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A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work

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March 2022

An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais, Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Any citation of this report should use the following reference:

Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) *A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway.

ISBN: 978-1-905861-91-0

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Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Executive summary

What is universal youth work?

The national and international policy context values youth work for enabling young people to achieve their full potential by strengthening their personal and social competences. Youth work values are founded on principles such as the provision of opportunities for meaningful participation, the development of agency and voice, and involvement in individual and collective action in order to develop social awareness. Personal and social outcomes associated with youth work include communication skills, agency, problem-solving, relationships, creativity, resilience and emotional intelligence. Youth work is increasingly associated with broad societal and civic objectives for greater inclusiveness, tolerance and civic engagement.

For the purposes of this review, 'universal youth work' is defined as youth work initiatives, interventions and programmes providing personal and social development activities that are, in principle, available to all young people and are not targeted at specific participants or needs. Also called 'open access youth work' or 'generic youth work', universal youth work is associated with positive framings of youth and involves open processes where activities are negotiated and emerge in partnership with young people. It takes place in an environment that fosters group interaction and learning and where participation is voluntary. While the distinctive features and ethos of youth work are identifiable in the research literature, delineating between the practice of targeted and universal youth work is complex and differs across jurisdictions. In response to the current and evolving needs of young people, policy debates and discourse increasingly highlight the potential for youth work to address issues such as integration, interculturalism and sustainable development, and to incorporate democratic and rights-based perspectives.

Aim of the study

This research study aims to synthesise recent evidence relating to the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work. Building on earlier analyses, this review focuses on research conducted during the period from 2011 to 2021. The review was undertaken in order

to inform the reform of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's (DCEDIY's) (DCEDIY) Youth Services Grant Scheme (YSGS).

The overarching research question guiding the review is as follows:

What is the international empirical research evidence in relation to the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work for young people aged 10–24 years?

Methodology

Based on rapid review guidelines, we adopted transparent and systematic methods for identifying, describing and synthesising the available research evidence. Through a combination of targeted database and hand searching strategies, we identified 5,450 peer-reviewed and grey literature articles and screened them for relevance. A total of 72 full-text articles were found to meet the selection criteria and were included in this review. These 72 articles were then subjected to a data extraction and coding process.

Review findings

The findings of this review indicate that a range of benefits accrue from universal youth work, with 71 of the 72 studies reviewed finding evidence of positive outcomes. We collated the primary outcomes identified as being associated with universal youth work into five thematic categories:

1. **Personal development and growth** emerged as the largest outcome category, with 192 individual outcomes identified across 61 studies. The sub-theme of *sense of self* included outcome areas such as increased confidence, openness to feedback, motivation, and character or identity development. The sub-theme of *skills development* encompassed the sub-categories of emotional skills (e.g. coping and emotional regulation), cognitive skills (e.g. personal agency, problem-solving and decision-making), social skills (e.g. communication, social competence and teamwork) and behavioural skills (e.g. making positive choices and taking responsibility).
2. **Relationships, connection and support** was the second-largest category, with 111 individual outcomes reported across 41 studies. These studies reported outcomes such as positive peer connections and relationships, relationships with adults, and

social support arising from participation in universal youth work. Having a safe, welcoming youth work space to go to was also a commonly recorded outcome.

3. **Civic values and behaviour** outcomes were reported in 43 studies, where 90 individual outcomes relating to this theme were identified. Participation in universal youth work was associated with gains made in terms of youth civic engagement, community service, leadership and volunteering. Enhanced social responsibility and knowledge of issues related to equality and diversity also emerged as an outcome of youth work participation.
4. **Health and well-being** outcomes were reported in 18 studies, with 40 individual outcomes identified. Young people were found to experience improved mental health, including enhanced ability to manage stress, anxiety, depression or other negative emotions. Youth work participation was associated with reduced risk behaviour, such as drug-taking/intentions to take drugs, alcohol use, smoking, and engagement in sexual activity.
5. **Education, career and hard skills** was the category with the fewest measured outcomes, with a total of 31 separate outcomes reported across 20 studies. Within this category, young people who were engaged in universal youth work were found to show greater motivation, engagement and connection in school. Enhanced career aspirations/motivations and the development of hard skills, such as music production or digital literacy, were also identified.

In addition to measuring outcomes, some of the studies reviewed identified elements or factors that were associated with or predicted positive outcomes. The three most significant factors identified were adult–youth relationships, the nature of project activities, and the distinguishing features of the youth work space.

Implications for the reform of the YSGS

The implications of this review for the reform of the YSGS are described below.

- There is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the benefits and utility of universal or open access youth work.
- The outcome areas identified in this review can be seen to have significant congruence with the five national outcomes set out in the guiding policy for children

and young people in Ireland, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014a). The implication of this review is that government support for universal youth work has the potential to contribute to the achievement of national policy goals for children and young people.

- The reform of the YSGS should seek to clarify the meaning of universal youth work in order to establish parameters for organisations seeking funding under the scheme.
- Reflecting emerging directions in the research literature, the future of youth work provision should include continued support for traditional areas of provision, such as youth clubs, while also nurturing the emergence of new approaches such as digital youth work. Owing to the relative scarcity of evidence, emergent themes (such as digitalisation) need to be rigorously assessed prior to any policy decisions being implemented with respect to the reform of the YSGS.
- Universal youth work has the potential to impact positively on youth civic values and behaviour. However, youth work provision in the United States of America (USA) appears to have a more explicit civic focus than youth work activities in Europe. It may be useful to enhance the competencies of youth workers and volunteers to engage in civic youth work in a more focused way.
- Within the Irish context, it would be valuable to develop an outcomes framework and a set of measures for universal youth work in order to allow for consistency in measurement of outcomes across funded services and to better inform our understanding of the impact of universal youth work. It would be useful to explore the impact of universal youth work on both hard and soft outcomes relating to the breadth of various outcome categories identified in this study. Differentiation with respect to 'soft' and 'hard' outcomes should be factored into any outcome evaluation model, with consideration given to the inclusion of participatory evaluation within any such model.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This literature review aims to synthesise recent evidence relating to the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work. The review has been undertaken in order to inform the reform of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's (DCEDIY's) Youth Services Grant Scheme (YSGS). The YSGS provides funding to voluntary youth organisations so as to ensure the emergence, promotion, growth and development of youth organisations with distinctive philosophies and programmes aimed at the social education of young people. As a policy initiative, the YSGS views young people as a resource to society with inherent capacity to contribute as valuable citizens. A broad spectrum of services is provided, universal in nature and with considerable variation in the size and scale of organisations funded. After four decades of the YSGS's operation, DCEDIY is reforming and modernising the YSGS in order to ensure that it is responsive to the current and evolving needs of young people. This literature review is intended to inform the reform process.

Building on earlier analyses (e.g. Dickson *et al*., 2013), the objectives of this review are to:

1. Provide up-to-date overview of recent relevant Irish and international literature on the benefits and outcomes of youth work (that is universal in nature and focused on generating positive youth development outcomes);
2. Draw out an explanatory framework in order to describe the benefits and outcomes of youth work that might be applicable to the Irish context, and
3. Draw out implications for the reform of the YSGS, with a particular focus on the five national outcomes set out in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014-2020*.

1.2 Research questions

In order to meet the time-sensitive needs of policy-makers, the research team at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) undertook an approach that adopts features of the Cochrane Rapid Review methodology; namely, "a form of knowledge synthesis that accelerates the process of conducting a traditional systematic review through streamlining or omitting various methods to produce evidence for stakeholders in a resource-efficient manner" (Garritty *et al*., 2021, p. 15). A protocol outlining the final set of search terms and the inclusion and exclusion criteria was agreed with DCEDIY prior to commencing the review. The following research question was also agreed:

> What is the international empirical research evidence in relation to the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work for young people aged 10–24 years?
>
> a. Towards what purposes is universal youth work directed?
>
> b. What outcomes and benefits have been found in empirical studies of universal youth work?
>
> c. What methods and tools are used to measure universal youth work outcomes?
>
> d. What factors have been identified as important to the achievement of positive outcomes through universal youth work?

A detailed description of the methodological approach used in developing this literature review is provided in Chapter 3.

1.3 Universal youth work: definitions and distinctions

As defined in the Youth Work Act, 2001, youth work can be understood as an educational endeavour which supports the personal and social development of young people, and in which they engage on a voluntary basis. In seeking to differentiate between types of youth work, however, the boundaries become less clear. At the most general level, the literature recognises a basic distinction between youth work activities available to all young people and those directed at particular groups (McGregor, 2015; Dunne *et al*. 2014). The former, based on a political commitment to universal services and welfare provision, is open (in principle)

to all young people regardless of their background. The latter, targeted at particular groups, recognises that certain young people have specific needs that cannot be addressed in a universal context. As characterised by McGregor, the purpose of universal youth work "is not pre-determined or aimed at addressing specific issues or problems as defined by policymakers" (McGregor, 2015, p. 74).

Universal or open access youth work is based on voluntary engagement, wherein young people can attend and leave at will (Hill, 2020). Davies (2015) regards young people's participation in self-chosen open access settings as the defining characteristic of this form of youth work. The importance of place and relationships are also viewed as critical elements of open or universal youth work. According to Ritchie and Ord, "association in youth work places a special emphasis on the relationships between young people and the generation of a 'club' environment" (Ritchie and Ord, 2017, p. 270). Open access youth work emphasises the value of interaction and learning in which group formation, identity and belonging are central features (Jenkinson, 2013; Williamson, 2007). For Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi (2015, p. 49), in contrast to 'tight' spaces such as schools, which are characterised by structuring and pre-planned activities, 'loose' youth club spaces are "open for negotiation and alteration and include elements such as adaptable learning opportunities", allowing for the unexpected. "Ambivalence, differences and unexpected incidents", the authors contend, have little room in tight spaces associated with more formal learning. Also important is the role of critical reflection, where a key function of the youth worker is to "enable the young person to reflect upon, and consequently learn from, their day-to-day personal experiences" (Adams, 2014, p. 86). Successful youth work settings, according to Ritchie and Ord (2017), foster engagement, provide supportive environments and feature participation.

Typically, characterisations of open access or universal youth work highlight its distinctions with targeted provision. Alongside scope, intent and resourcing are differences in style. Targeted youth work is focused on identifying groups of young people based on particular needs, and operates with predefined purposes or outcomes, often through one-on-one meetings between a youth worker and a young person in order to address 'problems' (Ritchie and Ord, 2017). In contrast, universal youth work, characterised by a lack of predefined activities, recognises the unpredictable and flexible nature of the work in which outcomes are

allowed to emerge and are negotiated with young people (Davies, 2015). McGregor (2015, p. 38) argues that universal youth work, as "an open process (in terms of access and curriculum) based on principles of experiential learning and social pedagogy" will necessarily entail a degree of "risk and indeterminacy". In addition, in the literature, universal youth work is associated more with positive framings, in contrast to the so-called 'deficit models' adopted in targeted youth work practice (Williamson, 2007). The debate, McGregor (2015) contends, has tended to associate open access youth work and its focus on non-predetermined learning with 'soft' outcomes, compared with targeted youth work meeting 'hard' or predetermined outcomes. In Europe, universal youth work is largely understood to be under threat and underfunded in comparison to targeted youth work (Dunne *et al*., 2014). Universal youth work tends to be volunteer-led, whereas targeted youth work is mostly staffed by professional youth workers (Kiely and Meade, 2018).

In practice, it can be difficult to discern the delineations between targeted and universal youth work. A lack of consensus on the definition and nature of youth work has complicated research on the impact of the field (Ritchie and Ord, 2017; Mundy-McPherson *et al*., 2012). While elements of the extant literature refer to services delivered through clubs, much of it is concerned with youth development programmes and services delivered by professionals who do not define themselves as youth workers. A systematic review on the impact of youth work that limited the scope of inquiry to interventions defined as youth work and adopted stringent criteria for the impact evaluation resulted in an 'empty review' (Mundy-McPherson, 2012). Literature on the distinctive nature of youth work highlights the ethos of youth work services. Longstanding principles that define youth work include voluntary participation, young people engaging as partners in learning, and a focus on the needs and experiences of young people (Fyfe *et al*., 2018). Davies (2015), adapts a purist definition of youth work practice, setting it apart from activities or programmes that utilise 'youth work approaches' and 'youth work skills' in working with young people to identify the distinctive nature of youth work practice as requiring:

- *Settings that are open access to which young people have chosen to come and participation is voluntary*
- *Practice seeking to proactively tip the balance of power in their favour*
- *Young people are perceived and received as young people, rather than as adults in transition*

- *Practice starting where young people are at, with the expectation that they will be able to relax, meet friends and enjoy themselves*
- *Key focus of the practice on the young person as an individual*
- *Respectful and responsive to young people's peer networks*
- *Respectful and responsive to the young people's wider community and cultural identities and helping strengthen these*
- *Practice seeking to go beyond where young people start, encouraging them to develop their personal potential and be critical and creative in their responses to world around them*
- *Practice concerned with what young people feel as well as what they know and do (Davies, 2015, p. 100).*

Within the literature, terms such as 'open access', 'generic' and 'universal' youth work are used interchangeably and definitions vary. Evidence from McGregor's (2015) study on universal youth work provision in Scotland, although suggesting that this form of youth work provision can generate a range of positive health and well-being outcomes and can provide safe yet challenging spaces for personal and social development in young people, cautions nonetheless that 'it all depends on what we understand by universal youth work. It also depends on what we mean by evidence' (McGregor, 2015, p.74).

In order to operationalise the definition of universal youth work for the purposes of this study, we suggest that the typology of youth work outlined in Table 1 (Dunne *et al*., 2014) offers a useful framework.

Table 1: Typology of youth work

Personal development – Universal	Specific issue(s) – Universal
Personal development – Target group	Specific issue(s) – Target group

In this interpretation, issue-based work can be universal "if adults and young people being partners in the learning process and curriculum emerging from the lived experience of young people are regarded as foundational principles" (McGregor, 2015, p. 65). In a similar fashion, Doherty and de St. Croix (2019) perceive open access youth work to mean that it is open in its orientation. In such an interpretation, while groups may have an open remit, they may operate with certain boundaries (such as age limits), or some, for example Black and minority

ethnic youth groups, may be for individuals who share specific identities and experiences. Additionally, in contrast with pre-planned, time-limited interventions, groups can be "open in terms of timescale, content, and intended outcomes" (2019, p.2). However, the authors caution that 'open-ended' does not mean lack of structure; projects may follow a routine and focus on specific activities: "in open youth work, these structured elements are neither compulsory nor permanent; they are fluid and responsive to need" (Doherty and de St. Croix 2019, p. 2).

1.4 Report structure

The remainder of this report is organised as follows:

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the purpose and value of universal youth work as represented in policy and practice discourse, together with a synopsis of findings from previous reviews examining the impact and outcomes of universal youth work.

Chapter 3 contains a detailed account of the methodological approach used in conducting this literature review, which consisted of five phases of identifying, describing, and synthesising the available research evidence.

Chapter 4 provides a synthesis of the findings from the 72 research papers included in this rapid review regarding the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work.

Chapter 5 concludes the study and presents an explanatory framework to describe the purposes, benefits and outcomes of youth work based on the review findings. It discusses the implications of the study findings for the reform of the YSGS.

1.5 Chapter summary

- The terms 'universal', 'open access' or 'generic' youth work are all used in the literature, leading to a need for definitional clarity.
- A lack of consensus on the nature and definition of universal youth work has complicated research on the impact of the field.

- While the distinctive features and ethos of youth work are identifiable in the research literature, delineating between the practice of targeted youth work and universal youth work is complex and differs across jurisdictions.
- Characteristics of universal youth work include that: it provides access (in principle) to all young people; it involves open processes where activities are negotiated and emerge in partnership with young people; it takes place in an environment that fosters group interaction and learning; and participation is voluntary.
- For the purposes of this literature review, 'universal youth work' is defined as youth work initiatives, interventions and programmes providing personal and social development activities that are, in principle, available to all young people and are not targeted at specific participants or needs.

Chapter 2

Context for the study

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of relevant policy and practice developments that have informed the environment in which youth work has operated over the course of the 2010s. Section 2.2 provides an overview of policy in relation to the purpose of youth work and its associated benefits, core principles and ethos as presented in current national and international guidance. Section 2.3 then examines the operational context for the delivery of youth work services in Ireland, including developments in policy relating to standards and quality.

Section 2.4 explores the nature of the outcomes of youth work. We first present an overview of the issues in the literature associated with the practice of outcomes-based assessment. This is followed by a synthesis of the findings from previous literature reviews that examined outcomes of universal or open access youth work.

2.2 Role of youth work: policy and practice debates

2.2.1 Youth work policy frameworks

Unlike many jurisdictions, Ireland has clearly defined the role of youth work. The *National Youth Strategy 2015–2020* sets out the Government's agenda and priorities for children and young people aged 10–24 years (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Within the Strategy, youth work plays a role in providing out-of-school supports for young people in their local communities and is valued for enabling young people to overcome adverse circumstances. The Strategy highlights the importance of young people's participation in youth work activities and its contribution to their personal and social well-being, including "developing core social skills and emotional competencies such as self-motivation, communication skills, collaborative working, critical thinking and problem-solving skills" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015, p. 14). The Strategy recognises that at the societal level, involvement in youth work can "enhance young people's connection with and contribution to their community, and enable them to be confident individuals, effective

contributors, successful learners, and responsible and active members of society" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015, p. 14).

As evidenced in the Strategy and across international policy frameworks, youth work is associated with a wide range of civic or societal objectives. Youth work "is a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people" (Council of Europe, 2020a, p. 1). The benefit of youth work in providing developmental opportunities to young people, including social and emotional competencies, is increasingly recognised. In an analysis of diverse youth work practice across 27 countries, Dunne *et al*. reported the commonality in the "shared understanding that the core aim of youth work is to support a young person's personal development in view of empowerment, emancipation, responsibility and tolerance" (Dunne *et al.,* 2014, p. 54). Youth work is characterised as a value-driven, youth-centric, self-reflective, developmental and relational practice (Council of Europe, 2015). On the individual level, the European Union (EU) Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 recognises the unique benefits that youth work affords to young people in their transition to adulthood, providing a bridge into education, training and work and equipping them with key skills such as teamwork, leadership, intercultural competences, project management, problem-solving and critical thinking. The EU Youth Strategy established overarching goals for youth work to:

- "Enable young people to be architects of their own lives, build their resilience and equip them with life skills to cope in a changing world;
- Encourage young people to become active citizens and agents of solidarity and positive change for communities across Europe, inspired by EU values and a European identity; and
- Help prevent youth social exclusion." (European Commission, 2018, p. 3)

The Council of Europe's 2017 Recommendation on youth work states that youth work is "quintessentially a social practice, working with young people and the societies in which they live, facilitating young people's active participation and inclusion in their communities and in decision making" (Council of Europe, 2017a, p. 3). The Council cites a number of positive outcomes attributed to youth work, namely that:

- "it leads to critical reflection, innovation and changes at local, regional, national and European levels;
- it contributes to young people's well-being, enhancing a sense of belonging and strengthening their capacity to make beneficial choices;
- it supports positive and purposeful transitions in personal, civic, economic and cultural life, enabling the development of competences that facilitate lifelong learning, active citizenship and labour market participation;
- it promotes the development of various skills such as creativity, critical thinking, conflict management, digital and information literacy, and leadership;
- it enhances diversity and contributes to equality, sustainable development, intercultural understanding, social cohesion, civic participation, democratic citizenship and the upholding of the values of human rights.
- it strengthens young people's resilience and thereby their capacity to resist negative influences and behaviour."(Council of Europe, 2017a, p. 4)

Youth work is increasingly associated with broad societal objectives for an inclusive, committed and tolerant society. As set out in the European Youth Work Agenda, a fundamental role for youth work is to foster "active, critical citizenship and democratic awareness and the appreciation of diversity among all young people" (Council of Europe, 2020a, p. 5). The link between citizenship and youth work is prevalent across youth policy frameworks. As a concept based on democratic and rights-based values, it forms part of the discourse around critical citizens, with youth work providing opportunities for the active exercise of democracy and generating social awareness (Aguirre *et al*., 2020; AGJ, 2020). Also termed 'global youth work', it serves as a tool for critical social education wherein the informal, voluntary, negotiated nature of youth work can harness young people's capacity to effect change at the personal and structural level by contributing to their communities at local, national and international levels (Adams, 2014). In this way, "Youth Work also takes on the function of mediating and representing the interests of young people within society…and thus strengthens the social significance of the perspectives of young people" (AGJ, 2020, p. 5).

Inclusion is seen as a core principle and benefit of youth work. Objective 9 of Ireland's National Youth Strategy contains a commitment to young people's inclusion in society, ensuring that their equality and rights are upheld, that their diversity is celebrated and that they are empowered to be active global citizens. This commitment to inclusion is also evident in Objective 10: "Young people's autonomy is supported, their active citizenship fostered, and their voice strengthened through political, social and civic engagement" (Department of

Children and Youth Affairs, 2015, p. 3). The ethos of youth work in Ireland, mirroring EU policy, emphasises participation, empowerment, and personal and social development, and is shared by much of the international research literature (e.g. Dickson *et al*., 2013). The EU Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 stipulates that youth work's guiding principles should be anchored in the international system of human rights, and that principles to be applied in all policies and activities concerning young people include equality and non-discrimination, inclusion, and participation (European Commission, 2018). These principles are very much at the fore in Ireland's *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, 2015 – 2020* (2015) and the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020.*

Overall, the dual purpose of youth work (reflected in Section 2.2.1), encompassing both societal and individual objectives, is widely acknowledged. Nonetheless, some have cautioned that the personal development aspect is paramount: "Although Youth Work can help combat societal challenges (e.g. youth unemployment, radicalisation or the promotion of physical health), these or other challenges must not be its primary aim. Instead, the enabling, self-determination and development of young people must always have priority" (AGJ, 2020, p. 6).

2.2.2 Emergent themes

Emerging new directions in youth service provision include a focus on digital youth work. The EU Youth Strategy highlights the need to support mutual learning and evidence building regarding digital youth work, and for the "structure, methods and communication channels of youth work to adapt to the digital world" (European Commission, 2018, p. 7). Specifically, it calls on youth workers to adapt to the changing needs of young people and to technological developments, and "upgrade their skills to understand the issues youth face online and exploit new opportunities offered by digital learning" aligned with a commitment for EU member states to provide financing and upgrade youth workers' skills (2018, p.7). In Ireland, where (as in most countries) youth work moved largely online during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Erwin and Thompson (2021) found that a key factor in determining the success of digital youth work related to the skills and commitment of youth workers and their ability to create safe online spaces for young people. The study also

highlighted the reality that 72% of young people lacked adequate digital access (Erwin and Thompson, 2021).

Another theme of policy and practice concerns integration and interculturalism in youth work. As part of the thematic priorities of the Council of Europe's Youth Sector Strategy 2030, the Council prioritised the need for youth work to extend access and attractiveness in order to benefit wider populations of young people (Council of Europe, 2020a). In Ireland, a report examining the perspectives of minority ethnic young people on the current and potential future role of youth work in their lives found that engagement took place mostly in mainstream youth groups (Walsh, 2017). The evidence suggested that especially for the younger cohort (aged under 16 years), young people can be fully supported to explore their cultural journey in mainstream youth groups. Importantly, their involvement in mainstream youth groups offered a 'normalising' experience for them, with an important facet of integration being participating in the wider community and in groups and activities around a common interest. Critical to the experience, however, was individuals having their "cultural and ethnic identities recognised, embodied and shared in a positive light" (Walsh, 2017, p. 107). Older youth (aged 18 years and over) are more likely to want opportunities to reflect on aspects of their ethnicity, with Walsh noting the potential for online youth spaces to explore integration and identity work. It specifically recommended that the YSGS review include the provision of enhanced youth work supports for young people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

2.3 Services and implementation

The environment for the development and implementation of youth work services in Ireland has undergone a number of policy and practice reforms over the course of the 2010s. The National Youth Strategy commits to providing effective youth work, enhancing existing services and initiatives, and monitoring youth work supports in order to ensure both the quality of services and value for money (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). In implementing the Strategy, the following priorities were established to inform the planning and delivery of services:

- ensuring a preventive focus in and across all universal programmes and schemes which focus on the development of young people; and

- developing efficient and user-friendly ways of collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data at local, regional and national level in order to inform service planning, delivery, assessment and continuous improvement.

Youth work infrastructure: status of the sector

While the State determines policy and provides funding, youth work is provided primarily by the voluntary sector. Ireland has approximately 1,400 paid youth workers and 40,000 volunteer youth workers (O'Donovan, 2020). The sector has seen increased professionalism among youth work organisations (Powell *et al*., 2010) and Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe to offer degree-level courses in youth work (O'Donovan, 2020). As is common across Europe, the economic downturn in 2008 had a significant impact on the youth work field. Concerns within the sector in Ireland that were identified in research included the erosion of funding, a struggle to maintain morale among workers, the increasingly acute needs of young people and calls for greater attention to engaging older young people (Jenkinson, 2013).

A 2020 report acknowledged that even in countries such as Finland and Ireland, where youth work is reasonably well-developed, State expenditure on youth work and youth services amounts to less than 1% of the annual education budget (O'Donovan, 2020). However, signs of increasing levels of investment were evident from 2021 (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2021). The National Youth Council of Ireland assessed the pre-pandemic state of the sector as strong, reporting youth work services to be significant in scope and scale by international standards (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2021).

Nonetheless, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic poses challenges for the sector. Recent research indicates that while the majority of Irish youth organisations were able to maintain a service during the crisis, they experienced a significant drop (69%) in levels of engagement, particularly from marginalised young people, as well as decreased volunteer levels (64%) (Erwin and Thompson, 2021). The impact on youth workers and volunteers included significant levels of stress and burnout. At the same time, the adaptability of youth work services during the pandemic and "a sense of genuine care from youth workers" (Erwin and Thompson, 2021, p. 50) was highly valued by young people, with the pandemic generating greater awareness of the importance of youth work (Shaw *et al*., 2022). Erwin and Thompson

found that the pandemic highlighted the need to "understand the essential nature of youth work not only when it is about crisis intervention, but also when it is about supporting young people's mental health, facilitating outreach efforts particularly with young people who may be 'at risk', and offering universal services or 'open access' youth work" (Erwin and Thompson, 2021, p. 14). The COVID-19 pandemic has also raised concerns about the impact on volunteer-led youth clubs and groups, "the backbone of our universal youth services" (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2021, p. 15). The National Youth Council of Ireland report noted that the 40,000 volunteers active in the field pre-pandemic had been largely lost and cautioned, "The sector will not be able to re-engage with large numbers of young people and run universal activities unless we can regain previous volunteers and recruit new ones" (2021, p. 15).

Quality in youth work

At a European level, the issue of quality in youth work is at the forefront of policy. The Council of Europe's Recommendation on youth work (2017a) called on member states to develop knowledge-based, quality youth work and ensure that mechanisms are in place to measure its outcomes and impact. As measurement has been mostly qualitative, "The ambition must therefore be to set indicators for youth work that actually mirror outcomes and the core principles, primarily focusing on the qualitative aspects" (European Commission, 2015, p. 20). The EU Youth Strategy for 2019–2027 provides for the development and implementation of a European Youth Work Agenda to provide a framework for strengthening and developing quality in, and recognition of, youth work. The Strategy includes plans for the development and dissemination of practical toolkits for quality youth work. A 2020 report on the implementation of the Council of Europe's recommendation (O'Donovan, 2020),found that most of the standards being developed were intended to be 'templates' and starting points rather than adaptable tools. It did conclude, however, by outlining a number of mechanisms or common threads that support quality youth work on the ground, as follows:

- Information gathering through regular surveys of youth organisations and young people
- The use of log books
- Reflective practice, group discussion, quality dialogue, and feedback
- Planning, goal setting and regulatory compliance

- Strategic management, project management; problem-solving; human resource management, and
- Organisational, peer and self-assessment.

In Ireland, similarly, the youth work sector has seen a number of developments associated with the management, governance and expectations of youth services. The 2010 introduction of the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work provided a framework that youth work organisations could use to assess, evaluate and articulate their practice, to show evidence of their outcomes-directed planning and to gather data that would demonstrate outcome attainment. Much of the impetus for outcome-based assessment has taken place in the wider operational context geared towards more efficient public services. Following the global economic crisis of 2008, and the establishment of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in 2011, the Irish Government, along with EU counterparts, adopted a focus on ensuring effectiveness in public spending (Madden, 2020). The Department of Children and Youth Affairs conducted a review (*Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes*) in order to "rationalise, reform and improve programmes and areas of policy responsibility" (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014b, p. 2). Tusla – Child and Family Agency's introduction of a commissioning model for child and family services called for services to be systematically planned, cost-aware, based on assessed need, and, above all, to adopt a conscious focus on outcomes (Shaw and Canavan, 2018).

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' 2014 value for money review highlighted poor data and the variation in metrics and measurability across the youth work sector as analytical challenges to assessing effectiveness and impact. A subsequent major reform plan for youth funding resulted in the amalgamation of targeted youth service provision into a single funding scheme, UBU Your Place Your Space (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019). Under UBU, youth work projects are oriented to the achievement of seven predefined personal and social outcome domains for young people, namely: communication skills; confidence and agency; planning and problem-solving; relationships; creativity and imagination; resilience and determination; and emotional intelligence (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019). In the implementation and management of UBU, the scheme's arrangements assigned a role to local statutory bodies, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) as intermediaries between DCEDIY and national voluntary youth services providers.

2.4 Youth work outcomes

2.4.1 Outcome measurement: discourse and debate

In Ireland, since the early 2010s, the practice and funding of youth work has taken place in a policy landscape focused on outcomes. Bovaird and Davies (2011) define outcomes as "the results that services provide that have an impact on the lives of service users and citizens" (pp. 93-4). In essence, adopting an outcome-based approach focuses attention on the impact of an intervention rather than on the associated activities and outputs. The overarching national policy framework for children and young people in Ireland, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020* (BOBF) (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014a), stipulated that Tusla – Child and Family Agency introduce the commissioning of services "by moving away from a grants system to outcome-based contracts, and offer support to build capacity within the children and youth sector to respond to the new approach" (p. 69).

The National Youth Strategy (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015) has its basis in BOBF. Overarching frameworks for child and family welfare such as BOBF set out a number of aspirational goals and intentions, based on population-level outcomes. BOBF established five national outcomes that relate to all Government Departments, statutory agencies, and voluntary and community sector groups that work with children and young people which are that young people: (1) are active and healthy with positive physical and mental well-being; (2) are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development; (3) are safe and protected from harm; (4) have economic security and opportunity; and (5) are connected, respected and contributing to their world. The Framework encompasses universal dimensions of child development, well-being and 'whole-of-life' outcomes. Of particular resonance for youth work are Outcomes 2 and 5. Outcome 2, with the goal of achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development, includes a commitment to recognise and validate young people's achievements in non-formal and informal learning (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015). Outcome 5, namely keeping young people connected, respected and contributing to their world, includes involving young people in planning and decision-making at the local level as well as promoting young people's political engagement and ensuring sustainable communities.

The high-level policy environment generally favours population-level outcomes that are broad and multifaceted and are not intended to be achieved by organisations, services or programmes working in isolation. While adherence to generalised notions of efficiency and outcomes upon which broad-based models are based can be valuable in unifying diverse stakeholders, such outcomes are difficult to implement in practice. In the United Kingdom (UK), common problems include "defining these outcomes and obtaining operational performance indicators to assess them" (Bovaird *et al*., 2012, p. 70). According to La Valle *et al*. (2016), even when outcome domains were specified, they were rarely accompanied by discussion on how they could be monitored, resulting in assessment efforts remaining developmental or aspirational.

Typically, enthusiasm for outcomes assessment at the policy and management level is not matched by practitioners, as its operationalisation is highly complex. In children and youth services, the increasing prevalence of the policy trend to prioritise outcomes is coming under criticism (de St Croix, 2018; Tunstill and Blewitt, 2015). Mundy-McPherson *et al*. (2012) found that evidence of impact and outcomes in youth work is "limited and disjointed, compounded by the fact that it is difficult to define the outcome measures and challenging to monitor these indicators over an extended period of time" (p. 216). In Ireland, as elsewhere, the move to outcomes-led, evidence-based practice has posed a number of challenges for the youth work sector. In responding, Jenkinson (2013) calls for a "shared understanding between agencies and policymakers of the values which underpin youth work and its development" (p. 13).

Literature on outcome measurement highlights differentiations between 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes or frameworks (Crawford and Pollack, 2004). Hard outcomes have clearly definable and quantifiable results that show the progress a beneficiary has made towards achieving desirable outcomes by participating in a project (Dewson *et al*., 2000). Soft or developmental outcomes are more complex to observe or measure, often because they relate to the 'internal balance' of a person: a change in attitude, confidence or self-control (McNeil *et al*., 2012). Among funding bodies, the documentation required for reporting is generally oriented towards hard outcomes (Harlock and Metcalf, 2016). In order for soft outcomes to be meaningful for funders McNeil *et al*. (2019, p. 4) argue, they should be used in a context that attempts to make "clear connections between what are considered to be the short-term or 'soft' outcomes of provision for young people and the longer-term impacts". Others have

highlighted the need to value soft outcomes for their own intrinsic value. Kiely and Meade's (2018) critique of outcomes assessment for youth work contends that the benefits for young people such as forming positive relationships with adults – in other words, soft outcomes – are not valued in and of themselves. Rather, they are seen in purely instrumental terms, such as their contribution to individuals' ability to find employment.

Critics of policy-makers' emphasis on evidence-based practice in youth work argue that the reliance on pre- and post-testing of an intervention or the use of control group methodologies popular in youth work are not suited to many youth work settings, nor have they led to an extended evidence base (Kiely and Meade, 2018; Stuart and Maynard, 2015). Moreover, such approaches are viewed as more viable for use with programmatic interventions and as being particularly unsuited to open access work, which recognises the unpredictable and flexible nature in which outcomes are allowed to emerge and are negotiated with young people and is characterised by a lack of predefined activities. According to Davies (2015), the 'unfinished' nature of youth work practice requires practitioners to negotiate uncertainty, to make choices and take the risks that are integral to youth work's "shifting informal exchanges" which mean "it can offer no guarantees of reaching certain and final outcomes" (p. 116). A 2020 review of the demonstrated impact of open access youth settings found that the vast majority of included studies were qualitative and focused "on self-reported or 'significant change' stories from young people; we recognise that there may therefore be a limit to whether or not they can be considered 'proof' of youth work impact" (Hill, 2020, p. 7).

As previously discussed, the nature of outcomes in youth work is complex. Instruments used to measure outcomes encompass a broad base of qualitative and quantitative research design methodologies. These range from studies that capture data from a particular group at a single point in time to longitudinal measurements that track progress over time. Among the latter, randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which involve a control and intervention group) are considered the gold standard. However, the cost and resourcing involved, as well as their suitability for universal youth settings, has been questioned (Stewart-Brown *et al*., 2011). In addition, the variety of scales and instruments used to measure youth work outcomes has posed difficulties in comparing findings, and, critically, for the staff responsible for administering such instruments within programmes and organisations. Such issues and

related considerations were encountered within the empirical studies selected for this review and are discussed in detail in Section 5.3.

2.4.2 Youth work outcomes: findings from recent literature

A summary of findings from a number of recent studies reviewing the literature on the impacts and outcomes associated with youth work are presented below.

Hill, P. (2020) *Open Access Youth Work: A Narrative Review of Impact*. Centre for Youth Impact. London. King's College London.

The aim of this study was to develop a narrative on the available research evidence on the impact of open access youth work for young people as relevant to the London context. The review included any study that constitutes original research which demonstrated an impact in any open access youth work setting regardless of study design. Drawing on 49 research studies – predominantly published from 2015 onwards – it summarised the key impacts into the following seven categories:

1. Society – social cohesion, volunteering, community or civic engagement, empowerment, cultural awareness and anti-racism.
2. Personal development – confidence, social skills, identity development, problem-solving and skills development.
3. Relationships – feeling supported; building trusting, non-judgemental relationships; and building capacity for positive relationships in the future.
4. Employment and education – developing hard and soft skills for the workplace, improved formal educational attainment, voluntary or paid opportunities, entrepreneurialism, and developing social capital.
5. A safe place to be – a safe and supportive environment, and somewhere you can be yourself.
6. Skills development – developing life skills, trying new things, and developing hard and soft skills.
7. Health and well-being – reduced risky behaviours, accessing services, and providing a place of respite.

The author cautions that the categories are simplified and unable to capture the complexity and nuanced nature of youth work. In addition, not all youth work projects will see the same impacts, with variation in the importance that young people attach to particular impacts or aspects thereof.

The review identified 10 common factors that contribute to the success or impact of open access youth work. The factors *Relationships* and *A safe place to be* were found to be both an impact of open access youth work and a factor contributing to its success. The other eight factors identified as important across the included studies were as follows:

- *Long-term work* – Relationships based on trust and respect need time to develop.
- *Stimulating activities* – Having engaging activities can be an important 'hook' to attract young people to the service initially and to keep them engaged on an ongoing basis.
- *Place-based youth workers* – Having youth workers who are familiar with the local area and lived realities of the young people is valued by young people.
- *Openness* – Youth work spaces should be welcoming, free of charge and allow young people to come and go as they wish.
- *Flexibility* – Youth work provision must be adapted to meet the needs and interests of young people.
- *Autonomy* – Youth work should involve a commitment to power-sharing between adults and young people – for example, involving young people in decision-making processes.
- *Joined-up approach* – Youth workers should link with other services.
- *Boundaries* – Young people appreciated being in settings with clear boundaries and expectations with regard to behaviour.

Dickson, K., Vigurs, C.A., and Newman, M. (2013) *Youth work: A systematic map of the research literature*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

This study was commissioned to inform the development of a youth policy framework in Ireland. The review aimed to map the empirical research evidence on the impact of youth work on the lives of young people aged 10–24 years, with a particular focus on the contribution of youth work to the lives of young people, the activities associated with outcomes for young people and the methods employed in assessing youth work activities. The review focused on both universal and targeted youth work provision. It included different types of studies and did not exclude any based on methodological design.

The map identified 175 studies (93 of which were impact evaluations) that provided empirical research evidence on the impact of youth work on the lives of children and young people aged 10–24 years. The review found that studies of youth work activities with a control group are very rare, with the result that there is limited high-quality research evidence about the impacts of youth work. An additional challenge is the lack of impact studies undertaken outside of the United States of America (USA). However, it is acknowledged that qualitative

data based on self-assessments are vital to inform practice and to provide children and young people with a voice that can be heard.

The study found that the aims, activities and ethos of youth work in Ireland was reflected in the international research literature. There is a focus on young people's sense of self and the development of their personal, social and emotional skills through educational, developmental, recreational and volunteer activities.

The findings of the review of 175 studies are summarised below.

Aims/purposes of youth work

Personal and social development: More than three-quarters of the studies reported personal and social development as the primary aim of the youth work activity.

Social change: A total of 30% of the studies aimed to facilitate young people to bring about change in their social worlds. Activities included empowering young people, supporting community change, and having a positive attitude towards what young people can offer society.

Education and career: Twenty-four studies saw youth work as a form of education or sought outcomes related to education, training or employment.

Safety and well-being: Some studies described the aims of youth work activities as preventing harm, engagement in crime, substance use and early pregnancy.

Contribution to society: Twenty-one percent of studies aimed to promote a greater sense of community connection and civic responsibility among youth.

Outcome domains

Relationships with others – both with peers and adults (66 studies)

Sense of self – personal development, self-esteem, confidence, identity and character (64 studies)

Community and society – civic engagement, connection to community (36 studies)

Health and well-being – impact on substance misuse, crime prevention, risk behaviour and mental health (36 studies)

Values and beliefs – aspirations for the future, values and attitudes towards diversity (30 *studies)*

Formal education and training – academic achievement, school connectedness and career aspirations (27 studies)

Mundy-McPherson, S., Fouché, C., and Elliot, K. (2012) If only "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet": A systematic review on the impact of youth work for young people.

This systematic review reported on interventions that the authors of existing publications defined as 'youth work' and which had young people as participants or the focus of the intervention. This review failed to find any relevant studies, possibly because the inclusion criteria were limited to intervention studies (such as RCTs), cohort studies, case control studies and nested case control studies and because of the strict application of the definition of youth work. It concluded, "The systematic review exposed the international absence of rigorously conducted evaluative research into the impact of youth work for young people" (Mundy-McPherson *et al.*, 2012, p. 213). The review calls for greater clarity where the definitional issues of youth work are concerned, suggesting that rigour in design and consistency in the terminology of youth work be universally adopted by the sector.

McGregor, C. (2015) ***Universal Youth Work: A Critical review of the literature*****.**

This study included research published between 2004 and 2014 and drew on published systematic reviews, including Dickson *et al*. (2013). A total of 175 papers were included in the study. This review found evidence that universal youth work can generate a range of health and well-being outcomes, make a contribution to improving formal educational outcomes, and impact on employability, as well as provide safe yet challenging spaces for personal and social development and intercultural learning. At the same time, it found that 'definitional dilemmas' underlie any discussion as to the role and value of youth work, with the review process illuminating a number of gaps in the peer-reviewed evidence base.

2.5 Chapter summary

- The role of youth work in providing developmental opportunities that contribute to the personal and social well-being of young people is widely acknowledged in national and international policy.
- As reflected in Irish policy and practice, personal and social outcome domains associated with youth work include communication skills, agency, problem-solving, relationships, creativity, resilience and emotional intelligence.

- Youth work is increasingly associated with broad societal and civic objectives for greater inclusiveness, tolerance and civic engagement. The link between citizenship and youth work is prevalent across policy frameworks.
- The emergence of digital youth work (heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic), while offering a number of opportunities for the sector, also requires upgrading of the skills of youth workers and adequate digital access for young people.
- The values of youth work are founded on educational principles, including providing opportunities for meaningful participation, developing agency and voice and engaging in individual and collective action to develop social awareness.
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ireland had a high level of involvement in youth services, with 40,000 volunteers active in the field; retention and re-engagement with this cohort is now required.
- The operational environment for the delivery of youth work services has increasingly seen an emphasis on developing quality standards, mechanisms and methodologies to demonstrate the contribution of youth work in society.
- The process of agreeing outcomes and the operational indicators with which to assess them is challenging; policy guidance recommends an environment that fosters dialogue, and particularly the participation of young people in the process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, this rapid review focuses on exploring and synthesising research examining the benefits and outcomes associated with youth participation in universal youth work. Specifically, the review aims to collate and summarise international empirical research evidence relating to the purposes, benefits and outcomes of universal youth work. This section provides a detailed overview of the methodology used to conduct the review.

3.2 Methodology

The methodological design of this review was informed by guidelines set out by Garritty *et al*. (2021). Based on these guidelines, we adopted transparent and systematic methods for identifying, describing and synthesising the available research evidence. This methodology involved five phases: (1) setting the research questions; (2) selecting a search strategy; (3) establishing the eligibility criteria; (4) conducting screening and data extraction; and (5) conducting a risk of bias assessment.

3.2.1 Setting the research questions

The approach taken to this rapid review was informed by a review of the methods employed in other similar systematic reviews and through ongoing discussions between the research team and DCEDIY, which commissioned this report. The purpose of the review is to provide DCEDIY with an overview of the research evidence relating to the purposes, benefits and outcomes associated with universal youth work in order to help inform the development of policy for the YSGS reform. For the purposes of this review, 'universal youth work' is defined as youth work initiatives, interventions and/or programmes that are, in principle, available to all young people and are not targeted at specific participants or groups (Hill, 2020; McGregor, 2015). In order to help inform policy and decision-making related to universal youth work in Ireland, the review aims to synthesise recent international research (e.g. published from 2011 to 2021) examining the benefits and outcomes associated with universal youth work for young people aged 10–24 years. In particular, the review will address the following research question and sub-questions:

What is the international empirical research evidence in relation to the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work for young people aged 10-24 10–24 years?

a. Towards what purposes is universal youth work directed?

b. What outcomes and benefits have been found in empirical studies of universal youth work?

c. What methods and tools are used to measure universal youth work outcomes?

d. What factors have been identified as important to the achievement of positive outcomes in through universal youth work?

3.2.2 Selecting a search strategy

In order to identify relevant research that focused on assessing the outcomes and benefits associated with youth participation in universal youth work, the research team devised a comprehensive, three-phase search strategy.

Phase One: database searches

In the first phase, the research team undertook extensive electronic database searching. Eight target databases were identified (PsycINFO, PsycEXTRA, Web of Science, Scopus, Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), ProQuest, Social Science, and ERIC) and searched using key terms. These were identified as key target databases as they are some of the most popular databases for research pertaining to psychology, sociology, and social work. They were also selected in order to ensure that our searches would identify both published and unpublished (e.g. grey literature) research. Relevant search terms were identified through pilot searches in these databases. Following these pilot searches, a final set of key search terms were identified by the research team as being relevant for the current review (see Table2). These terms were searched as keywords in each database. The review team employed truncation in order to ensure that words with variant spellings were also captured within the search. Targeted searches were conducted within each database. Search areas included the title, abstract and keywords sections of the articles. Searches were limited to papers published in the English language. Additionally, each database was searched for articles that were published/made available between January 2011 and September 2021. All searches were carried out by one member of the research team. Articles retrieved from the

databases were assessed for duplicates, and articles were screened in the following order: title/abstract and full-text.

Table 2: List of key terms searched in each database

"Universal Youth Work" or "Open Access Youth Work" or "Open Youth Work" or "Generic Youth Work" or "Volunteer-led Youth Work" or "Youth Work" or "Youth Club*" or "Youth Organisation*" or "Voluntary Youth Work" or "Youth Provision" or "Community-Based Youth Work" or "Community Youth Work" or "Youth Service" or "Youth Program*" or "Youth Initiative*"

Phase Two: reference list searches

In addition to searching the electronic databases for relevant research, two members of the research team also searched the reference lists of all included articles. The researchers hand searched the references cited within each of the included articles identified in Phase One in order to source other potentially relevant research that had not previously been identified through the electronic database searches.

Phase Three: targeted hand searches

In Phase Three, a member of the research team hand searched the websites of select youth organisations in Ireland and the UK in order to identify relevant research reports. A member of the research team also conducted a Google search to identify other potentially relevant research which cited key references, or had been included in other relevant systematic reviews (Hill, 2020) but had not been found within Phase One or Phase Two of our search strategy.

3.2.3 Establishing the eligibility criteria

Criteria for the inclusion/exclusion of studies in this review were established by the research team at the outset and adhered to throughout the searching and screening process. Studies were screened for inclusion/exclusion in this report according to nine specific eligibility

criteria: language; publication date; study design; type of study; target of youth work; study population; purpose of youth work; nature of youth work; and location/setting.

Language

For practical purposes, only studies that were available in the English language were included in the review.

Publication date

In order to ensure that the research included in this review would help provide relevant recommendations for current policy and practice, only the findings from recent empirical research were included in the review. Only those studies that were published/made available between January 2011 and September 2021 were included. However, no restriction was placed on publication type, and both published and unpublished studies were included. Specifically, research from both academic (e.g. peer-reviewed journal articles; book chapters) and grey literature (e.g. unpublished manuscripts; theses; commissioned reports) sources were included in this review.

Study design

Due to the complexities of the research questions posed, it is important that this review included evidence provided by multiple studies utilising different designs and methodologies. In order to ensure that this review captured a diversity of research methodologies, an open design criterion was applied to the current synthesis. Both quantitative and qualitative research studies were included in this review and there was no restriction placed on the design (e.g. RCT, cross-sectional, observational, etc.) of included studies.

Type of study

As a number of systematic reviews have previously been conducted in this area, in order to avoid a duplication in findings, literature reviews and meta-analyses were excluded from this synthesis. An overview of the findings from previous relevant reviews is provided in Chapter 2 of this report. Additionally, non-empirical research (such as commentaries or perspective pieces) was excluded. Only studies that reported new, original empirical research relating to universal youth work were included in this review.

Target of youth work

Only those studies that reported on youth work directed at young people aged between 10 and 24 years are included in this review.

Study population

To align with current policy and guidelines (e.g. World Health Organization), for the purposes of this research, 'youth' was defined as any persons aged between 10 and 24 years. Only research that reported on outcomes of youth work for youth aged 10–24 years (or with an average age between 10 and 24 years) was eligible for inclusion in this review. In order to ensure that the review captured evidence provided from multiple sources, studies that reported on findings related to youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work; youth workers engaging with youth aged 10–24 years; parents of youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work; and/or teachers of youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work were included in this review. Retrospective accounts (e.g. adults reporting on outcomes associated with their engagement in youth work when they were aged between 10 and 24 years) were also eligible for inclusion.

Purpose of youth work

All forms of youth work initiatives (e.g. clubs, programmes, drop-in activities, etc.) were eligible for inclusion in this review. However, in order to ensure that the youth work initiatives evaluated in this review aligned with the principles of positive youth development, only studies where at least one objective of the youth work related to the promotion of positive youth development and/or where the principles of the youth work are underpinned by a positive youth development framework were included. Youth work initiatives/programmes that focus on a specific issue (e.g. leadership skills) were eligible for inclusion in this review, provided that the initiative/programme is underpinned by a positive youth development framework.

Nature of youth work

As this review is focused on synthesising the benefits/outcomes associated with universal youth work specifically, as opposed to youth work generally, only youth work initiatives that are (in principle) open to all young people aged between 10 and 24 years were included in

this review. Youth work directed at target groups (e.g. 'at-risk' youth; ethnic minorities) were excluded. Youth work initiatives that traditionally target boys and girls separately (e.g. Girl Guides) are included, provided that the youth work is, in principle, open to all girls and boys within the local area/set geographical location.

Location/setting

The youth work must be carried out in a community setting in order to be included in this review. Youth work conducted in educational/vocational, religious, sports, or healthcare settings was excluded. Youth work conducted as part of residential summer camps was also excluded from this review.

Please see Appendix A for further information about the inclusion/exclusion criteria applied in this review.

3.2.4 Screening and data extraction

Following the search strategy outlined in Section 3.2.2, keyword searches of all eight databases returned a total of 5,414 articles (PsycINFO: 728; PsycEXTRA: 40; Web of Science: 1,202; Scopus: 2,102; ASSIA: 287; ProQuest: 392; Social Science: 339; ERIC: 324) (see Appendix B for more detail). All references were imported into EndNote and an assessment of duplicate articles was carried out. In total, 1,214 duplicate articles were identified and removed, which resulted in a total of 4,200 unique references (including journal articles, research papers, etc.) being retained. These 4,200 references were then screened according to the pre-established selection criteria (see Section 3.2.3). All articles were screened for exclusion/inclusion first based on reading the title and abstract, and then based on reading the full-text article, following recommendations by Mateen et al. (2013).

At the title/abstract screening stage, one researcher reviewed the title and abstract of each identified reference and made a decision to include or exclude the paper based on the nine inclusion criteria. A second researcher independently reviewed 20% of the titles and abstracts and made an independent decision as to their inclusion or exclusion based on the same selection criteria. Based on the 20% of dual-screened titles and abstracts, there was 91% agreement observed between the two researchers. Where the two researchers disagreed about the inclusion or exclusion of a paper, a third member of team reviewed the article in

order to resolve disagreements. This third reviewer also examined all excluded references. Where the third reviewer disagreed about the exclusion of an article at the title/abstract screening stage, the paper was carried forward to the full-text reviewing stage. During the title/abstract screening stage, a total of 3,749 references were found not to meet the inclusion criteria and were removed. This resulted in 451 articles being retained for full-text screening.

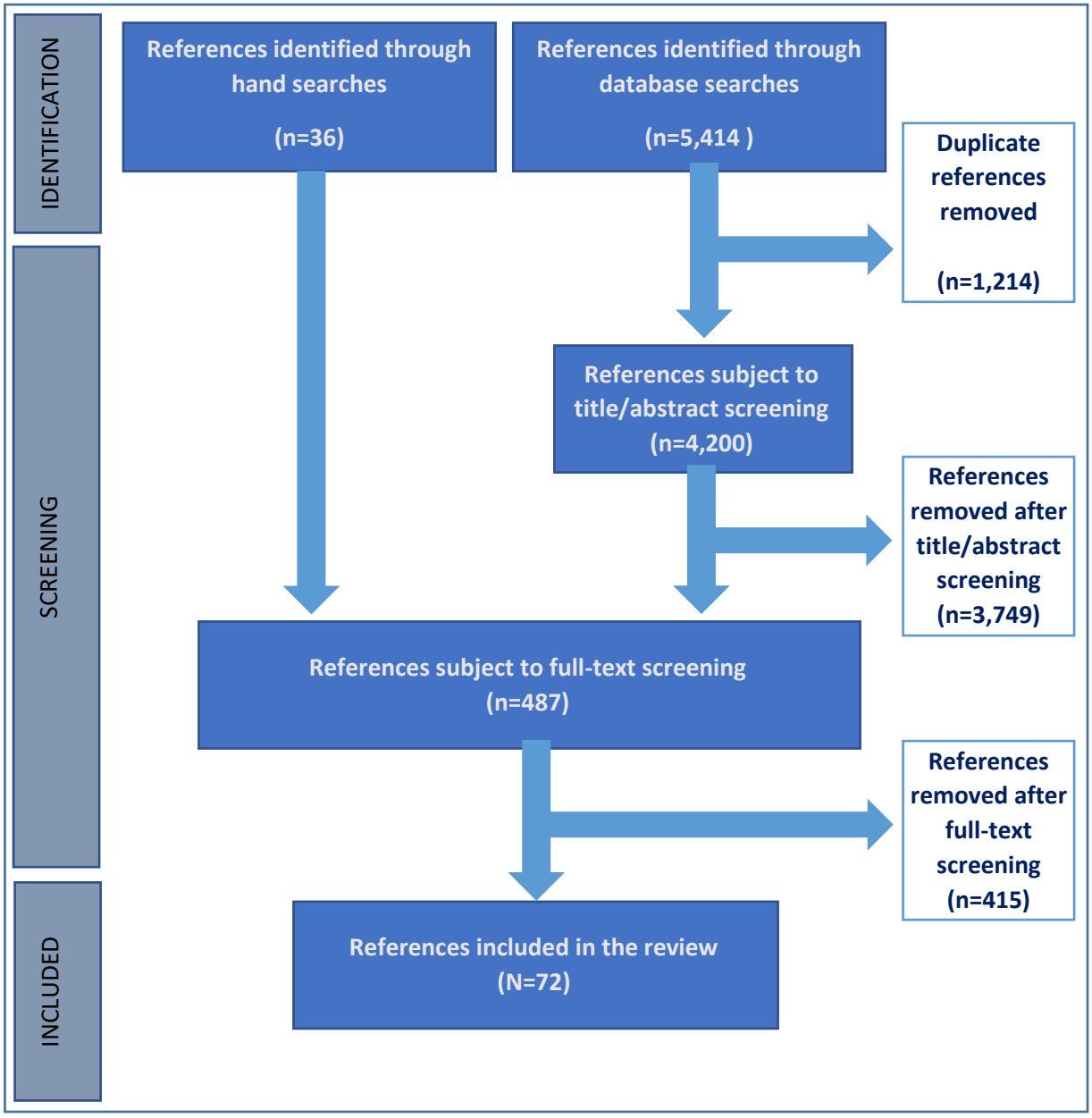
Prior to the next screening stage, full-text electronic copies of all included references were sourced by the research team. Where a full-text version of the article/chapter could not be found, the review team contacted the authors of the article (where possible) to request a full-text copy of the paper. Given that this was a rapid review, only those references where the full text could be sourced prior to 12 October 2021 were included in the full-text screening stage. Following the acquisition of the full-text references, the articles were screened against the inclusion/exclusion criteria by at least one member of the research team.[1] Dual screening was conducted on 20% of full texts, where a second reviewer independently read 20% of the full-text articles and made a decision as to whether the paper should be included or excluded using the aforementioned inclusion criteria. At the full-text screening stage, an agreement rate of 86% was observed between the two researchers. All disagreements were reviewed by a third reviewer who made the final decision as to whether the article should be included or excluded. This third reviewer also examined all excluded references. Where the third reviewer disagreed about the exclusion of a full-text article, all members of the research team discussed the article in question and came to a consensus as to its inclusion in the review. Following this full-text screening stage, a further 393 articles were removed, leaving a total of 58 articles that were found to have met the inclusion criteria (see Figure 1).

A member of the research team subsequently screened the reference lists of each of the 58 included articles. Hand searches of youth organisation websites and articles which cited key references were conducted by a separate member of the research team. Relevant articles identified during this hand searching process were screened following the same strategy

[1] One member of the research team reviewed 50% of articles, while a second member of the research team reviewed the remaining 50% of articles.

detailed above. This process resulted in the inclusion of 14 additional full-text articles. Overall, as a result of the screening process, a total of 72 articles were included in the review.

Figure 1: Screening process and number of references retained at each stage



Once data screening was completed, the 72 articles which met the inclusion criteria and were included in this review were subject to a data extraction process. Data from each of the included full-text articles were extracted and tabulated by one member of the research team. The following information was extracted from each study: name of author(s); year of publication; study design; aims of study; description of participants (including age, gender,

nationality); theoretical framework; description of youth work; purpose of youth work; methodology employed; indicators and outcomes assessed; type of measures/instruments used; quantitative results; qualitative results; and overall conclusions.

3.2.5 Conducting a risk of bias assessment

As the screening process relies on the researchers making interpretive judgements about the relevance of the research being assessed, an effective quality assurance process was developed in order to ensure that the researchers' judgements were appropriate and consistent. A detailed inclusion criteria tool was developed to assist the researchers with their judgements (see Appendix A). Additionally, 20% of references were subject to a blind dual-screening process at both the title/abstract and full-text screening stages. Furthermore, a third researcher reviewed all excluded titles/abstracts and full texts in order to ensure accuracy in the exclusion process.

3.3 Coding and analysis

In order to answer the research questions, all data extracted from the included articles were coded and subjected to a narrative synthesis. A member of the research team conducted a narrative synthesis in order to identify the characteristics associated with the included studies and the type/nature of youth work assessed. Characteristics were grouped so as to identify the commonalities and/or differences between the research studies. In order to identify the outcomes and benefits associated with participation in universal youth work, codes were generated for each individual outcome reported. Similar codes were grouped in order to form themes, following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). These emergent themes are described in Chapter 4 of this report.

3.4 Limitations

As this is a rapid review, it was necessary to make practical decisions in relation to the search strategy in order to ensure that the review could be completed within the specified time frame. It should be noted that the key terms selected for this review are not exhaustive. Key terms were selected based on pilot searches and a comparison of the terms which appeared to produce the most relevant results during pilot searching. Nonetheless, it should be

acknowledged that most search terms included a derivative of the term 'youth work', and different terms, such as 'after-school clubs', may have identified other relevant research. Similarly, all search terms included in this review were searched as key terms only. This may have restricted the types of studies discovered. Future reviews in this area may benefit from including a wider set of search terms or from broadening the search strategy to include Mesh terms. Furthermore, the articles identified by this review were restricted to those available in the English language, which may have resulted in a lack of representation of research conducted in non-English-speaking countries. Although it was not feasible to include non-English-language papers in this review, doing so would make a beneficial contribution to any future review in this area. It should also be noted that we observed a low response rate to our requests for full-text articles. Due to the time constraints associated with rapid reviews, it was not possible to allocate a large amount of time to the sourcing of full-text articles. Only those texts which could be sourced prior to 12 October 2021 were included in this review. In total, 32 references were excluded from this review because the full-text article could not be sourced. It is possible that some of these articles may have been relevant to this review and that it may have been possible to source these articles had it not been for the time constraints involved. It was also not possible to conduct a quality appraisal of the reviewed research due to the time constraints involved. Finally, although the inclusion of grey literature and hand searches is a strength of this review, it is acknowledged that these searches were not extensive, and future reviews may benefit from engaging in more robust grey literature and hand searching practices.

3.5 Chapter summary

A rigorous searching and synthesis methodology was adopted for this review, based on best-practice rapid review guidelines. Through a combination of targeted database and hand searching strategies, a total of 5,450 peer-reviewed and grey literature articles were identified and screened for relevance. A total of 72 full-text articles were found to meet the inclusion criteria and were included in this review. These 72 articles were then subjected to a data extraction and coding process. The results of this analytic process are detailed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Review findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synthesis of the findings from the 72 included research papers regarding the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work.

This chapter is organised as follows:

- Section 4.2 provides a profile of the studies included in the review. It describes the year each study was published, as well as the study's geographical location, study design, methods of data collection, respondent type and sample size. It also describes the theoretical frameworks guiding the studies, and profiles the organisations being studied and the types of youth work activities undertaken.
- Section 4.3 presents the review findings relating to the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work.
- Section 4.4 describes the measures used to assess quantitative outcomes within the studies reviewed.
- Section 4.5 outlines the factors conducive to positive outcomes identified across the studies reviewed.

4.2 Profile of included studies

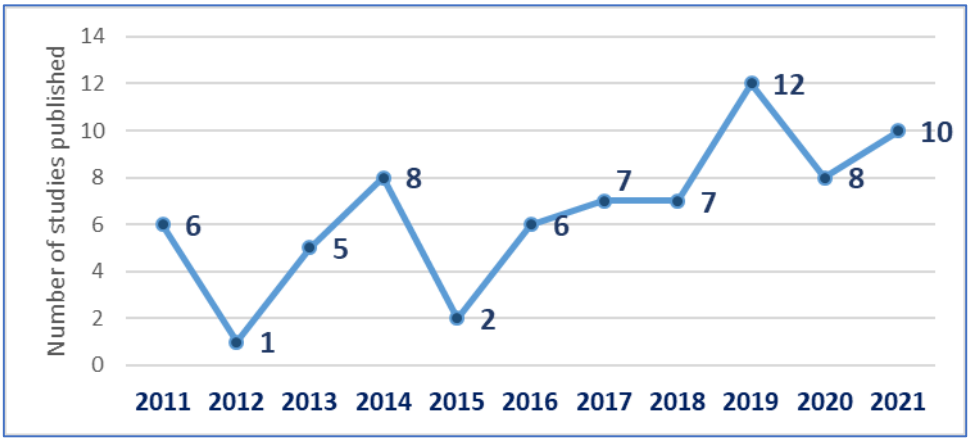
The findings of the 72 empirical research articles included were subjected to a narrative synthesis for the purposes of: (1) describing the characteristics of universal youth work initiatives/programmes; (2) identifying the outcomes/benefits associated with participation in universal youth work; and (3) understanding the aspects of youth work that promote positive youth outcomes.

4.2.1 Year of publication

All of the studies reviewed for and included in this report were published between 2011 and 2021. There was a noticeable increase in the number of studies published on universal youth

work from 2019 onwards, with a large percentage of studies (42%, n=30) being published between 2019 and 2021.

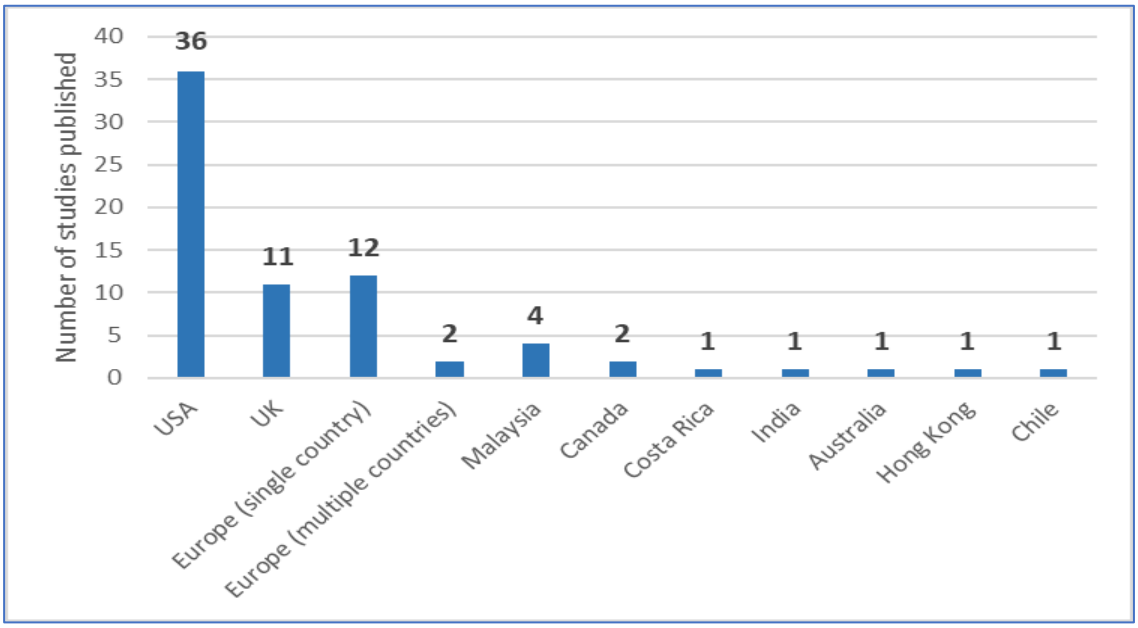
Figure 2: Year of publication



4.2.2 Geographical location

The research reviewed for this report was found to have been completed in a variety of different countries. However, one-half of the included studies/youth work initiatives (50%, n=36) were conducted in the USA. An additional 15% of studies (n=11) were found to have been carried out solely within the UK, while 6% of studies (n=4) were conducted within Ireland. Only a small minority (3%, n=2) of papers collected research from across multiple countries. Notably, both of these studies collected information about the outcomes associated with universal youth work from multiple European countries.

Figure 3: Geographical location of studies



4.2.3 Study design

The largest proportion (47%, n=34) of the primary empirical studies evaluated in this review employed a qualitative research design. A large percentage of studies (42%, n=30) employed a quantitative research design, while a small share (11%, n=8) utilised a mixed-methods design, which involved both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Of the quantitative studies, the most common study design employed was a cross-sectional research design (n=20). Other quantitative research utilised RCT (n=2), quasi-experimental (n=2), cohort (n=3) or longitudinal (n=3) research designs. The research designs used by the studies evaluated in this review can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Study design

STUDY DESIGN	NUMBER OF STUDIES
Quantitative research design	**30**
Cross-sectional	*20*
RCT	*2*
Quasi-Experimental	*2*
Cohort design	*3*
Longitudinal	*3*
Qualitative research design	**34**
Mixed-methods research design	**8**

4.2.4 Methods of data collection

The most common data collection method used in the included studies was a survey/questionnaire (50%, n=36). The majority (67%, n=24) of the studies that used surveys incorporated previously validated scales to measure constructs of interest. Interviews were the most common qualitative method used to gather data (38%, n=27), while researcher observation was conducted in eight studies. Focus groups were undertaken in six studies (8%). The increased prevalence of the Most Significant Change methodology (Cooper et al, 2019) for evaluating youth work largely explains the choice of researcher-elicited narratives or stories in five studies (7%). Finally, secondary analysis of extant survey data was conducted in two studies (3%), while document analysis was undertaken in one study (1%). Many studies used a combination of methods. The methods of data collection used in the included studies can be seen in Table 3.

Table 4: Methods of data collection

Survey/questionnaire *Including validated scales* *Including researcher-developed scales*	36 *24* *1*
Interviews	27
Researcher observation	8
Focus groups	6
Researcher-elicited narratives	5
Quantitative secondary data analysis	2
Document analysis	1

4.2.5 Profile of respondents

The 72 studies included in this review drew on data gathered from a range of respondent types. Not surprisingly, the most common respondent group was young people, with 50 studies (69%) involving young people as research participants. Of these, three studies involved females only and one involved males only due to the gender-specific nature of the youth work setting. In nine studies (12%), research was conducted with previous youth work participants who are now adults in order to assess the impact of youth work in adulthood. Adult leaders, including staff or volunteers, were included as respondents in 19 studies (26%), while parents' perspectives were sought in four studies (6%). A total of twelve studies (17%)

involved a mix of respondent types, with youth and leaders being the most common combination. The respondent types which supplied data for the included studies can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Profile of respondents

Respondents	Number of studies
Young people	50
Mixed (females and males)	*46*
Females only	*3*
Males only	*1*
Previous youth participants (now adults)	9
Leaders (staff/volunteers)	19
Parents	4
Mix of respondents	*10*

The age range of participants in the included studies was generally 10–19 years, with a smaller number of studies including young people aged up to 24 years. The mean age of youth respondents was given in 25 studies, and the average age across these studies was 15.3 years.

4.2.6 Sample size

Sample sizes ranged from 4 to 80,000 participants. The mean sample size across the 68 studies reporting a sample size was 1,655, and the median sample size was 123. A breakdown of sample sizes is provided in Table 6. Four studies did not report the sample size. One study was a clear outlier in terms of sample size, with 80,000 participants. When this study is excluded, the mean sample size is 489 participants.

Table 6: Breakdown of sample sizes

Sample size (total)	**Number of studies**
1–30	20 (28%)
31–100	8 (11%)
101–200	12 (17%)
201–300	4 (6%)
301–400	6 (8%)
400–500	3 (4%)
≥500	15 (21%)
Not reported	4 (6%)
Total	72

4.2.7 Theoretical basis of youth work

In order to understand the principles underpinning the various approaches to universal youth work, the research team reviewed the theoretical frameworks cited in each of the individual 72 studies. Of the studies included in this review, most (72%, n=52) appeared to be guided by one or more particular theoretical or conceptual frameworks, while approximately one-quarter (28%, n=20) did not explicitly identify a specific theoretical approach underpinning the youth work. Of the 52 studies which were guided by specific theories, 10 drew on multiple theoretical approaches. Across these reviewed studies, the most common underpinning theory was the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework (Lerner et al., 2009), which was the named approach in 20 of the included studies. According to the PYD theory, in order for youth to thrive and achieve positive developmental outcomes, youth work needs to engage youth in activities that are delivered in a safe environment and help them foster supportive and meaningful relationships with others. The underlying theories identified as guiding youth work in the included studies can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7: Underlying theories guiding universal youth work

Theory	Number of studies
None specified/identified	20
PYD	20
Bio-Ecological Systems Theory	5
Youth–adult partnership	3
Agency	3
Critical pedagogy	3
Social capital	3
Social and Emotional Learning Framework	2
Empowerment theory	2
Non-formal learning	2
Self-determination theory	2
Stage-fit theory	2
Psychological engagement	1
Identity theory	1
Acculturation/enculturation model	1
Community empowerment	1
Role theory	1
Social role theory	1
Diversity and inclusion model	1
Adler's theory of individual psychology	1
Socialisation framework	1

Psychological needs theory	1
Social support theory	1
Resilience theory	1
Attachment theory	1
Community capital	1
Human capital	1
Psychological capital	1
Flow theory	1
Digital literacy	1
Learning theory	1
Emotion theory	1
Social justice	1
Community of practice	1

Note: The total number of studies indicated is greater than 72, as several studies employed multiple theoretical frameworks.

4.2.8 Profile of youth work organisations

The 72 studies included in this review were based on research conducted in a diverse range of youth work settings around the world. As noted in Chapter 3, in order to be included in this review, the youth work settings under examination had to be universal in nature – i.e. open to all young people aged 10–24 years within a local/geographical area and not targeted at individuals with specific risks or 'deficits'. However, universal youth work programmes with a gender-specific focus were included.

One-half of the studies that met the inclusion criteria focused on youth work provision in the USA, with nine of these studies researching programmes affiliated with 4-H, America's largest youth development organisation. Three studies were focused on Boys & Girls Clubs of America, three on the Boy Scouts of America and two on the American Youth Circus Organization. A large number of the studies conducted in the USA (n=18) were based on independent youth development programmes, with some studies drawing samples from multiple programmes.

Whereas the focus in the research literature from the USA is predominantly on PYD programmes, published research on youth work provision in the UK and Europe was more likely to focus on open access youth work settings, such as drop-in youth work spaces and youth clubs. Eight studies from the UK described their research settings as open access youth work, with some studies focusing on multiple settings. Studies from the rest of the world included both PYD-focused programmes and open access youth work. Table 8 shows the

types and settings of youth work organisations examined in the studies included in this review.

Table 8: Profile of youth work organisations included in this review

Country	Organisation type/study setting or sample	Number of studies
USA	4-H programmes	9
	Boys & Girls Clubs of America	3
	Boy Scouts of America	3
	American Youth Circus Organization	2
	Individual PYD-focused youth programmes	18
	Online coding community	1
UK	Open access youth work settings	8
	Small voluntary organisation	1
	Scouts/Guides	1
	Digital youth workers from various organisations	1
Europe	Girls Work (Netherlands)	2
	Youth cafés (Ireland)	2
	Foróige – SoundSurfers (Ireland)	1
	Foróige – youth clubs (Ireland)	1
	Youth clubs (Norway)	1
	Youth clubs (Spain)	1
	Open access youth club (Italy)	1
	Youth work settings (Estonia)	1
	Professional youth work (Netherlands)	1
	Voluntary organisation (Europe; country not specified)	1
	Open access youth work settings in 6 countries	1
	Survey conducted in 40 countries	1
Rest of world	After-school programmes (Malaysia)	3
	Psy4Life (Malaysia)	1
	Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada (Canada)	1
	PYD programmes (Canada)	1
	4-S programmes (Costa Rica)	1
	Youth organisations (Chile)	1
	Youth clubs (India)	1
	Integrated youth centres (Hong Kong)	1
	Open youth work setting (Australia)	1

4.2.9 Types of youth work activities undertaken

The content or focus of youth work activities in the included studies was also diverse, but some broad themes or categories were identified. Most of the studies referenced more than one of these activities. The broad theme of informal learning was a goal in 48 of the included studies. This category includes group work, training, activities and information provision occurring within a youth work setting. Leisure and recreation was an activity in 32 of the included studies, including unstructured drop-in, hanging out, games, playing pool, cooking and field trips. Twenty-eight of the settings studied took a focus on civic action, which included leadership development, contribution to community, volunteering, environmental projects, etc. In 22 studies, there was explicit reference to experiential learning projects, whereby young people undertook a project in the area of arts; science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); or leadership, for example, and worked on it over a prolonged period. Many such projects had a strong emphasis on creativity, with arts, media and music used as mediums for engagement and learning. Likewise, STEM and sports were each a focus in nine studies. Other activities mentioned were homework support and digital youth work. Experiential learning projects, civic action and STEM were more likely to be named as youth work activities in studies from the USA, whereas leisure and recreation, including unstructured drop-in or 'hanging out' activities, were more common in European studies. The types of youth work activities in the included studies can be seen in Table 9.

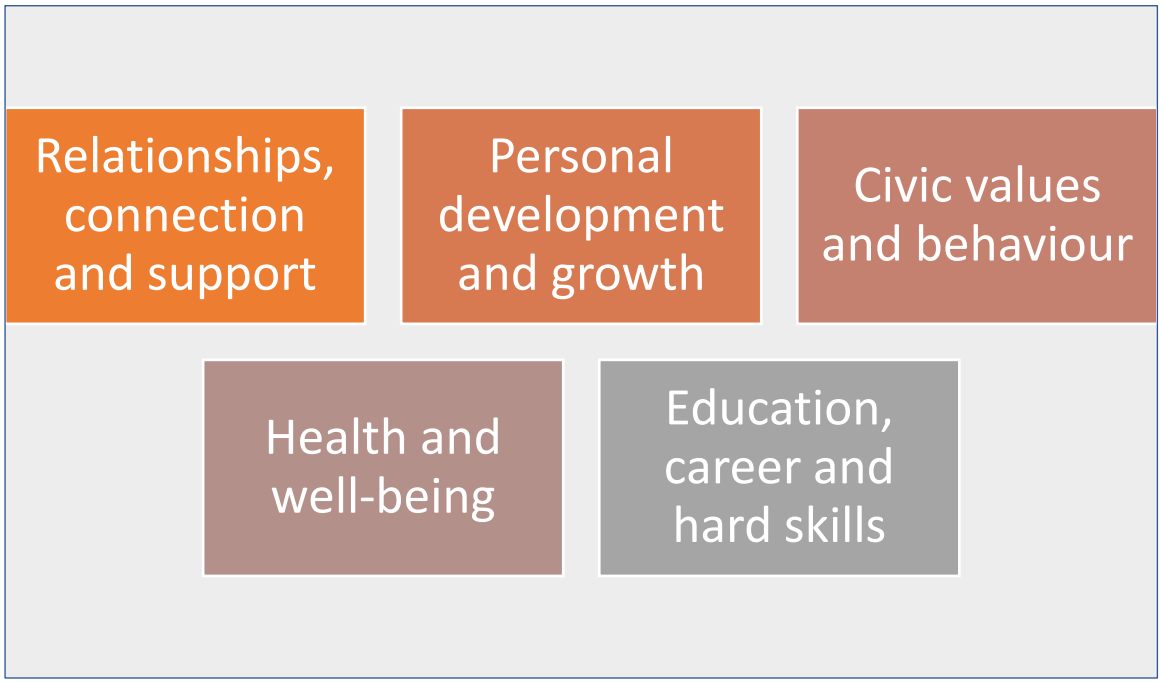
Table 9: Profile of youth work activity types

Activity type	Number of studies (%)
Informal learning	48 (66%)
Leisure and recreation	32 (44%)
Civic action/leadership/community service	28 (39%)
Experiential learning projects	22 (30%)
Arts, media, music	21 (29%)
STEM	9 (13%)
Sports	9 (13%)
Education/homework support	3 (4%)
Digital youth work	2 (2%)

4.3 Benefits and outcomes associated with universal youth work

In order to identify the impacts associated with universal youth work, individual outcomes reported in each of the 72 articles were identified, coded and grouped into separate categories. Of the 72 studies included in this review, only one study, Ferris *et al*. (2013), appeared to indicate that universal youth work was not associated with any significant positive outcome. Each of the remaining 71 articles identified at least one significant, positive outcome or change associated with universal youth work. Although a diverse array of outcomes was reported across the various studies, these outcomes were found to broadly fall into one of five thematic categories: (1) relationships, connection and support; (2) personal development and growth; (3) civic values and behaviour; (4) health and well-being; and (5) education, career and hard skills. These thematic categories were informed by those used in previous systematic reviews (e.g. Hill, 2020; Dickson *et al*., 2013) using a deductive analytic approach, and were modified to best represent the individual impacts emerging from this review.[2] Findings are discussed separately for each of these observed outcome thematic categories.

Figure 4: Overview of outcome thematic categories



[2] 'Impact' refers to significant outcomes or changes that were evidenced by youth and have been linked to their participation in youth work or to a specific feature within the youth work environment. Non-significant outcomes are not reported here.

4.3.1 Relationships, connection and support

A key benefit of universal youth work is that it is a space where young people can make and maintain positive relationships with others. Across the included studies, the social and relational aspects of universal youth work emerged very strongly, with outcomes related to this thematic category reported in 41 studies. A total of 111 individual outcome indicators were recorded, which were grouped into 21 themes. This finding was more likely to be reported in qualitative studies, with 29 such studies identifying outcomes related to this domain, compared with 12 quantitative studies.

Peer connections and relationships was the most common single theme within this category. As a result of their involvement in open access youth work, young people made new friendships with other young people and strengthened existing connections. These friendships were described as positive and were a source of great enjoyment and fulfilment for young people.

Nineteen studies identified relationships with adults, be they professional staff or volunteers, as an outcome associated with universal youth work, with characteristics of these relationships also named in other indicators. The ability to form and maintain positive relationships with adults was valued by youth attending youth work settings. Adult–youth relationships were seen as supportive, non-judgemental and helpful, and were often characterised by a high degree of trust. In 17 studies, outcomes related to social support received in the youth work environment were identified, including instrumental support, help with personal problems, emotional support and empathy. Staff and volunteers were also described as role models, mentors and guides. The relationships formed in youth work settings were described as ‘real’ and ‘trusting’ in six studies, while associated terms such as ‘acceptance’, ‘respect’, ‘lack of judgement’, and ‘feeling heard and accepted’ provided further insights into the perceived qualities of the adult–youth relationships formed in the youth work settings from the perspectives of young people.

More broadly, studies of young people highlighted the importance of providing an open space for young people in their communities. The youth work setting was identified as somewhere

young people felt a sense of belonging, a spirit of community or feelings of solidarity with others. In some studies, young people referred to the youth work space as a safe and welcoming one or a neutral space where people from diverse backgrounds could socialise. In addition to providing an opportunity for young people to make and meet friends, Ritchie and Ord (2017) argue that open access youth work spaces meet a deeper level of need, including providing a sense of belonging and acceptance where this is lacking in other areas of their lives. Their study, and others in this review, illustrate how the connections made in these settings (both between young people and youth workers and among young people themselves) are valued by the young people involved.

Constructively dealing with conflict was also identified as a benefit experienced by young people. As well as being an outcome, relationships, connection and support can be seen as the foundation for the emergence of outcomes in other thematic categories. The outcomes that were associated with the thematic category of relationships, connection and support in the included studies can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10: Outcomes associated with the thematic category of relationships, connection and support

Outcomes	Number of studies
Connection/positive relationships/friendships with peers	24
Connection/positive relationships with adults	19
Social support (including instrumental, emotional support, guidance, empathy, mentoring)	17
Ability to form/maintain positive relationships	6
Sense of belonging	7
A welcoming, safe space	7
'Real', trusting relationships	6
Sense of community	2
Feeling accepted	3
Help with personal problems	3
Feeling listened to and heard	2
Feelings of solidarity	2
Helping resolve conflicts between others	2
Connecting to those from diverse backgrounds	2
Adults have high expectations of/believe in youth	2
Social outlet/increased social interaction	2
Feel understood	1
Equal and included	1
Feeling respected	1
Feel valued	1
Lack of judgement	1
Relationships, connection and support	**111**

4.3.2 Personal development and growth

Of the five emergent thematic categories, personal development and growth was the largest observed; in total, across 61 studies, 192 individual outcomes were found to be associated with young people's personal development and growth. Within this thematic category, two notable sub-themes emerged: *sense of self* and *skills development*. A comprehensive list of the observed outcomes within these two sub-themes is provided in Table 11.

Sense of self: Of the 192 outcomes evidenced to be related to young people's personal development and growth, 104 of these outcomes appeared to be associated with young people's sense of self or character development. Within this sub-theme, the most prominent outcome assessed in the reviewed studies was young people's confidence, with 20 studies

proposing that aspects of the universal youth work experience are linked to greater self-confidence. Nine studies assessed young people's identity development, where youth participating in universal youth work appeared to understand themselves better or view themselves more favourably; eight studies reported on young people's strengthened character or personal growth, while another eight studies observed positive changes in young people's motivation to participate in or engage with the youth work club/programme. Six studies found that youth engaging in universal youth work initiatives showed greater openness to feedback, guidance and criticism. Several studies also showed that youth participating in youth work displayed more positive self-concepts, including better self-esteem (n=3), self-awareness (n=2), self-efficacy (n=3), self-respect (n=3), self-pride (n=3), self-mastery (n=2), resilience (n=2), perseverance (n=1) and sense of empowerment (n=3). Additionally, some studies found that youth engaged in universal youth work reported gaining a sense of purpose (n=3), finding personal meaning (n=1) and experiencing greater hope for the future (n=2). Lastly, a number of studies indicated that youth participating in universal youth work also expressed positive regard for others, showing development in outcomes such as personal responsibility (n=1), personal integrity (n=1), empathy (n=4), respect for others (n=1) and compassion/caring (n=2).

Skills development: Youth engaging in universal youth work were also found to display a wide variety of social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural benefits. Of the 192 outcomes related to the thematic category of personal development and growth, 88 outcomes were found to be associated with young people's skills development. In particular, the studies included in this review found a positive association between universal youth work and young people's emotional skills, such as their coping (n=3), emotional learning (n=2), emotional regulation (n=5) and self-regulation (n=3) skills.

Young people also demonstrated significant gains in their cognitive capabilities. Specifically, eight studies found that youth participating in universal youth work showed greater personal agency (e.g. forethought, intentionality and self-reflection). Other studies found a link between participation in youth work and better problem-solving or decision-making skills (n=6) and increased general knowledge or life skills (n=7). Additionally, a small number of studies reported significant outcomes related to young people's planning (n=3), goal setting (n=2), time management (n=1) and self-expression (n=2) skills, while other studies reported

that youth in universal youth work showed strong intellectual capabilities, such as competence (n=3), creativity (n=3), concentration (n=1) and adaptability/flexibility (n=2).

Several of the studies included in this report assessed young people's social skills/development. Of these studies, nine linked universal youth work with better communication skills. A number of studies also found that young people participating in youth work showed greater interpersonal skills, including social skills (n=5), social competence (n=2), prosocial skills (n=2) and teamwork/collaboration skills (n=5).

In addition, some studies assessed the behavioural development of young people participating in universal youth work and observed several positive outcomes relating to young people's ability to make positive choices (n=2), access resources (n=2), take on responsibility (n=6), develop talent (n=3) and show initiative (n=1).

Table 11: Outcomes associated with young people's personal development and growth

Personal development and growth (N=192)	**Sense of self/character development (n=104)** • Perseverance (1) • Resilience (2) • Motivation to participate in youth club/engagement in youth programme (8) • Engaging in leisure/recreational activities or clubs (4) • Empathy (4) • Compassion/caring (2) • Respect for others (1) • Sense of purpose (3) • Personal integrity (1) • Broadened horizons (2) • Openness to trying new things (2) • Openness to feedback, guidance or criticism (6) • Hopefulness for future (2) • Transformed worldview (2) • Confidence/self-confidence (20) • Self-efficacy (3) • Self-esteem/self-worth (2)	**Skills development (n=88)** **Emotional development** • Coping skills (3) • Emotional learning (2) • Emotional regulation (5) • Self-regulation skills (3) **Cognitive development** • Personal agency skills (8) • Planning skills (3) • Goal setting (2) • Problem-solving/decision-making (6) • Time management skills (1) • General knowledge and life skills development (7) • Competence (3) • Creativity (3) • Concentration (1) • Adaptability/flexibility (2) • Self-expression (2) **Social development** • Social skills (5)

	• Sense of achievement/pride (3) • Self-awareness (2) • Self-respect/acceptance (3) • Sense of personal responsibility (1) • Sense of empowerment (3) • Identity development (9) • Independence/autonomy (3) • Strengthened character/personal growth (8) • Finding personal meaning (1) • Thinking of future (2) • Self-mastery/realising one's potential (2) • Developing a voice (2)	• Communication/presentation skills (9) • Teamwork/collaboration (5) • Prosocial orientation/skills (2) • Social competence (2) **Behavioural development** • Making positive choices (2) • Accessing resources/opportunities (2) • Developing talents/interests (3) • Taking on responsibilities (6) • Taking initiative (1)

4.3.3 Civic values and behaviour

Outcomes related to civic values and behaviour were reported in 43 studies. A total of 90 individual outcomes were reported across these studies, which have been grouped into 9 sub-categories.

The outcome most commonly found within this theme relates to youth civic engagement and volunteering as a result of participation in universal youth work services. The included studies found evidence that young people had been active in their communities, undertaken social action projects, volunteered or engaged in service to their communities in other ways. Closely related to this, 22 outcomes relating to leadership skills or taking leadership were identified. A number of studies also found an increased sense of social responsibility among young people who had taken part in universal youth work.

There was evidence across many of the included studies of outcomes related to equality and diversity. Through youth work participation, young people were exposed to people from other cultures and experiences, which helped them to improve their knowledge and awareness of issues related to equality and diversity. Some studies reported enhanced cultural competence. Specific training or experiential learning projects focused on equality or diversity issues were also undertaken in a number of settings. Related to this, eight studies found outcomes related to greater social awareness or critical consciousness regarding issues such as race or gender among young people as a result of youth work participation.

Some studies also reported increased social, cultural or political capital among young people, arising from the increased social connections and value orientations resulting from their participation in universal youth work. The outcomes related to the thematic category of civic values and behaviour can be seen in Table 12.

Table 12: Outcomes associated with young people's civic values and behaviour

Civic values and behaviour (N=90)	Civic engagement/social action/volunteering/service to community (23) Leadership skills/taking leadership (22) Understanding and embracing equality and diversity (15) Critical consciousness/awareness of social issues/empowerment (8) Community connectedness (6) Social responsibility values (5) Political engagement/capital (3) Social capital (4) Cultural capital (4)

4.3.4 Health and well-being

Of the 72 research studies included in this review, 18 separate (8 quantitative and 10 qualitative) studies reported significant outcomes relating to young people's health and well-being. Overall, 40 individual outcomes were examined across these 18 studies. Within this category, one of the key outcome areas observed related to young people's mental and physical health (n=22). Several studies noted that young people attending universal youth work appeared to experience greater well-being (n=5) and better mental health (n=14), including being better able to manage stress, anxiety, depression or other negative emotions; avoiding self-harm; experiencing happy or positive emotions; and feeling secure. A small number of quantitative research studies also pointed to a positive relationship between youth work participation and young people's engagement in physical activity (n=1), perceptions of body image (n=1) and knowledge about specialised care services (n=1).

Another key health outcome reported in a number of the reviewed studies was related to young people's risky behaviour. In total, 18 outcomes linking aspects of the universal youth work experience to young people's engagement in risky behaviours were identified. However, it should be noted that most of the outcomes noted here were reported by qualitative research studies. Only two quantitative studies (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2014; Kuperminc *et al*., 2011) reported significant findings relating to young people's engagement in risky behaviour. These studies indicated that participation in youth clubs (e.g. Girls Work; Boys & Girls Clubs of America) was associated with reduced drug-taking/intentions to take drugs, alcohol use, smoking, and engagement in sexual activity. Notably, the evidence from the qualitative research complements these findings, as youth frequently attributed their

reduced engagement in risky behaviours (including drug and alcohol use) and their ability to make healthier decisions regarding risky relationships to their participation in the youth clubs/programmes. In five qualitative studies, youth and programme staff also described how youth clubs act as a place of physical or emotional safety for young people, where young people can seek refuge from the stresses of outside life or avoid exposure to risky behaviour. Table 13 shows the outcomes associated with the thematic category of health and well-being seen in the included studies.

Table 13: List of outcomes associated with young people's health and well-being

Health and well-being (N=40)	**Risk behaviour (n=18)** • Reduced risk behaviour (2) • Having a place of safety (5) • Alcohol intake/intentions (3) • Drug-taking/intentions to use drugs (4) • Smoking (1) • Knowledge of sexual consent (1) • Engagement in sexual activity (1) • Making healthier choices about risky relationships (1)	**Mental and physical health (n=22)** • Happiness/positive affect (3) • Reduced negative affect (3) • Coping with stress/stress management (2) • Mental health (1) • Reduction in anxiety (1) • Feeling secure (1) • Relaxation (1) • Avoiding self-harm (1) • Managing depression (1) • Positive body image (1) • Engaging in physical activity (1) • Relational/physical/emotional well-being (5) • Finding specialised care resources (1)

4.3.5 Education, career and hard skills

In total, 31 significant individual outcomes relating to young people's school performance, career orientation, or acquisition of 'hard' skills were reported across 20 (5 quantitative and 15 qualitative) research studies. In relation to young people's school performance, 15 significant outcomes were observed. The associated studies indicated that young people who were engaged in universal youth work showed greater engagement in school (n=9), including improved academic performance, studying and exam preparation. These young people also reported feeling academically motivated (n=4) and emotionally connected to their school (n=1). An additional eight outcomes appeared to be associated with young people's career pathways. This research suggested that young people's career aspirations/motivations (n=3) and career success (n=3) may be positively impacted by participation in universal youth work.

Young people participating in universal youth work also reported higher levels of career exploration (n=1) and resiliency to job searching (n=1). Finally, findings from a small number of studies also suggested a link between universal youth work and the development of hard skills (n=8). Young people engaged in universal youth work reported learning a wide array of career-oriented (i.e. hard) skills, such as music production, digital literacy, information technology (IT)/computer programming, foreign language skills and entrepreneurship. The outcomes associated with education, career orientation and the acquisition of 'hard' skills can be seen in Table 14.

Table 14: Outcomes associated with education, career and hard skills

Education, career and hard skills (N=31)	**School/academic performance (n=15)** • Positive academic attitude (1) • Studying (1) • Exam preparation (1) • Engagement in school/schoolwork (1) • Emotional connection to school (1) • Academic/grades improvement (3) • Perceived scholastic competence (1) • Learning to take action in relation to school (1) • Seeking help with homework (1) • Better prepared for academic journey (1) • College aspirations (1) • Academic motivation (1) • Numeracy and literacy (1)	**Career orientation (n=8)** • Career aspirations (2) • Employment (1) • Resiliency to job searching/broadened job searching (1) • Better prepared for career success (1) • Career exploration (1) • Achieved later life success (1) • Career motivation (1)	**Hard skills (n=8)** • Learned skills (music production, creative arts, digital media technology) (2) • IT skills/computer programming (2) • Digital literacy skills (1) • Foreign language skills (1) • Entrepreneurship (1) • Developed skills for labour market (1)

4.4 Measures used to assess quantitative outcomes

From the 38 studies in this review that incorporated quantitative research methods into their design, most (68%, n=26) appeared to use scales (e.g. multiple survey questions assessing a singular construct) to measure individual outcomes. A full list of the scales used to assess youth outcomes across the research studies is displayed in Appendix E. A variety of different instruments were employed to measure outcomes across each of the five thematic

categories, with researchers showing little overlap in the type of scales selected to measure youth outcomes. Most of the scales utilised by the researchers appeared to assess outcomes associated with a single thematic category (i.e. the personal development and growth category, or the health and well-being category). Only nine of the identified instruments appeared to measure outcomes across multiple thematic categories. No study was found to use an instrument that assessed outcomes associated with all of the five thematic domains. Furthermore, while the majority of studies appeared to assess youth outcomes using previously validated scales, it should be noted that several studies appeared to use modified versions of these scales in their research. Other researchers appeared to assess youth outcomes using their own self-developed instruments while, notably, some studies did not provide sufficient detail on their chosen assessment instruments. For example, Arnold and Gagnon (2019) and Kuperminc *et al*. (2011) appeared to draw on adapted versions (e.g. with selected items removed) of previously validated scales in order to assess youth outcomes in their research studies. Similarly, Boomkens *et al*. (2019; 2021), Jang *et al*. (2014) and Villegas and Raffaelli (2018) appeared to assess young people's personal development and growth using bespoke scales created by the authors for the purposes of their research, but further information on the validity of these scales was not provided. In contrast, a small number of quantitative and mixed-methods studies were found to use single-item measurements to assess certain outcomes, as opposed to using scales that comprised multiple questions. For instance, Kim *et al*. (2016), Dibben *et al*. (2017) and Sonneveld *et al*. (2021) assessed young people's civic participation using a single question examining young people's frequency of volunteering, while Polson *et al*. (2013) and Souto-Otero (2016) assessed social capital through one individual survey question.

4.5 Factors associated with positive outcomes in youth work

All of the studies included in this review explored outcomes of participation in youth work. Some, but not all, of these studies identified elements or factors that were associated with or predicted positive outcomes. This section synthesises three key themes identified across the studies that focused on process or practice factors. The themes are adult–youth relationships, project activities and the youth work space. Other factors identified – including

duration/intensity of youth work participation, involvement in decision-making, youth at higher risk and overall programme quality – are also briefly reviewed.

4.5.1 Adult–youth relationships

A total of 27 studies identified the adult–youth relationship as critical to the achievement of positive outcomes. The key characteristics of positive adult–youth relationships in the youth work setting, and of the roles undertaken by leaders, are outlined in Table 15.

Table 15: Characteristics of positive adult–youth relationships

Characteristics of positive adult–youth relationships	What successful leaders do
Trusting Respectful Honest Authentic Supportive Accepting Listening Encouraging Inclusive Sharing power	• Engage in informal conversations and enjoyable activities with youth • Cultivate peer cohesiveness and teamwork • Create structured but open-ended roles and opportunities for informal learning • Provide quality guidance • Have high expectations/expect follow-through • Move between roles (including friend, parent, mentor, teacher, boss) as required • Act as role models • Resolve conflict and manage group dynamics

The qualities of the adult–youth relationships are associated with a diverse range of outcomes. For example, Griffith and Larson (2016) found associations between young people's 'trust in staff' and their openness to seeking guidance, successful relationships with others, motivation in program work and work and learning within the programme. Worker *et al*. (2020) found that when youth view leaders as trusted adults, that respect and listen to them, and who create opportunities for informal learning, it helps realise youth knowledge, skill, or developmental outcomes. Similarly, Body and Hogg (2019) found that when young people feel listened to and heard in the youth work setting, this predicts outcomes such as confidence, self-esteem, efficacy to act positively, efficacy to stand up for youth rights, and task motivation.

A number of studies looked in detail at the processes used by adult leaders to support emotional learning among youth. In a study of high-quality youth programmes in the USA,

Orson and Larson (2021) found that, through sensitive conversations, programme leaders coach youth to understand and control anxiety. The approaches used by leaders included: (1) reframing young people's understanding of their abilities; (2) reframing young people's understanding of the challenges in their work; and (3) reframing young people's emotions (e.g. helping them to realise that anxiety is a normal experience in difficult work). Likewise, Rusk *et al*. (2013) identified that successful strategies adopted by youth work leaders included fostering awareness and reflection regarding emotions, suggesting strategies, and encouraging problem-solving.

4.5.2 Project activities

A total of 27 studies identified particular aspects of activities provided in youth work programmes as important in terms of specific outcomes. Engagement in project activities was seen to provide opportunities for informal learning and to facilitate the development of practical and artistic skills, leisure activities, career goals and life skills. It was also linked to increased self-awareness, trust building, and greater problem-solving and interpersonal skills (Fyfe *et al.,* 2020; Worker *et al*., 2020; Cooper et al, 2019; Villegas and Raffaeli, 2018; Haberlin, 2014).

The following features of youth work activities emerged as significant across a number of studies:

- *Collaborative project work:* The process of working together with others on project work, including sharing ideas, making plans, allocating roles and tasks, and problem-solving, led to meaningful connections with peers and adult leaders and to feelings of solidarity and belonging (Eriksen and Seland, 2021; Coburn, 2011).
- *Experiential learning:* A number of studies emphasised the importance of experiential learning – using the lived experiences of young people as the locus for learning. Ord *et al*. (2021) and Skuza (2020) found that young people had a greater sense of ownership of their learning because of its experiential nature.
- *Taking on roles and responsibilities:* In a study of four high-quality youth programmes in the USA, Salusky *et al*. (2014) found that young people develop responsibility in youth work projects through a four-step process: (1) voluntarily taking on roles and obligations, (2) experiencing challenge and strain, (3) being motivated to fulfil their obligations, and (4) internalising a self-concept that leads to responsible behaviour in

other contexts. Peers contribute to this process by providing a sense of solidarity while also imposing mutual accountability. Likewise, Larson *et al.* found that youth learn to take action as a result of the experiential learning process of observing themselves enacting a role successfully (Larson *et al*. 2019).

- *Competence or mastery:* Overcoming challenges and anxieties in undertaking project work can lead to feelings of competence or mastery among youth. This, in turn, is linked to a greater sense of purpose (Eriksen and Seland, 2021) and to grit, concentration, motivation to participate, and positive affect (Agans *et al*., 2019).
- *Balancing agency and structure:* Flexible structure is needed to support youth to identify and initiate their own collaborative activities (Roque and Rusk, 2019); young people should have agency in the creative process of project activities (Van Steenis *et al*., 2020).
- *Opportunities for reflection and personal expression:* Many projects used creative methodologies, such as digital storytelling (Pawluczuk *et al*., 2019), writing and presenting poetry (Chung *et al*., 2018) and music production (Van Steenis, 2020; Hesnan and Dolan, 2017), to help young people reflect on and to make meaning of their life experiences (Skuza, 2020). These activities are linked to increased confidence, communication skills, identity development (Chung *et al.*, 2018) and personal development (Hesnan and Dolan, 2017).
- *Paying attention to social and political context:* Projects that connect young people with their social and political contexts are associated with outcomes in the domains of civic values and behaviour. For example, Knudsen (2016) found that creating pathways for local youth to engage with elected officials and local stakeholders led to increased social and political capital. Likewise, Coburn (2011) and Brady *et al*. (2018) found increased social capital as a consequence of young people's exposure to wider social networks and issues during youth work activities. Furthermore, exposure to diversity in project activities is associated with increased engagement with people from other cultures (Iturbide *et al*., 2019; Haberlin, 2014).

4.5.3 The youth work space

Thirteen studies drew attention to the importance of the youth work space. A number of characteristics of the youth work setting were identified as important to the achievement of positive outcomes

- welcoming and accessible
- sense of safety
- open access
- relaxed
- sense of belonging
- associated with positive values (e.g. fairness, acceptance, inclusion)
- support from peers and leaders
- community/family-like atmosphere
- free admission

For example, young people taking part in research by McPherson (2020) and Moran *et al*. (2018) welcomed having somewhere positive and accessible to spend their time. Other studies found that these characteristics support positive youth development (Van Steenis, 2020), participation (McGrath, 2012) and learning (Cooper, 2019). In an ethnographic study of a youth club in Italy, Schlauch and Palmisano (2019) found that the relatively unstructured nature of open access youth work provided a space for new bilingual cultural practices to emerge – something that may not have been possible in more formal, structured spaces, such as educational settings.

4.5.4 Other factors identified

The three themes outlined above were the factors identified most frequently in the studies reviewed. However, a range of other factors were also identified, albeit less frequently.

Nine studies found enhanced outcomes for young people participating in youth work for longer periods of time. For example, Jang *et al*. (2014) found that spending more years in scouting was associated with personal networking, planning skills, goal setting, and greater engagement in recreational activities and club membership as an adult. Likewise, Kim *et al*. found associations between length of time in scouting and confidence, competence, connection with neighbours, charity donations, civic engagement and religious tolerance (Kim

et al., 2016). A study of youth work in the Netherlands found that young people who had a longer duration of participation in youth work had higher scores on all outcome variables (Sonneveld *et al*., 2021). It found that adults who had been involved in scouts were more likely to report involvement in community associations or working to improve something in their neighbourhood as an adult. Polson *et al*. (2013) conducted research with adults, comparing outcomes for those who had been involved in the scouts during childhood with those who had not. However, this outcome occurred only for adults who were heavily involved as youth (i.e. reaching the rank of Eagle Scout).

Three studies found better outcomes for young people who regularly attended youth work settings. For example, Akiva *et al.,* (2014) found associations between empathy, efficacy to express self to others, efficacy in problem-solving, and motivation to participate in the club among youth who attended frequently. Souto-Otero (2016) also found that participation intensity was associated with greater positive effects.

Five studies specifically tested for associations between youth involvement in decision-making and positive outcomes. For example, Krauss *et al*. (2014) found that involvement in decision-making was related to young people's sense of empowerment and agency. Youth voice in decision-making was found to contribute to cognitive and emotional engagement in school by Krauss *et al.,* (2017), and to leadership development by Aguirre *et al*. (2020).

Additional benefits for young people deemed to be at higher risk were found in five studies. For example, Scanlon *et al*. (2021) found in their study of youth projects in the UK that participants with low social and emotional literacy at baseline appeared to make greater gains related to personal locus of control, social skills, communication and self-expression, and well-being following engagement with youth work programmes. Similarly, Smith *et al*. (2017) found that youth with higher behavioural risk made greater skill gains than youth with low behavioural risk. However, they also found that youth with high developmental risk made less social and emotional learning skill gains than youth with low developmental risk. Eriksen and Seland (2021) found greater motivation to attend a youth club among young people who felt excluded or marginalised elsewhere. In a Dutch study (Sonneveld *et al*., 2021), 33% of youth reported finding specialised care services through their youth worker.

A number of studies found overall programme quality, involving a combination of many of the factors identified above, to be associated with better outcomes. For example, Scanlon *et al*. (2021) found that young people participating in higher-quality programmes – as measured by their Programme Quality Assessment tool – experienced better outcomes across all outcome domains compared with those taking part in lower-quality programmes.

A study by Ramey *et al.* (2018) showed that the positive developmental features of the programme setting (including promoting positive development, supporting positive relationships, engaging youth in decision-making, and providing skill building opportunities) were related to civic engagement, sociopolitical empowerment and sense of community. Similar findings were reported by Chung *et al*. (2018) and Boomkens *et al*. (2021).

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the findings of the systematic review, including a profile of the studies included in the review. The benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work were presented under five themes. The factors conducive to positive outcomes identified across the included studies were presented under four headings. In the next chapter, we present an explanatory framework to describe the purposes, benefits and outcomes of youth work based on this review and discuss the implications of the review for the reform of the YSGS.

Chapter 5

Discussion and implications

5.1 Introduction

This review, a synthesis of evidence from relevant Irish and international literature on the purpose, benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work, has been undertaken to inform the planned reform of DCEDIY's Youth Services Grant Scheme. The Scheme, providing funding to national youth organisations delivering universally available services to children and young people aged 10–24 years, has been in operation for over four decades – hence the identified need for reform and modernisation.

Building on earlier analyses (e.g. Dickson *et al*., 2013), this review has focused on the period from 2011 to 2021, a decade that has seen increasing attention on the role and benefit of youth work in policy and practice. The policy context, as set out in national and international practice (such as Ireland's *National Youth Strategy 2015–2020*), values youth work for enabling young people to overcome adverse circumstances and achieve their full potential by strengthening their personal and social competences. Universal youth work is primarily associated with positive framings of youth, with a number of policy instruments emphasising its role in ensuring active participation, empowerment and youth citizenship. In response to the current and evolving needs of young people, policy debates and discourse increasingly highlight the potential for youth work to address issues such as integration, interculturalism and sustainable development, and to incorporate democratic and rights-based perspectives.

A key focus has been on examining both theoretical and practice-based developments that can improve the accountability, transparency and outcome measurement aspects of the YSGS. The outcomes that will potentially inform the reform of the Scheme, grounded in BOBF, incorporate a number of dimensions for development, well-being and 'whole-of-life' outcomes to inform services working with children and young people. This review has focused on identifying the outcomes and benefits associated with universal youth work as evidenced in empirical studies. In response to changes in the operational environment and an emphasis on developing quality standards, instruments and methodologies to demonstrate the

contribution of youth work, this review has sought to identify key learning from the literature on how funders and practitioners could measure the outcomes of youth work, including the potential use of relevant performance and impact indicators. At the same time, the importance of process and quality is highlighted and a number of factors are identified as important to the achievement of positive outcomes through universal youth work.

5.2 Summary and integration of key findings

This rapid review of the literature sought to identify the benefits and outcomes associated with universal youth work in recent Irish and international research. Following a search of relevant databases, a total of 5,450 sources – including peer-reviewed journal articles, books and grey literature – were identified. These sources were subjected to a rigorous review process, which resulted in 72 studies being identified as meeting the agreed criteria for inclusion in this review. These studies were published between 2011 and 2021 and conducted in various settings around the world. The outcomes associated with universal youth work identified in each study were extracted and subsequently collated into five thematic categories: (1) relationships, connection and support; (2) personal development and growth; (3) civic values and behaviour; (4) health and well-being; and (5) education, career and hard skills.

Relationships, connection and support emerged as the second-largest outcome category, with 111 outcomes reported across 41 studies. Peer connections and relationships was the most common single outcome within this category, followed by relationships with adults, be they professional staff or volunteers. This category also included outcomes related to the social support received in the youth work environment, including instrumental support, help with personal problems, emotional support and empathy. Having a safe, welcoming youth work space to go to was also a commonly recorded outcome.

The largest outcome category identified was personal development and growth, with 192 individual outcomes identified across 61 studies. Within this category, two major sub-themes were identified: the sub-theme of *sense of self* included outcome areas such as increased confidence, openness to feedback, motivation, and character or identity development. The sub-theme of *skills development* encompassed the sub-categories of emotional skills (e.g.

coping and emotional regulation), cognitive skills (e.g. personal agency, problem-solving and decision-making), social skills (e.g. communication, social competence and teamwork) and behavioural skills (e.g. making positive choices and taking responsibility).

Outcomes related to the theme of civic values and behaviour were also common, with a total of 90 individual outcomes reported across 43 studies. Participation in universal youth work was associated with gains made in terms of youth civic engagement, community service, leadership and volunteering. In some studies, young people participating in youth work services were found to have enhanced social responsibility and knowledge of issues related to equality and diversity. Evidence of increased social, cultural or political capital among young people also emerged as an outcome of youth work participation.

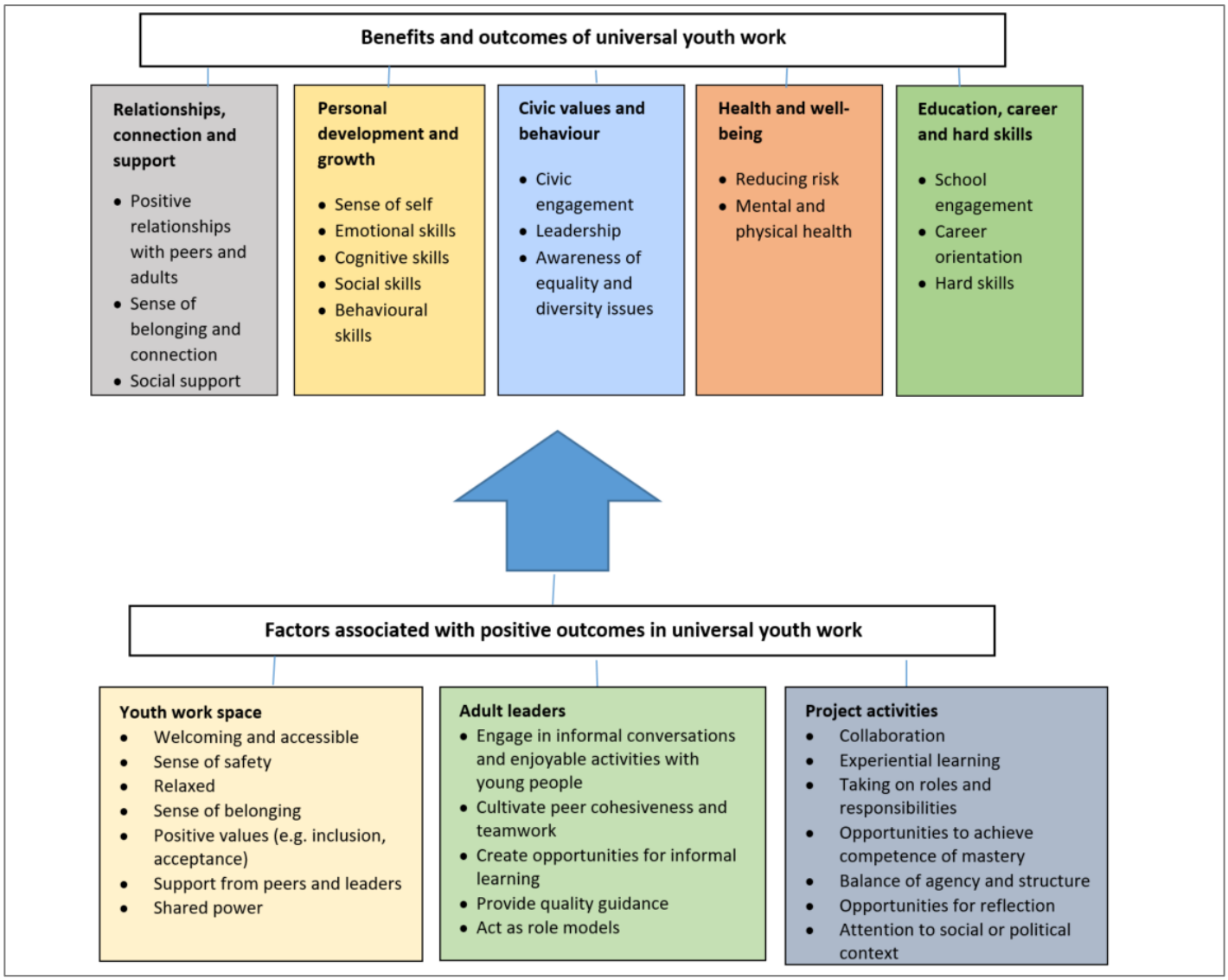
Youth health and well-being outcomes were reported in 18 studies, with 40 individual outcomes found in this category. Young people were found to experience improved mental health, including enhanced ability to manage stress, anxiety, depression or other negative emotions, while a small number of studies reported outcomes related to physical health. Youth work participation was associated with reduced risk behaviour, such as drug-taking/intentions to take drugs, alcohol use, smoking, and engagement in sexual activity. In a small number of studies, the youth work space was described as a place of physical or emotional safety for young people, where they could seek refuge from the stresses of outside life or avoid exposure to risky behaviour.

Finally, outcomes relating to education, career and hard skills were reported across 20 studies, with 31 individual outcomes identified. Within this category, young people who were engaged in universal youth work were found to show greater motivation, engagement and connection in school. Other outcomes were enhanced career aspirations/motivations and the development of hard skills, such as music production or digital literacy.

In addition to measuring outcomes, some of the studies reviewed identified elements or factors that were associated with or predicted positive outcomes. The three most significant factors identified were adult–youth relationships, the nature of project activities, and the distinguishing features of the youth work space. Other factors identified included the duration or intensity of youth work participation and involvement in decision-making. In Figure 5, the

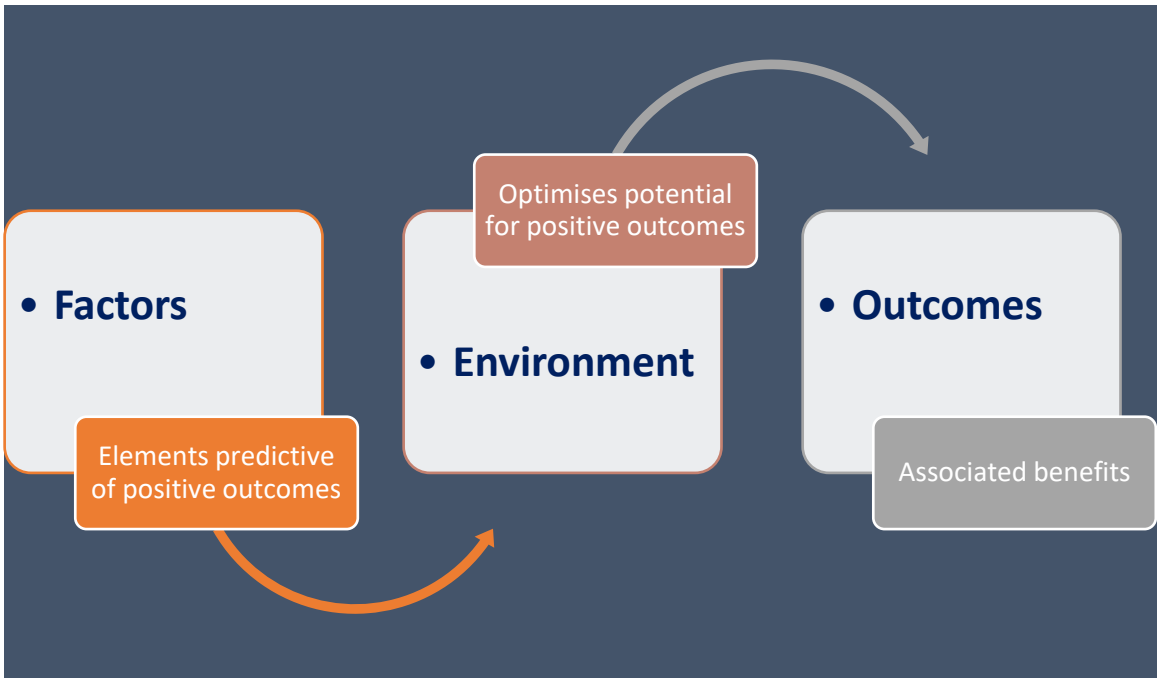
key findings are brought together into an explanatory framework (see also Appendix D, which lists the top eight outcomes in each of the five categories).

Figure 5: Explanatory Framework Showing the Relationship Between Aspects of the Universal Youth Work Environment & Youth's Positive Development Across Five Key Thematic Domains



While these thematic categories illuminate the key factors identified in the research, it is important to add some caveats. As noted by Hill (2020, p. 13), categories of this nature are over-simplified and unable to capture the complexity and nuance of real-life practice. Although presented separately for the purposes of illustration, the categories will overlap significantly in practice. For example, young people may grow in confidence and develop hard skills as a result of undertaking a community project that enhances their civic engagement and sensitivity to equality and diversity issues. Furthermore, not all youth projects will achieve all of these outcomes; there will be variation according to local context, resources, approach and other dynamics (Hill, 2020). There will also be variation in outcomes among young people within a single youth work setting, due to differences in factors such as motivation, engagement and family context. The factors identified should be seen as optimising the potential for positive outcomes to occur, as illustrated in Figure 6. Furthermore, the outcomes identified in this review depend on the nature of outcome measurement within the field, which is discussed in Section 5.3.

Figure 6: Illustrating the relationship between factors, environment and outcomes



5.3 Study design and outcome measurement in universal youth work

We now move on to reflect on the study designs and methods used to measure outcomes in the studies reviewed, beginning with quantitative studies and moving on to qualitative studies.

5.3.1 Quantitative studies

5.3.1.1 Design features

Within the quantitative studies reviewed, the most common form of study design used by researchers was a cross-sectional design, which focuses on gathering data from a single group of participants (mostly youth) at a single time point. Only a small number of studies were found to measure changes in youth outcomes over time. It has been argued that the lack of longitudinal assessments in the youth work area is a limitation, as without measuring a starting point (such as what young people's relationships, connections and support were like before participating in universal youth work), it is difficult to judge how the youth work activities have affected youth outcomes (Dickson *et al*., 2013). It is also argued that longitudinal measurements may be useful in helping services determine both the intermediate and longer-term outcomes associated with youth work participation (Scanlon *et al*., 2020). Thus, future evaluative research may benefit from tracking changes in young people's outcomes over the course of their participation in youth work, or (where possible) consider follow-up assessments with young people as they progress into adulthood. Similarly, there was a notable lack of comparison or control groups within the reviewed quantitative research. RCTs (i.e. where participants are randomly assigned to take part in a programme/initiative or to a control group) are generally considered the 'gold standard' of research design (Hariton and Locascio, 2018), as they enable researchers to more accurately infer 'cause-and-effect' relationships. In contrast, cross-sectional studies are typically considered to produce lower-quality evidence (Bondemark and Ruf, 2015). However, the use of RCTs within open access youth work is typically limited, as evidenced both by this review and previous reviews in this area (see Dickson *et al*., 2013; McGregor, 2015). Some researchers have noted that RCTs can be both laborious and resource intensive (Speich *et al*., 2018), which may make them unworkable in some youth work contexts, particularly for small community-based organisations (Centre for Youth Impact, 2021). Other practical

considerations (such as problems with limiting access to youth work) may further restrict the feasibility of conducting RCTs within youth work settings (Stewart-Brown *et al*., 2011). Nonetheless, due to the lack of comparative group study designs in this area, it is difficult to form firm conclusions about the impacts of youth work or identify the specific aspects of universal youth work that contribute to positive youth development. Although further RCTs in this area may be helpful, researchers may need to be mindful of the practical implications associated with RCT designs, and considerations of alternative approaches or comparative designs may be beneficial. For example, the Centre for Youth Impact recommends the use of multi-site trials to reduce the burden placed on individual community organisations, or using a waiting list design to avoid ethical issues associated with denying youth access to services (Centre for Youth Impact, 2021). Other researchers recommend using multi-informant reports (e.g. youth and parent/staff reports) to help increase the strength of the evidence obtained by cross-sectional/observational research (Tobia *et al*., 2019).

5.3.1.2 Outcome domains

Although the variety of outcomes assessed across the included studies is a major advantage of this research which showcases the vast benefits associated with youth participation in universal youth work, the lack of consistency in the scales/instruments used across the different studies is a general limitation of this research area. While some studies – most notably those that focused on evaluating established youth work organisations, such as 4-H clubs (Perry, 2021; Serido *et al.,* 2011; LaVergne, 2013) – appeared to draw on similar items to measure youth outcomes, the majority of studies used different tools to assess youth outcomes. The lack of consistency in tools and methods used between researchers makes it difficult to compare findings across the different research studies (Yohannon and Carlson, 2019) and inhibits our understanding of the impact of universal youth work across different settings. Greater consistency in the types of instruments/questions utilised should be a key consideration for future evaluative research in this area in order to better inform our understanding of the impact of universal youth work on youth outcomes.

Furthermore, it is clear from reviewing this research that outcomes relating to young people's personal development and growth are the most frequently assessed impact of universal youth work. Of the 38 mixed-methods and quantitative studies included in this review, 33 assessed outcomes associated with young people's personal development and growth. In

comparison, only eight quantitative studies assessed outcomes relating to young people's health and well-being, while five assessed impacts relating to education, career and hard skills. Additionally, most of the research reviewed here appeared to assess soft outcomes (e.g. empathy, self-confidence, self-esteem, social support). Soft outcomes appeared to be predominant within the relationships, connection and support and personal development and growth categories, while hard outcomes (e.g. organisation membership; number of hours spent volunteering; time spent exercising; substance use; grades) appeared to be more commonly assessed within the health and well-being, civic values and behaviour, and education, career and hard skills categories. Crucially, previous research argues that is important for services/researchers to assess the impact that service provision exerts on both hard and soft outcomes (McNeil *et al*., 2012; Morgan, 2009). Thus, future quantitative research in this area may benefit from placing more emphasis on exploring the impact of universal youth work on both hard and soft outcomes relating to the five thematic categories identified in this review.

5.3.1.3 Single-item versus multi-item scales

Overall, across the quantitative studies included in this review, surveys were the most widely used tool to assess youth outcomes (see Appendix E for a full list of outcome measures used). Within these surveys, researchers appeared to measure outcomes in three ways: (1) using scales that were previously validated/developed by other researchers to assess youth outcomes; (2) modifying existing scales or developing bespoke measurements to better assess the construct of interest; or (3) using single-item questions to measure a particular youth outcome. Multi-item measurement instruments are typically considered superior to single-item measures (Postmes *et al*., 2013), as researchers argue that single-item measures tend to have lower reliability and validity than multi-item scales and thus may be more susceptible to measurement error (Jovanović and Lazić, 2020; Sarstedt *et al*., 2016). Although the majority of quantitative studies included in this review relied on multi-item scale assessments, several studies were found to assess youth outcomes using single-item questions (either alone or in combination with multi-item scales). While some researchers may see this as a limitation, others argue that single-item measures have pragmatic benefits which may make them advantageous to use in certain circumstances (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007). In particular, researchers note that using multi-item scales to assess several outcomes

may result in participant fatigue and that substituting single-item or shorter measures for select scales (where appropriate) may help reduce the burden placed on participants and improve survey usability (Cheung and Lucas, 2014). Given that evaluations of youth work are often thought to place additional burden on staff/youth (Scanlon *et al*., 2020; Bossen *et al*., 2016), these pragmatic considerations may be particularly relevant within this context. Notably, researchers contend that single-item measures may be most appropriate for assessing concrete (i.e. focused) outcomes (Bergkvist, 2016; Cheung and Lucas, 2014), while some outcome frameworks recommend using single-item assessments where previous studies have shown that one question is a suitable measurement (Scanlon *et al*., 2020). Within this review, single-item measures appeared to be most commonly used when assessing outcomes associated with the civic values and behaviour and the health and well-being categories. Thus, there appears to be both pros and cons associated with each survey approach, and future research in this area may benefit from considering how to ensure that youth outcomes are assessed using valid and reliable measurements while avoiding undue participant/staff burden.

5.3.2 Qualitative studies

A qualitative research design was the most commonly used approach across the 72 studies reviewed, accounting for 47% of the studies. Qualitative methods were also used as part of a mixed-methods approach in 11% of studies. Within these studies, the methods used most frequently were interviews, observation and focus groups. A key strength of qualitative evaluation approaches is that they give voice to young people, leaders and parents, informing our understanding of the benefits of youth work as articulated by the key stakeholders involved. Qualitative approaches allow a context-specific understanding of the benefits of youth work for participants and the factors that motivate them to participate. They can also identify ways in which the delivery of youth work can be improved (Dickson *et al.*, 2013).

In response to the issues related to top-down outcome measurement in open access youth work, identified in Section 2.4.1 of this report, there has been a small but discernible shift towards participatory evaluation methods tailored to the youth work setting. A participatory evaluation approach, also referred to as public and patient involvement in research, is a process whereby stakeholders (including staff and young people) play a key role in the

research and evaluation process. Bergold and Thomas understand participatory research methods as a process "with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study" (2012, p.1). Studies adopting participatory research methods emphasise the importance of providing young people with a safe and inclusive space to express their views, as well as the use of youth-centred creative methods. In line with children's rights frameworks, young people should also have their views listened to and taken seriously and feedback should be provided to them on how their input was responded to (Byrne *et al*., 2020; Lundy, 2007).

Five of the studies included in this review were informed by the principles and methods of Transformative Evaluation, a participatory methodology developed specifically for the evaluation of youth work. Based on the principles of participation, learning, negotiation and flexibility, the approach allows youth workers to take a more active role in evaluating their work, thus redistributing the power inherent in the evaluation process (Cooper, 2018). The goal is for evaluation to function as a process that supports learning and thus improves youth work practice and outcomes (Cooper, 2018).

The key method used in Transformative Evaluation studies is the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology, a story-based evaluation tool which involves the collection and interpretation of stories about change (Cooper, 2018). Young people are asked to reflect on the difference that taking part in youth work has made for them and tell their story. Youth workers then come together to reflect on the young people's MSC stories. Outcomes are categorised into themes by groups of youth workers. It is argued that this approach can contribute important information in order to inform the evaluation of programmes and can also drive programme improvement. The included studies that adopted this approach were predominantly based in the UK and Australia and were published after 2017 (see for example Fyfe *et al*., 2018, 2020; Cooper *et al*., 2019).

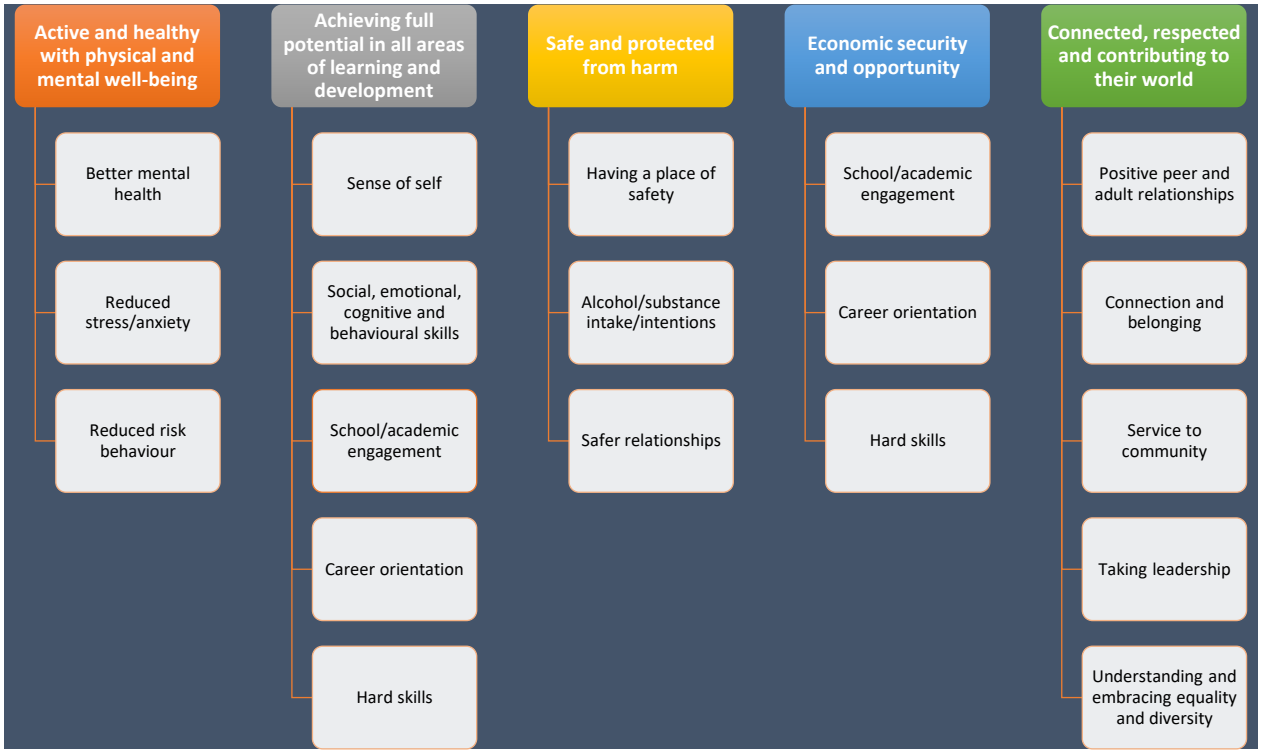
5.4 Implications for the reform of the YSGS

In this final section, we reflect on the implications of this review for the reform of the YSGS.

5.4.1 Congruence with national outcomes

The findings of this review indicate that a range of benefits accrue from universal youth work, with 71 of the 72 reviewed studies finding evidence of positive outcomes. The outcome areas identified in this review can be seen to have significant congruence with the five national outcomes guiding policy for children and young people in Ireland set out in *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014a).

Figure 7: Outcomes identified in studies of universal youth work grouped according to the five national outcomes



The five national outcomes and the relevant findings of this review are outlined in more detail below.

Active and healthy with physical and mental well-being: Our review found evidence that universal youth work has contributed to health and well-being outcomes, including mental health and reduced risk behaviour. Supportive relationships with adults and peers and

feelings of belonging in the youth work space were seen to lead to enhanced well-being and improved mental health among young people.

Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development: This is the national outcome for which the most evidence was found in this review. The breadth and depth of findings in relation to personal development and growth point to the significant contribution that youth work makes to supporting young people to become more self-aware and develop social and emotional skills, such as teamwork, decision-making and personal agency. The experiential nature of youth work activities is a key contributor to outcomes in this area. Some evidence of positive outcomes was also found in relation to formal education, career orientation and the development of hard skills.

Safe and protected from harm: This review found some evidence that youth work services provide young people with a place of refuge from risky or stressful environments in their homes or neighbourhoods, and were found to protect against exposure to risk behaviour such as alcohol, drug or tobacco use.

Economic security and opportunity: This is the outcome for which the least evidence was found in this review. A number of studies reported findings related to enhanced educational engagement, career aspirations/motivations and the development of hard skills, which are likely to improve employment prospects.

Connected, respected and contributing to their world: There was significant evidence found in relation to this outcome within the thematic categories of relationships, connection and support, and civic values and behaviour. The universal youth work setting facilitates the formation of supportive and respectful peer connections and youth–adult relationships, and helps young people to feel a sense of connection and belonging in their communities. Evidence was found relating to young people contributing to their worlds via community service, leadership and volunteering as a result of participation in universal youth work services.

The implication of this review, therefore, is that government support for universal youth work has the potential to contribute to the achievement of national policy goals for children and young people.

5.4.2 Blending the old and the new

This review of the literature on universal youth work published between 2011 and 2021 shows that youth work activity combines 'tried and tested' traditional approaches with some new models and activities. Established organisations such as 4-H, Scouts/Guides, Boys & Girls Clubs, and Foróige have a high profile among the studies reviewed, continuing a long tradition in the provision of youth work services, yet also embracing innovation and change. In terms of traditional youth work approaches, we see a continuation of the youth club model, built around recreation and place. There is strong support in the literature for the continued provision of local youth clubs. Eriksen and Seland (2021) argue that, in the context of an increased prevalence of loneliness and self-reported distress among young people, youth clubs can play a critical role in youth well-being. They suggest three prerequisites for well-being in youth:

1. A place to be, in which they can experience belonging and the possibility for safety
2. Having positive relations with others
3. Experiencing growth, purpose and the feeling of confidence.

Eriksen and Seland's argument that youth clubs "may function as a transitional space that enables the young people to grow and develop a more secure sense of self" (2021, p. 187) appears to be borne out by the findings of this review.

There is also evidence that some newer spaces and places are opening up for youth work, with a notable trend towards digital youth work as either a core or partial focus in youth work activities. While some digital youth work takes place exclusively online, other projects – such as those studied by Hesnan and Dolan (2017) – adopt a blended approach, using digital technology as a facilitator of youth development both online and offline. A common theme in digital youth work is an emphasis on young people as active producers of their own learning.

Digital youth work, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, comes with both challenges and opportunities. Alongside its potential for greater social inclusion, research has identified gaps in the digital competencies, skills and knowledge of both youth workers and young people. Obstacles experienced by youth workers include "personal attitudes towards

technology and social media and confidence levels. In reality, competences may vary considerably and this should be reflected in the planning and delivery of digital youth work" (Connolly, 2017, p. 296). Fernández-de-Castro *et al*. (2021) highlight the need for further exploration of the role of professionals in digital youth work and argue that not enough attention has been paid to practical concerns, including institutional and technical support and the burden of online working. In considering the potential for digital youth work, the issue of access is highlighted by the Council of Europe's *Council conclusions on Smart Youth Work* which calls for more attention to be given to "mapping and addressing the digital gap and inequalities to access the technological developments from the viewpoint of young people, especially those with fewer opportunities, youth workers and youth leaders and other stakeholders supporting youth" (Council of Europe, 2017b, p. 5). According to Siurala, "Digital exclusion refers not only to exclusion from access, but even more to exclusion from media skills and competences" (Siurala, 2021, p. 224); access includes not only device literacy but also content literacy: the ability to understand, communicate and create material. The future of youth work provision, therefore, will include a continuation of traditional youth work provision, such as youth clubs, while also nurturing the emergence of new approaches.

5.4.3 Global variations in civic focus

There are distinct differences in focus between youth activities in the USA and in Europe. As noted in Chapter 4, more structured experiential learning projects, civic action and STEM were more likely to be named as youth work activities in studies from the USA, whereas leisure and recreation, including unstructured drop-in or 'hanging out' activities, were more common in European studies. This difference in focus has been noted in previous research. Ohana argued that "European youth work projects are strong on personal development but less strong on supporting the real world agency of young people; they focus insufficiently on how to put learning into practice" (Ohana, 2019, p. 5). Ohana attributes such shortcomings in part to a lack of competence and confidence among youth workers and leaders. In evaluating the political and civic mission of youth work, Ohana identified the need to develop an appropriate methodological foundation for this dimension of youth work.

An implication of this finding is that DCEDIY may wish to reflect on whether it would like funded projects to focus more explicitly on civic outcomes. Should it wish to do so, it may be

useful to enhance the competencies of youth workers and volunteers to engage in civic youth work in a more focused way. An online tool developed by the Council of Europe (2020b) provides a competency framework for youth work that serves as a useful benchmark in support of a number of societal objectives. For example, in achieving the goal to *Support and empower young people in making sense of the society they live in and engaging with it,* youth worker competencies require them to*:*

- assist young people in identifying and taking responsibility for the role they want to have in their community and society;
- support young people in identifying goals, developing strategies and organising individual and collective action for social change;
- support young people in developing their critical thinking and understanding about society and power, how social and political systems work, and how they can have an influence on them; and
- support the competence and confidence development of young people.

5.4.4 Outcome measurement

While this review has found a significant body of evidence showing the outcomes associated with universal youth work, it would be beneficial if the redesigned YSGS allows for ongoing research and evaluation. Evaluation processes are required in order to account for and defend public investment in universal youth work while also facilitating youth organisations, youth workers, volunteers and young people to reflect on and improve practice. A key challenge will be to simultaneously address the needs of all stakeholders while minimising the burden on services, which are primarily volunteer-led. Based on the review of issues related to measurement identified in Section 5.3, we have highlighted several key messages to inform the design of evaluation processes for the reformed YSGS.

Consistency of measurement: As noted in Section 5.3, the studies included in this review drew upon a diverse range of designs and measures to assess youth work outcomes. A lack of consistency in tools and methods used between researchers makes it difficult to compare findings across the different research studies (Yohannan and Carlson, 2019) and inhibits our understanding of the impact of universal youth work across different settings. In an Irish

context, therefore, it would be valuable to develop an outcomes framework and set of measures for universal youth work in order to allow for consistency in measurement across funded services and to better inform our understanding of the impact of universal youth work. This process could be informed by frameworks developed in the youth work field internationally, such as the Youth Investment Fund outcomes framework in the UK (Scanlon *et al*., 2020).

Enhance breadth and depth of outcomes measurement: 'Soft' or 'intrinsic' outcomes are those that are primarily experienced by individuals (for example, self-esteem and confidence), while those that can be measured and valued by other people (including educational achievement or employment) are known as 'hard' or 'extrinsic' outcomes (McNeil *et al*., 2012). It was noted in Section 5.3.1.2 that much of the focus in the evaluation of universal youth work is on soft rather than hard outcomes. Furthermore, there is a tendency for research to focus on personal development rather than on civic, health or education outcomes. Future research in this area would benefit from placing more emphasis on exploring the impact of universal youth work on both hard and soft outcomes relating to the breadth of the five thematic categories identified in this review.

Minimise burden: It was noted in Section 5.4.4 that consideration should be given to ensuring that youth outcomes are assessed using valid and reliable measurements, while avoiding undue participant/staff burden. One way to achieve this is to use a mix of multi-item and single-item measures. While multi-item scales are generally considered more reliable and valid, carefully chosen single-item measures also have a role to play (particularly in the measurement of hard outcomes) and involve less burden on participants.

Move beyond single-point-in-time measures: A limitation of the current evidence base is that cross-sectional 'one-point-in-time' studies predominate. In designing future research, it would be valuable to track changes in youth outcomes over time or consider follow-up assessments with young people as they progress into adulthood. This may be particularly helpful in identifying how youth work impacts the development of hard skills, such as educational attainment or career development, over time.

Pay attention to quality and process: This review has identified factors relating to the quality or process of youth work as critical to the achievement of positive outcomes. It is important,

therefore, that future evaluation strategies incorporate a focus on quality and process. McNeil *et al.* (2019) emphasise the need for evaluation frameworks to include a focus on "staff practices, settings and quality" in outcomes frameworks, while an EU report on quality assessment in youth work (European Commission, 2015) argued that the knowledge gathered should be used as a basis for constructive analysis and reflection, creating a culture of learning within organisations.

Involve meaningful participation: Child and youth participation is a core theme in Irish policy relating to children and young people. It is imperative, therefore, that young people are enabled to participate meaningfully in evaluation processes, a theme that is highlighted in the youth work literature (McNeil *et al.*, 2019; European Commission, 2015). As noted in Section 5.3.2, the MSC methodology (Cooper, 2018) has been specifically designed as a framework for participatory evaluation in youth work, allowing for youth and youth worker involvement in outcome mapping and practice improvement.

5.4 Conclusion

This rapid review has synthesised research evidence relating to the benefits and outcomes of universal or open access youth work, with a specific focus on research published between 2011 and 2021. This section has concluded the review by highlighting the following key implications of the review for the reform of DCEDIY's YSGS:

- There is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the benefits and utility of universal or open access youth work.
- The reform of the YSGS should attempt to clarify the meaning of 'universal youth work' in order to provide clarity with respect to organisations seeking funding under the Scheme.
- Outcome-based assessment should be undertaken as a joint venture between DCEDIY and the organisations delivering universal youth work services.
- Differentiation with respect to soft and hard outcomes should be factored into any outcome evaluation model, with consideration given to the inclusion of participatory evaluation within any such model.

- In order to achieve outcomes related to civic values and behaviour, an explicit focus on supporting civic youth work may be required.
- Owing to the relative scarcity of evidence, emergent themes (such as digitalisation) need to be rigorously assessed prior to any policy decisions being implemented with respect to the reform of the YSGS.

Appendix A

Inclusion/exclusion selection criteria tool

Selection Criteria	Included	Excluded
1. Language	Full study written in English	Full article not available in English
2. Publication Date	Studies published between 2011 and 2021 (pre-prints accepted)	Studies published before 2011 or after 9 September 2021
3. Study Design	Primary studies only, including: • Randomised controlled trials • Cross-sectional studies • Observational studies • Experimental studies • Qualitative studies	Secondary Research • Systematic reviews Opinion/Think Pieces • Guidelines • Blogs
4. Type of Study	All types of qualitative/quantitative research reporting original empirical findings, including: • Theses • Conference presentations • Book chapters • Journal articles • Research reports	• Articles that do not provide sufficient data to extract • Articles that report findings from research that is reported elsewhere
5. Target of Youth Work	Youth work must be directed at youth between the ages of 10 and 24 years (or with a mean age between 10 and 24 years)	Youth work primarily targeting persons aged under 10 years or over 24 years (or with a mean age outside the 10–24 years age band)
6. Study population	Articles reporting outcomes from the following participants: • Parents of youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work • Youth workers working with youth aged 10–24 years • Youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work • Teachers of youth (aged 10–24 years) engaged in youth work	Articles reporting outcomes from any other sources • Articles where the youth involved in youth work are aged under 10 years or over 24 years (or with a mean age outside this age band)
7. Purpose of Youth Work	Studies where at least one purpose/objective of the youth work was to impact/contribute to positive youth development (PYD) • Studies where the main objective of youth work was focused on other outcomes, but a sub-aim included a focus on PYD • Studies where the youth work was underpinned by a PYD theoretical framework	Studies where PYD was not specifically targeted by the youth work • Articles where PYD is not integrated into the theoretical framework of the intervention/programme/initiative
8. Nature of Youth Work	Youth work must be universal in nature • Youth work must be open to all young people aged between 10 and 24 years within a local/geographical area. • Youth work initiatives/programmes that focus on a specific issue/topic but are open/available to all youth within the geographical area are also acceptable. • Youth work that targets a specific gender (e.g. Girl Guides) or is run by religious organisations will be included.	Specifically targeted youth work • Studies where participation in youth work is restricted by a certain criterion (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality) • Youth work that is targeted at at-risk populations or with a focus on a deficit model
9. Location/Setting	Studies where youth work is carried out in community settings • Youth work conducted in after-school settings is included.	Studies where youth work is conducted in educational/vocational, sports, residential summer camps or healthcare settings are excluded.

Appendix B

Database search strings and results

Name of database	Key terms searched	Areas searched	Number of references found
PsycINFO	(“Universal Youth Work” OR “Open Access Youth Work ” OR “Open Youth Work” OR “Generic youth work” OR “Volunteer-led youth work” OR “youth work” OR “youth club*” OR “Youth organi?ation*” OR “Voluntary youth work” OR “youth provision” OR “community-based youth work” OR “community youth work” OR “youth program*” OR “youth initiative*” OR “youth service” ("Universal Youth Work" or "Open Access Youth Work" or "Open Youth Work" or "Generic Youth Work" or "Volunteer-led youth work" or "youth work" or "youth club*" or "youth organi?ation*" or "voluntary youth work" or "youth provision" or "community-based youth work" or "community youth work" or "youth service" or "youth program*" or "youth initiative*").id. limit to (english language and yr="2011 - 2021") OR “Universal Youth Work” OR “Open Access Youth Work ” OR “Open Youth Work” OR “Generic youth work” OR “Volunteer-led youth work” OR “youth work” OR “youth club*” OR “Youth organi?ation*” OR “Voluntary youth work” OR “youth provision” OR “community-based youth work” OR “community youth work” OR “youth program*” OR “youth initiative*” OR “youth service” ("Universal Youth Work" or "Open Access Youth Work" or "Open Youth Work" or "Generic Youth Work" or "Volunteer-led youth work" or "youth work" or "youth club*" or "youth organi?ation*" or "voluntary youth work" or "youth provision" or "community-based youth work" or "community youth work" or “youth service” or “youth program*” or “youth initiative”).ab. OR “Universal Youth Work” OR “Open Access Youth Work ” OR “Open Youth Work” OR “Generic youth work” OR “Volunteer-led youth work” OR “youth work” OR “youth club*” OR “Youth organi?ation*” OR “Voluntary youth work” OR “youth provision” OR “community-based youth work” OR “community youth work” OR “youth program*” OR “youth initiative*” OR “youth service” ("Universal Youth Work" or "Open Access Youth Work" or "open youth work" or "Generic Youth Work" or "Volunteer-led youth work" or "youth work" or "youth club*" or "youth organi?ation*" or "voluntary youth work" or "youth provision" or "community-based youth work" or "community youth work" or "youth service" or "youth program*" or "youth initiative*").ti.	Title, abstract or key concepts	728
ERIC	TI "universal youth work" OR TI "open access youth work" OR TI "open youth work" OR TI "generic youth work" OR TI "volunteer-led youth work" OR TI "youth work" OR TI "youth club*" OR TI "youth organi?ation*" OR TI "voluntary youth work" OR TI "youth provision" OR TI "community-based youth work" OR TI "community youth work" OR AB "universal youth work" OR AB "open access youth work" OR AB "open youth work" OR AB "generic youth work" OR AB "volunteer-led youth work" OR AB "youth work" OR AB "youth club*" OR AB "youth organi?ation*" OR AB "voluntary youth work" OR AB "youth provision" OR AB "community-based youth work" OR AB "community youth work" KW "universal youth work" OR KW "open access youth work" OR KW "open youth work" OR KW "generic youth work" OR KW "volunteer-led youth work" OR KW "youth work" OR KW "youth club*" OR KW "youth organi?ation*" OR KW "voluntary youth work" OR KW "youth provision" OR KW "community-based youth work" OR KW "community youth work" TI "youth service" OR TI "youth program*" OR TI "youth initiative*" OR AB "youth service" OR AB "youth program*" OR AB "youth initiative*" OR KW "youth service" OR KW "youth program*" OR KW "youth initiative*"	Title, abstract or keywords	324
Scopus	(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("universal youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("open access youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("open youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("generic youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("volunteer-led youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth club*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth organi?ation*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth provision") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("voluntary youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("community youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("community-based youth work") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth	Title	2,102

	service") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth program*") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("youth initiative*")) AND PUBYEAR > 2010 AND PUBYEAR < 2022		
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)	ab("universal youth work") OR ab("open access youth work") OR ab("open youth work") OR ab("Generic youth work") OR ab("Volunteer-led youth work") OR ab("youth work") OR ab(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ab(("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations")) OR ab(("youth organization" OR "youth organizations")) OR ab("voluntary youth work") OR ab("youth provision") OR ab("community-based youth work*") OR ab("youth service") OR ab("community youth work") OR ab(("youth program" OR "youth programme" OR "youth programmes" OR "youth programs")) OR ab(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR ti("universal youth work") OR ti("open access youth work") OR ti("open youth work") OR ti("generic youth work") OR ti("volunteer-led youth work") OR ti("youth work") OR ti(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ti("youth organi?ation*") OR ti("voluntary youth work") OR ti("youth provision") OR ti("community-based youth work") OR ti("community youth work") OR ti("youth service") OR ti("youth proram*") OR ti(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR if("universal youth work") OR if("open access youth work") OR if("open youth work") OR if("generic youth work") OR if("volunteer-led youth work") OR if("youth work") OR if(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR if((("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations") OR ("youth organization" OR "youth organizations"))) OR if("voluntary youth work") OR if("youth provision") OR if("community-based youth work") OR if("community youth work") OR if("youth service") OR if("youth program*") OR if(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives"))	Title, abstract or keywords	287
ProQuest	ab("universal youth work") OR ab("open access youth work") OR ab("open youth work") OR ab("Generic youth work") OR ab("Volunteer-led youth work") OR ab("youth work") OR ab(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ab(("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations")) OR ab(("youth organization" OR "youth organizations")) OR ab("voluntary youth work") OR ab("youth provision") OR ab("community-based youth work*") OR ab("youth service") OR ab("community youth work") OR ab(("youth program" OR "youth programme" OR "youth programmes" OR "youth programs")) OR ab(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR ti("universal youth work") OR ti("open access youth work") OR ti("open youth work") OR ti("generic youth work") OR ti("volunteer-led youth work") OR ti("youth work") OR ti(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ti("youth organi?ation*") OR ti("voluntary youth work") OR ti("youth provision") OR ti("community-based youth work") OR ti("community youth work") OR ti("youth service") OR ti("youth proram*") OR ti(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR if("universal youth work") OR if("open access youth work") OR if("open youth work") OR if("generic youth work") OR if("volunteer-led youth work") OR if("youth work") OR if(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR if((("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations") OR ("youth organization" OR "youth organizations"))) OR if("voluntary youth work") OR if("youth provision") OR if("community-based youth work") OR if("community youth work") OR if("youth service") OR if("youth program*") OR if(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives"))	Title, abstract or keywords	392
Social Science	ab("universal youth work") OR ab("open access youth work") OR ab("open youth work") OR ab("Generic youth work") OR ab("Volunteer-led youth work") OR ab("youth work") OR ab(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ab(("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations")) OR ab(("youth organization" OR "youth organizations")) OR ab("voluntary youth work") OR ab("youth provision") OR ab("community-based youth work*") OR ab("youth service") OR ab("community youth work") OR ab(("youth program" OR "youth programme" OR "youth programmes" OR "youth programs")) OR ab(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR ti("universal youth work") OR ti("open access youth work") OR ti("open youth work") OR ti("generic youth work") OR ti("volunteer-led youth work") OR ti("youth work") OR ti(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR ti("youth organi?ation*") OR ti("voluntary youth work") OR ti("youth provision") OR ti("community-based youth work") OR ti("community youth work") OR ti("youth service") OR ti("youth proram*") OR ti(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives")) OR if("universal youth work") OR if("open access youth work") OR if("open youth work") OR if("generic youth work") OR if("volunteer-led youth work") OR if("youth work") OR if(("youth club" OR "youth clubs")) OR if((("youth organisation" OR "youth organisations") OR ("youth organization" OR "youth organizations"))) OR if("voluntary youth work") OR if("youth provision") OR if("community-based youth	Title, abstract or keywords	339

	work") OR if("community youth work") OR if("youth service") OR if("youth program*") OR if(("youth initiative" OR "youth initiatives"))		
Web of Science	TI=("universal youth work")) OR TI=("open youth work")) OR TI=("open access youth work")) OR TI=("generic youth work")) OR TI=("volunteer-led youth work")) OR TI=("youth work")) OR TI=("youth club*")) OR TI=("youth organisation*")) OR TI=("youth organization*")) OR TI=("voluntary youth work")) OR TI=("community youth work")) OR TI=("community-based youth work")) OR TI=("youth provision")) OR TI=("youth service")) OR TI=("youth program*")) OR TI=("youth initiative*") OR (AB=("Universal Youth Work" or "Open Access Youth Work" or "Open Youth Work" or "Generic Youth Work" or "Volunteer-led youth work" or "youth work" or "youth club*" or "youth organi?ation*" or "voluntary youth work" or "youth provision" or "community-based youth work" or "community youth work" or "youth service" or "youth program*" or "youth initiative").ab. OR (KP=("universal youth work")) OR KP=("open youth work")) OR KP=("open access youth work")) OR KP=("generic youth work")) OR KP=("volunteer-led youth work")) OR KP=("youth work")) OR KP=("youth club*")) OR KP=("youth organisation*")) OR KP=("youth organization*")) OR KP=("voluntary youth work")) OR KP=("community youth work")) OR KP=("community-based youth work")) OR KP=("youth provision")) OR KP=("youth service")) OR KP=("youth program*")) OR KP=("youth initiative*")	Title, abstract or keywords	1,202

Note: *All searches were restricted to articles published in English between January 2011 and 8 September 2021. Where possible, search terms were restricted to terms identified in the abstract, title or keyword areas of the article. Search terms are searched as key terms only. Separate searches were conducted for the abstract, title and keyword areas, and then combined using the OR function in each database (where this feature was available).*

Appendix C
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Appendix D*: Top eight most common benefits found in each thematic category*

Categories	Relationships, connection and support	Personal development and growth	Civic values and behaviour	Health and well-being	Education, career and hard skills
Number of positive outcomes	**111**	**192**	**90**	**40**	**31**
Top eight most common benefits (ranked by frequency of response)	Connection/positive relationships/friendships with peers	Confidence/self-confidence	Civic engagement/social action/volunteering/service to community	Having a place of safety	Academic/grades improvement
	Connection/positive relationships with adults	Identity development	Leadership skills/taking leadership	Relational/physical/emotional well-being	Career aspirations
	Social support (including instrumental, emotional support, guidance, empathy, mentoring)	Communication/presentation skills	Understanding and embracing equality and diversity	Drug-taking/intentions to use drugs	Learned skills (music production, creative arts, digital media technology)
	Sense of belonging	Motivation to participate in youth club/engagement in youth programme	Critical consciousness/awareness of social issues/empowerment	Alcohol intake/intentions	IT skills/computer programming
	A welcoming, safe space	Strengthened character/personal growth	Community connectedness	Happiness/positive affect	Positive academic attitude
	Ability to form/maintain positive relationships	Personal agency skills	Social responsibility values	Reduced negative affect	Studying
	Real, trusting relationships	General knowledge and life skills development	Political engagement/capital	Reduced risk behaviour	Exam preparation
	Feeling accepted	Openness to feedback, guidance or criticism	Social capital	Coping with stress/stress management	Engagement in school/schoolwork

Appendix E

Relationships, connection and support	Personal development and growth	Civic values and behaviour	Health and well-being	Education, career and hard skills
Multi-domain measures • Five Cs of Positive Youth Development Scale (30 items; Geldof *et al*., 2014) • Positive Youth Development Inventory (55 items; Arnold *et al*., 2012) • Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1982) • Youth Experiences Survey 2.0 (Larson and Rusk, 2011) • Psychological Needs Satisfaction Scale (16 items; Standage *et al*., 2005). **Single-domain measures** N/A	**Multi-domain measures** • Five Cs of Positive Youth Development Scale (30 items; Geldof *et al*., 2014) • Positive Youth Development Inventory (55 items; Arnold *et al*., 2012) • Youth Experiences Survey 2.0 (Larson and Rusk, 2011) • Sociopolitical Control Scale (17 items; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991) • Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (8 items; Peterson *et al*., 2011) • Psychological Needs Satisfaction Scale (16 items; Standage *et al*., 2005) • California Healthy Kids Survey (California Department of Education, 2009) • Life Skills Scale (Boleman *et al*., 2008) **Single-domain measures** • Grit Scale (12 items; Duckworth *et al*., 2007) • Concentration Scale (6 items; Standage *et al*., 2005) • Motivation to Participate in Youth Work (4 items; Goudas *et al*., 1994). • Youth Program Quality Survey (Akiva *et al*., 2014) • Adolescent Empathy Scale (Lipman *et al*., 2014) • Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (5 items; Goodman *et al*., 1991) • Goal Orientation Scale (Lipman *et al*., 2014) • Adolescent Hope Scale (3 items) • Hope Scale (6 items; Snyder *et al*., 1991) • Adolescent Purpose Scale (2 items; Arnold & Gagnon, 2019) • Social Competence Scale (9 items; Lipman *et al*., 2014) • Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) • Psychological Empowerment Scale (17 items; Boomkens *et al*., 2019) • Agency Scale (13 items; Boomkens *et al*., 2021) • Boston University Empowerment Scale (9 items; Rogers *et al*., 1997) • Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (24 items; Neill, 2008) • Organisational Engagement (5 items; Vandell *et al*., 2005) • Life Chances (9 items) • Optimism/pessimism about the future (5 items; Kazdin *et al*., 1986) • Functions of Identity Scale (10 items; Serafini & Adams, 2002) • Creative Self-Efficacy Scale (Tierney & Farmer, 2002) • Distance Travelled Tool (Stuart & Maynard, 2015) • Helping Hands Evaluation Survey (Anteby & Wrzesniewski, 2014) • Youth Investment Fund Evaluation Framework (Scanlon *et al*., 2021)	**Multi-domain measures** • Positive Youth Development Inventory (55 items; Arnold *et al*., 2012) • Sociopolitical Control Scale (17 items; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991) • Sociopolitical Control Scale for Youth (8 items; Peterson *et al*., 2011) • California Healthy Kids Survey (California Department of Education, 2009) • Life Skills Scale (Boleman *et al*., 2008) **Single-domain measures** • Single-item reports of civic involvement • Community Engagement Scale (7 items; Krauss *et al*., 2020) • Community Contribution Scale (13 items; Bautista *et al*., 2010) • Youth Inventory of Involvement (5 items; Pancer *et al*., 2007) • Gender-Equitable Men Scale (Singh *et al*., 2013) • Social Provision Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987)	**Multi-domain measures** • Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1982) **Single-domain measures** • Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (9 items; Ebbeck & Weiss, 1998) • Mental Health Index (MHI-5) of SF-36 item questionnaire • Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006) • Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston *et al*., 2009)	**Multi-domain measures** • Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1982) • Life Skills Scale (Boleman *et al*., 2008) **Single-domain measures** • Educational Attainment Scale (3 items; Lipman *et al*., 2014) • Cognitive School Engagement Scale (4 items; Li & Lerner, 2013) • Cognitive Engagement in School (5 items; Cochran *et al*., 1994) • Emotional Connection to School Scale (5 items; McNeely *et al*., 2002)

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