



UNIVERSITY OF
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Faculty of Education

Evaluating provision, progress and quality of learning in the Children's University

2012

Executive Summary

Professor John MacBeath



Fourth Report to the CU Trust
January 2013





Key findings – The ten ‘A’s

1. Attendance

Children who participate in CU activities have, as a consequence, better attendance records than children in the same school who do not participate. This has been a consistent finding from 2007 to the present.

2. Attainment

There is evidence that not only do CU-engaged children attain more highly than their non-CU counterparts but that there is a positive correlation between the length of time children are involved with CU activities and their performance in tests and exams.

3. Achievement

Achievement also encompasses what has been realised by the CU Trust itself, measured by its growth and outreach over five years.

4. Attitudes

Changes in attitudes for Children’s University attendees has been a consistent finding over the last five years.

5. Adventure

Surmounting obstacles, testing yourself against more ambitious challenges, has been shown to encourage determination and perseverance.

6. Awards

Children’s University awards have their own special currency, as parents and children attest to the excitement of learning in new ways and in new contexts. Passports play a vital role.

7. Agency

Agency may also be applied to the Children’s University itself, an agent of change in a systemic sense, in respect of changing local management, initiative and innovation and, in a deeper sense, affecting the way in which we come to understand and evaluate learning.

8. Aspiration

To be able to succeed in other contexts, to visit places beyond one’s own immediate neighbourhood, to see the inside of a university for the first time is demonstrated in the data as extending horizons of the possible.

9. Adaptability

The value of Children’s University is also measured by adaptability - of children and young people, of teachers and schools, and of the educational system itself.

10. Advocacy

Perhaps the most significant measure of advocacy is the spontaneous adoption of the Children’s University by people and organisations in other countries. That it has such international appeal and relevance is hugely significant.

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About the author



Professor John MacBeath

John MacBeath is Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge where he held the Chair of Educational Leadership from 2000 to 2008. He is currently Projects Director for the Commonwealth Centre in Education.

From 1997 to 2001 he was a member of Tony Blair's Task Force on Standards and in 2001 he received the OBE for services to education.

For two decades he has researched learning in and out of school, learning in museums, and study support, and since 2007 has worked with the Children's University in both a consultancy and evaluation capacity.



Acknowledgements

The success story of the Children's University is owed to a number of key people who have not only kept it alive but grown it into a major national, and now international 'movement'. This is primarily owed to the imagination, and apparently unlimited energy, of its Chief Executive Ger Graus, and the core Manchester team. Ger would be the first to attribute the CU's longevity and impact to Andrea Wood, who has been his 'Radar' and has also been an invaluable support to me in the evaluation. Thanks too to Triinu Onton who continues to try, after three years, to keep Ger in order. And a debt is owed to the work of an expanding team of indispensable people - Lynne Upton, Director of Learning, Caroline Gilbert, Fundraising Manager, Richard Barry, Learning Consultant and Michelle Box, Acting PA to the Chief Executive, stepping in to cover during Andrea's maternity leave.

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And last, but really in first place, are the amazing people in CU centres everywhere who made it happen and are continuing to do so - and that includes the children who are the Children's University! They did the evaluation for me.



The evaluation

The Children's University, or CU, is so self-evidently a 'good thing' that an evaluation of its impact might seem redundant. However, the purpose of an external evaluation is to take a more objective, or at times sceptical stance. It questions the nature of the taken-for-granted, and problematises the 'good', and the assumptions which underpin it. It concerns itself with evidence and attempts to derive measures which are rigorous enough to discriminate among the 'almost good', the 'good' and the 'excellent'. As such it serves a summative as well as a formative purpose. It summarises achievement and progress but also points ahead to implications for the future. This evaluation too tells its own story, drawing on a large body of evidence to identify:

- The level of student participation in Children's University activities, differences by region and schools, schools' clusters, and the nature of incentives and rewards
- The 'added value' for children who participate in Children's University activities in terms of achievement broadly defined, curricular-based attainment more specifically defined, and attendance

- The value of the Children's University in enhancing dispositions, self-efficacy and motivation to learn
- The contribution of the Children's University 'curriculum' in extending and enhancing knowledge and skills
- The role and contribution of school senior leaders, teachers and other school staff in encouraging student participation
- The role, validation and impact of Learning Destinations
- The extent to which Children's University centres evaluate their own quality and effectiveness and uses made of quality assurance frameworks
- The quality assurance process
- The nature, contribution and impact of the Children's University (CU) Trust's central management team

This fourth evaluation covers the period 2011 to 2013 but also includes an overview of the Children's University (CU) Trust's first five years: April 2007 to January 2013.



Executive summary

Ten measures of success – The Ten ‘A’s

1. Attendance

Children who participate in CU activities have, as a consequence, better attendance records than children in the same school who do not participate. This has been a consistent finding from 2007 to the present. This applies to both authorised and unauthorised absence. Two explanations are offered by children themselves. One explanation - which might be termed ‘strategic’ - is that school attendance gives access to CU activities.

“Frankie has had an amazing time, he jumps for joy when he knows it is Tuesday. He has made lots of friends and can’t stop talking about it.”
(Parent)

A second explanation is that by virtue of being in the CU, children are happier and more fulfilled in their school work. 83% of children agreed/strongly agreed with the statement ‘I now feel much more confident about my class work.’ 75% agreed/strongly agreed that ‘I pay more attention in class since being in the CU.’

2. Attainment

‘Attainment’ is generally taken to refer to gains made that can be measured by standardised tests or ‘value added.’ These may be seen as ‘extrinsic’ indicators, that is, they do not necessarily have any lasting value but are a required passport to other places, work, further and higher education, and employment.

In the 2010 evaluation of the Children’s University¹ we saw that achievement is significantly better at

ages 7, 11 and 14 for children who participate in the Children’s University compared with non-attenders. Evidence on attainment, however, comes from a range of sources and shows considerable variation among different forms of provision. It therefore requires an effort on the part of schools to attend to, and sustain, the links between engagement with learning in and out of the classroom. Where this occurs **there is evidence that not only do CU-engaged children attain more highly than their non-CU counterparts but that there is a positive correlation between the length of time children are involved with CU activities and their performance in tests and exams**, as the following data from Sheffield illustrates.

Participation	English Level 4+	Maths Level 4+
Non-CU	67	67
30+ hours	81	82
65+ hours	82	81
100+ hours	85	84
Sheffield	77	78

3. Achievement

Achievement is a bigger and ultimately more sustainable concept than attainment. It may include what is learned and tested within a national curriculum but it extends to a wide variety of emotional, social and cognitive accomplishments, with a life beyond schools, beyond tests and exams and beyond easy measurement. Achievements are often defined in breadth of interests, as children engage in a variety of activities, from chess to rock climbing and drama. But achievements are also defined by a depth of expertise in any one of those areas of interest for example.

¹ ‘Evaluation of the Children’s University 2010 – Third Report’, Professor John MacBeath, University of Cambridge, January 2011 (ISBN: 978-0-9561319-4-2)



Achievement also encompasses what has been realised by the CU Trust itself, measured by its growth and outreach over five years, in relation to:

- The number of centres – 90 in England and a further 26 across other parts of the British Isles
- The number of children – 136,000 of which 125,000 are aged 7 to 14 and a further 11,000 are 5 and 6 year olds
- The number of schools and academies – 3,000 in England alone
- The number and variety of public Learning Destinations – 2,200
- The uptake of Passports To Learning – 250,000
- The number of allied Higher and Further Education Institutions - 100
- The range and quality of partnerships
- The affiliation of other countries
- The awards won nationally
- The significant move towards financial sustainability

Achievements of the Children's University (CU) Trust have also been recognised in prestigious national awards and nominations.

4. Attitudes

Changes in attitudes for Children's University attendees has been a consistent finding over the last five years. The evidence comes from children themselves, and from parents, teachers and co-ordinators. It is evidenced in anecdotes, spontaneous endorsements, interviews and from surveys, the results of which have varied little over the years, although they are influenced to some extent by geographic location and length of association.

90% of students agree/strongly agree with the statement: 'I love learning new things.' Many spontaneous written comments refer to the range of personal and social benefits:

"These activities are not only fun and keep you out of mischief but they make you like school more, help you get on better with other people and give you more confidence to do your class work and your homework."
(13 year old boy)

5. Adventure

Ad-venture, venturing forth, is defined in the dictionary as 'to engage in hazardous and exciting activity, esp. the exploration of unknown territory', and as 'an unusual and exciting, typically hazardous, experience.'

By definition adventure involves risk. For children, the nature of risk outside of curriculum and classroom is of a different order to risk of failure or humiliation inside the class. For the adults who work with children, the more adventurous the initiative, the greater the risk of failure. However, initial failure is more likely to be seen as intrinsic to the activity and as a motivator to do better rather than being seen as demoralising, attended by sanctions and often resulting in emotional withdrawal. **Surmounting obstacles, testing yourself against more ambitious challenges, has been shown to encourage determination and perseverance,** as exemplified in outdoor activities such as abseiling and rollerblading. 87% of children agreed/strongly agreed with the statement in the CU attitude survey: 'I'm not afraid to try things out even if I fail.'





6. Awards

According to their own testimony, gaining awards for participation is not the primary motivation for children to engage in CU activities. Nonetheless, awards are valued by students because they endorse, make visible and celebrate what has been achieved. While marks and grades may not always provide the occasion for sharing with parents, **Children's University awards have their own special currency, as parents and children attest to the excitement of learning in new ways and in new contexts. Passports play a vital role**, the value attached to them borne out in the low loss rate, comparing very favourably with the 'real' adult equivalent.

In response to the statement: 'It is important to me to get credits so I can take part in graduation ceremonies', 84% of children and young people agreed.

7. Agency

Agency refers to the power to act, a recognition that making a difference is in your own hands. We talk of 'agents of change', acting individually or collectively rather than as passive acceptance of what others dictate. One of the more worrying findings of school effectiveness research is that a sense of agency diminishes as children attend school, as conformity and obedience tends to be valued more highly than initiative, individuality and idiosyncrasy. Although 'agency' is not a term that is within their vocabulary, the sense of power and purpose is expressed in the following quote from an eleven year old boy:

"I don't have to wait for teachers to tell me what to do or to stop me doing things 'cos I just do things myself and find out things by myself and sometimes with other people too. I like having responsibility actually."

A sense of agency can also be applied to teachers and other adults who express similar sentiments to their pupils, taking initiative rather than waiting for permission, liberated from 'the constraints of targets and testing' as one teacher put it. **Agency may also be applied to the Children's University itself, an agent of change in a systemic sense, in respect of changing local management, initiative and innovation, and, in a deeper sense, affecting the way in which we come to understand and evaluate learning.**

8. Aspiration

For many children, particularly in homes and areas of acute disadvantage, their view of the future is often bleak and uninspired. It may be reinforced on a daily basis by peers and parents and by their classroom experience. To influence aspiration often seems beyond even the best teachers. **To be able to succeed in other contexts, to visit places beyond one's own immediate neighbourhood, to see the inside of a university for the first time, is demonstrated in the data as extending the horizons of the possible.**

"After I visited the university I thought for the first time maybe I could do that one day myself. I really didn't know before that what a university was."
(10 year old girl)



The growth in attendance at university lectures is a further measure of aspiration beyond the limitations of neighbourhood and community, and a measure too of the CU itself, creatively discontent with the tried and tested.

9. Adaptability

The value of Children's University is also measured by adaptability - of children and young people, of teachers and schools and of the educational system itself. Defined as 'the ability to adapt to new situations and new challenges' it is tested at the following levels of impact.

In respect of children and young people, the ability to adapt to the challenges of new contexts for learning is much of its attraction, re-adapting in new ways and with a new outlook on learning and on classroom learning ('learning in the wild' and 'learning in captivity'). The evidence comes from responses to questionnaires and from testimony in written statements and in interviews.

Perhaps one of the most salient features of personal and social education is to learn to get on with others who are different from you and to adapt expectations and attitudes. As one twelve year old boy put it:

"It makes you enjoy school more and get on with your pals better because you understand them better and meet people who are different from you and like different things from you."

Adaptability at teacher and school level is evidenced by openness to change and

willingness to create opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. As activities expand and new ideas gain momentum year on year there is evidence of schools becoming more creative and adventurous in what they offer and in respect of the partners with whom they engage.

For Learning Destinations, adapting to the needs of young visitors, offering structured learning experiences has required flexibility and adaptability, while validation has required new perspectives and new appreciation of what a site such as a museum can promise.

The embrace of the Children's University by universities, and in many instances by the support of their Vice Chancellors has been shown in making premises available, investing time and goodwill and participating in graduations.

While there is some evidence of teachers tailoring their teaching to the experience that children have beyond the classroom, this remains one of the major priorities for the CU in the future. For the benefit of learning beyond the classroom to be realised teachers need to be informed and alert to children's renewed self-confidence and their history of experience beyond the national curriculum.

Responsiveness and adaptability are also vouchsafed by a range of quality assurance processes which monitor and advise centres, encouraging and supporting CU's own self-evaluation and capacity building.



10. Advocacy

Like adaptability, advocacy works at a number of levels, as children enthuse their friends, as CU managers, co-ordinators and teachers extol its benefits, and as the CU Trust, in all its aspects, acts as a (inter)national voice through partnerships and communities, learning partners and Learning Destinations. While the leadership team, and the Chief Executive in particular, are tireless advocates, it is through the tangible gains and the voices of children and young people that the CU is sustained and enhanced. Capturing learning experiences, testimonials

and graduations in photographs, videos and on the CU website are all powerful forms of advocacy, giving access to good ideas and imaginative invention.

Perhaps the most significant measure of advocacy is the spontaneous adoption of the CU by people and organisations in other countries, less an outcome of purposive advocacy by the Chief Executive or others than the transparent value of CU activities and achievements. That it has such international appeal and relevance is hugely significant.

“There are skills such as problem solving, communication, collaboration, experimentation, critical thinking and creative expression. These skills become curricular goals in themselves and the objects of new assessment methods. Perhaps the most significant aim is for students to be able to create their own learning goals and plans—to establish what they already know, assess their strengths and weaknesses, design a learning plan, stay on-task, track their own progress, build on successes and adjust to failures. These are skills that can be used throughout a lifetime to participate in a learning society.”

(UNESCO, 2012, page 17)

***“University of fun
A brilliant way to get children inspired.”***

The Sunday Times



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