

How to Increase Access to Extra-Curricular Activities

Participation in non-academic activities can be profoundly important to young people's lives, yet many young people still don't have access to programs that inspire them. **Helen O'Donnell** explains how a new initiative is helping communities and schools overcome the barriers to accessing extra-curricular activities.



Here in the UK our education system is focused on a classroom curriculum. The success markers along the way—the tests, key stage milestones and exams—are all constantly reinforcing an emphasis on what happens within classrooms. But did you know that by the time a child turns 18, they will have spent only nine per cent of their waking lives in a classroom?¹

Our education system is focused on this small percentage and does little to acknowledge that learning is not just a classroom activity. With the new Ofsted framework in practice, inspectors will now be making judgements on a school's commitment to personal development and character education—recognition that there is more to success than quantitative academic results. But this is still only a small part of their assessments.

To my colleagues and I here at Children's University, this nine per cent of a child's life represents only part of the story. It's the contrasting 91 per cent that remains our focus. Our mission is to inspire all children to learn beyond the classroom, create wider communities of learning and remove barriers to learning for all children.



Learning outside of the classroom

There's no shortage of evidence that what goes on outside the classroom has significant positive impact. Sutton Trust's *Life Lessons* report² found that essential life skills such as confidence, motivation, resilience and communication are associated with better academic outcomes and better prospects in the workplace. They also reported that 88 per cent of young people, 94 per cent of employers and 97 per cent of teachers said that life skills were as, or more, important than academic qualifications. Extra-curricular activities contribute to the development of these skills.

Reports like these are great for illustrating evidence, but when I talk to people about what I do and the work of Children's University, people readily furnish me with their own anecdotal evidence. Talk to many people about the importance of activities beyond the classroom and people are always willing to share their own experiences: the friendship groups centred around a youth club, the confidence gained from weekend drama clubs, the interests developed from a visit or school trip to somewhere new. Opportunities for learning are everywhere and so many people are walking, talking evidence of the life-long impact of participation.

Inspiring and ensuring participation

However, it is easy to assume that we all appreciate how important learning beyond the classroom can be and that activities are available by the bucket load. While these opportunities are out there in abundance, getting children to be inspired by them and ensure access them are two very real challenges.

Earlier this year The Social Mobility Commission published the report *An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility*.³ As Dame Martina Milburn wrote in her foreword to the report:

An Unequal Playing Field found that the school you go to, the area where you grow up, and your socioeconomic background largely determine what types of activities are available outside the classroom. There was a direct link between household income and participation for almost all extra-curricular activities which were included in the survey. Children from the poorest households were much less likely to take part in any extra-curricular activity, but particularly music and sport.⁴



There is a real disparity in participation from those children facing disadvantage, despite evidence pointing to the fact that those facing disadvantage benefit most from participating. When you factor in the importance of parental engagement, the cost of transport, equipment, entrance and subscription fees, it's easy to see the barriers that many face in making the most of their time. Throw into the mix the increasing pressure schools are under to deliver curriculum results, it's easy to see why many schools are not prioritising activities that take place beyond the classroom.

Making participation accessible

So, what role does Children's University in combatting all of this? Well, we manage a network of over 58 partners who run Children's University in over 1,000 schools across 66 Local Authority Areas. Together we quality assure opportunities to learn in all their forms: from after-school clubs, to learning at public destinations like museums, libraries and even retailers. We then encourage, track and celebrate participation for over 110,000 children each year. We do what we can to make these as accessible as possible and are constantly developing partnerships with organisations able to offer up opportunities for children—whether they're formal recurring sessions, or one-off opportunities—as long as there are elements of structured learning. Children's University celebrates over 3.6 million hours of extracurricular learning each year.

Having been in existence since the early 1990s and formalised with CU Trust as a central charity in 2007, the Children's University network has traditionally used a paper 'passport' scheme to record children's activities. Children collect stamps from validated learning providers and then get their achievements celebrated with certificates and a formal graduation ceremony when certain milestones are hit. We celebrate achievements from 30 hours of participation, right through to 1,000 hours.

Making data accessible

While our 'Passport to Learning' scheme has been a huge success, with children embracing the passport, it has made data capture a challenge for the CU Trust at a national level. We've always known how many passports we've distributed to partners around the country, but what gets recorded within their pages is unable to be passed on beyond a quantitative total. This is why we've spent the past two years developing Children's University Online, a new digital platform that will work alongside the paper passport scheme to add huge value for children, schools and partners.

Fundamentally, it's a simple system: learning providers can go online and get their activities validated and receive a digital stamp code that they can then issue to children who participate in their activities, and children receive a login where they have a safe and secure place to record the stamp codes they collect for taking part in activities. While it's simple in its concept and functionality, it has the ability to generate participation data that has real-world applications to improve availability and access to opportunities. Its simple dashboard reporting shows schools a clear picture of what activities are available to their students, as well as what children are actually doing. Within the context of the new Ofsted framework, it's a perfect way for schools to quantify and illustrate what their students are doing towards personal development and character education.

Key to the added value of Children's University Online is the addition of tags that are attached to all activities. For the first time, we're able to categorise activities by type (arts, STEM, social action, family learning etc...) and we're associating essential skills so that we can illustrate the skills developed through participation. Working as part of the [Skills Builder Partnership](#), all activities available to children are tagged with up to three of the essential skills defined by the partnership. Using a skill set that's being embraced by over 700 partners (including major employers, businesses and other education partners), this puts the language and understanding of skills within a recognised framework.

In addition to categorisation and skills, we're also able to tag activities as to whether they involve children engaging with employers, professional or HE/FE environments—all things that schools are now expected to be recording as part of the Gatsby Benchmarks⁵ under the government's Careers Strategy.⁶

Children's University Online is now in the early stages of a public roll out and is already showing its value. With over 1,000 activities already validated for children in over 2,000 different destinations, we're already able to get a picture of hot spots of successes and opportunity areas where we need to broaden the offer of activities available. As children begin to use the system, we will get a clear idea of which of these activities children are actually doing.

Acting on the data

The key phrase for Children's University is 'actionable data'. What we mean by this is the information that Children's University Online will be delivering is not data for data's sake, but actionable information that will inform management decisions at every level. For an individual child, they will be presented with the



skills they're developing alongside the interests they're building through the categories they're most enjoying. For schools, they will be able to see their offering of activities for children by category and skill and ensure that their work covers all bases. For Children's University at a regional and national level, we will be able to see a picture of participation on a grand scale. We can use this information for good—brokering introductions to new partners, sharing successes, and helping inform policy around character education and informal learning.

While the picture of participation we're able to paint will be valuable, so too will the blanks; the children not participating, and the activities not engaged with. For those children who the Social Mobility Commission's 'An Unequal Playing Field' highlights as not participating, Children's University Online will shine a light on in real time. For the children who need it the most: the girls who see STEM as 'not for them', the children from low-income families with limited access to culture, the rural children without a local museum, this is life-changing. With our support, their teachers and communities will be best placed to address these issues and ensure that all children have more equal opportunity to make the most of that 91 per cent of their time that they spend outside a classroom.



For more information, visit <https://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk> or email contactus@childrensuniversity.co.uk

For more inspiration from Helen O'Donnell on how we are all responsible for children's learning, view her TEDx talk at:

<https://medium.com/@HelenODonnell/my-tedx-nantwich-talk-life-long-learning-dd71946fecf6>

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References

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