

Supporting Vulnerable Adolescents

Public Accounts Committee Inquiry

November 2022

Written Evidence submitted by Dr Frances Howard and Nottingham Civic Exchange

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This submission builds on research developed by Dr Frances Howard from the Department of Social Work, Care and Community within the School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.
- 1.2. The definition of vulnerable is based on the analysis and intersection of different factors in a young person's life: problems in social relations (family, friend or school), exposure to risky behaviours (parental use of alcohol or drugs), behavioural problems or familial offending. 'Urban' youth, frequently face the most challenges, such as being born into families of lower socioeconomic status, lower educational outcomes, high drop-out rates, inadequate health care, gang violence and exposure to the premature death of family members and friends.
- 1.3. However, the concept of risk has proliferated across a range of youth-related fields, in so much that it becomes a social, political and moral entity in itself. Risk has become normalised language used by services for young people today whereby social conditions become individualised. In this way, young people are depicted as both 'risky' and 'at-risk' and to blame for social problems.
- 1.4. Arts programmes are frequently provided for youth who are deemed unfortunate or unruly. Globally, arts programmes for at-risk youth have been widely recognised as beneficial; however, there has been a lack of criticality on how arts experiences can have an adverse impact.
- 1.5. For adolescents taking up interventionalist or inclusionary programmes or under deficit groupings such as not in employment education or training (NEET), their experience of education has been significantly lower quality, with lower-level outcomes. Young people's experiences have been defined by deficit pedagogies.

- 1.6. Despite boosting the achievement of vulnerable adolescents through adopting a range of assessment practices, encompassing forms of coaching and mentoring, two-way feedback and the incorporation of young people's cultural interests, deficit pedagogies are deeply embedded within the pedagogical strategies.
- 1.7. Educational initiatives, designed to 'close the gap', for example in relation to broadening access to the arts and culture for a wider range of young people, have been translated into adverse effects on 'inclusion', public pedagogy and social justice. Currently there is a 'patch-work' approach to supporting vulnerable adolescents, which is highly dependent on the local offer, parental knowledge and support.
- 1.8. Youth programmes that have taken a 'targeted' as opposed to universal approach, has had unintended consequences for the reproduction of inequalities and disadvantaged for vulnerable adolescents. Young people identified as 'at-risk' were more likely to receive poorer quality, deficit-oriented, mechanistic and instrumentalised arts programmes.
- 1.9. The application of alternative and informal education for regulatory purposes can further disadvantage vulnerable young people. For young people entering the programmes under deficit labels their experience of education can become an instrumentalised and 'targeted' approach predominantly concerned with behaviour modification, rather than a universal programme for cultural and intellectual development. Governance and accountability in these settings is not consistent.
- 1.10. These findings align with previous research which has questioned whether the desire to 'do good' actually obscures the most innovative and engaging approach to youth support programmes and initiatives.

2. **About the authors**

- 2.1. [Dr Frances Howard](#) is Senior Lecturer in Youth Studies, within the Department of Social Work, Care and Community. Having worked previously in Youth Work, local authorities and Arts Education, her current research includes youth arts programmes, music-making, health and well-being, youth work and informal education, community engagement / development, youth participation / voice and

activism. Alongside her role at NTU, she is an Advisory Board member for [Nottingham's Community Artist Network](#), and a Moderator for the [young people's Arts Award](#). Dr Howard Frances is currently co-convenor of the [BERA Youth Studies and Informal Education special interest group](#) and an active Member of the [Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work](#).

- 2.2. [Nottingham Civic Exchange](#) is Nottingham Trent University's pioneering civic think tank with a primary focus on issues relating to the city and the region. Nottingham Civic Exchange enables discovery by creating a space where co-produced approaches are developed to tackle entrenched social issues. Nottingham Civic Exchange supports the role of NTU as an anchor institution in the city and the region. Nottingham Trent University holds engagement with communities, public institutions, civic life, business and residents at the core of its mission.

3. **Supporting vulnerable adolescents**

- 3.1. This submission responds to call for evidence published in November 2022.
- 3.2. The Committee will question senior officials at the Department for Education on whether government understands what is needed to effectively identify and support vulnerable adolescents who are at risk of avoidable adverse outcomes, and who may need costly government interventions if their needs are not addressed.
- 3.3. Which adolescents are vulnerable?
- 3.4. What support do they need?
- 3.5. Is there a coherent approach to supporting vulnerable adolescents, with clear accountability and governance arrangements?
- 3.6. Are national and local bodies working effectively together to identify vulnerable adolescents and meet their needs?

4. **Recommendations**

- 4.1. The deficit model, which is firmly embedded within benchmarks and measurements related to adolescents, needs to be questioned. Instead, environments within which vulnerable young people can develop positive self-appraisals, while recognising that this does not mean devaluing their peers or the social groups from which they come, should be supported.
- 4.2. Youth Workers hold a position of advantage in terms of getting to know young people, often outside of the purposes and remits of government bodies and local agencies. Mentoring and informal support sessions are valuable in this regard.
- 4.3. For those involved in the application of education for regulatory purposes, their perceptions of the young people, their own pedagogic values and how judgements were made should be further explored. This has implications for future training and professional development of individuals who work with young people and the arts in order to address assumptions made about young people's artistic and academic abilities due to their social background or behaviour.
- 4.4. Funding should be provided to include high-quality educational experiences as opportunities to boost young people's intrinsic and motivational development.
- 4.5. Future interventions should avoid the narrative of young people and young workers, only successful in economic prosperity. Where education and work are positioned as the only ways out of poverty, if a young person is deemed unsuccessful in either of these areas, they are further excluded.
- 4.6. Future policy interventions need to value more holistic and human perspectives as both causes and support for those who are vulnerable. There should also be the opportunity for local organisation to be consistently supported by National bodies, beyond funding, to include training and staff supervision.
- 4.7. Dr Frances Howard is happy to speak to committee members confidentially about aspects of her research; She is also happy to present oral evidence to the committee or individual committee members.

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