

EQUITY

## **Call for Evidence: Young People and Work Report**

**January 2026**

## About

Equity is the largest creative industries trade union with 50,000 members united in the fight for fair terms and conditions across the performing arts and entertainment. Our members are actors, singers, dancers, designers, directors, models, stage managers, stunt performers, circus performers, puppeteers, comedians, voice artists, supporting artists and variety performers. They work on stage, on TV and film sets, on the catwalk, in film studios, in recording studios, in night clubs and in circus tents.

## Contact

For further information about this response, please contact Anna Shea, Policy Officer – Industry, [ashea@equity.org.uk](mailto:ashea@equity.org.uk)

## Summary

1. Equity welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence for the Young People and Work Report. This submission discusses four barriers to young people entering and remaining in the creative industries: lack of access to high-quality arts training; the cost of courses and audition fees; the cost of casting directories; and the Minimum Income Floor in the Universal Credit calculation.

## Question responses

1.	<i><b>What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?</b></i>
----	---

2. The creative industries have long been dominated by the wealthy and privileged, and the problem is getting worse. Arts education has suffered because of national policy shifts which undermine the sustainability of UK arts and entertainment. Since 2011, there has been a 23% decline in hours of teaching of all arts subjects ([Campaign for the Arts, 2025](#)). People from working-class backgrounds make up just 16% of those in creative occupations, and proportions of working-class actors, musicians and writers have halved since the 1970s ([Brooke, Miles and Taylor, 2022](#)). In a recent study on the arts class gap, only 44% of creatives surveyed said they earned enough to make a living, with many requiring second jobs ([Rise Associates, 2026](#)). The barriers of low pay and precarious work in the industry are compounded by the wider problems of the UK's housing crisis, rising costs and fraying social safety net. Without an elite education or access to the Bank of Mum and Dad, it is harder and harder to build a career in a creative profession.
3. The first factor that prevents young people from entering the creative industries is a lack of access to high-quality arts training. Until recently, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) represented a significant barrier in this regard. Equity welcomes the government's commitment to scrap the accountability measure, recognising that it has constrained student choice at GCSE to a narrow focus on STEM subjects. Without specialist, high-quality arts education, children only have access to the arts as an extra-curricular activity. Research from Education Policy Institute highlights that children attending independent schools are much more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, including arts and music, than those from all other types of schools ([EPI, 2024](#)). Without

quality arts education in schools, the arts become the preserve of the socioeconomically privileged from primary school onwards.

4. Once a young person makes the decision to pursue a career in performing arts, a second barrier that prevents them from participating in education or training is the high cost of tuition and audition fees. Students training to be performers and creative practitioners are struggling to cover course costs. Research with Equity's student members found that 94% had to audition for places on courses, with 57% of them having to pay audition fees, many paying hundreds and even thousands of pounds in total. Three quarters have to balance often intensive training schedules with work and 15% take on debt to make ends meet. These costs are pushing working-class and marginalised students out of the sector, with 65% of Equity's working-class student members saying that audition fees and course costs prevented them from applying to training institutions ([Equity, 2024](#)).
5. Historic cuts to funding across higher education, and particularly to the top-up funding for arts subjects, create another barrier to engaging in high-quality performing arts training. The 2021 cut to top-up funding for arts subjects and the subsequent freeze and further cuts in 2024 and 2025 have left higher education institutions (HEIs) with just £130.54 per FTE student. Department for Education research found that the unit cost per FTE undergraduate was £12,159, leaving HEIs to fund the rest of the cost, or push it onto students ([DfE, 2019](#)). This funding crisis in performing arts higher education is pushing specialist institutions to close or reduce their training provision. In recent months, we have seen the closure of East 15's Southend campus, Bristol Old Vic Theatre School pull their undergraduate provision and replace it with foundation courses, and Italia Conti introduce a two-tier training system in which students who can pay higher fees benefiting from a more comprehensive programme. These developments are part of a wider trend towards performing arts education and training becoming less and less accessible to working class young people in an industry where holding a degree is often crucial to participation in the industry ([Sutton Trust, 2024](#)).
6. A third barrier to entering and remaining in the workforce is the cost of casting directories, which Equity calls "a tax on hope." Casting directories like Spotlight charge artists a fee for inclusion. In most industries, this practice – of charging work seekers a fee whether they find work or not – is illegal. However, Spotlight and other directories enjoy a carve-out from regulations governing employment agencies that is specific to the performing arts. Our members frequently share concerns with us about the cost of casting directories and its impact on their incomes. It cannot be right that those who need work bear the cost of their own recruitment.
7. A fourth barrier to working in the creative industries is what we call "the self-employment penalty." The Minimum Income Floor (MIF) is a level of income in the Universal Credit (UC) calculation which is assumed for self-employed people regardless of their actual earnings. In months of low income, it seriously reduces UC payments, including payments for children and rent. The MIF is used to assess how much Universal Credit a gainfully self-employed person should receive each month. With an adequate social security safety net, the amount a person receives usually depends on how much they have earned – the more you earn, the less Universal Credit you receive. But for the gainfully self-employed, the system assumes a minimum income, usually 35 hours paid at national

minimum wage. If you earn less than this, you will still only receive the amount of Universal Credit you would receive if you *had* been paid for 35 hours at national minimum wage. Meanwhile, if you are employed, there is no Minimum Income Floor and you will be paid an amount of Universal Credit based on your true earnings.

- 8. The MIF is weighted against self-employed people and disproportionately affects Equity members. It is incompatible with the fluctuating nature of self-employed creative work. As a result, it is driving highly motivated self-employed creatives away from the industry, pushing them out of highly skilled and rewarding work and into lower-skilled work elsewhere. In summary, the MIF is pushing creative workers out of the arts, disabled workers away from work, and in-work UC claimants into poverty and ill-health.

2.	<b><i>What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?</i></b>
----	---

- 9. In Equity’s view, these four barriers must be removed.
- 10. First, while the scrapping of the EBacc is a welcome measure, the government must go further and continue to invest in quality arts education by restoring arts funding across the education sector and recruiting specialist teachers to ensure that the arts is fully embedded in the curriculum. The government must also address the funding crisis in higher education.
- 11. Second, audition fees should be abolished. 71% of Equity’s student members said that this would be the most effective way of reducing financial barriers to their courses and the Sutton Trust has called on the government to ban institutions in receipt of public funding from charging fees for auditions ([Sutton Trust, 2024](#)). We are calling on institutions with performing arts courses to scrap audition fees, end hidden course costs and cover expenses for accessing auditions and open days. We believe every young person should have the chance to pursue their talents no matter their background. The performing arts should be for all, reflecting the diversity of voices and experiences that make up UK society.
- 12. Third, casting directory fees should be banned. It cannot be right that young people who need work bear the cost of recruitment. The High Court’s decision in Equity’s challenge to casting directory fees that the biggest such directory, Spotlight, is not an employment agency leaves workers in all industries vulnerable to upfront fees in an employment directory In September 2025, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) passed an emergency motion expressing concern for the economy-wide implications of the decision. Since September 2024 it has been TUC policy to lobby for the repeal of the unfair exemption for the performing arts and entertainment industries and call for such casting directory fees to be borne by producers, not workers.
- 13. Fourth, Equity is campaigning to abolish the Minimum Income Floor for self-employed claimants of Universal Credit, which acts as a barrier to young performers seeking support in their time of need. Instead, the government must rely on the test to decide whether a worker is gainfully self-employed as robust enough to ensure that bogus self-employment cannot be claimed.