers/civil society, crucial for successful implementation of the curriculum.

Moore et al. (2022) state explicitly the need for the Welsh Government to strengthen political and citizenship education in schools, improve teaching guidance by overtly focusing on this during PGCE training, and ensuring that modern history and the politics of Wales are well embedded within the curriculum, including through new GCSE qualifications. These 'structural' recommendations are echoed by the work of Andreouli et al. (2024), who note that the new Welsh curriculum needs to be supported by additional funds to manage the extra workload of the curriculum, a repository of resources/examples to monitor how citizenship is being taught to develop supportive guidance, with greater recognition of the importance of political/citizenship education more generally. Furthermore, Moore et al.'s (2022) report suggests the importance of a robust Task and Finish Group to deliver and disseminate high-quality resources, co-produced with citizens, together with a

4 Welsh Government. *Curriculum for Wales*. Available at: https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales

public information campaign aimed at engaging diverse groups (adults as well as school age).

The Welsh Government recognises some of the issues, demonstrated by its commitment to the development of political/citizenship education resources for use in Welsh schools (e.g., resources developed with the Association of Citizenship Teaching to support politics teaching), something also championed by the Electoral Reform Society Cymru and its 'Our Voices Heard' project (Blair and Mathias, 2018). There is a danger, though, that the focus on schools' autonomy, linked to the core principle of subsidiarity which the Curriculum for Wales is designed around, in relation to delivery of these resources leaves them at risk of huge variation. This relates to both delivery and efficacy, as recognised by Andreouli et al. (2024) who note the challenge of varied implementation of the Curriculum for Wales across schools and the lack of guidance. The Welsh Government has recently agreed to the creation of new GCSEs in History and Social Studies, with Welsh history and politics being key components (Qualifications Wales, 2023). While not compulsory to study, it has been suggested that these newly formed qualifications could lead to future opportunities, such as specialist PGCE courses and specialist and more in-depth citizenship education at secondary level (Moore et al., 2022).

The Electoral Commission's (2025) UK-wide research suggests that television and social media are the most popular ways young people aged 11–25 currently get information about politics, although the television source is often passive (e.g. hearing what parents are watching). They go on to suggest that young people want to know more about political parties and the difference their votes can make (56 per cent and 54 per cent respectively), and to learn about this in lessons (44 per cent), from visits by people working in politics (42 per cent), and through school trips (34 per cent) (Electoral Commission, 2025). Crucially, exposure to political discussions at home or school impacts on young people's confidence in voting, but many young people are not having these conversations. Indeed, The Electoral Commission (2025) found that while 81 per cent of those who frequently talk about politics at home feel confident voting, only half of young people do so regularly. Similarly, those who have learnt about politics at school (76 per cent) feel confident about voting. However, only just over a third have done so, and often in the context of history lessons rather than a wider democratic context.

In terms of Welsh government initiatives, the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales was established in 2021 to examine options for Wales's constitutional development and to identify ways of strengthening Welsh democracy. In 2022 the Welsh Government issued The Electoral Administration and Reform White Paper to consult the Welsh population more widely about ways in which it can significantly improve democratic engagement. In 2025 the 'Innovating Democracy Advisory Group' was set up, based on the recommendation of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, with a specific remit to 'revitalise the way that the people of Wales interact and engage with the institutions and processes that affect our daily lives … to strengthen the capacity for democratic innovation and citizen involvement in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2025). Alongside the Welsh Government's focus on modernising elections in Wales, improving political engagement, and developing political/citizenship education and resources, the creation of Medr in 2024 – overseeing post-16 education with an explicit commitment to lifelong learning and civic engagement – may increase the prominence of political education across the sector.

Youth-centred approaches

A growing body of research affirms that enhancing political understanding amongst young people requires educational resources that are not only informative but also participatory, accessible, and reflective of their diverse experiences. As such, listening to and involving young people is essential. Here two ideas intermingle, 1) young people co-designing political/citizenship curriculum/education/information, 2) young people taking part in activities that involve co-creation/participation (e.g. designing an intervention or campaign relating to a cause they are interested in) while engaging with political/citizenship education or with political/citizenship related public information.

In relation to the former, co-designing educational resources with young people is not a radical idea in itself. Bessant et al. (2016: 276) note, 'In co-design, those affected by the proposed design are actively involved as partners in the design process'. However, they suggest that this model turns traditional ideas of citizenship education on their head: rather than citizenship education taking a top-down approach to help young people *become* (better) citizens, co-design of democratic education involving

young people allows 'valuable new political knowledge and skills that ought to be incorporated' into 'citizenship curriculum' (2016: 280). This makes it richer and at the same time incorporates what they call 'a new politics' (2016: 278) which recognises how young people interact, i.e., highly interactive digital engagement, peer-based communities, and in critique of the 'politics as usual' model (2016: 279).

Indeed, traditional top-down models of political/citizenship education are increasingly seen as insufficient for fostering meaningful engagement in democratic life. Instead, youth-centred approaches that prioritise co-creation and contextual relevance are emphasised. The IFES Learning Agenda Report (2024) suggests that when young people are actively involved in the design and implementation of civic education programmes – as co-creators, decision-makers, and evaluators – the resulting materials are more inclusive, credible, and effective. These participatory models not only improve comprehension of political systems but also build young people's confidence and capacity to act within them. The work of the Get Political project (CESIE, no date) reinforces this, emphasising participatory learning experiences and tailored, relatable content and impacts on political literacy and engagement among youth. Overall, this emphasises that young people are more likely to engage when they have access to clear, practical information and when they play a role in shaping how that information is delivered.

It is not only the act of co-design that matters, but also the extent to which the resulting resources are situated within the lived, everyday realities of young people. As Biesta (2011) argues, civic learning is not simply about transmitting knowledge of democratic institutions, but about cultivating democratic subjectivity – a process deeply embedded in social, cultural, and affective dimensions of life. Resources developed with young people have the potential to reflect the complexity of their socio-political landscapes, especially when they are informed by how young people already make sense of power, participation, and belonging in their communities. This reflects the work of Mills and Gale (2010), who advocate for an 'education for social justice' approach that is attentive to the everyday geographies and lived experiences of learners. When educational tools are responsive to local, contextual realities, they not only become more meaningful, but also more impactful in developing critical civic sensibilities.

Nelsen (2021) further illustrates the transformative potential of critical pedagogy, showing that civic education grounded in youth agency and social realities

– particularly those of marginalised communities – can significantly increase political participation. Similarly, Cohen and Kahne et al. (2012) argue for a reimagining of civic education to reflect the participatory, peer-based, and digitally mediated nature of contemporary youth political engagement. Their research highlights the importance of aligning educational practices with the ways in which young people already interact with public life. Finally, the Youth Political Participation Literature and Policy Review 1980–2023 (Bacalso et al., 2024) synthesises decades of literature and policy, accentuating that inclusive, participatory strategies – rooted in the needs, contexts, and voices of young people – are important for fostering sustained and meaningful democratic participation.

Methodology

The methodology employed was guided by an overarching research aim and a set of research questions. The aim of the research was to learn from young Welsh citizens aged 16–24 about their understanding of making political and social change in Wales, and to identify what is required to strengthen their future capacity for active citizenship. This aim was addressed through two research questions: 1) what do young Welsh citizens aged 16–24 know, and not know, about how to make political and social change in Wales?; 2) what information and resource(s) do they identify as useful to improve their future understanding and enable (the potential for) active citizenship? The project deliberately did not get mired in definitions (i.e. the difference between political education, citizenship education, and democratic education); the focus was on 'political understanding' in a broad sense and as influenced by the participants.

A facilitative and developmental, rather than directive, approach to co-design was utilised, underpinned by the five civics curriculum co-design protocols identified by Bessant et al. (2016). These protocols outline a transformative approach to educational practice, as well as providing a practical and manageable basis for the research. The first protocol, **recruiting participants,** involved identifying and working with young people who were both interested in a democratic project and willing to engage critically and constructively in curriculum design; the protocol outlines that self-selection via an outside organisation, is appropriate. The second protocol, **identifying and overcoming obstacles,**

addresses barriers to participation, particularly subverting traditional top-down (educator to student/young person) power relations, thus facilitating more equal participation. The third protocol, **enquiry and deliberation,** suggests a focus on values, including discussion by participants about why a democratic project is important thus creating clarity of purpose. The fourth protocol (linked to the previous protocol), **clarity of purpose,** highlights that the legitimacy and agency of the participants is key, enabling active citizenship. The final protocol, **obligations,** emphasises the responsibilities researchers have in supporting participants' development as political agents, helping to navigate power dynamics and institutional constraints, as well as ethical considerations around issues like consent.

Taking the above protocols into account, the project was framed by a research methodology that aimed to capture as much rich information as possible, allowing cross-cutting themes to be identified as well as insight into the type of resource young people wanted to deliver the key information identified. The key activities were as follows:

Review of literature and policy

A non-systematic narrative approach enabled a comprehensive synthesis of existing research literature and policy on the topics at hand, providing a broad exploratory overview of the current state of play, highlighting key themes and gaps (Hecker and Kalpokas, 2023a). The decision to review academic research *and* policy provided valuable insights into the issues at hand and allowed us to identify major themes that could then feed into the subsequent online surveys and focus groups with young people.

Online surveys

We surveyed young Welsh citizens aged 16–24 to assess their understanding of political institutions and how to make political and social change, and their confidence in their ability to make change, specifically ascertaining differences in participant feedback between the UK Parliament and Welsh Parliament and the reasons for their stated understanding/confidence levels. We also asked them what information and resource(s) they would find useful to improve their understanding.

There were three surveys, available to complete in both English and Welsh language:

1. An initial online JISC survey sent to current registered OU students aged 16–24 with a Welsh postcode, to test the survey [60 respondents]
2. An open online JISC social media survey aimed at young Welsh people aged 16-24 (advertised via the OU in Wales's X/Twitter account) [204 respondents]
3. An online survey carried out by an external marketing company [100 respondents]

In total the surveys were completed by 364 Welsh people in the targeted age range, providing useful context and discussion points for the focus groups and resource design.[5] Ethical approval for the surveys was obtained from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Participants were entered into a draw to win a voucher, and did not take part in future research stages (although were invited to receive the final report).

Online focus groups

In line with the protocols noted above (Bessant et al., 2016), we collaborated with community-based youth organisations to support recruitment and participation in the online focus groups. Community groups working within the research themes were invited to an initial in-person workshop, where the research was introduced and the five co-design protocols outlined. Following this engagement, two organisations – Grange Pavilion Youth Forum and Pembrokeshire Youth Service – agreed to participate further.[6] A member of staff from each organisation subsequently invited volunteers (who were already part of the respective groups) within the target demographic to take part in the focus groups, in line with protocol one (recruiting participants via self-selection).

The youth organisations we were working with suggested that it would be useful to provide a 'way into' the research subject matter for participants, rather than

5 Three surveys were used to ensure a sufficiently large and diverse sample of responses; the externally commissioned survey was included to bolster response numbers and mitigate the risk of low participation in the student and open online surveys.

6 The other organisations agreed to work with us on dissemination.

starting 'cold' in the focus groups, as some of the participants may lack confidence. As such, we decided to ask the participants to complete an educational course we had already created, a ten-hour long OpenLearn course, 'Introduction to making political and social change'[7] (The Open University, 2022), written by the lead author of this paper (Smith). This course was created prior to the research project, but as the title suggests covered similar themes. OpenLearn is an online platform run by The Open University with all courses open access and free. Directions to complete the course were provided to participants ahead of the focus groups, with completion of the course – and subsequent focus group – leading to a 'Changemakers research project' certificate of completion plus an online voucher. Completion of the course gave the participants the opportunity to build their democratic knowledge, experience online learning, and develop skills in critical reflection and independent study. Crucially, it provided a shared foundation for the subsequent focus group discussions.

Following completion of the OpenLearn course, two 1.5-hour long online focus groups were held with the participants, to explore the type of resource(s) they need to improve their understanding of making political and social change, using the OpenLearn course as a baseline. The focus group discussion points were also informed by the available online survey results. Each focus group, held in Microsoft Teams, consisted of nine participants, plus a member of staff from the relevant youth organisation, as well as the OU research team (the article authors) who led the sessions. A semi-structured approach to the focus groups was taken, utilising a predetermined set of open-ended questions to guide the discussion, while allowing flexibility for participants to explore topics in greater detail and for the research team moderators to probe further based on the participant responses. This 'space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds' (Magaldi and Berler, 2020), was useful for capturing diverse perspectives and overall group dynamics, and was in line with protocol 2 (subverting traditional top-down power relations, thus facilitating more equal participation). Project participant information distributed ahead of the focus groups made clear the purpose and values of the research (protocol 3, enquiry and deliberation) thus creating a shared clarity of purpose (protocol 4). The

7 This course can be accessed at the following URL: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/introduction-making-political-and-social-change

information also set out the obligations of the researchers, including ethics and consent (protocol 5, obligations). Ethical approval for the focus groups/all participant contact was obtained from The OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), and informed consent obtained from all participants/their parent/guardian if under 18 (ref: HREC/4652/Smith).

Following both focus groups, the Teams generated transcripts were anonymised[8] and analysed to highlight key findings, taking a combined thematic and narrative approach, allowing for both the extraction of key themes and the centring and interplay of the participants' personal experiences (Hecker and Kalpokas, 2023b). The analysis was conducted through iterative, reflexive engagement with the data (rather than formal coding) taking detailed notes and highlighting significant quotes and observations in a data analysis grid. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the data, capturing the complexity of participants' perspectives (St Pierre et al. 2014[9]), and is consistent with an interpretivist approach that emphasises contextualised meaning-making and researcher interpretation over procedural coding frameworks.

Development of the educational resource

As well as consulting partners at the OU in Wales to make sure the resource met internal and external compliance and accessibility[10] standards, we also worked with four volunteers drawn from our previous focus group participants. This allowed us to ensure that the resource was meeting the needs of our target demographic and was in line with the suggestions made in the focus groups. We asked the participants specific questions, rather than asking for general feedback, because the resource was based on the feedback and format recommendations we had already gathered as well as wider research. As such, we did not need feedback on, for example, whether the chosen format was one they personally would use or whether they'd prefer an alternative design, but rather the specifics of the resource we were creating in order to finesse it and make it work for their lives.

8 See 'Focus groups', below, for examples of anonymised text.

9 See St Pierre et al. (2014) for discussion of the merits of a non-coding approach to qualitative research.

10 Including WCAG 2.2 AA.

The final output is a website[11] designed with a topic-based, basic guided information architecture. This structure organises the content around clearly defined subject areas and supports users in navigating through tailored information pathways based on their selections. The core principles of this design include: 1) thematic organisation: content is structured according to specific topics or themes to enhance clarity and relevance, 2) user-directed exploration: visitors can select areas of interest directly, 3) guided navigation: the interface offers directional cues that support a progression through related content.

The methodological approach as a whole aimed to meet the two interlinked ideas discussed in the literature review, 1) young people as co-designers of the resource[12], 2) context-based participatory activities. The website we created means the latter – and active citizenship more generally – can be realised by the former (e.g., the website could give someone the information needed to create a campaign).

Surveying young people

Amalgamation of the three surveys showed that by a small margin the young Welsh people we surveyed felt more confident about their ability to influence political and social change through the Welsh Parliament ('yes' - 66.2 per cent/n=239), as opposed to the UK Parliament ('yes' - 65.8 per cent/n=239).[13] However, overall they were less confident in their understanding of *how* to make change through the Welsh Parliament (net confidence: 39.6 per cent/n=143) compared to the UK Parliament (net confidence: 41.5 per cent/n=149).[14]

11 The final website can be accessed at the below URLs. Each version includes a 'toggle' which allows the user to switch from English to Welsh or Welsh to English, to meet Welsh language standards:
https://changemakers.wales/en/ [the English language version]
https://changemakers.wales/cy/ [the Welsh language version]

12 See 'limitations' and 'discussion' sections of this paper for discussion of how the co-design aspect could be enhanced in future stages of the research.

13 The OU student and external marketing survey respondents were stronger on this than the social media survey respondents.

14 As above.

Despite feeling more confident that they can influence change in Wales, the survey results suggested that many young people in Wales lack knowledge about the tools to impact change in both the UK and Welsh Parliaments. Barriers can be logistics focused – not knowing who or where to contact. Indeed, the survey results suggested that many young people lack an understanding of how parliaments operate and their focus. This could be the result of this having a limited curriculum focus at secondary school. Across two of the surveys (OU student survey and the external marketing survey), a high percentage of respondents (86.7 per cent/n=52 for the student survey, and 61 per cent/n=61 for the external marketing survey) said they did not learn about political or social change at secondary school, and across all three surveys the total selecting this response was 43.3 per cent/n=157.

The surveys revealed the importance of social media when learning about making change. In two of the surveys (OU student survey and external marketing survey), over half of the respondents chose social media as a significant source from a potential nine sources of information (a third of the social media survey respondents selected it). Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram and Twitter/X all scored highly as key social media sources. However, although social media might be a key source of information, it was deemed by many respondents to be less useful for understanding how to make change through the Welsh Parliament (net usefulness: 47 per cent/n=91) than the UK Parliament (net usefulness: 56.7 per cent/n=110).

In relation to design, an online course was the most popular format for learning about how to make change, with other online options also popular, such as a video resource, online booklet/text, a website, and a social media campaign/feed. Respondents were keen that resources were quick to complete, with 10-20 minutes the most popular answer, followed by 5-10 minutes. In terms of important design elements, easy to understand language and covering a range of learning modes were popular answers. In terms of content elements, explanations of how political institutions work, explanations of issues/areas/laws each Parliament covers, and explanations of who to contact/where to contact were popular responses.[15]

15 Due to the timing of the external marketing survey in relation to the educational resource design/build, the design questions were only included in the first two surveys, and not the external marketing survey.

Focus groups

The starting point of the focus groups was to evaluate the participants' engagement with the 'Introduction to making political and social change' course. Overall, the focus group findings suggested that the course was useful for a general understanding of how to make political change as active citizens, but less useful on the specifics of making change through and outside of political institutions, with the format also deemed unengaging in relation to the content/aims of the course.

It was clear that the participants' top priorities for the new educational resource included visual clarity, some level of interactivity, nation-specific guidance, and political context. The focus groups revealed that, overall, the participants felt an online tool was the most engaging medium for them to learn how to engage politically. They felt there were some changes that could be made to the existing resource, which we acknowledge was originally designed for more detailed engagements with various ways of enacting active citizenship.

It also became clear that we needed to create a resource that focused more clearly on both political and social change (the latter was deemed lacking/unclear). A key point raised by many of the people we spoke to was the importance of socio-historical and socio-political context, of introducing multi-layered connections between UK nations, and deciphering the complexities of individual political institutions. The focus group feedback suggested this needed to be done in a visually compelling way, incorporating interactivity, colour, and fun design. Real-life scenarios felt to the young people like helpful 'ways in' that they would be able to relate to. Importantly, nation specific guidance to really dig into the nature of interconnected power, and what institutions are responsible for what political issues, consistently came up as a key requirement. Two comments summarise this:

> When it began with the introduction on the devolved parliaments, it would have been nice for those who don't really understand how it works [to have] maybe a list of the powers that the Parliaments hold … So, people could understand [that with] transport, we [Wales] control things like that. (Focus group 2, participant 1)

> I think it can be frustrating when you're trying to find the right pathway, so if you have an issue you feel passionate about, who do you go to and how long will it take you? … But I think that [explaining] the Welsh Government does this and you go here, but Welsh Government doesn't do this, and you go to the UK for that, I think that would really help to make sure that the issues get from… the person to the MP, to the debate, as quickly as possible. (Focus group 1, participant 1).

In terms of specific findings, overall participants reported improvements in conceptual understanding, but more mixed outcomes in relation to political processes and course design. The majority of participants (n=15/19) said that the course improved their understanding of what 'active citizenship' is (focus group key finding 1). Only one participant said the course did not. As one participant noted, '…the real life examples of how you can be an active citizen put into perspective what the idea of active citizenship is' (Focus group 2, participant 1).

The majority of participants (n=14/19) said the course improved their understanding of how to make political and social change as active citizens (key finding 2):

> I think for me … it pointed you in the right direction of who to contact and where it went to. (Focus group 1, participant 2)

> You know you were able to … go on to that part of the website and see [who to contact] and I found it very useful [that] there were links in the course itself to take me directly to where I needed to go to have a closer look. Otherwise, I wouldn't have known where to start looking for that kind of information. (Focus group 1, participant 3)

However, understanding became less clear when participants reflected on specific institutional routes to change. Only four of the participants (n=4/19) said the course improved their understanding of how to make political and social change in the UK through the UK Parliament/devolved parliaments (key finding 3). Around two thirds (n=12/19) said maybe. This pattern was even more pronounced in relation to extra-parliamentary routes. Only two of the participants (n=2/19) said the course improved their understanding of how to make political and social change in the UK outside of the UK parliament/devolved parliaments (key finding 4). Nearly two thirds (n=10/19) said no, with the rest (n=6/19) saying maybe.

> It had some really useful links, so … the resources that you showed were really useful in my opinion, but the actual information given seemed a bit of an information document, information overload, sort of like a textbook. (Focus group 1, participant 4)

> I think in terms of the stuff on the UK Parliament, I would say it was a little bit too vague in the sense that it made it sound really easy to go on to contact a lord or go and have your debate be discussed in Parliament. And I think it didn't really highlight exactly how hard that is. It was good, but just maybe a bit wishful. (Focus group 2, participant 2)

> I would say it does because obviously it depends on the issue you're campaigning for because if it was like immigration or something, obviously the petition would go through the UK Parliament whereas it's like transport for Wales kind of issue, you're going to go through the

> Senedd. So, I think it kind of helps you consider that you … have to put your issue into perspective, what your petition is about. But again, it would be helpful if there was a list. (Focus group 2, participant 3)

Concerns were also raised about the delivery of the course itself. The majority of the participants (n=14/19) did not find the format of the VLE based course engaging, and zero participants said it was the right completion length (key finding 5).

> Though it doesn't necessarily affect the learning outcome, if we made it a bit more visually appealing and fun, then people would actually want to do it because when I saw it was a lot of writing and it wasn't very engaging. And so, if you had more photos and more colours or something that made it look a bit more enticing and maybe a bit more modern than I would have been a bit more enthusiastic to do it. (Focus group 1, participant 5)

> It did feel like a bit too much to read. I struggle to read huge blocks of text … but the activities were fun overall, and the content itself was quite enticing, but just the way in which it was delivered which was block text and then another block text didn't really get me engaged in that sense. (Focus group 2, participant 4)

Alongside the survey data, these insights were vital in helping us to develop the next stage of the Changemakers project, and pinpointing what kind of resource would best serve the need of the target demographic.

Creating the educational resource

After triangulating the findings from the surveys, focus groups and the literature and policy review, we concluded that a quick to use website with interactive elements would best fulfil the needs of our target demographic.

Stage 1 – designing the website

Our first key activity was creating an outline plan for the website design/style, its infrastructure, and the initial text/content for each section of the website; the latter was partly based on the original OpenLearn course – rewritten as appropriate – along with new text, to make sure we met the needs outlined by the participants. We then hired an external website design company to help us put our plan into practice.

The focus group participants had consistent crossover in a number of responses, which were key to the design of the website. First, they responded best to the idea of a resource that was colourful, clear, relatable, and with easy to understand language. They also advocated for less explanatory detail over clear design and visual logic. They also felt the resource should be simplified and directional, i.e. it should act like a 'flow chart' to direct young people from their issue-based problem or scenario to a potential route(s) for engagement with political systems that might support them to enact change. As political and social change was understood often in limited ways and to varying degrees, they therefore wanted something that would be potentially responsive 'in the moment' as they became aware of a social or political issue rather than requiring them to know where to look. Finally, they felt a website would work best because it would also be accessible for immediate information, via smartphones – an indication in itself that accessibility is important, as well as understanding the ways in which young people use technology and access information.

The website was therefore planned with a streamlined, consistent but visually interesting design, a clear and accessible layout, and an infrastructure that facilitated engagement with both the different ways to make political and social change and the key social issues pertinent to young people. Crucially, we decided to use a topic-based 'pathway' approach which focused on HOW young people can make change in ways that feel accessible to them, i.e., directing young people from their issue-based problem or scenario to a potential route(s) for engagement with (political) systems that might support them to enact change, taking into account local context (i.e. Wales and the wider UK and where power lies in relation to different issues).

To help us narrow down the topics to be featured on the website we utilised the information from the external marketing survey, which indicated that mental health/health (46 per cent of 100 respondents), social justice and equal rights (36 per cent), the environment and climate change (30 per cent), education (36 per cent), and the economy (24 per cent), were the most important issues for the young Welsh people surveyed. After cross-referencing these findings with the focus groups and the wider desk research, we decided to highlight the following social issues on the website: climate and environment, economy and finance, education, extremism, gender equality, global issues, LGBTQI+ equality, migration, physical and mental health, political participation, racial equality, and social justice.

Following on from the focus group feedback, we decided that the website should also highlight examples of real-life young Welsh people whose active citizenship has created demonstrable impact, such as Welsh Youth Parliament Member Angel Ezeadum and Youth Climate Ambassador for Wales, Poppy Stowell-Evans. These examples would be accessible and relatable, alongside examples from more well known public figures.

Stage 2 – developmental feedback

We worked with four of our previous focus group participants to ensure that the website was meeting their needs. Generally, the response to the website was positive, making it clear that the website was visually interesting and easy to use, and explained how to make change and how parliaments work in the context of devolution. We did make some changes in response to participant feedback though, including: changing the opening text on the introduction page to make changemaking less 'intimidating' (so, making it clear that change can be made via means other than UK and Welsh Parliaments); edits to other bits of text, such as changing 'join the changemakers' to 'be a changemaker' (so it felt less like being asked to join a club), to clarify some sections or better explain some concepts; rather than narrowing down the number of topics, we stuck with the original twelve, but slightly changed some of them to make them more relevant; changing some of the inspirational examples, to make them more relevant (more Welsh and young adult examples); and keeping the theme switcher so participants can choose from four website colours, with the default colour pink.

The final website has the following sections:

The **front page** of the website includes the website title ('Changemakers'), introductory text which makes the devolved/national aspect of making change clear (i.e., you can make change locally, in Wales, and the UK), and a strapline stating it's about small changes leading to big change (to make the concept of making change more accessible). It also lists the twelve key issues under 'what do you care about' which can be clicked on to lead through to each individual issue.

The **'issues'** tab also lists each issue with a short amount of introductory text. Clicking through then leads to further information on each issue. For example, **'climate and environment'** contains more information about what others are doing and what individuals can do (including links to other relevant websites), as

well as a 'who's responsible' section outlining with a pink tick which institution (local councils, Welsh Parliament, or UK Parliament) is responsible - users can then click on the relevant answer to get more information. They can also click on 'be a changemaker' which gives them suggestions about how they can try and make change (such as create a petition).

The **'action'** tab gives information on how to take action to make change both through political institutions and outside of them. Each section can be clicked on to get more information and examples. Users can, if they wish, head straight to this section if they don't have a specific issue or they want to find out more general information.

The **'inspiration'** tab lists four examples – two famous, two ordinary young Welsh citizens. Each one can be clicked on to get more information, outlining what they did, whether they were successful and any challenges.

The **'devolution'** tab explains how politics in Wales works and which institution does what.

There is also an **'about'** tab which explains the origins of the project, and the **'Cymraeg'** tab which changes the English text to Welsh (and vice versa, on the Welsh language version of the website).

Limitations

Our research indicates that there is potential for further development. Indeed, the young people that participated in our research made other suggestions that we can build into this website or act on in a subsequent project stages. Suggestions for the website include: more interactivity, such as quizzes/tests of learning and note taking/highlighting facilities; a game element, e.g. a game which tests a person's changemaking skills and the decisions that have to be made to get a positive result; an 'AI element', e.g. interacting with a chatbot to ask questions, or using it to review/give feedback on a person's answers; videos (such as inspirational changemakers talking about how they made change); more case studies; a glossary/highlighting key words. Outside of the website, suggestions include: more focus on social and political change in schools to increase awareness and understanding, including opportunities for discussion and debate; provision of accessible education resources across the educational pipeline; using social media platforms to increase awareness.

More generally, we would like to enhance the co-design elements of the project. Indeed, it's fair to say that the project up to now has 'leaned into' co-design, working with participants to shape resources, rather than fully design them. In future stages of our research, the five civics curriculum co-design protocols identified by Bessant et al. (2016) could be extended through a more sustained model of youth participation. Recruitment (protocol 1) could move beyond time-limited self-selection towards longer-term youth advisory roles, enabling participants to shape not only specific outputs but also research priorities and evaluative criteria. This would further subvert traditional top-down (educator to student/young person) power relations, thus facilitating more equal participation (protocol 2). Enquiry, deliberation, and clarity of purpose (protocol 3) could be strengthened by embedding collective reflection points throughout the research cycle, allowing young people to revisit, critique, and redefine the project's aims as their political understanding develops (in turn, enhancing clarity of purpose (protocol 4) and enabling active citizenship). Finally, the obligations protocol (5) could be built on by formalising pathways for participants to translate learning into action beyond the project itself – for example through sustained links to schools, youth organisations, or policy-makers – thereby reinforcing young people's ongoing agency as political actors rather than positioning co-design as a discrete, project-bounded experience.

Discussion

Enhancing political understanding among young people demands resources that are not only informative but also co-designed, accessible, and grounded in their everyday realities. The literature discussed above suggests that when young people are directly involved in shaping educational materials, those resources are more likely to resonate with their experiences, foster deeper engagement, and support active democratic participation/citizenship. The 'Changemakers' project at The Open University builds on this approach, using Wales and young people aged 16–24 as a case study. Through mixed research methods, the project explores young Welsh people's knowledge of UK political systems, their understanding of how to make political and social change, and the kinds of tools they need to become informed, empowered citizens.

This paper has presented key findings from the project, detailing the collaborative development of a multilingual, interactive website designed to support political learning and engagement among 16–24-year-olds in Wales. Beyond producing a usable educational resource, the research contributes to broader conversations about political and citizenship education – both within and outside formal education settings – by highlighting the importance of clarity around devolved governance. Indeed, our research indicates that many young people are uncertain about the roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, how these impact their daily lives, and where change happens/who has the power to make particular changes. We conclude, therefore, that it is essential that citizenship resources, both in school and beyond, include this important context. Our research also highlights the importance of social media, with many young people finding online tools to be the most engaging medium for political education.

The findings underscore the value of youth-centred, digitally accessible, and context-specific approaches to political education. For educators and practitioners, this work reinforces the importance of involving young people in the design of learning tools to ensure they are appropriate. By treating young people not simply as learners but as political actors with expertise in their own lives, co-designed approaches like those used in Changemakers begin to reframe the purpose of political/citizenship education. They challenge deficit narratives of youth disengagement and instead position young people as central to shaping more responsive and inclusive democratic futures.

Beyond curriculum content, this calls for a broader shift in how institutions understand young people's political agency, not as future citizens in waiting, but as current actors navigating and influencing their civic environments. Importantly, the findings reinforce growing evidence that meaningful civic learning cannot occur in isolation. Rather than treating political/citizenship education as a discrete subject area, it must be embedded across the curriculum and within school and community cultures. Participants emphasised the importance of linking democratic learning to their own lived experiences - from social justice issues in their communities to digital activism and climate action. This aligns with contemporary research highlighting the importance of 'everyday politics' (Harris et al., 2010) and the need to reimagine civic engagement as relational, situated, and co-produced. Young people's political formation occurs across multiple spaces: in digital environments, peer cultures, family life, and informal educational contexts. If co-designed

resources are to be effective, they must be situated within this broader ecology of learning, creating reinforcing feedback loops between formal curricula, youth voice initiatives, digital media practices, and school culture. As Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) argue, young people engage in what might be termed 'everyday politics' – a form of engagement often overlooked by traditional education systems. Co-designed civic education should not only reflect young people's lived realities, but also connect meaningfully across the wider educational experience in order to foster a more sustained and relevant democratic literacy.

Future research

The next phase of our project will focus on evaluating the *impact* of the newly developed website on the understanding young Welsh people aged 16–24 have of making political and social change in Wales and the wider UK. This will also provide an opportunity for us to gather feedback on the efficacy of the website in relation to the second element of youth participation described above – young people taking part in activities that involve co-creation/participation while engaging with political/citizenship education and information. By analysing both qualitative and quantitative research data/feedback (including user engagement metrics, built into and trackable via the website, such as numbers of visits, and how people find the website/where they come from), we can gather insightful information about the website's effectiveness in achieving its intended goals. This critical assessment will not only validate the website's current performance but also guide future enhancements to better serve the project's target audience. Additionally, when developing the website further and/or other resources, we would like to utilise a fuller co-design methodology, building on the formative approach taken so far, including deeper exploration and application of Bessant et al.'s (2016) protocols.

Additionally, the website will be embedded within the work of the newly launched pilot 'Newid Future Generations Changemaker Academy', a partnership between The Open University in Wales, the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Bridgend College, and Unloc (The Open University, 2026). The Academy seeks to support young people aged 16–25 to develop the skills, confidence, and political knowledge required to lead social and political change aligned with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. The Academy's structure is explicitly designed to foreground iterative learning and reflection, allowing young people to

influence future programme development based on their experiences of participation and changemaking practice. In this sense, it extends the five civics curriculum co-design protocols identified by Bessant et al. (2016) by moving from short-term consultation towards more sustained youth involvement across the project lifecycle. Participants are not only positioned as learners or beneficiaries, but as co-creators whose insights will inform the post-pilot programme content and delivery modes. By embedding co-design within a pilot that connects research, practice, and policy, the Academy strengthens the pathway from youth-centred political education to demonstrable civic impact in Wales.

The Changemakers website is a key resource used by students taking part in the pilot year of the Changemakers Academy (2025-2026). This connection demonstrates the project's emerging impact beyond academia, informing Welsh Government-linked initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic engagement, youth participation, and long-term civic capacity in Wales, and reinforcing the value of research-driven resources in shaping public policy and practice. The Academy also provides an opportunity to deepen and extend youth participation through a pilot-based model of collaborative design. Rather than treating co-design as a discrete research stage, the Academy will work with young people as ongoing contributors to the development, testing, and refinement of learning activities, tools, and pathways for political and social change. This includes using the Changemakers website as a shared knowledge base and practical resource, while enabling participants to shape how it is used, adapted, and built upon in lived educational and civic contexts.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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