

Evaluation of the Children's University™ 2010 Executive Summary

Professor John MacBeath



Third Report to the CU Trust
January 2011



Key Findings

1. Being in the Children's University **significantly** improves school attendance.
2. Achievement is **significantly** better at Key Stages 1 to 3 for children who participate in Children's University compared with non-attenders.
3. The further children engage with Children's University, the better their attendance and achievement.
4. Children's University provides an environment for self-driven, confident and collegial learning.
5. Children's University provides a safe haven and models positive relationships.
6. Pupils and teachers testify to life changing experiences.
7. 'Opportunity costs' are high for children in disadvantaged areas who do not attend Children's University.
8. Certificates, credits, Passports To Learning and graduations are valued incentives and rewards.
9. University settings help to inspire and raise aspirations for children, and their parents.
10. Children's University has helped to *"make learning a reality beyond academic studies."*

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"Children's University has been a fantastic experience for all three of our children. They are, as you know, three very different characters and Children's University has inspired and challenged them all.

The experience of Children's University has been, for us, a wonderful learning experience, it has made learning a reality beyond the academic studies and given the children a positive outlook to learning and how "... boring ..." skills can be used in real life.

The children have enjoyed team work and friendship during the exploration of different modules. They have tackled subjects they thought they wouldn't be able to do and faced challenges that took them beyond the comfort zone. But we believe that having taken these challenges in safety and with all the fun of Children's University partner events the children have grown in confidence. Confidence that at age 15 saw David going off for a week's course at Imperial College London to join over 200 young people to study Maths and Science. He didn't know anyone but neither had he when attending some Children's University events. It was just like Children's University only bigger and longer.

Knowledge gained in a fun way at Children's University events comes back in study. When looking at food chains in Science, Richard had a light bulb moment: "But that's what we did when we played that game at Ryton Pools...!"

Children's University has helped support our children's learning and widen their world. I wish you all the best for the future and hope that you will be able to support many more children through the experience that is Children's University."

**Parent of a CU Student
Warwickshire Children's University**



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 the Tony Blair's Task Force on Standards and in that same year he received the OBE for services to education.

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



The evaluation

This third evaluation has gone further than its predecessors by seeking evidence of value-added not only in terms of the Children's University experience itself but in respect of attainment in core curriculum subjects. While these measures do not get to the heart of what the Children's University is about they are, for Government and for funding bodies, important indicators. For young people themselves they are a passport to further and higher education, complementing the Children's University Passports To Learning which attest to learning in destinations other than school.

The headline findings are hugely encouraging. Children's University pupils attend better by virtue of the activities which enhance their school experience. Children's University pupils achieve better by virtue of renewed self-confidence in their own potential. Children's University pupils enjoy learning more because they extend their repertoire of interests and see learning in a new light.

Perhaps most powerful of all in the data which follow are the testimonies of young people whose enthusiasm and total commitment shine through and offer evidence of the most direct and infectious kind. It is, ultimately, about the lives and futures of children.



Executive summary

Background

The Leadership for Learning team of the University of Cambridge were tasked with evaluating whether or not the Children's University (CU) has an impact on pupils' attainment, attendance and attitudes towards learning.

This evaluation gathered the following data:

- Analysis by the Fischer Family Trust of comparative attendance data from almost 3,000 children in 16 local CUs, disaggregated by Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) area and non-NRU area.
- Analysis of attainment data in 2007/8 and in 2008/09 at Key Stage 1 for children aged 7 (1,273 pupils), Key Stage 2 for children aged 11 (1,489 pupils) and in 2007/8, 2008/9 and 2009/10 at Key Stage 3 for children aged 14 (99 pupils), with disaggregation by gender, ethnicity, Free School Meals entitlement, NRU and non-NRU areas.
- Questionnaires to 248 CU participants from 17 schools in 6 local CU centres and to 8 local CU centre managers or coordinators.
- Follow-up interviews with 60 children and 5 local CU managers in 3 CU sites (and 5 schools) – Sheffield, Warwickshire and West London.

Key findings

The following are 10 key findings from this study.

1. Being in the Children's University significantly improves school attendance.

Pupils' attendance data were examined over 9 school terms in 16 local Children's University centres from 2006/07 to 2008/2009. Overall there are significant differences in authorised and unauthorised absences between the two groups in favour of CU participants. Interviews with children and young people offer explanations for better attendance:

"Even if I'm not feeling very well I'll still come into school because I don't want to miss after school activities."

"What we do in Children's University means a lot to me. It makes me want to come to school more even when I'm not, like, really into the subjects that we are doing that day."

Better school attendance is also a consequence of children and young people saying they feel more confident about themselves and are better equipped to meet the challenges of class work. Responses to the questionnaire items produced the following statistics in the categories 'Always true/True most of the time': 'I now feel much more confident about my class work' (83%) and 'Being in the CU has made me more confident about myself' (82%).



2. Achievement is significantly better at Key Stages 1 to 3 for children who participate in the Children’s University compared with non-attenders.

Comparison of achievement on 12-13 indicators (Levels in English, Reading, Writing, Mathematics and Science) for Children’s University participants compared with their non-CU peers found that:

- At KS1 for children aged 7, achievement on all of the 12 indicators is significantly better than that of children from the same school who are not involved in CU activities.
- Comparing these CU participants with children nationally also showed that on every indicator they were doing significantly better, with particularly strong value-added in Maths.
- At Key Stage 2 for children aged 11, there was evidence of significant added value on 9 of the 13 indicators. For girls there was evidence of value-added on 10 of 13 indicators. For boys it was 8 of the 13.
- At Key Stage 3 for children aged 14, across 4 local CU sites, there was evidence of significant gains for CU participants across all 13 measures.

3. The further children engage with Children’s University, the better their attendance and achievement.

There is confirmation for the data from Local Authorities and schools which have conducted their own local, internal evaluations. Sheffield provides one example. At Key Stage 2, CU participants with 30+ hours perform significantly

better than their non-CU counterparts, most noticeably in Maths (82% achieving Level 4+ as against 75% for non-CU pupils). Achievement differences become greater by the amount of CU learning children engage in. This is illustrated by one Sheffield primary school.

KS2 Level 4+	Non-CU	30-100 CU hours	100+ CU hours
English	34%	45%	76%
Maths	35%	63%	100%

Levels of attendance across Sheffield Local Authority also show improvements by levels of engagement with Children’s University activities, rising from 93.6% for non-participants to 94.1% (0-10 hours of CU participation), to 94.7% (10-30 hours of CU participation), 94.9% (30-100 hours of CU participation) and 95.5% (100+ hours of CU participation).

4. Children’s University provides an environment for self-driven, confident and collegial learning.

Learning new things with uninterrupted time, trying things out without anxiety over failure, getting help when you need it, working with friends, taking responsibility for your own learning and growing confidence, all rated highly as the best of current practice, and define the nature of the Children’s University learning environment. It is collegial, unhurried, low risk, supportive and self-determining. Gaining credits and being eligible to graduate is a less intrinsic benefit but also a unique selling point of the Children’s University. As one CU manager put it:



“It’s the enthusiasm and delight children get from doing things and learning things they had never thought of before, exploring new areas, new ways of learning. Yes, there is a lot of learning out there beyond the classroom walls.”

5. Children’s University provides a safe haven and models positive relationships.

There is consistent consensus from interviews with young people and school staff that the ethos of the Children’s University is one which encourages self-help, support for others and does not tolerate discrimination or bullying. One 14 year old girl spoke tearfully about erratic attendance because of being constantly bullied, but said that the Children’s University had been a lifeline for her, as her friends were quick to point out:

“No one ever bullies you in CU. It just wouldn’t be what CU is like. It is a safe place as well as fun place.”

6. Pupils and teachers testify to life changing experiences.

Follow-up interviews to pupil questionnaires found repeated accounts of ‘life changing experiences’. These were confirmed by teachers and CU managers who commented on changes in children’s behaviour, on attitudes to school and application in class.

“He’s just a different person now, puts up his hand, joins in, volunteers to help, brims with a confidence that was never there before.”

7. ‘Opportunity costs’ are high for children in disadvantaged areas who do not attend Children’s University.

“I would just play on my Xbox all the time if I didn’t go to CU.”

The evidence from Baroness Greenfield’s studies of 10 and 11 year olds who spend an average of 1,500 hours annually on games and virtual reality sites has found serious adverse impacts on cognitive and emotional functioning as well as on social skills. As well as the addictive effects of PC gaming on concentration and motivation in class, teachers point to the high costs, personal and financial, for young people who do not attend Children’s University activities, who then simply ‘hang out’ and get into trouble with the police and shopkeepers.

“I go [to CU] every night of the week. It’s mad man, ‘cos if I wasn’t, I would be just hanging out at the shops with the lads who just want to cause trouble.”

8. Certificates, credits, Passports To Learning and graduation are valued incentives and rewards.

Gaining credits proves both a powerful motivator and, for young people, added value over and above the enjoyment of Children’s University activities and the pride in ‘graduation’. Where Passports To Learning were in current use, the extent to which they were prized by children came as a welcome surprise to teachers. Early fears that they would be lost were dispelled.



"No, they haven't lost it and they said they keep it so safe, one of them actually said to me she kept it in her bed, under her pillow! So it really means a lot to them because they're really trying to get it filled in because they know that it's going to mean something so to them it's really, really important."

9. University settings help to inspire and raise aspirations for children and their parents.

"Children just walking through the University in this huge grounds and obviously I was with my own son and he was absolutely in awe, he could not believe it and there were students milling around and he said you know why are they here and just that whole thing about being on this big campus and that will be their dream. Matthew actually said, "Wow!" - you could see his little mind ticking over and I just think it was an amazing feeling for everybody."

The pride young people took in graduating was one shared by their parents, some of whom, like their children, had never been inside a university.

"Going to university made me and my parents really proud. Like seeing me in a cap and gown my mum said she never thought she'd see inside a university. It just makes me feel proud."

10. Children's University has helped to "make learning a reality beyond academic studies."

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Notes:

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