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The Children's University

John MacBeath

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InForm is a series of papers whose purpose is to capture significant ideas and events that enhance our understanding of leadership, learning and their inter-relationship. These offer reflections on recent seminars, policy papers and emerging issues nationally and internationally. They attempt to capture the implication for policy and practice in leading the learning of students, teachers and of those who exercise a leadership role in classrooms, schools and communities.

The Children's University Trust offers 7 – 14 year olds exciting and innovative learning activities and experiences outside of normal school hours. In this issue of InForm, John MacBeath, Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge and co founder of Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network, summarises the work of the Children's University (CU) since its inception in 2007. The CU now has close to 100,000 children, 2,750 learning destinations, has distributed near to a quarter of a million passports to learning and has won three major national awards.

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LEADERSHIP *for* **LEARNING**
The Cambridge Network

A mission to children



At the heart of its work is the ambition to raise aspirations, boost achievement and foster a love of learning

The Children's University (CU) aims to promote social mobility by providing high quality out-of-school-hours activities to children aged 7-14 and engaging the wider communities as learning partners. At the heart of its work is the ambition to raise aspirations, boost achievement and foster a love of learning, so that children can make the most of their abilities and interests, regardless of their circumstances. CU aims particularly to reach young people facing disadvantage through the targeting of grants to the promotion of activities in areas of deprivation.

Originally established by Tim Brighouse (then CEO in Birmingham) and David Winkley, a leading Birmingham head, the CU was revitalized five years ago with a grant from The Sutton Trust, starting with a small handful of centres and a management team of three based in the Royal College of Music in Manchester. The major credit for the continuing growth and of the CU nationally and now internationally is owed to Ger Graus, its creative and apparently tireless Chief Executive, only rarely to be found in his office as his diary takes him on a daily basis to CU centres around the country as well as to other countries interested in finding out more about CU.

By April 2012 there were 80 local CUs accounting for 2,900 schools and academies and close to 100,000 children with a total of just over 2 million hours of attendance. While centres have grown exponentially, the Manchester management team numbers only five people. The unit has remained intentionally small, demonstrating that the vitality of the CU lies 'out there' in local schools, universities and communities and the many agencies and 'learning destinations' that become partners.

An important principle of the Children's University is that participation is voluntary. It is intentionally something other than school – with a different feel, different activities and often a different location, staff and peer group. The ultimate testament to the effectiveness of the Children's University is that young people give up their time to attend and that they begin to realise that learning can be “... a *satellite navigation system to better places in life...*”. Over the past year not only has children's participation and commitment continued to increase but they are also now playing a much more proactive role in generating ideas for future activities and exercising their agency and leadership.

Each local Children's University has a link with a Higher Education Institution and is encouraged to appoint its own Chancellor. Local CU Chancellors include the authors Louis



The more the potential to learn in sites outside school is opened up, the more imaginative and unexpected the result. One of the latest additions to the repertoires of learning destinations is a cemetery

de Bernières and Gervase Phinn, BBC's Anita Bhalla, Major General Christopher Callow, High Sheriff of Northamptonshire, David Laing and Olympic medallist Nick Gillingham. The national CU Chancellor is the children's author Michael Morpurgo.

Ger and the team have benefited hugely from the encouragement and backing of Dr Sandy Bradbrook, Chair of the Trustees, and the Board - Sir David Winkley, Richard Howard, the Rev Sarah Hayes, Professors Mick Waters and Sonia Blandford, Alec McGivan and more recently Jock Brown and Dr Anita Bhalla.

The annual conference held in Shrigley Hall in Macclesfield is expanding so fast that it is difficult to contain the 30 or so exhibitors and all those who wish to attend. From 30 or so delegates four years ago, 180 have signed up for the conference in December, including delegates from Australia, Malaysia, China, India and the Netherlands where the CU is currently established or is about to be.

Learning destinations

Opportunities to learn out of the classroom are a distinguishing aspect of the CU. The more the potential to learn in sites outside school is opened up, the more imaginative and unexpected the result. One of the latest additions to the repertoires of learning destinations is a cemetery. What questions might be provoked by structured and focused explorations in a cemetery? Family histories and changing family size over the years? Child mortality? Changing life expectancy and advances in medical care?

The 2,750 learning destinations include:

- The BBC
- The Houses of Parliament
- Shakespeare 4 Kidz
- Chatsworth House in Derbyshire
- Stage Arts Warwick (SAW)
- Engineering for Life (Engineers without Borders)
- Port Vale Soccer Club
- South Yorkshire Wildlife Park
- Doncaster Minster: a detective trail
- The Plymouth Naval Base
- The Plymouth Records Office

Many of the learning destinations and out-of-hours activities are suggested by children themselves and tutors try to accommodate their suggestions as long as there are viable numbers. 'While we try to meet all good suggestions', says a tutor in Doncaster, 'We can't do Disneyland or bungee jumping'.

Students take the initiative

In East London Academy a group of secondary students created and led a club for children in years 3 to 5. The student leaders called it 'Artyculture', a 'blend of our culture and art/crafts'. The three student leaders, from Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Albania and the club tried to focus on different aspects of the culture in each:

'We're the teachers but we had a supervisor. We're doing everything, powerpoints, information, simplicity, basically trying to make it interesting so that others will learn.. We talked about it together and now we teach it – it's great because it was our idea and now we're planning and running it'.

Lectures

At first sight the idea of children opting to go to a university lecture after school or on a Saturday morning seemed unlikely, but like much else that was originally met with scepticism, lectures have proved hugely popular. In Plymouth the first lecture attracted 30 young people, growing to over 150, the success of previous events spread both by advertising and by word of mouth. In Plymouth, children now travel from Devon and Cornwall to attend.

Lectures in different parts of the country include:

- How insects see the world - Professor Peter Smithers
- Polar Exploration – Anthony Jinman
- A year in Madagascar – Jeremy Sabel PCC biodiversity champion
- Marine Photography – National Marine Laboratory
- Pyromania – Professor Roy Lowry
- The truth behind Finding Nemo – The National Marine Aquarium
- Geology – Professor Iain Stewart (presenter of BBC's Journeys from the Centre of the Earth)

On Saturday mornings the superstore B & Q, a new learning destination, offers lectures and workshops for young people. At Manchester University, under Professor Rosalie David of Biomedical Egyptology, children take part in *Making a Mummy, Ancient Egyptian Gods, Writing in Hieroglyphs, the Egyptian number system* and *Egyptian jigsaws*.



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There are also master classes, run by university MEd or PhD students. For example, *Practical Piracy* is a Masterclass that includes topics on history, renewable energy and nutritional deficiency.

Partnerships

Formally launched at the British Library in June 2012, a partnership with the Reading Agency created a Summer Reading Challenge. Local libraries sign up and display the learning destinations logo. CU passport holders can claim up to six hours of credit for reading six books plus a further four hours for additional challenging activities related to literature.

Another summer programme, promoted by Lambeth CU is the Poetry Parnassus, with free activities such as *Eat Your word Edible Poetry*, *Kid's Poetry Tea party*, *Kids' Poetry Treasure Hunt*, in which they hunt for individual lines of poetry and use them to create their own poem.

Also in Lambeth and recently validated by the CU, children can engage in exploratory trails around the Natural History Museum, including hands-on family activities, animal vision workshops and explorer backpacks.

Collaboration with UTV media, based in Wigan is an e-learning programme which enables children to create their own radio promotions, with the help of the UTV creative team, writing, recording a radio or video 'commercial'.

Partnership with the RSPB has resulted in two programmes *Wildlife Action Award* and *Wildlife Explorer Groups*. The Action Award is gained through participation in a range of activities which increase knowledge about the threat to wildlife and involve children in taking action to address the problem. *Explorer Groups* typically involve a volunteer-led wildlife trail which takes place about twice every month.

Sports-Xtra offer a range of out of school sports courses, including less well known sports tailored to different ability levels and under the direction of highly qualified sports coaches and sustained by networks of support nationally.





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Passports to learning

The creation of passports which give entry to learning destinations and receive a stamp for every validated learning hour, has been a major success. By March 2012, 160,000 passports had been issued, planned to reach a quarter of a million by 2013. The prototype with squared corners was rejected by children who pointed out that real passports have rounded edges. Passports, now with rounded edges and embossed with gold are so valued that the loss rate of around 2 per cent compares with an adult rate of 20 per cent.

As demand grew and children accumulated more validated hours, the award had to expand continuously. It now looks like this:

Undergraduate level	Hours
Children's University Awards	30-100
Children's University Certificates	130-200
Children's University Diplomas	230-300
Children's University Degrees	330-400
Postgraduate level	
Children's University Postgraduate Awards	430-500
Children's University Postgraduate Certificates	530-600
Children's University Postgraduate Diplomas	630-700
Children's University Postgraduate Masters Degrees	730-800

Graduations

Graduations take place in universities, often in surroundings described by children as 'awesome' and by parents as 'breathtaking'. They are very often presided over by the Vice Chancellor himself/herself, handing out certificates to children begowned and wearing tasseled mortar boards.

West London Academy describes the events in these terms:

The whole ceremony is photographed and filmed – prior permission being sought on Club registration forms and on the Graduation invitation letter. Photos are then made available to parents on the Academy website, while the DVD is sold on a cost basis to parents. Refreshments are offered and this is a chance for parents and children to talk to Academy staff, to representatives of Learning Destinations and to view the WLACU displays of events during the year. The latter part of the evening is a chance for everyone to relax after the formalities of the award presentation and to share in the fun that the WLACU provides for its members.

Validation: Planning for learning

Local CUs are validated as Emerging, Established, or Advanced according to criteria and benchmarks laid out in the document *Planning for Excellence*. A second quality assurance document *Planning for Learning* assures the quality of Learning destinations. Currently 1,200 validators have been trained to use the document.

Going international

The first CU site beyond the UK was the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Its Director General, Dr. James Bradburne, is an ardent supporter of the Children’s University and attends every annual conference of the CU. His message that ‘nobody ever failed a museum’ is illustrated with examples of how a museum can stimulate intellectual inquiry, problem solving and inspire new ways of thinking and seeing the world.

Garrisons for army children in Germany have proved highly successful in taking children beyond the closeted environment of the base to learning destinations such as Paderborn Pirates Rugby team, Paderborn Equestrian Centre, the Attic Theatre Company and the Kunsthalle in Bielefeld.

Children’s University centres have now been established in the Netherlands, while Australia and Malaysia are currently in discussion with Chief Executive, Ger Graus, and will send delegates to forthcoming conferences.

Funding

Donations have come from J.P. Morgan, Garfield Weston Foundation, The Sutton Trust, Nationwide Building Society, Fidelity Foundation, the DfE and the national office’s own fundraising efforts.



**The first CU site
beyond the UK
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Strozzi in
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The Cambridge evaluation

The evaluation, conducted by the Faculty of Education over the last four years, examines the three As - attendance, attitudes and achievement. A sub category of achievement is a fourth 'A' – attainment, performance on tests and exams. This is the remit of the Fischer Family Trust who compared CU attendees and non-attendees in a controlled study. The hypothesis was that children who take part in the CU will perform better on exams compared with a matched sample of their peers. For the government this would be the most important measure of the Children's University's worth. Measures of attainment go well beyond these proxies to encompass all the new skills, enhanced knowledge and self esteem that accrue from taking part on the CU. These factors are to some extent measured by attitude surveys but often more powerfully through interviews, teacher and tutor testimonies and parental commentaries.

The 2010 evaluation study reported ten key findings:

1. Being in the CU significantly improves school attendance.

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.

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

In the second reading of the Education Bill Michael Gove pointed to the progressively widening gap between those on free school meals and those not. A gap in reading scores of 16 points at age 7 grew to 21 points by age 11 and 28 points by age 16. That gap narrows for the most disadvantaged children who participate in CU activities.

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

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 school is an experience of struggle and failure, with very few incentives and rewards for the return on investment. For such children who can easily fall between the cracks, the CU environment has proved to offer a lifeline, restoring self-esteem and satisfaction in learning.

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

A sense of safety and friendship offered by CU is valued in particular by

vulnerable children. It is also a safe place to talk with teachers about bullying and racism, typically concealed and suffered in silence. Relationships forged within CU among pupils, and between pupils and teachers carries over into the main stream of school - a raised awareness and readiness to deal with incidences of bullying or intimidation.

6. Pupils and teachers testify to life changing experiences.

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 of 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 gain a new understanding of children's lives and learning in differing contexts, able to bring that heightened knowledge and awareness back into the classroom

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

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. Those who do attend prove to be much less prone to trouble and police 'harassment'.

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

Access to learning destinations validated by CU as learning sites, have proved to be highly motivational, the stamp on children's Learning Passport providing a cumulative record of their achievements, leading to the excitement of graduations and impetus to engage further.

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

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, raising aspirations and making a university education less beyond their reach.

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

The range of activities encompassed within the CU helps to cultivate many of the skills and dispositions that are at a premium with employers. Initiative, self direction, reliability, ability to work in a team, willingness to learn, emotional intelligence, while less likely to be the product of direct teaching, have been shown to be the product of engagement in CU activities.



Children's University centres have now been established in the Netherlands, while Australia and Malaysia are currently in discussion with the Chief Executive

An attitude survey reveals the following top 10 of 20 items

Statements	Agree/ Strongly agree	Very important
I get help when I'm stuck	95.4	93.9
I love learning new things	92.5	93.0
It is important to me to get credits so I can take part in graduation ceremonies	91.6	87.3
I get to work with and get help from my friends	91.2	89.2
I now feel much more confident about my class work	90.2	83.1
I'm not afraid to try things out even if I fail	87.0	89.1
I really learn a lot from CU activities	83.6	72.1
I get time to work on something I'm enjoying without interruption	82.0	82.4
Being in the CU has made me more confident about myself	80.1	82.0
I like CU because I can be good at things I'm not so good at in school	78.0	73.3

**Children's
University
provides a 'tool
box' for school
improvement**



In the words of a Warwickshire headteacher, Children's University provides a 'tool box' for school improvement. He testifies to significant improvements in academic achievement and behaviour. What the children see is the chance to make friendships, have fun and work towards goals; they gain a sense of achievement.

Our data shows us a direct correlation between success out of the classroom and performance in school, particularly for boys. Of thirteen boys in Year 6, twelve completed at least one module for Children's University, some as many as six, during the latter part of KS2. The progress they made during their time in KS2 averaged 13.4 points across reading, writing and maths.

In Doncaster College, bringing parents in to support their children's learning also 'creates permission for adults to get through the doors and back into learning'. Reflecting on her children's enjoyment and achievement a mother writes:

Jonathan and John's stories

Jonathan

In year 6 living with foster parents and teetering on the brink of permanent exclusion, Jonathan has a new lease of life through the CU. His headteacher cites three reasons for his 'redemption'. First, CU learning is hands on and experiential. Secondly, the bulk of time is given over to exploring ideas rather than being teacher led. Thirdly, CU tutors have no preconceptions about children and do not 'pigeon hole' them, so enabling Jonathan to create a new identity for himself.

John

In school, says his deputy headteacher, John is passive, always left behind and switched off in lessons. During the script writing activities in CU he 'is engaged at every stage, offering suggestions about plot lines and character, walking round the room as a troll, making up dialogue'. The different environment seems to be liberating for him. He has taken up every opportunity to complete all the modules available including Shakespeare without Tears.

I would just like to say how fantastic the Children's University scheme is at recognizing and rewarding children in participating in activities outside of school hours. I think the scheme gives children in school who might not be high achievers the platform to improve confidence, a sense of achievement and boost their self worth. I have two children, year 4 and 5 who will be attending the ceremony on 9th Nov, one receiving the 'high achiever' award who relish in the fact that they are in this position. Congratulations on a job well done, the future of the scheme and I am happy to spout off to all and sundry the benefits it brings to not only yourselves but the children and wider community."

Shelli Williams (Parent, October 2011)

Six more As

The 2012 evaluation complemented the four As above, with the following:

Aspiration, Adventure, Agency, Adaptability, Advocacy and Awards.

Awards

The CU has now won two major national awards:

Winner, *Social Change Awards 2011 - the Everyday Impact - New Enterprises Award* for their outstanding work in raising aspirations and promoting social mobility through providing high quality out-of-school-hours activities to children aged 7-14 years. In June 2012 the CU was highly commended by the *Charities Awards 2012* and in September won the *Third Sector Excellence Award 2012 – Small Charity, Big Achiever*. The CU has also been shortlisted for the *Charity Times Awards 2012* and the *Young People Now Awards 2012*.

Websites

www.childrensuniversity.co.uk

www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/local-cus/.

www.childrensuniversity.co.uk/media--publications/cu-publications

www.theparentpractice.com/

<http://ticketing.southbankcentre.co.uk/poetry-paranassus>

www.rspb.org.uk/youth/makeanddo/do/actionawards/index.aspx

“The genius of the Children’s University is not only in exploiting the ‘where’ but in asking the ‘why’ and the ‘why not’ questions. Why not find ways of exploiting the potential resource for learning of cultural repositories such as museums but also the less evident resources of an airport, for example?”

Professor John MacBeath

Evaluations on the Children’s University by the University of Cambridge

can be found via: www.childrensuniversity.co.uk

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