

Key findings from the *Evaluation of the Children's University™ 2010* and their relevance for Government policy

by

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

'You aren't going to learn much if you're not there'. As is evident from numerous studies, irregular attendance is not only hugely disruptive to children's continuity and progress but falling behind is also a powerful demotivator, creating a vicious circle of low motivation-low-achievement-low motivation.

A recurring theme in the evaluation of the CU is children's increased attendance because, as they told researchers, they don't want to miss CU activities, however engaged, or disengaged, they may be during timetabled lessons. In addition the CU does offer opportunity for catching up and restoring confidence. The success of local initiatives is because individual schools and local authorities have created space and support for developing new and innovative ways of supporting the most vulnerable.

We plan to strip away these stifling bureaucratic burdens and offer local authorities the space they need to be more daring and imaginative in how they provide services and deploy resources to the benefit of every child in their area. In particular, local authorities will be free to develop new and innovative ways of supporting the vulnerable.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 68)

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

At age seven, the gap in reading scores between those children who were eligible for free school meals and those who were not was 16 points. At age 11, the gap was 21 points in English and Maths. At age 16, the gap was 28 points at GCSE, and only 30% of children eligible for free school meals got five good GCSEs including English and Maths. In 2009, only 4% of children eligible for free school meals even sat a chemistry or physics GCSE, and in 2008 40% of those children did not get even a single C in any GCSE.

(Michael Gove, Education Bill, Second Reading, Hansard)

One of the central tasks of the Children's University is to reduce the gap between the highest and lowest achievers, the most and least privileged, the richest and poorest. The evidence clearly shows that well thought through, well structured provision out of school hours benefits children and young people who lack the quality of support enjoyed by the highest achieving children.

As the Government's international data shows, countries that do well have high social capital, providing a fund on which to draw, located in families communities and, fostered and capitalised upon by successful schools and excellent teachers.

Schools cannot do it all, as a salutary reminder from Baroness Greenfield's study of 10-11 year olds illustrates. These children spent 900 hours in school, compared with 1,277 hours at home and 1,934 hours spent in the virtual world of the internet or games. But schools can build the bridges between learning in and out of school, a vital characteristic of the best of local CUs.

Schools should decide their own priorities, based on their local circumstances, the views of parents and the needs of their pupils.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 34)

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

The democratisation of access to knowledge for all. And every one of our policies is driven by this guiding moral purpose.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 23)

The Children's University is driven by a moral purpose and a belief that what is good for the best of children is good for all children. Making the best that has been thought and said accessible to all is stimulated by good teaching but its lifetime in memory can be pitiful and short without sources of support beyond the classroom. Learning is consolidated and sustained when children have opportunities to engage with other children and adults in a learning rich environment. And, as the evidence, shows, the greater and more sustained the opportunities for learning activities beyond the classroom the higher the achievement. Engagement with CU has been shown to set in train a virtuous circle of engagement-satisfaction-raised-motivation-higher-aspiration-higher achievement.

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

While school is, for many children a place in which success comes easily, for others schools is an experience of struggle and failure, with very few incentives and rewards for the return on investment. For such children, unless fortunate enough to have an extremely gifted teacher, classroom learning does not inspire confidence. In secondary schools in particular children can easily lose their way with a range of subjects and teachers each with their own expectations and classroom routines. These issues are very well documented, especially at the point of transition from primary to secondary, and especially for children with special educational needs. For children who can easily fall between the cracks the CU environment is a lifeline. 'Inclusion' without appropriate provision is not the answer (see for example *The Costs of Inclusion*, MacBeath et al, 2006)

We believe the most vulnerable children deserve the very highest quality of care. We will improve diagnostic assessment for schoolchildren, prevent the unnecessary closure of special schools, and remove the bias towards inclusion.

(Government Manifesto, May 2010)

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

Racism and bullying may also play a part in suppressing the attainment of minority ethnic groups and there is worrying evidence to suggest that there is an upward trend for racist incidents in some schools.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 18)

The paper highlights the negative effects of bullying and intimidation which can be highly detrimental to engagement, to learning and ultimately to life chances in particular for some children from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The sense of safety and friendship offered by CU is not only valued by vulnerable children but it is also a safe place to admit to bullying and racism, typically concealed and suffered in silence. The 'relationships forged within CU between pupils, and between pupils and their teachers means that in the main stream of school life there is a raised awareness and a watching brief as to incidences of bullying or intimidation.

The modeling strong reciprocal relationships within CU can be made to carry over into the day-to-day life of schools and classrooms.

6. Pupils and teachers testify to life changing experiences.

For children and young people the evidence is clear - opportunities to complement and enrich classroom learning can be life changing. Disillusion can become ambition and failure turned to success. What is often overlooked is the potential life changing experience for teachers. The escape from the classroom allows them to engage with children in a different environment, to listen, free from pressures of time and impatient targets. They not only begin to understand the lives and learning of children in differing contexts but are able to bring that heightened knowledge and awareness back into the classroom. The freedom to innovate will allow experienced and dedicated professionals to create new avenues of opportunity which promote equity.

We need to make sure that the experienced and dedicated professionals in our schools have the freedoms and support that they need to succeed in delivering equality of opportunity.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 27)

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

Put simply, the system is not working for some of our poorest and most disadvantaged children.

(The Case for Change, Paragraph 10, The Case for Change)

On an ethical level this gap between the rich and the poor is indefensible. But reducing inequality is not only the guiding ethical imperative of our education policy; it is an absolute necessity if we are to compete economically on the global stage.

(The Importance of Teaching, Executive Summary, paragraph 3)

Confronting and dealing with disadvantage is at the forefront of Coalition Government policy. The correlation between disadvantage and achievement, cited above, is underpinned by a number of factors including low expectations of teachers, parents and pupils themselves but also powerfully by the experiences in neighbourhoods and peer groups. Young people who do not attend CU are often by default, to be found hanging around shops and street corners, vulnerable to trouble makers, to drugs and other inducements. They are also likely to fall foul of the law.

Partnerships through CU, with joined up social, health and welfare services can go a long way to addressing these issues.

Empower local authorities to have a strong, strategic role in championing the needs of parents and pupils - particularly the most vulnerable.

(The Importance of Teaching: White Paper, 5:42)

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

Innovation drives improvement, we have already announced the creation of an Education Endowment Fund. This fund will enable schools, local authorities, parents, voluntary and community sector organisations and social enterprises to bid competitively for money to trial innovative approaches to raising the attainment of pupils from deprived backgrounds - especially in underperforming schools.

(The Case for Change, Paragraph 41)

Children's University as an innovation has a long history but as it has grown and benefited from a creative centrally based team and support from government funding it has opened the doors to a range of innovations and creative thinking.

The opening up of learning sites in the community – museums, art galleries, stately homes, libraries, workplaces – validated by CU as learning sites, have proved to be highly motivational, the stamp on children's Passport To Learning providing a cumulative record of their achievements.

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

The 'one size fits all' approach of recent years has done little to improve the life chances of some of our most vulnerable children. The fact is that government is simply not best placed to respond effectively to the wide variety of circumstances and challenges faced by schools and their pupils, and nor are inspectors, advisors and central government bureaucrats the people best able to extend opportunity to every child. So, instead, we need to make sure that the experienced and dedicated professionals in our schools have the freedoms and support that they need to succeed in delivering equality of opportunity.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 27)

As Michael Gove has argued low expectations can come from government policy, from teachers and schools, and may be difficult to reverse in a limiting or patronizing climate. One of the aspirations of the CU is to instill a belief in teachers, parents and pupils that a university education is an option, hence taking children and their parents into university settings, broadening horizons of possibility.

While Coalition policy draws widely on research, citing teachers and school leaders as two key influences on pupil achievement, it is also acknowledged that parental attitudes and aspirations are hugely influential determining factors. The support and impetus that parents give (or fail to give) to their children goes a long way to explaining the gap cited in the White Paper.

Through CU graduations which a majority of parents attend, through visits to Universities and through a keen interest taken by Vice-Chancellors, children and their parents are offered a vision of what might be. The following testimony from a parent is quoted in the evaluation of the CU:

"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**

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

Employers justifiably value a whole range of practical skills and experience that go far beyond the most demanding academic paper.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 63)

The range of activities encompassed within the CU cultivate many of the skills and dispositions that are at a premium with employers. There is a consistent strain that runs through all research into what employers are looking for in young people – initiative, self direction, reliability, ability to work in a team, willingness to learn, emotional intelligence. OECD¹ data trends show the occupational structure is now moving inexorably towards communication, technological, people-related and the flexibility, transferable and generic skills which allow people to make the transition to five to ten jobs in a lifetime. These are not, unfortunately, the product of directive teaching but arise through opportunities to exercise choice, to make mistakes, to work together with others, all of which are cultivated by CU activities.

Promoting equality in our school system, linked to their wider role in relation to children's services. They will be acting as local agents of change, championing parents' choice and the needs of the most vulnerable.

(The Case for Change, paragraph 89)

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development