

Department for Education Character consultation

Written evidence submitted by Nesta

Nesta is an innovation foundation based in the UK and supported by a financial endowment. We use our expertise, skills and funding in areas where there are big challenges facing society. We work with partners around the UK to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.

Q.10 - We are defining character as:

- **believing that you can achieve**
- **being able to stick with the task in hand**
- **seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future, and**
- **being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us.**

To what extent do you agree that character and resilience are important in enabling young people to be successful and to thrive in later life?

1. We are pleased to see that DfE's focus on character takes into account some of the wider skills that young people need to thrive in the future. A [summary of research evidence](#) published by the EEF highlights evidence which links skills such as self-efficacy, perseverance and resilience with young people's academic and long-term outcomes. Nesta strongly agrees that alongside academic success and digital skills, these wider competencies are important in enabling young people to be successful and thrive in later life.
2. However, we are concerned that the definitions used by DfE lack clarity and are not linked to commonly-used terminology in this field. This makes it difficult to draw links with [related concepts and sub-skills](#), such as self-perception, motivation and perseverance. We strongly encourage DfE to refer to these using commonly-accepted terminology drawn from the evidence base in this field of work.
3. DfE could refer to the EEF's [evidence review](#) for examples of terminology that are related to DfE's 'aspects of character', such as self-efficacy, self-concept of ability, persistence, motivation and resilience. If the DfE does not use commonly-accepted terminology, there is a significant risk that schools and teachers will find it difficult to locate and access relevant evidence and interventions that develop these skills in young people. Using consistent and specific terminology for these skills will also help create a shared framework for measurement and monitoring, so schools, colleges and employers can monitor how skills are developed through education.

Q.11 - Thinking about the aspects of character and resilience that you think are most important in order for people to be successful in life, are there any that you feel are not covered in the list below? If so, please list these and tell us why you feel they are important.

- **Believing that you can achieve (e.g. being self-confident, believing in your own abilities)**
 - **Being able to stick with the task in hand**
 - **Seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future (e.g. deferred gratification, being aspirational and ambitious)**
 - **Being able to bounce back from the knocks that life inevitably brings to all of us (resilience)**
 - **Having strong personal qualities and values like kindness, generosity, a sense of justice, respect, integrity and humility.**
 - **Social skills, such as being articulate and able to mix and work easily with others, forming and maintaining long term relationships and commitments**
4. We encourage DfE to be more specific about the sub-skills that are related to the identified aspects of character. For example, [collaboration](#) and [oral communication](#) are closely related to social skills, and these should be identified in the framework. There are also wider skills that [we know to be important to the future of work](#) that are not included in DfE's definition, including judgement and decision-making, critical thinking, the ability to come up with original and creative ideas, complex problem-solving, active learning and active listening.
5. There is also a [wealth of evidence](#) linking social and emotional skills with positive life outcomes. Being able to recognise and manage emotions, setting and achieving positive goals and appreciating the perspectives of others are some of the elements that are missing from this list. Social and emotional skills [underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance and emotional wellbeing](#).

Q.12 - Which aspects of character do you think are most important in the workplace, or most valued by employers?

- **Believing you can achieve**
- **Being able to stick with the task in hand**
- **Seeing a link between effort today and payback in the future**
- **Being able to bounce back from knocks**
- **Having strong personal qualities and values like kindness, generosity, a sense of justice, respect, integrity and humility.**
- **Social skills, such as being articulate and able to mix and work easily with others, forming and maintaining long term relationships and commitments**
- **Others (please list below)**

6. It is essential that the DfE draws on the most up to date research and labour market data when linking its focus on character to skills demanded by employers. Nesta's [Future of Skills](#) report has predicted that interpersonal skills, such as active listening, social perceptiveness and adjusting behaviour in relation to others, are likely to be in-demand skills in the labour market of 2030. These constructs closely relate to DfE's description of social skills under the character framework. In light of this, DfE should ensure 'social skills' are consistently referred to in its definition of character.
7. Based on analysis of over 41 million job adverts, Nesta [has also published](#) a list of the top 10 highly transversal skills in the UK labour market. Top skills include communication skills, organisational skills, teamwork/collaboration and problem solving. We encourage DfE to emphasise these skills in their character framework.

Q.13 - What activities and approaches do you think are most effective in supporting the development of character and resilience? What evidence do you have to support this? (for example, any published evaluation studies, or data collection done within your organisation)?

8. There is [evidence to suggest](#) that universal school-based social and emotional programmes (e.g. the UK Resilience programme) can have a significant positive impact on the development of social and emotional skills in young people, such as resilience and self esteem. These skills are closely related to aspects of DfE's definition of character. As summarised by the [EEF](#) and [Health Promotion Research Centre](#), there is some promising evidence to suggest that service learning programmes, outdoor adventure programmes and arts and sports-based activities can also support the development of skills such as self-esteem, resilience, self efficacy and social skills.
9. At present, there is a lack of evidence-based provision and funding available to support interventions that develop wider skills in the UK. Through our [Future Ready Fund](#), Nesta is supporting a range of early-stage projects that we believe have high potential based on early impact data and the available evidence base. For example, [Voice 21](#) helps students to improve their social competence through a whole-school improvement programme focused on developing oracy skills. DfE should provide targeted funding and support to enable promising innovations to test, and for successful ideas to scale – especially those that do not require intensive school resource.

Q. 14 - We are keen to understand how access to character building activities can help make the greatest positive difference to groups of children and young people vulnerable to poorer life outcomes, such as those living in

poverty/with economic disadvantage, having a disability or SEN, being a young carer, living in care and others.

What examples of good practice do you have that demonstrate how barriers to participation in activities can be overcome for these groups?

10. We strongly encourage DfE to exercise caution when describing the need to build 'character' in vulnerable or disadvantaged young people. There is a significant risk that this is interpreted negatively by schools, communities and young people. DfE should instead use commonly-accepted terminology to refer to specific skills, such as social and emotional skills, collaboration or self-efficacy.
11. Through our Future Ready Fund, Nesta is supporting several programmes which break down barriers to participation in programmes which build social and emotional skills. One way to remove geographical access barriers is to deliver programmes within existing communities. For example, [Football Beyond Borders](#) targets adolescent boys who are at-risk of exclusion, delivering the programme in participants' own schools. Whole school interventions can also ensure that all students are able to access and participate in skill-building programmes. For example, [Voice 21](#)'s oracy programme is integrated into classroom and curriculum time. We believe that interventions that target such skills explicitly can have a significant impact on the life chances of all young people, particularly those vulnerable to poorer life outcomes.

Q. 15 - What evidence do you have of specific activities or approaches that can be particularly helpful for these groups of children?

12. Through our Future Ready Fund, Nesta is supporting [Khulisa's Face-It](#) programme, which builds social and emotional skills in at-risk young people in schools and PRUs. Both *Face-It* and *Khulisa's Silence the Violence* project have demonstrated some [positive impact](#) on the development of skills such as self-belief, self-confidence and conflict resolution in young offenders in prisons, young people excluded from school and gang-affected young people. *Football Beyond Borders*, another Future Ready Fund grantee, has [promising evidence](#) around the impact of their work on the development of skills in disadvantaged young people, particularly boys at risk of exclusion.

Q. 16 - We are keen to understand how developing character and resilience in children and young people may contribute to reducing the likelihood of gang membership and youth violence (e.g. knife crime), and preventing anti-social attitudes. Are you aware of any character-related work focused on this area?

13. [A review of evidence](#) published by the World Health Organisation suggests that programmes which build interpersonal, social and emotional skills in young children can help prevent aggression and improve prosocial skills. These skills are related to concepts included in DfE's definition of character, although there are key differences in terminology. Many violence and crime prevention programmes in the UK aim to build young people's social and emotional skills, such as self-regulation, self-esteem, cooperation and interpersonal skills. There is [evidence to suggest](#) that interventions such as [Khulisa's Face-It](#) intervention can lead to improvements in young people's conflict resolution skills, anger management and prosocial behaviour. Nesta is currently supporting the expansion of Khulisa into Pupil Referral Units through our [Future Ready Fund](#) grant programme.

Q. 27 - Finally, please share any views or specific examples of character development which have not been captured elsewhere which you think will assist us to support schools and other organisations in character development.

14. We encourage DfE to provide schools and teachers with evidence-based guidance and resources around how to build these skills in young people. We also recommend that the DfE fund more evaluation to build the evidence base around 'what works' when it comes to developing these skills in secondary students.
15. Schools also need support to assess the quality of their provision, which might include feedback from young people and teachers, validated measures, or observational methods to understand the impact of their provision in this area. [ImpactEd](#) is an example of an organisation working to facilitate schools' systematic evaluation of in-school intervention programmes, including to improve schools' understanding of how interventions support competencies such as resilience.
16. Nesta would welcome a conversation with DfE about how we can use our resources or lend our expertise to provide support to this policy agenda.

Contact:
Jed Cinnamon
Senior Programme Manager, Nesta
Jed.Cinnamon@nesta.org.uk