

Comment: Never too early to be aiming high



The Childrens University scheme aims to boost social mobility by raising the aspirations of children from a wide range of communities through high quality learning activities and experiences outside normal school hours. Picture: Getty

SOCIETY stands to gain from Queen Margaret Children's University's model of wider access across all ages of learning, says Irene Hynd

It's never too early to aim high. That was the clear message given at a colourful graduation ceremony held at Queen Margaret University a few weeks ago. In front of a proud audience of parents, carers, teachers and supporters, around 60 East Lothian primary and secondary school pupils donned caps and gowns to receive certificates from the Queen Margaret Children's University in recognition of their extracurricular achievements in learning.

Queen Margaret is the first higher education institution in the east of Scotland to host the Children's University. The initiative, which has had significant success in England, exemplifies a key principle of QMU's approach to widening access and participation – to work collaboratively with partners locally to promote ambition and achievement, and raise aspirations at an early age across a range of communities.

Specifically, the Children's University model aims to boost social mobility by providing high quality, exciting and innovative learning activities and experiences outside normal school hours to children aged 7-14, and 5 and 6-year-olds with their families. Queen Margaret University engages all manner of diverse learning partners across our wider communities to help us achieve those aims.

Although they can be encouraged by their families and teachers, pupils must volunteer their own time to further explore the world around them by participating in a range of activities to build up credits for their individual learning passports. The chance to work towards bronze, silver and gold certificates not only motivates children to achieve different levels of goals, but provides them with much needed recognition of their achievements beyond the classroom.

The driving force behind this work is the ambition to raise aspirations, boost achievement and foster an early love of learning so that, regardless of the background into which they have been born, young people can make the most of their abilities and interests.

It is a fact that children born to middle and higher income families in Scotland are more likely to achieve greater wealth, improved health, and higher levels of participation in post-school education and cultural activities. Although open to all, the ethos underpinning the Children's University is to target young people facing socio-economic and educational disadvantage. Of course, the more

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For all participants, the Children's University is designed to spark curiosity and draw out each child's strengths at an early stage. The aim is to create a confident and inquisitive approach to learning from the outset which will influence their approach to life. In doing so, they will be rewarded by discovering new interests and hidden abilities and hopefully begin to realise that anything is possible. By fostering a positive attitude to learning, and by opening the doors of the university to children who may otherwise have been unlikely to cross the threshold at any point in their lives, there is an opportunity to raise aspirations, change attitudes and set a new direction for lifelong learning, personal achievement and citizenship.

Although QMU was not the first to pioneer the Children's University model, the initiative embodies our collaborative approach to widening access across all ages of learning.

Our ground-breaking Academies project, a skills and career development project for 15 to 18-year-olds, is now recognised as one which delivers real results for Scotland's young people. An exemplar of partnership working, the Academies project draws upon expertise from university, colleges, schools, local authorities and businesses to increase young people's understanding of Scotland's key industries. By working together, the partners can not only present outstanding educational opportunities for youngsters, they can create a dynamic young workforce to support the development and economic growth in the country's key sectors – hospitality and tourism, creative industries, health and social care and food science.

Success is not achieved in isolation, nor does it happen overnight. By pooling resources and taking a longer term approach to engaging our young people, we will be more effective at removing barriers to success, with society being the ultimate benefactor.

- Irene Hynd is University Secretary at Queen Margaret University qmu.ac.uk