



**UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE**

Faculty of Education

# **Evaluation of the Children's University**

**Executive Summary**

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**Second Report  
January 2010**

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## Introduction

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This report complements and extends the evaluation of the Children's University that began in Autumn 2007 in which the following key purposes were set out, taken from the initial tender and the business plan presented to the DCSF in 2007.

Objectives:

- To measure the success of CU against its own aspirations and objectives
- To report on the viability of the initiative as a whole and of individual centres
- To identify good, promising and breakthrough practice
- To identify areas for improvement
- To offer explanations for successes and failures
- To identify the most promising strategies for systemic improvement

In that first report presented to the Trustees in November 2008 the achievements and progress of the CU to date were summarised as:

- The ability to engage and sustain young people's interest in voluntary learning activities out of school hours
- The breadth of learning encompassed, complementing and enhancing mainstream curricular provision
- The responsiveness of centre managers and tutors to children and young people's needs and their creativity in devising imaginative ways of meeting those needs
- The imagination and industry in exploiting potential sites for learning in the local community, nationally and even internationally
- The collaboration with partners in the community, with statutory business partners and with higher education
- The value of the university partnership in celebrating achievement and raising aspirations of children for whom 'university' was never within their conceptual compass
- The enthusiasm reported by children for activities which led to new interests and new friends
- Leadership from the centre

In the year following that first report these same issues define the essence of CU experience. While on the surface it may seem that little has changed the story to be told is one of deeper rootedness and growth, not simply in numbers of centres but in a more rigorous concern for the quality of provision. Resilience in a time of economic crisis and sustainability through partnerships with other agencies and organisations emerge as key themes.

This evaluation reports on:

- The positioning of the Children's University within a proliferating number of Out-of-school-hours (OSHL) initiatives and government policy of extending schools
- The nature, functions and development of the national organisation and its relationship with local centres
- The nature and diversity of local provision and implications for finance and sustainability
- The nature and quality of provision in eight selected case study sites and issues for local and national sustainability
- The gains for participating pupils through case studies of individual children
- The rationale, development and potential uses of Planning for Learning
- The purposes and uses of the passport to learning
- The role, scope and activity of the Chief Executive's Office

Data-gathering activities and data collected include: interviews with children, teachers, headteachers, Centre Managers and Local Authority colleagues; observations of lessons and activities for young people at all sites; observation and participation at centre managers' meetings, including the annual conference; leading training at centre managers' meetings and analysis of documentation.

By April 2010 there will be a total of 50 local CUs in England, 34 in or containing 40 Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) areas and 16 outside of these but with a clear focus on challenging contextual relative deprivation. Local management arrangements vary according to the local context of individual CUs; out of the 50 local CUs, 27 are managed directly by the local authority and 23 through other arrangements such as schools' collaboratives, Further and Higher Education, Education Business Partnership, a trust, a foundation, a regeneration project, a community project and Academies. In total, the national Children's University growth marks an increase of 38 local CUs from 12 to 50) in England (or 415%) over the period 2007-2010.

## Learning out of school

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The case for the creation of something called ‘the Children’s University’ has been made in numerous places and in previous documents and hardly needs further justification. Yet it is worth reminding us just how strong and significant is the case for provision of learning opportunities beyond the school curriculum. There are 10 key arguments which may be couched as five ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors – the push towards OSHL (out-of-school-hours-learning) and the pull of the enriching opportunities that the Children’s University offers. The first five of the following may be seen as ‘the push’ from research and policy. The second group of five refers to the irresistible ‘pull’ of the CU.

1. Social capital as the primary determinant of school success
2. The significant impact of the peer effect
3. The continued failure to close the achievement gap
4. The inherent limitations of schooling
5. The high stakes competitive environment
  
6. The liberating effect of time, space and lack of pressure
7. Opportunities for self determination and self direction
8. Broadening contexts and opportunities for learning
9. The collegiality of relationships with supportive adults
10. The fulfillment and empowerment which come from experiencing success

It is in the face of the evidence of both the push and pull that the past 15 years has seen the expansion of structured opportunities for voluntary learning outside the classroom. It has moved from being a concern of a small number of voluntary organisations such as The Prince’s Trust and Education Extra, through an innovative strategy of the new Labour government of 1997, to being a core part of the duties of local authorities, and an expectation on schools that learning neither ends at 4 or begins at 9. Integral to the *Every Child Matters* strategy is the recognition that outcomes such as enjoyment and achievement, making a positive contribution, staying safe (in both physical and psychological senses), health and well being and economic well being are beyond the scope of teachers and what happens in the classroom alone.

A range of government policies not initially connected with study support such as the Healthy Schools, Gifted and Talented, and PE and School Sports programmes have largely been implemented through an expansion of OSHL opportunities. The Personalised Learning strategy gives further, though somewhat tacit, support to the importance of a diversified range of learning opportunities beyond the curriculum. Currently the principal policy underpinning a continued expansion of OSHL is the requirement on schools to provide access to “a wide and varied menu of activities for all children out of school hours as part of the core offer of extended services”.

## **New contexts for learning**

The 2008 OECD publication *Trends Shaping Education* identifies seismic shifts as to the context in which schools ‘deliver’ the curriculum, in itself a term redolent of producer, rather than a consumer or creator role. Four of these have relevance for the Children’s University.

- The new economic landscape and the rapid growth of knowledge intensive service economies
- Widening divides between affluence and poverty, exacerbated by populations on the move, creating new diversities of languages, religions, lifestyles and values and in communities
- Transformative technologies which are not only proliferating exponentially but which assume new constellations of information, the users creating the content
- Changing social connections and values, with less social interaction, diminishing social trust and new complex configurations of home life

The democratic lateral access to, and creation of, knowledge is symbolic of the deep environmental change that challenges the producer-consumer of traditional schooling. It posits a learning community in which students are producers and co-producers, carrying knowledge back and forward not only between one classroom and the next, not only between home and school, but within school networks nationally and internationally.

## **Children, the university of knowledge, policy and politics**

It is within this paradigm shift of knowledge exchange and creation that the value and contribution of the Children’s University has to be understood. Its potential appeal to policy makers has to be set within the context of diversifying programmes and opportunities that already exist and the significance and viability of what the CU can offer. For policy makers, privileging any one of those initiatives is dependent on their U.S.P (Unique Selling Point) and the strength of evidence that they can offer as to impact, sustainability and the headline government objective of ‘raising standards’. While the Children’s University has, in many respects, been a lead player in both its old and new guises, it needs to establish itself further as an integral element of the government’s own drive to boost attainment.

Disentangling the relationship between what schools can do and what has to be the primary function of other initiatives is a political issue that continues to present a challenge to system design. These are also issues for the CU both nationally and locally.

- The primary objectives for a session/module/term/year
- The CU ‘curriculum’ and pedagogy
- The relationship to the mainstream curriculum
- The types of young people that are of most concern
- The most salient criteria in evaluating success
- The nature of quality assurance and self evaluation

Attending to these issues has to be set within logistic, financial, ideological and pragmatic constraints. This presents a significant challenge for the national CU which has to both recognise and deal with the diversity of agendas and priorities from both new and well established CUs.

### **The role of the local authority**

Local authorities have one of two roles vis-à-vis individual CUs: either owner or sponsor, in the latter case generally in collaboration with other bodies. Sefton, Kent and Norfolk are current examples of such ownership. Hull, Doncaster and Bradford are sponsored, in different and less direct ways, by the local authority. District Councils, which do not have responsibility for children's services, in some areas such as Kent, the CU is based within the Children, Families, Health and Education Directorate of the County Council, offering activities in eleven areas of Kent, each area broadly corresponding to a School Cluster Group based around a single town or city.

Local authorities have an overarching responsibility for services for Children and young people and the planning mechanism is the comprehensive Children and Young People's Plan. As a minimum requirement for any CU to be able to work effectively such a plan must provide legitimation for the CU's activities. This requires at the least a recognition of the significance of planned learning opportunities outside of normal lessons and of the role of voluntary, commercial, educational and sports and cultural organisations in providing such activities.

On the basis of such legitimation an authority not directly running CU activities needs to ensure that it acts as a gatekeeper and broker, enabling the CU to gain access to partners, sponsors and potential providers, via Local Strategic Partnership Boards, through extended services development and delivery arrangements as well as access to cultural and recreational services.

Finally, it falls to the authority to assist a CU in developing a realistic engagement with schools; not merely for marketing or delivery but, over time, supporting schools to develop their capacity to reinforce, and further build on, the learning that children have achieved through the Children's University outside of their normal lesson time.

## The Curriculum Conundrum

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### **The passport to learning**

The Chief Executive's creation of a passport has provided a significant piece in the jigsaw, offering not only something attractive to, and valued by children, but also a key device for quality assurance. The passport rests to a large extent on the notion of breadth and its designation as a 'passport' is not coincidental as it follows the aphorism that travel broadens the mind. Venturing beyond school and beyond the immediate neighbourhood is the first step for many children into a world previously closed to them. Museums, castles, dockyards, stations, zoos, airports, universities are described as 'learning destinations' because they can offer an emotional and mind expanding experience if they are appropriately structured to engage and challenge.

Intrinsic to the definition of a learning destination is that it should be able to provide a focus, a question to answer, a problem to solve, and a tool or strategy for inquiry that can help in the transfer of learning (which we know to be highly contextually bound), scaffolding learning so that it is able to travel from one context to another. Focusing on the *how* as well as the *what* of learning can help to add to the repertoire of skills and openness to further intellectual exploration. In this respect the validation of learning destinations is hugely important as well as well as hugely challenging.

This is where the *Planning for Learning* becomes a key linchpin and lever for assuring quality.

### **Planning for Learning**

*Planning for Learning* is a key exemplary document produced in the last year. One of its main purposes is to illustrate the inherent possibilities of learning in non-school environments and to help to give substance to the what and how of learning in educational sites such as museums, aquaria, art galleries and in sites which have a less explicit educational function such as shopping centres, railways or building sites. As its title suggests it is as much a planning resource as an evaluation tool, raising questions as to how the hidden educational potential of the site might be made explicit, problematic and a focus of inquiry. Its framework captures the essence of what the Children University 'is', what it values and what its priorities are.

The challenge for learning destinations, including school sites is to understand, build in, and be able to meet, these criteria. It presupposes that there is a continuing dialogue and negotiation between the representative of the learning destination and of the CU. The importance of that quality assurance relationship should not be underestimated.

### **Planning for Excellence**

*Planning for Excellence* performs a complementary but different function to its sister publication *Planning for Learning*. Its primary purpose is to meet the an essential strand of the CU's initial strategic planning, the need for integral and rigorous quality assurance - a constant on the Trustees' agenda from the outset. *Planning for Excellence* is designed not simply to be a monitoring tool after the event but as planning tool for building quality into the provision and a self evaluation tool for ongoing reflection and dialogue.

*Planning for Excellence* is a development and adaptation of the QiSS Recognition scheme which evolved to give a more rigorous edge to out-of-school-hours learning and to offer schools a means through which the quality of their offering could be celebrated, validated and shared more widely. QiSS has been in operation since 2001 and is currently used in some 90 local authorities with about 800 quality awards granted. It is open not just to schools but to all organisations which provide out of school learning programmes for children and young people. Its use is a requirement for *Playing for Success* centres. Other recipients include public library services, youth and community centres, supplementary schools and faith-based community groups.

The self evaluation purpose at the heart of QiSS is undertaken against criteria which evolved through wide ranging discussions with teachers, pupils, volunteer support staff, representatives of the Princes Trust and the Cambridge team. The first publication was under the aegis of the Princes Trust and later taken over by the DCSF. While internally focused on creating a dialogue around practice it was also seen as a kind of scaffolding for telling a success story to an external audience. The three tier structure of Emerged, Established and Advanced was designed to offer a challenge to progress and to know what would be needed in order to build on and deepen quality.

## **The CU as a national organisation**

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It is critical to the long term survival and growth of the Children's University that it is seen as a powerful national organisation and not simply a scattering of individual projects. This was the vision of its original founder and remains the central vision in its relaunch. In a market where branding and corporate identity carry great weight the Children's University needs to be known, and recognised as a high quality provider and with a distinctive niche in the learning world.

Being a part of the national organisation and carrying its logo and affiliation has to, therefore, carry high value-added for local centres. While good progress has been this is not, however, unequivocally the case and the relationship between the centre and peripheries remains an important issue going forward.

In the absence of an agreed theory-in-practice about how voluntary learning can become transformative, there is a danger of a market-led approach both losing focus and integrity and dissipating resources. However, given the funding position of many local CUs, the need to meet the requests of the participating schools that may be looking for activities as short term solutions, makes the development of a more focused and strategic based approach more challenging.

A running issue over the last year has been in relation to membership fees. The tensions around this issue have now been resolved through ensuring a transparent process in which the nature of the contribution relative to the size and scope of the local centres was negotiated of the fee structure and their belief that it had been imposed rather than negotiated. This touches on the identity and function of the national organisation as a membership organisation or a service delivery agency.

The involvement of CU Managers in consultation and decision-making is also a crucial aspect of an organisation which has such a small central office and procedures have been put in place for CU managers to shape agendas for local and national meetings.

### **Relationships with the national CU**

The issue of payments is a complex one and the Chief Executive has made extensive efforts to create a framework which is fair to all in what has been shown above to be a highly complex scenario. In almost all cases, being part of a national organization is highly valued and viewed as worth the financial contribution.

The value of belonging to the national organisation is not in dispute among those who attend meetings and workshops, who phone the Chief Executive's office on a regular basis to ask for advice and help, who request a visit at short notice, who are supported with funding when they have run out of resources. They value the collective voice they have with government, the information flow, the briefing on education policy and practice and how it will affect the work of local CUs, the obtaining of national sponsorship and the central development fund. Networking with other centres, the sharing of problems and opportunities, the kindredship of being part of something ambitious and ground breaking are all highly valued. For some existing, but sometimes tired centres, the national strategy has brought a sense of rejuvenation and re-invigoration.

## **The role and work of the National Executive**

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The Children's University has been sustained over time prior to the renewed interest and its rebirth with a Board of Trustees, a National Executive, newly established centres and a funding stream. The CU has, in places where it has thrived, done so by virtue of the commitment and hard graft of individuals, very often working independently and creatively, operating outside the mainstream and sometimes in defiance of convention. They have survived because of their well-defined values and rationale underpinning their work. They have survived because these centres and those who manage them are thoughtful and impassioned, responsive to children's needs and sensitive to the interests of parents and the local community. What they may have hoped for from the establishment of a national executive is recognition and support, help with ensuring continued funding and a wish to be part of a vibrant national organisation. They looked for a national executive which would ideally be informed, in touch with what is happening on the ground, imaginative in creating and directing resources to areas of greatest need and potential growth, flexible in its response to emerging needs and able to both nurture and manage diversity. In such a scenario the Executive would judge itself by the connectivity and liveliness of the debates and developments, raising the profile of the CU nationally and convincing policy makers and politicians of its indispensable worth.

In many respects the appointment of Ger Graus to that office has fulfilled those expectations. The CE has been able to present a national voice, has helped to raise the profile of local efforts and served to increase their status within and beyond local communities. While there would appear to be a strong case for the appointing a team of people able to carry the ambitious range of tasks suggested above, complementing one another's skills, the Trustees have kept a watching brief on the role, scope and impact of the Chief Executive's office with consideration of the best means of supplementing the range of activities.

There are potentially three distinct tasks which, as the organisation develops, could be ideally carried out by three people or perhaps two with overlapping roles;

- Management of key partnerships both existing and new (e.g Academies/Trust schools/HE –school partnerships etc), university and local authority liaison
- Management of Planning for Learning, learning destinations, curriculum development and professional development activity
- Management of strategic planning, financial management, grant-making, monitoring, support and quality assurance

### **Channels of communication**

The main forum for feedback and moderation of the work of the Chief Executive's Office is the Trustees meeting in which a range of issues are engaged - updating and exchange of views, policy development, funding and development priorities.

As the only channel of intelligence between CU centres and Trustees the Board is deprived of a first hand insight into the day-to-day life of centres or the nature of the interchanges that take place at national conferences and regional workshops and the celebration of graduation ceremonies. The opportunity for regular monthly meetings

between the Chair and the CE served an important updating and monitoring purpose, in part a mentoring process, in part feedback and monitoring of ongoing activities, and in part to ensure the prioritization of issues such as budgetary planning, writing of reports, taking and following up on minutes of meetings and producing fundraising plans. These meetings no longer occur on a regular basis in order to review how best to combine systematic mentoring and appraisal as well as relieving the Chair of significant extra work as the CU consolidates and expands.

Trustees rely on their major source of intelligence as the CEs written and verbal report to the Trustees and the periodic Cambridge evaluation. Attendance by Trustees at more of the regional meetings and workshops and the annual conference could offer them valuable insights the achievements and challenges for centre managers and their relationship with the Centre. The formalisation of appraisal and mentoring are potentially important further channels of information and dialogue.

## **It's about children**

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From a worm's eye perspective what are the key ingredients in the CU experience that make it attractive and fulfilling for children of different abilities, interests, personalities and learning preferences?

### **Choice**

The exercise of choice is a fundamental attribute of the CU 'offer'. This invitational term is commonly used to refer to the curriculum 'offer', a curious usage in a context which refers to a subject of study which is compulsory, attended by targets, normative standards and sanctions, and often the cause of children's disaffection with school and even education. For Fiona, like many of her counterparts elsewhere, Kent CU courses play a crucial role in offering a positive social learning experience away from the performance dominated school culture.

### **Active participation**

Choice is an active process and activities freely entered into increase the likelihood of engagement and of children. This is especially the case where the nature of the activities require initiative and agency on the part of the learner. For Lewis in Portsmouth the motivation for involvement in the CU is the opportunity of *opting into* a learning actively which interested him. The word 'activities' is common in the CU discourse, a marked and telling contrast with school where the notion of the 'lesson' is paramount and 'activities' would rarely be used to refer to Mathematics or English, for example. These same subjects are more likely, however, to be conceived of as activities in a CU context because of a pedagogy which is not driven by 'coverage', time constraints and targets. For Ben it was the lure of the active participatory learning in the Dance and Drama club that hooked him.

### **Extension of existing subjects and novelty**

CU activities include both an extension of some school subjects but more typically sitting side by side novel experiences and new interests such fencing, robotics, pottery and first aid as, reinforcing prior learning while also extending horizons into new areas of excitement and intrigue.

The CU offers 'a form of curriculum enrichment, which nurtures children's interests in informal learning environments', says one Kent headteacher. This is of particular significance for a young girl called Jane, for example, whose satisfaction comes being able to cope and flourish in a different environment from the classroom, with different kinds of challenges and social relationships. To see her take the lead in learning is an important step for her, says her teacher.

During one of the sessions observed she was confidently taking part and helping others along too. On one occasion she demonstrated to another girl how to cut up the fruit saying 'Watch I can do it now'. When the observation that Jane as a generous learner was fed back to her teacher, the teacher commented 'She is good at pairing up and is very kind and attentive and often asks 'What do you think?' but doesn't offer her own views often or show that she can do something.

## **Outcome**

Activities benefit when there is a tangible outcome, something to work towards, a performance, a parade, a product of some kind which marks achievement and can be celebrated. The outcome for Aaron was to participate in a course called 'Ghost Ship' in which children designed and made flags which they would carry through the 'Ghost Parade' on June 28<sup>th</sup> in Portsmouth - a city wide celebration of Henry VIII's reign. The use of the term 'outcomes' has quite different connotations from the co-option of the term used to refer to measured attainment on tests. However, raising aspirations, described as an outcome in Doncaster, is seen as going hand in hand with raising exam attainment - a necessary passport to higher education and employment.

## **Pride and confidence building**

In class Lewis is adept at techniques of avoidance, hiding so as to avoid being called on by the teacher. Edward's 'fragile self esteem and confidence' has been overcome by the support and challenge within the Bicester CU. Billy, described as 'a feral child with very few boundaries' has been able to flourish with a different set of expectations and a sensitive and supportive relationship with adults. Jamie spoke of 'feeling good' about himself and his progress in Maths where he had struggled with the work. Sarah thinks all the CU activities over the years have enabled her to 'do more things myself'. Claudia explained how she was learning how to handle 'sadness'.

## **Enjoyment in challenging tasks**

Courtney's favourite subject is Maths which she described as providing a challenge. Robbie particularly enjoyed Maths and Science partly because of his talents in both, but also because of the level of challenge they constantly provided him. Jamie joined the running club because he knew he wasn't as good as others in the class. He explains how much rising to the challenge had improved both his ability and his self confidence. Provision of such challenging tasks in the school curriculum was limited due to the constraints of class size and the pressures of preparing for SATs where a core emphasis was placed on supporting all pupils to reach their target levels of attainment.

## **Recognition for achievement**

It is a fundamental tenet of CU activities that achievement is made visible, recognised and celebrated. Emphasis is placed on the value of achieving something in its right, in a sense downplaying the extrinsic lure of a gold award. The progression of achievement marked by awards and the eventual graduation are an important symbolic element and motivator, and the pride shown at graduation with parents and dignitaries present is a beginning rather than an end.

## **Time and space**

Tiffany never had time to complete an exercise in class, a source of anxiety and frustration for her. Chloe too has benefited from the time in CU to carry a task through from beginning to end and feels pride in doing so. Aaron expresses disappointment that the topics he enjoys were not covered in sufficient depth, however. Fiona clearly enjoyed such projects as they provided licence for her to develop her creative skills. She speaks of spending time during her two week holiday working on different pictures and textiles for the final project. Observation of Fiona reported that throughout the sessions she seemed capable of following instructions, completing her work and using her strengths to personalise her own creation. Headteachers spoke of their relief at the absence of targets and assessments within CU and the freedom this gives the children. One of the greatest

benefits for the children, according to a Bicester headteacher, is the pedagogical approach - pupil-centred and exploratory rather than a learning template which is followed by all. 'There are no targets, no objectives and no plenaries', common goals with flexibility, creativity and individuality, 'It is not a factory approach'.

### **Adult relationships**

A strength of CU provision is that it brings children into contact with a range of adults, of different ages, from different backgrounds and in differing occupations and varying walks of life. Helen, a Hull primary head, talks about the value of taking pupils out of the school environment on trips which create opportunities for dialogue with other adults, including male role models. This has 'immeasurable value' she says, and 'feeds into the whole system for raising esteem, achievement, and, ultimately, attainment'. This is what James Coleman many years ago defined as the 'vertical' relationship which builds social capital rather than the 'horizontal' relationship which, in many circumstances diminishes motivation and effort.

### **The 'feelgood' factor**

Many children who are part of the CU have low esteem, underachieve at school and see themselves as failures. For Sian opportunities try out new things, be part of a group and tastes success gave her ways to 'feel good' about herself, particularly in sport and art. Many children's self esteem and confidence take a knock when family circumstances change and there is uncertainty and instability. In Edward's case it was when his father lost his job, triggering a period of mental illness. Edward was suddenly often late at school, very tired and lacking in confidence. His headteacher felt that he would benefit from CU activities and Edward has now been involved in art and sporting activities all year. His Headteacher explained that the sessions 'have given his parents a breathing space and that CU has supported his fragile self -esteem and confidence'.

### **Easing transitions to secondary school**

Working alongside children from another school, it was commonly said, boosted self confidence and helped in easing the transition to secondary school. For Ben, socialising beyond his immediate network had, said his mother, helped him to make the transition from primary to secondary school a smoother path. The headteacher of Bude School in Hull described relationships with adults in different contexts as promoting a smoother transition to secondary school because 'children gain confidence in interacting and meeting new people and forming learning relationships with them'.

### **Transfer of skills**

The lateral transfer of skill and dispositions from one context has been identified by researchers such as David Perkins and Howard Gardner at Harvard as one of the greatest weaknesses of classroom teaching. English is English, Maths is Maths and what is learned there is bound up with the context in which it has been taught. Learning how to learn means gaining the ability to take the 'how' of your learning across boundaries of subject, time and place. For Ben it was Glass Painting: while something entirely new to him, he relished it not only for its own sake, but because the skills he learned there contributed to Art and to mapping in Geography.

**Inclusiveness**

When asked what she would identify as the most important aspect of CU in Bicester, Sarah's mother said, 'It is inclusive – it's not pretending to be. I hear the word inclusive a lot but it doesn't mean much. Inclusive usually means we'll let her in but we don't know what to do with her. For me to say it's inclusive is quite a compliment'. Naomi, the Extended School's Manager in Bicester speaks with passion about the core value which underpins the CU, a commitment to providing activities which can be accessed by all irrespective of disability or financial hardship. Children from the local special school now attend CU activities following an approach by Naomi to the headteacher and governing body. This inclusiveness is emphasised in conversations with parents and is integrated into all publicity materials.

## Conclusions

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The evidence points to an undeniable impact of the Children's University in its reincarnation. How impact is measured provides a complex equation.

### **Individual children**

The most immediate measure of impact is the evidence from individual children whose self confidence and re-engagement with learning is a tribute to the nature of activities offered, the environment in which they take place and the relationships which are an integral aspect of that environment. At best it is an environment carefully construed to reflect a set of values and beliefs as to children's 'potential', measured not by constricting tests of attainment, but by expanding the boundaries of the possible, and sometimes even the 'unthinkable'. The measure of success for these children, the majority of whom are currently in primary schools, will be tested at the transition point to secondary when their resilience and self efficacy will be tested in a different, and sometimes hostile environment. The implication for the CU nationally and for local providers is to consider what needs to be put in place to support the most vulnerable children at that and other transition points in their learning journey. For the evaluation, tracking these children over then next year or two will help to identify what hinders and what helps.

### **Their parents**

Interviews with parents constitute a small sample and represent only those available and willing to talk to researchers. This makes it difficult to extrapolate from their, usually enthusiastic, testimony. What is unarguable from decades of school effects research is that the parental effect, for good or ill, is more powerful than the school and teacher effect. Parents who support their children's learning, either directly and personally, or indirectly through enlisting their children in complementary learning activities, are a crucial centerpiece in the achievement jigsaw. The 'Parent pizza' in Bicester, a device to structure conversations with parents is a powerful example of what can be learned, built on and adapted.

One implication for the CU is to identify breakthrough practice and to demonstrate ways in which information for parents can be enhanced. More importantly CU can also show what part parents can play in complementing its activities and being able to offer the sensitive support that children need in the transition from primary to secondary schools and from childhood to adolescence.

### **Their teachers**

It is not simply children and parents whose growth in learning is attributable to involvement in the CU. The evidence from teachers testifies to their growing understanding of the how, where and why of learning and the challenge it presents to their teaching and to their relationships with the children in their charge. In part they welcome the release from targets and testing and the freedom this gives to children, but more profoundly they welcome the insights that such freedom brings. The question it raises is how much these insights into children's learning, and the consequent implications for teaching, transfer back into the classroom. Do teachers simply revert to old ways and the pressures of a performativity agenda or do they build the pedagogic bridge between learning in and out of school? It presents a significant challenge, but one that the CU

might begin to address through key gatekeepers in local authorities, headteachers, critical friends and collegial networks.

### **The school**

It follows that when teachers learn from their pupils, and headteachers commit to CU values, a school becomes a better place. As staff interviewed point out, this does not simply happen, but relies on a whole school approach to planning, sustaining and evaluating improvement. The quality of, and progress in, learning in and out of school then plays an integral role in school self evaluation and capacity building. When self evaluation is ongoing and embedded in the day-to-day life of classrooms and linked with other learning destinations the school may be described as a learning organisation or a community of learners. There is obvious scope for publication of guidelines which are designed to equip teachers and school leadership with information, tools and strategies which would serve self evaluation and capacity building purposes.

### **The local community**

There is not a great deal of evidence as to how the CU impacts on community life. Although it is an explicit purpose of programmes such as Doncaster, it represents a long term goal - its return on investment, coming to fruition as these children become young people and adults with a different outlook on life and learning. In the medium term, efforts are being made to bring in local people and local sites which offer collaborative potential and which can extend the compass of CU activity and impact. And in the immediate term the impact of the custodial function cannot be ignored, keeping children out of trouble, gang membership and other attractions which arise when the only options out of boredom are mischief making and anti-social pursuits. It may be worth gathering data from police, social work and community agencies as to the impact, if any, of providing children with alternative lifestyle choices.

### **The system**

Impact in terms of 'the system' may seem to be the most tenuous and intangible, yet may prove to be the most powerful. From a system point of view the Children's University is a laboratory in which a significant amount can be learned about the lives and learning of children, about the nature of schooling and how it meets and fails to meet the needs and interests of children. The 'system' is a somewhat intangible entity, but may be 'measured' through policy making at local authority and national level and through the growing range of agencies who touch, and are touched by, the activities of the CU.

### **Academics**

As measures of impact become increasingly tenuous the effect on academics may prove to be the most elusive of all. There is currently a dearth of information and published papers in academic journals as this is not deemed a high priority. Yet the academic indices count citations and references to work as key impact measures. CU has an obvious appeal to the academic community and their support could prove a valuable resource.

### **Policy makers**

Impact on policy may prove to be one of the most significant indicators of CUs success. As policy changes so hearts and minds of local authorities, headteachers and teachers tends to follow. Funding for the CU is a small index of policy effect and events such as that held at the House of Lords are helpful in spreading the word. Ultimately, policy makers will be convinced when there is an irresistible demonstration of the power of the

Children's University to achieve what has up until now eluded successive policies – the narrowing of the achievement gap and the rise in children's engagement with, and achievement in, school.

### **Next steps**

A singular omission to date has been the lack of quantitative evidence of pupil achievement and progress on tests/exams, providing comparative data on those who attend CU and those who don't. Discussions with the Fischer Family Trust have been ongoing for some time and the priority for this round of the evaluation is to provide that data. Much earlier would have been premature, but with a couple of years of activity since the relaunch of the national organisation, now is a good time to conduct that study.

For policy makers such data are regarded as 'hard' currency and are likely to prove more persuasive than narratives and stories. From our perspective the most important use of the quantitative data will be as a means to explore what the data is telling us and what deeper insights local CU managers and tutors can bring to its interpretation.

What can be learned and what may be generalised from this sample of schools nationally will furnish the conclusions and recommendations of the final report.

## Appendix 1: Vignettes of local CUs

This section presents a small number of excerpts of case studies, or vignettes, of CU centres, chosen in consultation with the Chief Executive and with CU Managers to represent a geographical spread of a variety of practice, well established and, in many respects exemplary of the grounded work of the Children's University. A comprehensive selection of vignettes is available on the Children's University's website - [www.childrensuniversity.co.uk](http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk).

### 1. Bicester CU: A school case study (secondary)

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Bicester is a small market town within the Oxfordshire countryside with long standing military connections; the nearby village of Ambrosden houses a military garrison whose personnel serve on six months tours of Iraq. The town is three miles from the M40, is served by two railway stations and there are plans for a new east-west rail link through Bicester. Bicester's location makes it an ideal commuter base. The university city of Oxford is within 15 miles to the south, Birmingham is within one hour traveling distance to the north and London one hour to the south.

Bicester has a population of approximately 28,000 with an ethnic minority population of 8.9%<sup>1</sup> and approximately 8,000 children of school age<sup>2</sup>. The educational outcomes at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 are broadly in line with national averages but there are two adjoining wards where outcomes are significantly below national averages<sup>3</sup>.

#### The secondary school

The head teacher at the Brookside School is a strong supporter of CU. He sees the benefits in several ways. Firstly he believes that CU offers the children at his secondary school opportunities and access to things that they would never experience at an affordable price. These opportunities are crucial if the 'life chances of the children at the school are to be enhanced'. He is committed to the model of CU activities remaining affordable and for him this is one of its greatest strengths in Bicester. His school is situated next to one of the newly built Children's Centres in a ward where the educational outcomes at Key Stage 3 (when children are aged 14) and at Key Stage 4 (when children are aged 16) are significantly below average.<sup>4</sup> The educational outcomes in Bicester more generally are broadly in line with national averages. Families at his school suffer from what the national Children's University terms 'aspirational deprivation' and so CU can play a significant part in enriching learning and 'opening children's eyes to the possibilities for them'. He believes that for a lot of his children CU has helped them to engage back at school. All of the teachers at his school lead out-of-hours learning for the children and many within CU as tutors. He explains that the 'the relationships created in CU cement the relationships back at school enabling a greater focus on learning'. These relationships with adults in different contexts he believes also enable a smoother transition to secondary school as 'they gain confidence in interacting and meeting new people and forming learning relationships with them'.

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<sup>1</sup> 2001 census

<sup>2</sup> 2001 census

<sup>3</sup> [www.neighbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [www.neighbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk)

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits for the children, according to the head, is the pedagogical approach 'there are no targets, no objectives and no plenaries'. He explained that there is a common goal, for example 'we are all going to make an animal made from clay but there is flexibility about how to get there and freedom about what the animal will look like at the end. It is not a factory approach.' The approach is child-centred and exploratory rather than a learning template which is followed by all. The learning and tutoring approach at CU is in synergy with the curriculum at the school. The school adopted a 'Leading Aspect Award' approach two years ago which aims to 'develop life long learning by embracing pupil voice and personalised learning'. They received their 'Leading Aspect Award' in January 2009 for the curriculum – the first such award in Oxfordshire. The school starts by asking the children 'How do you want to learn?' They choose the topic and decide how they will report back on their learning. One group built an Anderson Centre as part of a World War II topic and organised a VE day party for parents. The head teacher feels that it is probably no coincidence that the school has developed this pupil-centred and pupil-led approach to learning. CU was born in the school, the pottery sessions take place on the school site and the teachers at the school have had a long association with CU activities. The benefits of a more creative approach to learning have been experienced and although it is difficult to draw a connecting line between the pedagogical approach at CU and the school's approach, there is a harmony between the two.

## **2. Sheffield CU: A family of provision**

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The Children's University in Sheffield is led by a CU Manager employed by the Local Authority and run within the system for Study Support. Sheffield CU was originally established in the early 1990s but it has been significantly re-invigorated in recent years, and appreciates the boost afforded by the rejuvenation of the national organisation. There is a strong commitment to the Children's University in Sheffield, both for local delivery and within a national organisation. The CU Manager is an impassioned advocate for CU work and her colleagues responsible for funding maximise every opportunity to support the Sheffield CU and ensure resources for sustainability.

Sheffield CU is a self-confident organisation that is well led and supported by the Local Authority. They compile data that identifies children who participate in CU activities and their corresponding SATs results. They are reticent to draw causal links, but are confident to assert that participation in CU activities reinforces good practice in schools and the data support the claim that children who participate in CU activities attain good levels in the statutory assessment in Year 6 and better in comparison to those who don't. There is likely to be a connection between schools who engage with CU and study support and those who don't, and with young people who engage with out-of-school hours learning and those who don't. What is significant is that Sheffield CU has the means to access this data and is comfortable with the analysis and scrutiny of this data. Their work is firmly embedded in the work of the schools whom they serve and the Local Authority. The CU Manager brings a passion and commitment to her role and has the capacity to think creatively. She works hard on behalf of school colleagues and the young people, and relishes the opportunity to make a difference.

### **3. Kent CU: A school case study (primary)**

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Kent, the ‘Garden of England’, has a growing population, standing at one a quarter of a million in 2008, with above average levels of employment. It is comprised of twelve local district authorities, and Medway as a unitary authority with its own Children’s University. As part of trend for rising attainment, in 2008 65% of 16 year olds achieved at least five GCSEs at A\* to C. Kent is one of the few remaining counties to retain the 11 plus.

#### **The primary school**

Riverview Junior School in Gravesend is a typical Children’s University site, offering courses to all of its pupils. Children opt for individual modules, then assigned on a first come basis, building up learning credits over time. All participating children work towards achieving a bronze, silver and gold award, presented at Children’s University ceremonies at the end of each academic year. Riverview is a relatively large school, with 468 pupils on roll. It provides an education based around the three ‘R’s: respect, responsibility and reliability. A significant number of pupils take part in Children’s University modules, actively encouraged to do so by their head teacher who has been actively involved with KCU for over ten years. She is an ambassador for the scheme which she describes as a ‘form of curriculum enrichment, one which nurtures children’s interests in informal learning environments’.

The emphasis here, as in all CU centres in on active learning with children engaged in activities without too much instruction or hand holding, rather with a pedagogy aimed at enhancing learning capacity, resting on trust and a belief that all children can learn when they take charge of their own learning. It is a defining characteristic of the Kent CU and held in place by a strong quality assurance approach. It has achieved Advanced status awards from Quality in Study Support and Extended Services (QISS). It is seen by the CU Manager, as a vital tool within the self-evaluation process, not only highlighting strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement but also as a means of organising provision.

## Appendix 2: Children's case studies

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This section presents a small number of excerpts of case studies of children drawn from a number of CU settings. These children were observed and interviewed, in some cases where practicable complemented by conversations with their teachers and/or parents. A comprehensive selection of vignettes is available on the Children's University's website [www.childrensuniversity.co.uk](http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk)

### **Jane**

Jane is in Year 5 and is 9 years old. She is one of five in her family. Her reading age is a little below age related expectations and her Maths and literacy are levels 3C. Her teacher commented that her writing, reading and Maths fluctuate depending on her levels of confidence. This was the reason for encouraging her to take part in CU. She needed encouragement to do this as according to her teacher 'leaving the school and the village and going to the college was a big deal'. Jane herself said that she was anxious the first time. Her village is 15 minutes outside the town but to Jane the trip was an enormous step 'We went on a coach and it was a long, long way and the building was very big'. This underscores the importance of the vision of the local CU to enable children from such communities to see places on their doorstep. The teacher felt that it would be really beneficial for her to see that she can cope and flourish in a different environment. During the session I [the evaluator] observed she was confidently taking part and helping others along too. On one occasion she demonstrated to another girl how to cut up the fruit saying 'Watch I can do it now'. Her teacher commented that Jane is a generous learner 'She is good at pairing up and is very kind and attentive and often asks 'What do you think?' but doesn't offer her own views often or show that she can do something and that to see her take the lead is an important step for her'.

Her teacher feels that Jane's confidence has grown and her success has helped her speak up more and contribute more in her classroom. Jane herself wanted to attend the cookery module as 'I keep watching it on TV and would like to do it myself'. In the discussion group with two other boys she explained some of the different techniques such as 'claw and bridge'. She demonstrated how to hold your hand in the shape of a bridge when cutting an apple and an onion and said: 'I showed my Mum this when I got home'. She enjoyed working with David and Michelle [two other children] and developed a greater confidence about interacting with them as time went on 'I got used to these different people and to asking them for help'. She had been impressed with the kitchens and with the fact that one of the module leaders was a woman and had worked in a restaurant. The glimpse she had gained of cookery on the television had become concrete and she could meet people for whom this was a job and a real passion. She explained that she would like to continue to cook and to 'go there when I am older to learn to do more stuff'.

The invitation to parents to come in had given her much pleasure. Her teacher commented that 'an hour with someone who was important to her' was prized as the household is busy and crowded.

### **Robbie**

Robbie is an extremely gifted child, particularly in relation to Maths and Science. Throughout Key Stage 2 he had been working on extension activities in Maths which extended beyond the Level 5 SATs. It was estimated that in Year 6 he was coping with Maths work equivalent to that of a Year 9 (children aged 14) standard. He particularly enjoyed Maths and Science partly because of his talents in both, but also because of the level of challenge they constantly provided him. Robbie was being predicted Level 5 in his Key Stage 2 SATs. He had an excellent school attendance record however he displayed a fluctuating attitude to in-school learning. It was feared that an anti-school ethos would impact on his attainment at high school where he would become largely free from the watchful eye of so many staff members who knew his family background and academic potential.

Robbie is the eldest of two boys who live at home with their mum, neither boy having any contact with their fathers. Robbie had spent time in care during his pre-school years as a result of his mother being imprisoned for house burglary whilst addicted to heroin. Since being released from prison Robbie's mum had stayed clean of drugs and was keen for both sons to reach their potential, however she was struggling to do this both socially and economically. Unable to find permanent employment Robbie's mum was reliant on state benefits which meant that when Robbie passed the entrance exams (with a score of 97%) for the nearby private school, his mum had no means by which she could contribute to the fees or associated costs.

Robbie has been a prolific attendee of CU courses. He had participated in courses throughout his school life; sports related, Maths Challenge, the Chinese Culture Club (Sefton have strong links with Taiwan) and Ozzies church group. He would be receiving his gold award at the end of the year. For Robbie the CU modules provided a useful means through which he could extend the school day, serving to keep him from wandering the streets of and being attracted by negative local street culture.

### **Jamie**

Jamie is an only child living at home with his mum, who is supportive of his schooling and education. Jamie could be described as a slow learner who had, until Year 5 (aged 10), experienced below average attainment. He had struggled to understand basic numeracy and literacy skills, and his low attainment was construed as a key factor in explaining his fluctuating attitude to learning in general, and to in-school learning in particular. However, during Year 5 Jamie was considered by his teacher as among the most improved pupils in the year group. He had made considerable progress in all areas of the curriculum and she was predicting that he should achieve Level 4 (the national expectation for children aged 11) in his Key Stage 2 SATs (end of primary school national tests), predicting that if his recent rate of improvement continued he could achieve Level 5 (above the national expectation).

Jamie was keen to talk about school, trips and visits and the CU courses he had opted to follow. He spoke slowly and carefully, in a manner which initially resembled Bernstein's 'restricted speech code', however as his accounts developed, his range of vocabulary extended and his ability to explain his school experience and choices became among the most sophisticated in the group. In terms of school he enjoyed subjects where he perceived he could achieve. For example he spoke of 'feeling good' about himself and his progress in Maths where he had struggled with the work, but now he realised that if he

slowed down and tried a different method he could often reach the correct answer. He used examples from literacy where he realised that he often needed the help of the teacher but that after a certain point he didn't need it anymore because he understood what was being asked of him and that he 'could do it'. This 'can do' attitude was emulated and strengthened by his participation in CU course.

Jamie explained how the CU courses provided an opportunity for him to 'work on areas' that he knew weren't his strengths. Describing himself as being 'not really good at anything in particular, but always willing to try', Jamie opted for courses which he identified as being in areas/skills in which he needed to work on in order to improve. He opted for running club because he thought he wasn't as good as most of his classmates. He chose multi-skills because it helped him to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. He was looking forward to Year 6 when he thought he'd like to learn some cooking skills. It was clear that Jamie's choice of course was made in a structured formulaic way, possibly reflective a low self esteem and that he approached the courses with a view to learning more than merely participating.

Jamie's involvement in CU courses had started during Year 4 (aged 9). Although it is not possible to identify a correlation between his improved attainment and involvement in CU courses it is difficult to negate the positive relationship between the two. Served with a menu of activities Jamie was opting into learning culture which was almost certain to have a positive impact on his self esteem and efficacy.