

Youth Social Action and careers:

Scoping research to inform the development of a toolkit for secondary schools and colleges

This research summary is part of a project, commissioned by the Careers & Enterprise Company and the #iwill campaign, creating a toolkit to support schools and colleges to use Youth Social Action (YSA) as part of their careers education. The research will also help the Careers & Enterprise Company and #iwill tailor the guidance they offer schools and colleges, and inform wider national debate about how schools and colleges can use Youth Social Action as part of their programme of careers education.

The #iwill campaign, launched alongside the results of a wide cross-sector consultation into a definition of Youth Social Action, describes YSA as *'practical action in the service of others to create positive change'*. Activities included within this definition include volunteering, campaigning or any project that involves people coming together to solve an issue or improve something in their community. The #iwill campaign also highlight 6 principles that create what the campaign considers high quality social action. These principles are:

- “Reflective: recognising contributions as well as valuing critical reflection and learning.
- Challenging: stretching and ambitious as well as enjoyable and enabling.
- Youth led: led, owned and shaped by young people’s needs, ideas and decision making.
- Socially impactful: have a clear intended benefit to a community, cause or social problem.
- Progressive: sustained, and providing links to other activities and opportunities.
- Embedded: accessible to all, and well-integrated to existing pathways to become a habit for life.¹

This document summarises the findings emerging from the scoping research carried out to inform the toolkit. The research comprised of:

- Four interviews with academics with expertise in Youth Social Action (YSA).
- Three interviews with senior managers in organisations carrying out YSA.
- Two interviews with representatives of employers.
- Two interviews with school leaders.
- Three interviews with careers leaders in schools.
- Four interviews with teachers.
- Two youth workshops.
- A rapid review of academic and grey literature on YSA and careers education.
- A survey of 75 teachers.

¹ <https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/principles/>

1. Making the case for Youth Social Action (YSA) in careers education

Our findings suggest that there are a number of benefits to young people taking part in social action:

1) Clarity and commitment to future careers:

- The 2017 National Youth Social Action Survey² found that 81% of young people who had taken part in social action said they believed it would help their future job chances.
- Taking part in YSA appears to enable young people to reflect on their own sense of purpose and think critically about their social surroundings. Rapa et al (2018) found that young people who engaged in YSA had higher expectations for their own career paths as a result³, while Diemer and Blustein (2006) reported that young people with greater awareness of socio-political inequalities imagined their future careers with more clarity and commitment than their peers⁴. The young people we spoke to told us that they believed their YSA would help them to find fulfilling careers.
- Interviewees also described this sense of purpose as having an impact on young peoples' lives more generally, not just in terms of their future careers.

2) Skills that relate to employability:

- Randomised Control Trials of YSA programmes have shown that YSA develops key skills for employment and adulthood, such as 'empathy, problem solving, grit and resilience, sense of community, and educational attitudes.'⁵
- Both interviewees and the young people we spoke to reported that YSA developed fundamental skills valuable to school and life. These were beneficial both when applying to jobs and when in the workplace. The most commonly referenced skills were increased confidence, communication and team working skills.
- These skills were believed to develop because social action provided opportunities for application and practice, often outside of the normal learning or work-experience environment.

Interviewees also pointed out the benefits to schools, colleges and the community that came from offering YSA opportunities. These included:

- Reputational benefits for schools and colleges.
- Benefits to the community in terms of YSA's social impact.
- Better access to YSA for young people from low income backgrounds when schools and colleges support young people to find opportunities compared to young people relying on their own networks to access YSA.

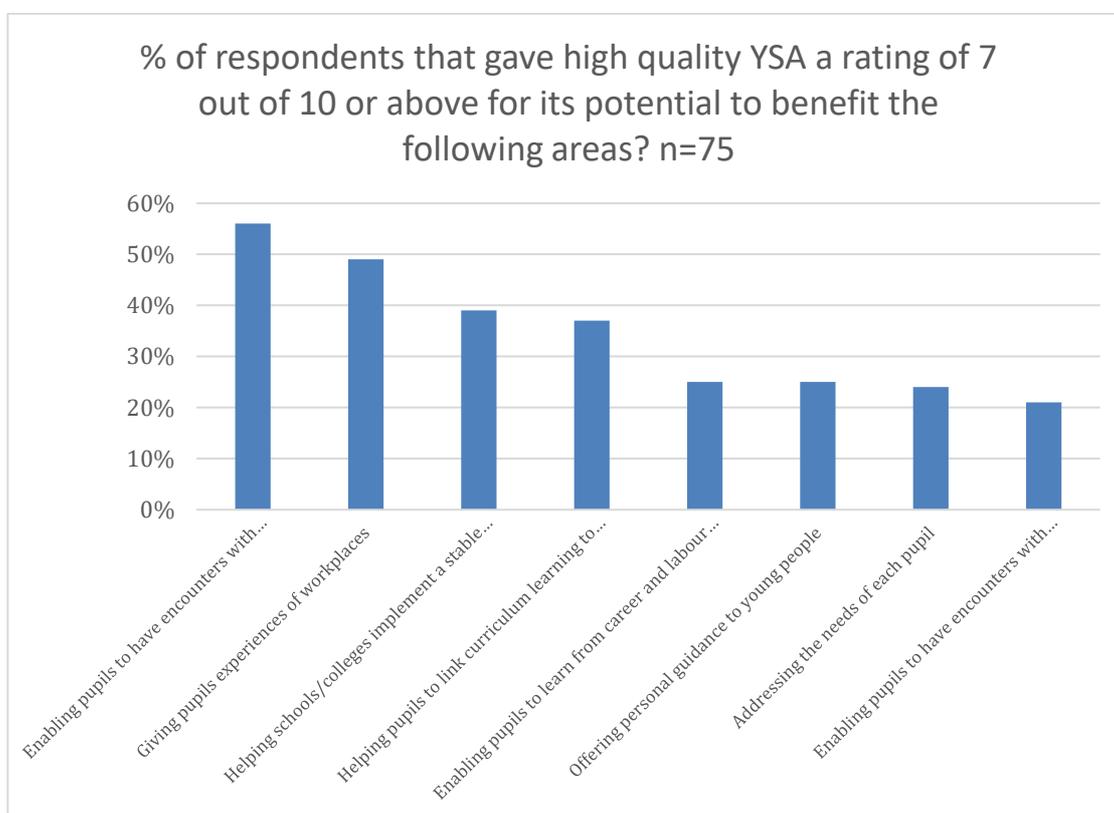
² Knibbs, S. & Michelmore, O. (2018) 'National Youth Social Action Survey 2017'. London: Ipsos Mori http://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YSA_infographic_web.pdf

³ Rapa, L.J., Diemer, M.A. and Bañales, J. (2018) 'Critical action as a pathway to social mobility among marginalized youth'. In: Developmental psychology, vol. 54:1 (p. 127)

⁴ Diemer, M.A. and Blustein, D.L. (2006) 'Critical consciousness and career development among urban youth'. In: Journal of vocational behaviour, vol. 68:2 (p.220-232)

⁵ Kirkman, E., Sanders, M., Emanuel, N. and Larkin, C (2016) 'Evaluating Youth Social Action: does participating in social action boost the skills young people need to succeed in adult life?'. London: Behavioural Insights Team. <https://www.bi.team/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/YSA-Report-Final-Version1.pdf>

Finally, almost all (83% n=65) agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in high quality Youth Social Action has the potential to help pupils develop skills and attributes that will help them succeed in the workplace. Respondents also felt that YSA had the potential to support schools across all the Gatsby benchmarks, in particular those related to encounters with employers and work experience (figure 1).



2. To what extent do schools and colleges link YSA to careers education?

The #iwill campaign's National Youth Social Action Surveys^{6/7} provide a useful overview of recent participation in social action. The 2017 survey estimates that approximately 60% of young people take part in some form of social action, with 40% taking part in YSA that meets the #iwill campaign's definition of "meaningful" social action (see part 1).⁸

Schools, college and universities are the main route into Youth Social Action participation; the 2017 National Youth Social Action Survey⁹ showed that the first experience of YSA for 69% of young people was through their school or college. YSA in schools and colleges also appears to be on the rise. Details from the as yet

⁶Pye, J. & Michelmore, O. (2017) 'National Youth Social Action Survey 2016'. London: Ipsos Mori <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2017-02/youth-social-action-in-uk-2016.pdf> and

⁷Knibbs, S. & Michelmore, O. (2018) 'National Youth Social Action Survey 2017'. London: Ipsos Mori http://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YSA_infographic_web.pdf

⁸The survey defines meaningful social action as:

- Young person has participated in the last 12 months, participated at least every few months, or did a one-off activity lasting more than a day in the last 12 months.
- Recognised both a benefit to themselves and others/the environment as a result of their social action

⁹Knibbs, S. & Michelmore, O. (2018) 'National Youth Social Action Survey 2017'. London: Ipsos Mori http://www.iwill.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YSA_infographic_web.pdf

unpublished NFER #iwill Teacher Voice Survey 2016-18 show a rise in the proportion of secondary schools in which teachers state that over half of their pupils take part in YSA from 13% of schools in 2016 to 26% in 2018. Awareness of YSA also appears to be growing in secondary schools, with a 20 percentage point drop in the proportion of secondary schools in which teachers stated that “they don’t know if youth social action was part of their schools’ culture and practice” over the same period.

Our survey also suggested that schools and colleges are using elements of YSA. Almost all (92%, n=69) reported that pupils at their school take part in actions such as volunteering, campaigning or fundraising, with half (52%, n=39) indicating that pupils take part at least termly.

However, schools do not appear in practice to link YSA with careers education. Ofsted’s work highlighting good practice using YSA in schools and college in 2016¹⁰ showed schools making links between YSA and the wider curriculum but made no mention of careers education.

2.1 Variations in the use of YSA and careers in schools and colleges

The interviewees we spoke to described the overall participation in, and nature of YSA in schools and colleges in the following terms:

- Use of YSA in schools and colleges was described as varied, some had YSA embedded in their cultures and practices, some carried out YSA but did not label it as social action, others did very little. The quality of social action in schools and colleges was noted as being variable.
- Interviewees described the YSA that was taking place in schools and colleges as ranging from one-off activities to national initiatives of limited impact e.g. walk to school week.
- Interviewees believed that some, but very few schools were making links between YSA and careers outcomes, in particular employability skills (see Section 1). One YSA practitioner described how, in a school where YSA was integrated into careers, the two ‘sat really well together’. A common observation was that pupils taking part in YSA were not given opportunities to reflect on their experiences.
- There was a consensus especially amongst the academics we spoke to, that schools and colleges did not enable young people to reflect on other aspects of personal development they might have gained through YSA, such as humility, empathy or compassion.
- Geographical variation in the use of YSA in schools and colleges means it is limited to pockets of activity rather than broad regional differences. For example, some academics and social action practitioners said that schools in ‘the North’ did not recognise the term “social action”, however another practitioner gave examples of outstanding practice from Northumberland LA.
- The clearest differentiating factor, mentioned by multiple interviewees, in social action participation was attributed to the socio-economic status (SES) of children. The academics we interviewed noted children from low-SES backgrounds are less likely to participate due to lack of encouragement from teachers or other life pressures which inhibit engagement. This lack of equity in access to YSA was also flagged by the young people we spoke to. Unpublished data from the NFER #iwill Teacher Voice

¹⁰Ofsted (2016) ‘How social action is being applied to good effect in a selection of schools and colleges’.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/540766/How_social_action_is_being_applied_to_good_effect_in_a_selection_of_schools_and_colleges.pdf

Survey 2016-18 also reflects this view, showing a persistent socio-economic gap in participation since 2014.

- Interviewees, however, believed that taking part in YSA through schools and colleges was an important way to reduce socio-economic inequities in access to YSA.
- One interviewee (an academic) also mentioned gender, citing a large-scale survey of participation in YSA indicating that girls were more likely to take part than boys. Another (a careers leader) felt that careers education resources might be more effective with BAME pupils if they included examples of pupils “that looked like them”.

2.2. Barriers to participation

Interviewees mentioned a number of factors preventing schools and colleges from offering YSA to their pupils, or from making links to careers clear when YSA does take place:

- Limited funding, both for schools and community youth services, was considered a key barrier to participation in YSA.
- As set out above, interviewees noted that the term ‘social action’ is unfamiliar and there is a lack of knowledge with regard to what YSA is, and its benefits. For example, one suggested that teachers often think of social action merely in relation to fundraising rather than recognising the wide range of actions (such as volunteering or campaigning and in-school peer-to-peer tutoring) that make up YSA. This knowledge deficit was cited as being due to teachers not having time to learn about or find out about YSA.
- Survey data supported interviewee’s belief that “social action” was not a common term in schools and colleges. Less than a third of respondents (29%, n=22) were aware of the term ever being used in their setting, while only one respondent reported that the term was “often” used.
- A lack of understanding is compounded by schools’ prioritisation and focus on academic subjects. This focus limits teachers’ capacity to dedicate time to it. On the other hand, interviewees acknowledged that the new Ofsted framework might create an environment in which social action can be prioritised.
- Colleges were described as being more familiar with vocational activity than schools. This was believed to reduce barriers to social action.
- It was also noted that some schools and colleges may be located in communities without an established and receptive volunteering infrastructure. For these schools, establishing a culture of YSA in their local community will require additional barriers to be overcome such as the set-up of safeguarding practices and risk assessments.

2.3. Existing support

Interviewees were positive about the number of organisations supporting schools and colleges to carry out social action activity. Organisations that were mentioned included Enabling Enterprise, Sport Leadership UK, #iwill resources, WE Schools and the Careers & Enterprise Company. Similarly, interviewees mentioned a number of resources and toolkits that help schools and colleges implement social action (WE Schools resources and #iwill were mentioned frequently); or that aimed to support careers education (the Careers & Enterprise Company Toolkit on Gatsby Benchmarks was mentioned).

However, no interviewees mentioned resources linking YSA to careers whilst several interviewees noted that they were not aware of any existing resources.

3. Toolkit content

Interviewees highlighted a range of factors that might influence the toolkit's success. Broadly, these included suggestions regarding:

- Increasing the use and quality of YSA in schools and colleges;
- key audiences;
- preferred format;
- and, optimising a communication strategy.

3.1 The use and quality of social action

Interviewees suggested a number of ways in which the toolkit might help increase the use of YSA in schools and colleges, as well as ways in which to drive up the quality of YSA.

- The toolkit should clearly define meaningful Social Action and should map YSA onto frameworks that schools prioritise e.g. Ofsted or the National Curriculum.
- Adults facilitating YSA need to have a full understanding of its benefits. A theme throughout the interviews was the need to ensure that YSA has a clear syllabus, objectives and outcomes.
- Resources should use language that is consistent with Ofsted terminology. For example, the Ofsted framework under consultation references 'active citizenship' so potentially this terminology should be used instead of social action.
- As set out in the #iwill campaign's quality framework (see Section 1), interviewees emphasised a number of aspects of YSA that they saw as leading to more effective careers education for young people:
 - Young people choosing their own projects, rather than reflecting teachers' interests.
 - YSA projects being rooted in the realities of young peoples' communities. YSA was seen as working best when young people chose issues that were important to them and their communities (for example knife crime, or local environmental degradation).
 - Long term projects rather than one-off actions.
 - Young people being guided to reflect on and understand the skills they are developing (and skills they are yet to develop and could work on in future projects).

At the same time, interviewees pointed out the benefits of schools and colleges using teacher-led, one-off or compulsory activities as a "hook" to get young people interested in YSA. This progression towards quality in YSA was also reflected in the literature, with one previous volunteering programme talking about a gradual progression over time from a mandated, teacher-led activity towards a youth-led approach¹¹.

3.2 Audience

- Interviewees made a number of suggestions regarding the audience of the toolkit. These included content aimed at:
 - School and college leaders;
 - careers leaders;
 - enterprise advisors;
 - teachers;
 - and young people.

¹¹ Ellis, A. (2005) 'Active Citizens in School: Evaluation of the DfES Pilot Programme'. London: Institute for Volunteering Research

- To ensure buy-in from school and college leaders, the resources should be in concise format and written in accessible language that links multiple interests together, for example covering careers, social action and how it relates to Ofsted and the curriculum.
- School and college leaders may also require guidance on how they might implement YSA with varying levels of available capacity and resource.
- Careers leaders and enterprise advisors will be most attracted to a toolkit that helps them develop their networks, and makes it easier for them to meet Gatsby Benchmarks (such as ensuring every young person has a meaningful employer encounter).
- Teachers are more likely to require guidance on how YSA can enhance the curriculum, if possible backed up by evidence about improving outcomes.
- Some interviewees noted that impact could be maximised by engaging younger children, who were more likely to engage and could grow in confidence over time.
- For teachers and students, buy-in should be fostered by co-developing resources.

3.3 Format

- The toolkit should be as simple and succinct as possible.
- Schools and colleges needed a conceptual framework of the type of activities that constitute YSA, alongside as wide a range of examples as possible
- The toolkit should include a directory of local or regional opportunities. This would help schools and colleges find external organisations to work with, reducing the bureaucratic, capacity and financial barriers that interviewees commonly cited as difficulties.
- Schools and colleges need administrative support, for example clear safeguarding procedures for working with external organisations.
- There were calls for face-to-face training to support the toolkit. Views on the specifics of training were mixed; one interviewee suggested CPD for careers leads from external organisations, whereas others argued for peer-to-peer training which they believed would be more engaging.
- A toolkit should include detailed case study examples of good practice.
- Several interviewees talked about using tech to support the toolkit. Could students, for example have a space to log and reflect on experiences (through an app or on a web platform).
- The toolkit should offer guidance for teachers on working with external adults, such as employers, and the role teachers could play in supporting adults who were less experienced working with young people.

3.4 Comms

- It will be important to make clear the role that schools (and young people) have had in developing this toolkit, so it “feels bottom-up” rather than being imposed from above.
- Specifically, Ofsted and DfE were seen as essential for raising the profile and lending legitimacy to the toolkit.
- Interviewees suggested using “champions” at two geographical scales; *regional champions*, who were able to help signpost schools and colleges to the toolkit, and *school champions* who would lead on maximising the impact of the toolkit in individual schools and colleges. This approach is set out in research on previous projects, for example in Active Citizens in Schools¹².

¹² Ellis, A. (2005) ‘Active Citizens in School: Evaluation of the DfES Pilot Programme’. London: Institute for Volunteering Research

- Employers should play a role in endorsing the toolkit.

4. Pitfalls to avoid

Interviewees believed that YSA in schools and colleges might have a small number of potential drawbacks. These included:

- Worries that time devoted to YSA would reduce time for activities that more directly affect school performance (and subsequently Ofsted and league tables).
- There was also a strong feeling that the impact of social action is considerably reduced when it is poorly implemented. This might impact upon individuals, who could fail to develop and progress, as well as communities who could end up garnering limited benefits from the activities young people conduct.
- Some interviewees felt that linking social action directly with employability skills reduced YSA to a transactional mandated activity that is solely seen as a pathway to employment -rather than as meaningful in its own right. This could have negative long-term consequences for volunteering.