



# **The impact of Children's University on the development of essential skills in children aged 11+**

**A project funded by Nesta as part of the Future Ready  
Fund with support from the University of Sussex**

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## Forewords

### **Helen O'Donnell, CEO and Director of Partnerships, Children's University**



*Over the last 5 years I've seen the impact that participation in Children's University has on the development of vital skills in young people. From talking to children on school visits, to parents at graduations, and hearing directly from our Managers and learning partners, it is clear that what we do helps children build the essential skills they need in education and beyond. Signing up as Skills Builder partners in 2018 and introducing their framework into Children's University Online was the first step towards us capturing this impact. The challenge then, was evidencing our impact beyond simple anecdotes.*

*I am proud to introduce this report as it signifies the first time my organisation can accurately illustrate and quantify the impact that our programme has on skills development. Thanks to Nesta funding, and with much appreciated academic input from the University of Sussex, we have been able to explore this robustly.*

*The results of this research are incredibly encouraging and entirely validate our decision to partner with Skills Builder. Importantly they show a direct link between participation in Children's University and the use and improvement in essential skills development.*

### **Tom Ravenscroft, Founder and CEO, Skills Builder**



*This new report from our key partner Children's University is an important and highly encouraging one. It shows clearly the impact that a thoughtful, structured approach can have to building the essential skills that every child and young person needs to fulfil their potential. Children need the chance to both directly build their essential skills, and then to put them into practice - and this report demonstrates that the Children's University approach is achieving both.*

*We are excited about working with Children's University in the coming years to support their ambition to enable all children and young people to build their experiences and master their essential skills. This report is an important milestone towards that ambition.*

## **Executive summary**

Children's University is a charity that encourages, tracks, and celebrates learning that takes place beyond the classroom. While curriculum time remains the focus of the formal education system, we know that time spent wisely beyond the classroom holds unlimited potential for life-changing experiences, skills development, and social mobility.

Using the Children's University framework, our delivery partners and schools validate learning opportunities for children in whatever form they take. These activities must match our criteria of being voluntary and containing elements of structured learning. They must also take place outside of the formal classroom curriculum. For children, this means that through Children's University they can participate in activities in their own school but beyond the classroom (lunch time and after-school clubs), as well as within their local community (libraries, sports clubs, museums and other local destinations) alongside activities at home (self-led, online or downloadable) and activities run by our national partners (retailers such as Pets at Home, and with organisations like Forestry England). Each child's journey through our programme is as unique as they are.

In order to bring consistency of experience for children and to ensure that the impact felt through participation in varying activities is comparable, we use a consistent shared language around categories of learning and skills. When it comes to skills, Children's University is a member of the Skills Builder Partnership, using their clearly defined set of eight essential skills. We believe, along with hundreds of other schools, charities, employers and educators, that using Skills Builder's Universal Framework offers children and young people a common language to use when talking about their own skills development. Using *Children's University Online* (CUO), our digital platform that children use to record their participation, we tag all activities with up to three key skills as defined by Skills Builder. At time of writing there are over 5,300 available activities for children, all tagged with skills.

With the support of Nesta's Future Ready Fund, Children's University set out to interrogate skills development in Children's University participants aged 11+. By building a survey mechanism into CUO, we were able to question children regarding the skills that we expected them to be developing via the skills their activities had been tagged with.

As this report shows, on the whole it is clear that children do feel that they are both using and improving skills through their participation in our programme. We aim to use this knowledge to best improve our programme and support schools and partners to maximise the impact that their activities can have.

# **Introductions**

## **Children's University**

### **A brief background**

Children's University runs a long-established *Passport to Learning* programme that is proven to have a huge positive impact on children.<sup>1</sup> We currently reach over 110,000 children each year through a consortium of close to 60 local delivery partners. These partners are typically universities, further education institutions and Local Authorities. All are not-for-profit and all are committed to equality of opportunity for the children in their area and encouraging limitless learning beyond the classroom. We also run a digital platform, *Children's University Online* (CUO), that works alongside our passport scheme offering children a safe and secure space to record their participation, while also providing schools, partners and policy makers with actionable data that helps inform and improve provision.

Children's University began in the early 1990s as a way to engage young pupils in subjects and opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them. It was incredibly successful in schools in areas of deprivation and the idea spread. In 2007, Children's University Trust was formed – a national charity that now supports, coordinates, and fundraises for Children's University activity across the UK.

Schools sign up to work with their local Children's University partner and children are then issued a *Passport to Learning* in which they record learning and a log-in for CUO. Using these tools they collect stamps for participating in Children's University quality-assured activities beyond the classroom. Once significant stamps are accumulated, their achievements are celebrated at a university-style graduation ceremony, often in local universities or civic buildings.

Our passport system and inspirational graduation ceremonies ensure a clear and tangible recognition and reward system to engender aspiration and pride. Our *Passport to Learning* is unique in that it works across the UK, applying a nationally recognised tool for encouraging, tracking and celebrating learning. We have always been confident that participation in Children's University has a huge impact on the skills children are able to develop. However, it is this assumption that we aimed to interrogate through this research project.

### **An overview of our work with primary schools**

Children's University began in primary schools and has grown predominantly as a primary school programme. Participants are typically aged 5 – 14 years-old with the majority of them being aged between 7 – 11. While the number of schools participating in our programme fluctuates from year to year, typically we would expect to see around 92% of our participating schools being primary schools.

### **An overview of our work with secondary schools (prior to this project)**

As a programme that for many years simply recorded the number of hours of children's participation in learning beyond the classroom, interest in our programme remained predominantly from primary schools. However, since 2016 the programme has been developed to bring in additional value

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<sup>1</sup> <https://childrensuniversity.co.uk/about-us/the-difference-we-make/>

around recording categories of learning and, since 2018, skills in line with the Skills Builder Framework. This additional value and data around skills particularly is especially relevant to secondary schools and our aim as an organisation is to grow our reach into more of them. We have always seen pockets of success around the country with secondary schools, some even using the programme right through to 6<sup>th</sup> Form. Some Children's Universities use the programme with those aged 11+ as a way to quantify volunteering and social action opportunities, mentoring activities with their feeder primary schools, and link to careers activity. Through CUO, young people are able to view their participation history and the skills they have been using throughout. This acts as a way for them to refer back and link their skills development to real-world activities.

When we launched CUO in May 2019 the Skills Builder essential skills were a key development with particular relevance to secondary schools. Using the Future Ready Fund support we wanted to ensure that our assumptions about participants' skills development were correct. That is, that the impact we believe we have on skills development in young people is both real and significant. In evidencing this, our goal is to grow our presence in secondary schools and in doing so, increase accessibility to the impact we are able to have in supporting the transition from primary to secondary and beyond.

### **An overview of 'Children's University Online' (CUO)**

CUO is a digital platform for validating and quality assuring learning opportunities for children that take place outside of the classroom. These activities can be inside or outside of school but must have clear elements of structured learning. All activities have skills associated with them, which are recorded online each time a child records their participation. Children can log into their own dashboard and are encouraged to reflect on the skills they are building. Similarly, schools and partners within the Children's University network can report on the skills built through their engagement with the programme. All participation generates data for impact and evaluation.

Typically, activities are registered by the organisations providing them (museums, libraries, and sports clubs, amongst others) and it is these activity leaders along with our local managers who define the skills that children are expected to build by participating. Using the 8 essential skills defined by the Skills Builder Framework, up to three are tagged for each activity that is validated.

With the support of the Future Ready Fund we have been able to develop our offer specifically for the 11+ age range so that secondary-aged children can additionally take a far more self-led and metacognitive approach to skills development. This includes developing a dashboard styled to best suit a more mature age-range, as well as giving them the ability to submit their own activities and take part in reflection surveys regarding their skills use and development.

# Our Theory of Change

Our theory of change is as follows.

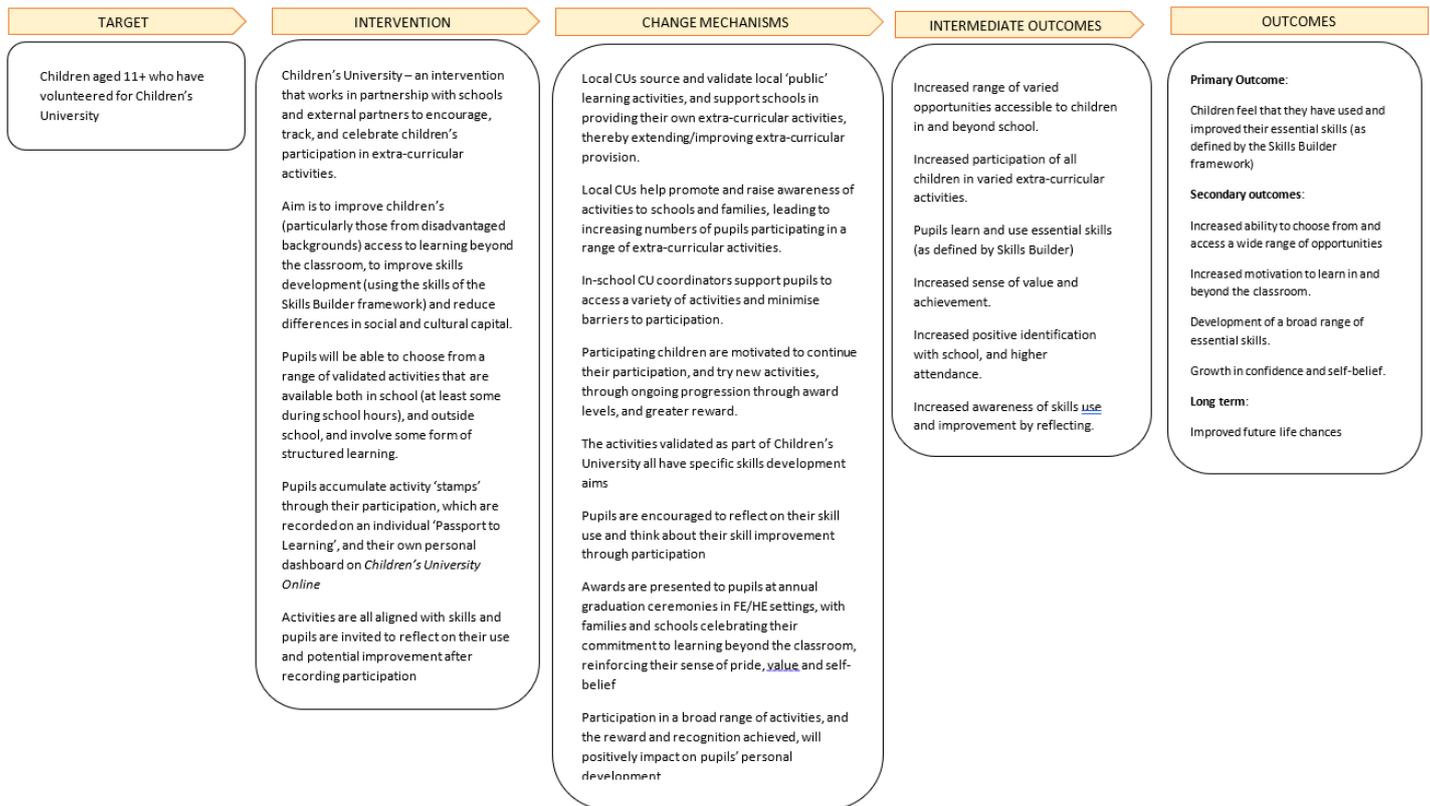


Fig. 1. Theory of Change

## Skills Builder

### Brief overview

The Skills Builder Partnership was founded by former teacher and CEO of Enabling Enterprise, Tom Ravenscroft. Developed in consultation with teachers, other educators and employers, there are 8 essential skills that are at the heart of the framework; listening, presenting<sup>2</sup>, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, aiming high, leadership, and teamwork. The Partnership brings together more than 700 organisations towards a common mission, joined by shared language, principles and outcomes. Skills Builder supports schools to build the essential skills of every learner through the training of staff, a comprehensive curriculum, and links to employers. They collaborate with youth organisations to drive collective impact through the Skills Builder Framework, supporting assessment and measuring impact.

The Skills Builder Universal Framework is protected by a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License. It should be attributed as Ravenscroft, T.M. (2020), Skills Builder Universal Framework of Essential Skills, London: Skills Builder Partnership at [www.skillsbuilder.org/framework](http://www.skillsbuilder.org/framework)

<sup>2</sup> The skill 'Presenting' was renamed 'Speaking' by Skills Builder during the period of this research. As this was originally named 'Presenting' and built into CUO as such, it is referred to throughout the research as 'Presenting'.

## Further reading on Skills Builder

- Skills Builder website: <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/>
- Skills Builder Framework: <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/universal-framework/>
- Skills Builder on Twitter: [https://twitter.com/Skills\\_Builder](https://twitter.com/Skills_Builder)
- Skills Builder resource Hub: <https://hub.skillsbuilder.org/start/>

## The Skills Builder Essential Skills

The skills as defined by Skills Builder are as follows:



Fig. 2. The Skills Builder skills and definitions

## Why Children’s University is a partnership member

Children’s University has been a proud member of the Skills Builder Partnership since 2018. What Skills Builder offers organisations like Children’s University is a framework with which we can describe, recognise and develop the essential skills that children build through participation in our programme. For Children’s University, the appeal of signing up was to be using and introducing children to a shared language around skills that is also being used widely by hundreds of other organisations. When children see and reflect on the skills they develop through Children’s University, they are using the same terms and definitions that they will use in school, when they participate in programmes run by other organisations, look for work experience with major employers, and engage with the work of over 750 other organisations. There is simplicity, strength, and clarity when we all use a shared language.

## How Skills Builder fits with ‘Children’s University Online’

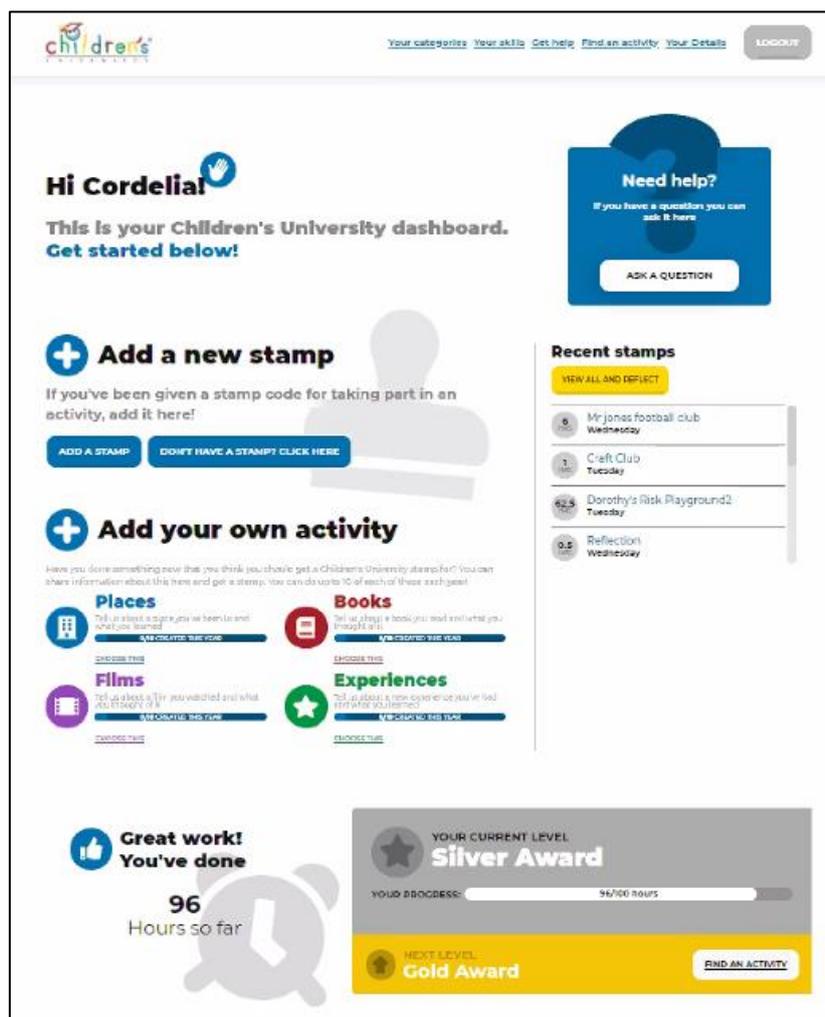
Children’s University launched CUO in 2019 as a way to add value to our long-established passport programme. Every single activity that is validated for children (currently 5,300+ at time of writing) is digitally tagged with up to three of the Skills Builder essential skills. This means that alongside seeing their hours build up, children are also able to see how their skills are developing. It also means that teachers and our local delivery partners can report on the availability of and participation in, activities by skill. If there are gaps in their local offer, they can use this actionable data to make changes to rectify this. If there are successes, these can be highlighted and celebrated. The addition of skills to CUO is visible to different users in a variety of ways:

### For children and families

Children collect stamp codes in their *Passport to Learning* that they can then add online. Each stamp equates to around one hour of structured learning. By adding their codes to *Children’s University Online* they unlock further information showing them the interests and skills they are developing through participation. All children have their very own dashboard which helps them see how they are progressing towards the next award level; reflect on the skills they are building and help them find new activities.

The following images taken from a child’s dashboard<sup>3</sup> show how this is illustrated.

Fig. 3. A snapshot of a child’s dashboard



<sup>3</sup> This is a demonstration account with dummy data

Fig.4. Zooming into the same image we can see a child's general progress in hours and how this fits within the Children's University Award levels<sup>4</sup>



Fig.5. Further down the same dashboard screen a child is shown the top skills that they have developed by participating in tagged activities. They are also given the option to 'View all skills'.

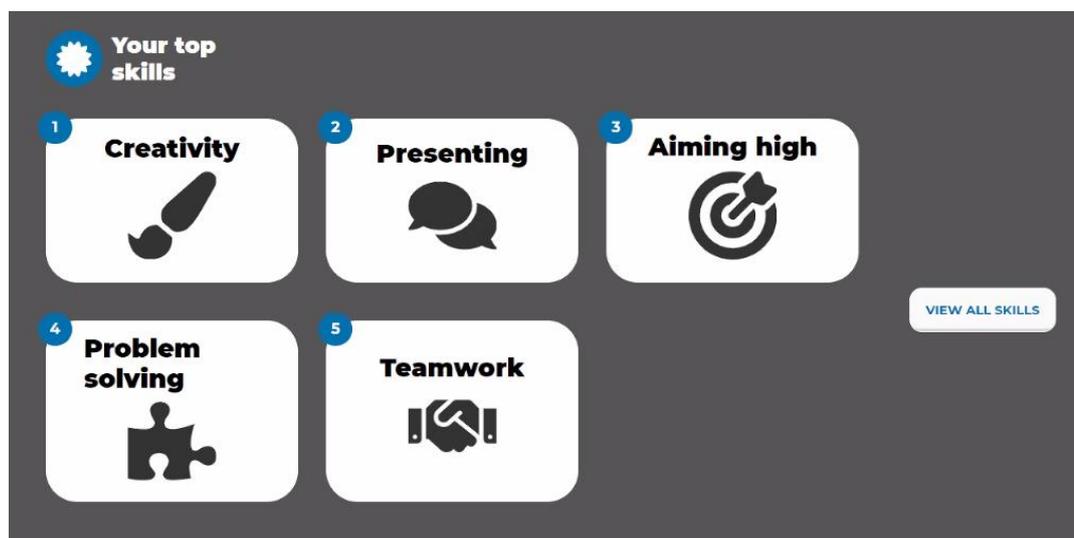
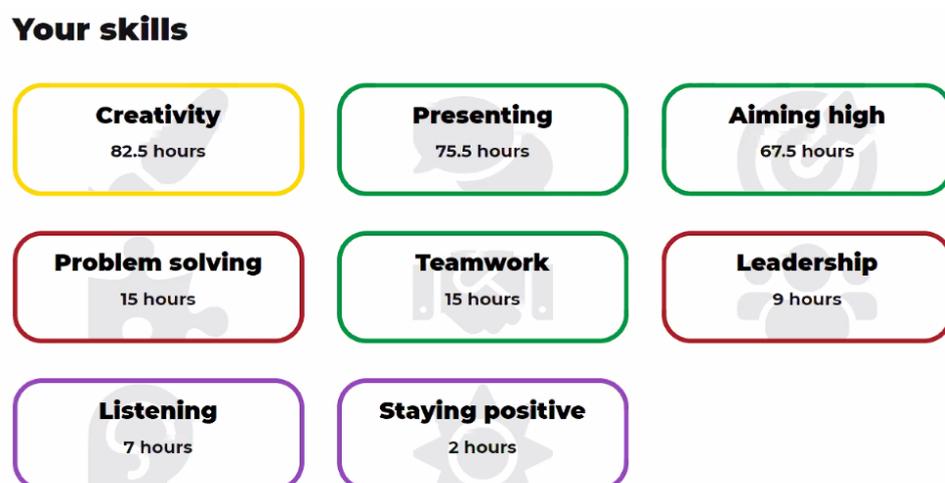


Fig.6. By clicking 'View all skills', a child can see how their total numbers of hours breaks down by the skills that have been tagged. This shows all 8 of the essential Skills Builder skills and their hours accordingly.



<sup>4</sup> Children's University celebrates awards at intervals of 30, 65 and 100 hours, all the way up to 1,000 hours. It is these awards that are celebrated at our graduation ceremonies.

Fig.7. When searching for new activities, children are able to run a simple search based on activity or location (e.g. 'Football' or 'Manchester') but they are also able to search by the skills that are tagged – thereby allowing them to further develop the skills they know they have, or find activities that develop the skills they have less experience of developing.

**Find an activity**

I want to find activities near  [Fewer options](#)

**More search options**

How far away is your activity?

When does it start?

When does it end?

What ages is it for?

I don't mind  4 and under  5 - 10  
 11 - 16  16+

Is there a cost?

I don't mind  Yes  No

What type?

Arts, culture and music  Careers and enterprise  Citizenship  
 Family learning  History and heritage  Languages  
 Literacy  Mental health and well-being  Nature and the environment  
 Online  Outdoor learning  Practical life skills  
 Science, technology, engineering and maths  Social and community action  Sports and physical  
 Uniformed groups

What skills can you learn?

Aiming high  Creativity  Leadership  
 Listening  Presenting  Problem solving  
 Staying positive  Teamwork

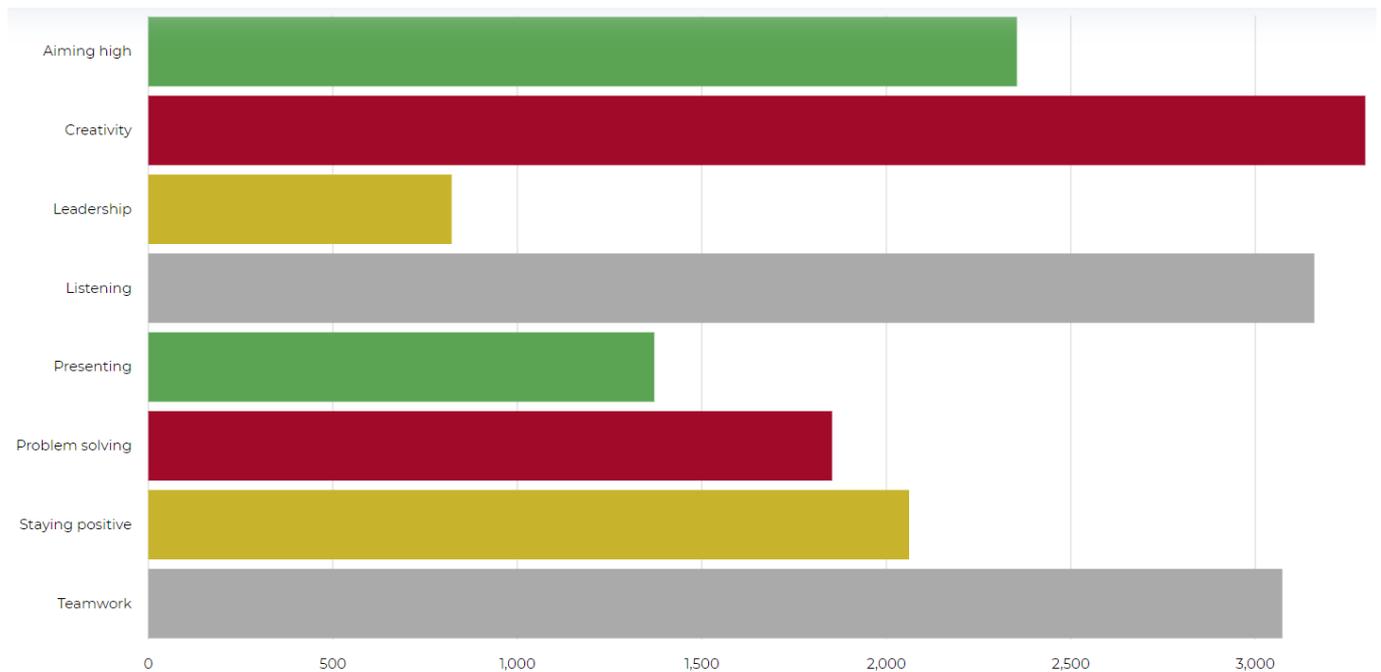
### For schools

As soon as their pupils are signed up, schools can monitor their individual and collective participation and report on the activities that they take part in, both inside and outside of school. Easy-to-use printable reports show what extracurricular opportunities the school has to offer their pupils, what skills are being developed in line with the Skills Builder Framework, and what categories of learning are popular and where there is opportunity for development. It also provides an easy way to

monitor the number of encounters their pupils have with employers and FE/HE environments in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks.

With regard to skills, the following screenshot<sup>5</sup> from CUO illustrates the kind of information that is able to be generated at a school, local and national level. Seen here is a graph showing the availability of activities (quantity) for children as per the skills they are tagged with.

*Fig. 8. Activities nationally available by skills*



Schools, local delivery partners and Children’s University Trust can compare availability reports such as this alongside participation reports measuring hours of participation by skill. Comparison of the two can help highlight, for example, where we may see activities that are available but not actually being used, as well as gaps in provision.

In the report above, for example, we can see that ‘leadership’ is a skill that is particularly under-represented in comparison to ‘creativity’ and ‘teamwork’. This highlights room for improvement in our provision of activities tagged as developing leadership and gives us strategic insight into where staff time can be best spent in order to give participants the best chance at broad skills development.

## **What we are evaluating**

Children who participate in Children’s University have the opportunity to learn in a rich range of contexts, experience new places, visit colleges and universities and attend their own graduation ceremonies. This adventure introduces children to the joy of learning, instils a sense of curiosity for the world around them and develops their confidence and aspirations for future life. We know what we do works and has an incredible impact on the lives of children. A 2017 Education Endowment

<sup>5</sup> Taken from a demonstration screen. Not current data.

Foundation (EEF) evaluation<sup>6</sup> showed that participants in Children’s University schools made an additional two months’ progress in maths and reading in KS2 SATs after participating in Children’s University for two years. For those eligible for free school meals this increased to three months.

However, as an organisation we have always been confident that our impact goes beyond attainment and that children should be recognised for gaining more than just an accumulation of hours in a passport. Skills are a major focus for Children’s University and being part of the Skills Builder Partnership is vitally important. We were keen to use the Future Ready Fund to robustly evaluate the extent to which our assumptions about skills use and development were correct. Do children really use and improve their essential skills through participation?

## **The statements we are interrogating**

Using a survey outlined in detail below, we wanted to evaluate the skills used and the skills improved as reported directly by Children’s University participants aged 11+. As described above, all activities that are part of the Children’s University framework are tagged with up to three of the Skills Builder essential skills. The assumption being that the activity leader and the Children’s University Manager who validates the activity are best placed to decide what these skills should be. We set out to find:

- the percentage of respondents that felt they used the skills our validation stated;
- the percentage of respondents that didn’t feel they used skills that were stated
- the percentage of respondents that felt they did use the skills that our validation stated and felt they improved;
- of those that did improve, what percentage stated that they felt they had ‘strongly improved’

## **Overview of work with University of Sussex**

As described above, all participants’ experiences of the Children’s University programme are entirely unique. They are free to choose the activities they participate in, and these will be unique to each child based on local availability, the offer within their schools, their interests, and their personal circumstances at home, as well as the extent to which their parents are engaged. For example, a child passionate about sports could gain Children’s University stamps by taking part in school football training alongside additional activities at a local club. Another child may take part in self-led STEM activities at home, where another may participate in regular drama classes and visit museums and other destinations with their family. Validated activities could be one-off workshops, or regular sessions run by a school or third-party provider. Given all these variables are at play, it poses challenges for finding a standard measure with which we can benchmark impact. Additionally, our focus on skills is specifically linked to the skill set of 8 essential skills as defined by the Skills Builder Framework. While standard measures exist for empathy, resilience, and other SPECTRUM skills<sup>7</sup>, none such standardised measures exist in relation to Skills Builder. As a result, our focus with the support of the University of Sussex team has been to develop a unique custom survey that follows

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<sup>6</sup> <https://childrensuniversity.co.uk/media/1093/eef-childrens-university.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> SPECTRUM is a review of how non-academic and essential skills are conceptualised and measured in relation to child and adolescent outcomes. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/evaluating-projects/measuring-essential-skills/spectrum-database/>

the consistent structure of a standard measure, while remaining flexible enough to reflect the variables as per the above.

## Method

### Design

With the support of the University of Sussex and our digital partners, The Tech Dept<sup>8</sup>, we built a custom online survey that responded to the unique activities completed by children. When a child completes a validated Children's University activity, they are issued a stamp code which can then be entered into CUO as a record of their participation. This code is a simple combination of a colour and a four-digit number (e.g. RED 1542). Upon entering this code on their dashboard<sup>9</sup> CUO automatically recognises what the activity is, adds the relevant duration to their award progress, and recognises the skills that the activity was tagged with upon initial validation. For those children aged 11+ participating in this project, they were then given the option of completing the survey based on the skills associated with the activity.

The survey specified the name of the activity and made it clear that children were hoped to have used certain skills (specified and defined depending on the activity) and they were then asked about their use of this skill, followed by their thoughts on their personal improvement in the skill area. Additionally, they could expand on their answer using a free text box. These surveys were uniquely generated depending on the name of the activity and the skills associated.

Fig. 9. A survey for an activity showing one skill. Surveys included up to three skills.

**Reflect on the activity - 'Break dancing '**

Well done! You just got a Children's University stamp for completing the activity - 'Break dancing '.

By completing this survey, you will get a chance to think and reflect on the skills you've developed, and an extra half a stamp for every four activities you give feedback on.

You'll be asked three questions about up to three skills. There will be statements you may agree with or disagree with. There are no right or wrong answers, so just feel free to be honest. This will also help Children's University to know more about the activities that we encourage young people to do and help us to improve those activities for other children.

**Tell us about Listening**

By taking part in 'Break dancing ', it was hoped that you would use your skills in Listening.  
What we mean by Listening is that this activity should have given you the opportunity to listen and take in information that you could then use.

**"Taking part in this activity I used this skill"**

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

**"Taking part in this activity I improved this skill"**

Strongly agree  Agree  Neutral  Disagree  Strongly disagree

**Tell us about how you used this skill**

<sup>8</sup> The Tech Dept are the digital agency we contract to build and manage the ongoing development of CUO.

<sup>9</sup> See fig. 3. under [For Children and Families](#) for a screenshot

The results of these surveys were then exported in a .csv file for analysis by the Children's University Trust team. The full process for analysis was designed with the University of Sussex to ensure it was fair, consistent, and robust and to give both quantitative and qualitative feedback.

While many of the standardised measures used by other Future Ready Fund projects focused on a pre- and post-intervention survey, this was not possible for this project due to the variables described above. The statements of "I used this skill" and "I improved this skill" were specifically phrased to give a close indication of skill use and improvement as near to a pre- and post-benchmark as possible. While the Children's University programme is an 'intervention' as typically understood by educators, we based our analysis at an activity level rather than at intervention level. It was agreed that this would best reflect the impact of the activities and would not be complicated by potential participants not taking part in any activities. That is to say, as our focus is on the impact that activities have on skills development, we would gain nothing from looking at an intervention level as that would include participants signed up to the programme but remaining inactive.

### **Our measures**

Following extensive discussion with the team from the University of Sussex, it was agreed to create a Likert scale to measure student's responses. When asked to respond to statements about their skills use and improvement, students chose from:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

For the purposes of our .csv data export, these points were translated into a numbered system from 1 – 5; 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. 3 was deemed as neutral. Only responses number 4 and above were to be considered as positive affirmations of skills use and improvement.

### **Ethics**

Based on learnings taken from workshops with Nesta and the University of Sussex, it was agreed that participants taking part in this project would not be forced to take part in our skills surveys. As a result, we worked to incentivise students by offering an additional Children's University stamp as part of our awards programme for every four surveys a child completed. The University of Sussex agreed this was not undue reward and fairly matched the time and effort taken.

However, by not having the surveys as mandatory, we faced the additional challenge of making sure that both schools and pupils were aware of our work and the benefits of survey completion to them. For schools, this meant making sure that they were aware of our research. For students, this meant making them aware of the additional stamps they could gain. To this end we worked on targeted communications to schools and teachers, and digitally created a 'pop up advert' on the dashboard of participating children.

## Participants

A significant portion of our Nesta funding was awarded for the recruitment of a Digital Inclusion Officer (DIO) who joined Children's University Trust in September 2019 focussed on recruiting, onboarding and supporting participants for this project. The DIO was tasked with recruiting local Children's Universities from within our existing network (not all of our member organisations work with secondary-aged participants) and supporting them to onboard new secondary schools and their pupils. With CUO only launched in May 2019, the DIO focused on supporting the digital upskilling of our local Children's University delivery partners and ensuring that pupils in their participating schools were set up with log-ins for CUO.

By March 2020 we had signed up:

- 11 local Children's Universities
- 18 schools
- 2,066 secondary students with accounts on CUO

## Impact of COVID-19 on participant numbers

While these target numbers were due to increase to 15 local partners, working with 25 schools and 3,300 students online by June 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of schools meant that we agreed with Nesta that this target would not be possible to meet.

Unfortunately, with the 2019-20 academic year being the timeframe for this project, the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic closing schools had a significant impact on participant numbers. Not only was it necessary to agree to lower our final (June 2020) targets to our March 2020 levels, but the ongoing impact of COVID-19 into the 2020-21 academic year and the ongoing restrictions and challenges schools faced placed further challenges in our way. While a significant number of students were onboarded and accounts created, the real engagement work and ensuring that children were using CUO and engaging with Children's University was not possible.

Lines of communication from the DIO and the Children's University Trust team to pupils were filtered through a hierarchy of Trust to local partner, to school, to pupil. With many Children's University Managers (employed independently by our local member organisations) placed on furlough, along with the challenge of school closures and inconsistent lines of communication between schools and pupils across the country, the embedding of the programme in the education of these students was not possible in the way planned. During the Autumn 2020 term many schools which had been previously excited and keen to be participating in March 2020 were simply not able to continue<sup>10</sup>.

By the time of our final report we had gained survey data from participants on 241 incidents of skills use by children in 15 schools managed by 7 local partners. However, due to the scalable nature of digital work and the automation that the survey mechanism relies on, this report can be run again in the future and it is our intention that this report becomes an annual evaluation. While the effect of

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<sup>10</sup> As an illustration, one email from a Head Teacher in October 2020 stated: *"Last year was our first year with Year 7 joining as members and with lockdown and prolonged school closure for most pupils, it has been far from ideal. Our priority at this time is to ensure the safe continuation of learning and life in school and we are therefore not in a position to devote the time and energy we would wish to the Children's University. We look forward to being able to return to having the time, capacity and resources to engage fully with all the scheme has to offer."*

the COVID-19 pandemic will reduce over time, we know that our survey is replicable in the future and greater participation and engagement will increase the robustness of our findings.

### **The challenges faced and our responses**

In addition to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and the unprecedented closure of schools, we faced several other challenges. These included:

#### *Staff capacity*

Initially scheduled to start in post from June 2019, personal events and recruitment challenges meant we were unable to fill the role of DIO until September 2019. This put additional strain on staff resources prior to this and meant the DIO began learning about CUO and the project 'on the job' without the summer months for preparation.

#### *Technical blockers*

CUO was a new system that replaced a legacy system. While much of our original time plan focused on engagement activity and embedding the programme and CUO within participating schools, we had to spend a significant proportion of time on technical developments in other areas of the platform that previously were not perceived to be blockers. For example, areas of CUO unrelated to this project needed amending before schools wanted to upload their pupil data. Initial administration functionality was not user-friendly and additional funds were sought externally to this project in order to make necessary changes around December 2019.

#### *School relationships/hierarchy*

Particularly challenging was the relationship/hierarchy between Children's University Trust – which employs the DIO – and the participating schools. Local Children's Universities typically manage their own relationships with their local schools and so communication is filtered through them. As such, we needed to remain within the communication patterns and structures that already existed. At times this unintentionally caused delays and blockers that slowed down progress. For example, when delays meant that students were not signed up by October half term (2019) some schools were then not keen to sign up until the start of the new term in order not to be introducing a programme part way through a school term.

#### *Conversion from participant to respondent*

As above, ensuring students not only took part in the programme but also responded to survey requests was a key challenge. Response rate was particularly challenging when COVID-19 impacted so negatively on our ability to communicate with schools and pupils directly.

## **Results**

### **Quantitative**

In December 2020 we exported the survey results to date from CUO. There were 241 individual incidents of skills reflected on. Results were collated collectively (i.e. all skills together) and as individual skills. Results showed the following:

#### **All skills**

- 92% of respondents felt that they used the skills that Children's University validation stated
- 8% of respondents felt that they did not use the skills that Children's University validation stated

- 94% of those respondents who felt that they used the skills that Children’s University validation stated, also felt that they improved their use of the skills in doing so
- 73% of those respondents who felt that they used the skills that Children’s University validation stated, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

At an individual skill level, results showed as follows:

### **Staying positive**

- 88% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 13% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 93% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 75% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

### **Teamwork**

- 89% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 11% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 94% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 65% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

### **Problem solving**

- 84% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 16% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 91% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 63% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

### **Presenting**

- 89% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 11% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 100% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 83% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

## **Listening**

- 90% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 10% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 100% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 83% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

## **Leadership**

- 100% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 0% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 100% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 71% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

## **Creativity**

- 100% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 0% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 91% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 75% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

## **Aiming high**

- 94% of respondents felt that they used this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 6% of respondents felt that they did not use this skill when our validation stated that they would
- 97% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so
- 72% of those respondents who felt that they used this skill, also felt that they strongly improved their use of the skill in doing so

## **Qualitative**

The qualitative feedback we gathered came from our survey results. Children were able to give feedback specifically linked to the individual skill they were asked about, as well as the activity in general. The following are general anonymised quotes from students:

*"This experience helped me strengthen my bonds with friends."*

*"Writing down 3 positive things that happened every day really helped me feel better."*

*"I think I can become a spy when I am older."*

*"While doing it I had fun with my sister."*

*"CU is great."*

*"Quite good to learn from a professional."*

*"Working for this badge really helped me to stay connected and I found it to be a lot of fun!!!"*

*"I really enjoyed this challenge."*

Encouragingly the comments left were predominantly positive. A decision was made when designing the survey that the comment field would not be obligatory. Children could complete the surveys simply by marking their feelings on the Likert scales. A discussion was held around making the comment field obligatory, but it was assumed that children may then simply say what "they think we want to hear". While this has resulted in not gaining qualitative responses from all respondents (only 40% of respondents added comments to their Likert responses) it has increased our confidence in the validity of the comments received.

Without COVID-19 our original plan was to interview children who had been particularly responsive for extended case studies. This was sadly not possible.

Comments linked to the specific skills included these responses when asked how they used the skill:

### **Staying positive**

*"I stayed positive."*

*"[This activity helped me] get more positive with mental strength."*

*"Some mornings I don't always want to do it, but when I do it makes me feel happier. It improves my mental health."*

### **Teamwork**

*"Me and my sister worked together to work out the answers for an online quiz. I also worked with my friend to plan and do an online cook-a-long."*

*"I had to be blindfolded and trust other people to tell me what to do."*

*"I worked with my family to complete some of the challenges and games."*

*"We came together to complete the same goal. This is something we do as a family."*

*"I used teamwork when I made the dice with my mum."*

*"Worked with my friend to complete the games."*

*"claberlayshin." [Collaboration]*

## **Problem solving**

*"Finding the way around problems."*

*"I had to make a camp/den at indoors using only blankets, pegs and other furniture, and had to think about what I could use."*

*"I used this skill when I was doing the main activity which was fun but difficult. I spent some time working out the answer to the codes which helped me solve the mystery. I then used a similar method to make my own message for my Mum to try and work out."*

*"Using the maps to find the animals I needed to find."*

*"In this challenge, there was no need for me to use problem solving skills."*

## **Presenting**

*"Getting better with stage fright from doing this."*

*"I used this skill to find out how to present the objects to explain my life."*

*"I now feel more confident in telling people how they should look after their teeth."*

*"I used this skill by sharing my ideas with my cousin and my brother."*

## **Listening**

*"You have to listen to the description of each move, especially when he hurt himself and couldn't perform all of the moves. I might hurt myself if I don't."*

*"I listened to how we were to cut the fruit and vegetables up."*

*"I listened to my parents talking about the animals, and Read the information signs that were in place."*

*"We went down into the prison and the man from the castle was telling us all about how it was a long long time ago and all the facts I learnt about how you had to pay for food if you was in prison and even if you were innocent you had to pay to leave."*

*"Mum explained all the scientific names of the animals."*

*"I listened to my mum, who gave me instructions and help."*

## **Leadership**

*"Leading on the games."*

*"My mum told me that I had to do this on my own."*

## **Creativity**

*"Using this skill we made some salt crystals using salt and water and string. In the end we should get some crystals on the string."*

*"I used my creativity skills to make a nice poem about Autumn."*

*"I thought about how I could paint my jar and I decided to make it a marshmallow."*

*"I used my creative skills to make a fruit kebab look appetising and to make a sandwich look like a stick of rhubarb."*

*"Being creative by copying instructions to make a 2D model on a platform that piqued my interest."*

*"I had to use my imagination to create a new planet."*

*"I painted and created the dagger."*

*"I used this skill to find unique ways to take silly photos."*

*"I used all my skills to draw the animals as best I could."*

*"I came up with a new idea for my poem."*

## **Aiming high**

*"I used this skill by aiming to gain a blue peter badge."*

*"Planned to finish the model over three days achieved it over 2!!!"*

*"Fitness acting dance coordination listening and following instructions."*

## **Summary of results**

### **General**

The results from this project strongly show that Children's University has a positive impact on skills development for those aged 11+. Of those Children's University participants that responded to our surveys, 92% felt that they did make use of the skills that our validation process stated they would. As an organisation we have been confident in the value that we bring to the lives of our participants and anecdotal evidence has always been positive regarding skills development, so it is very encouraging to have statistical evidence to reinforce this.

It is particularly encouraging that as well as young people feeling like they used these essential skills, their development and improvement of these skills is something we are pleased to be able to evidence. Of those respondents who felt that they used the skills that our validation stated, 94% felt that they improved their use of the skill in doing so.

We know from this:

1. that in the 92% of the activities included in this survey, our local managers and learning providers have accurately tagged activities with the relevant skills;
2. that participation in these activities through Children's University has a strong positive impact on young people's development of essential skills.

### **At a skill level**

Looking at these results at an individual skills level, we see that there is a variance in the extent to which children feel that they have used each of the 8 skills. These are as follows:

Staying positive	88%
Teamwork	89%
Problem solving	84%
Presenting	89%
Listening	90%
Leadership	100%
Creativity	100%
Aiming high	94%

While there is minimal variance of just 16%, this is noteworthy and raises questions about the individual skills.

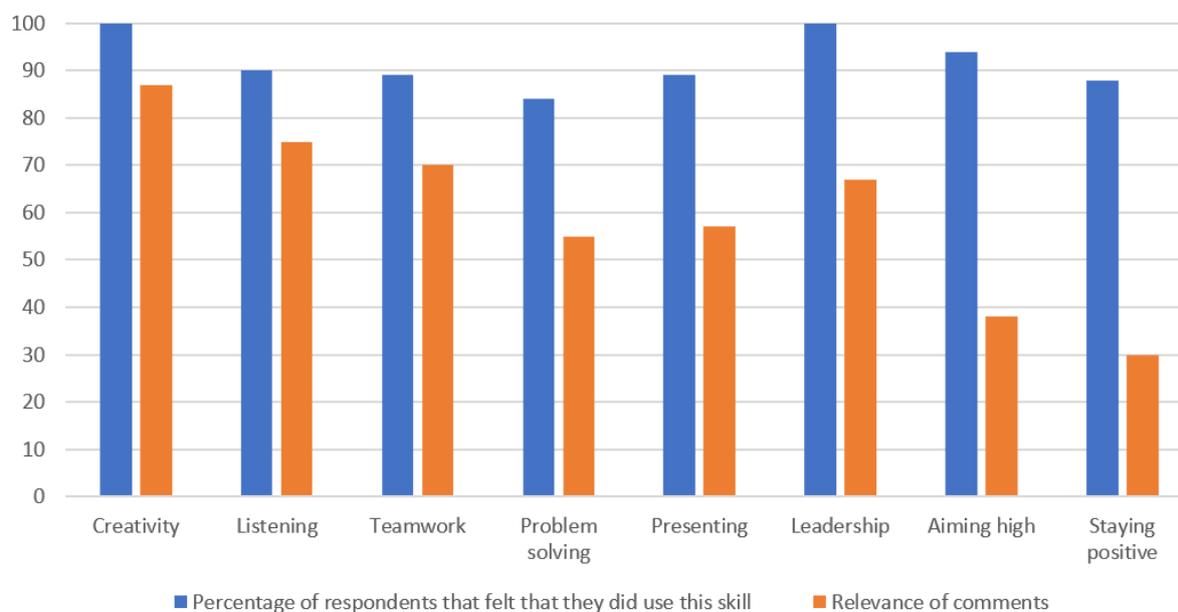
### Cross-referencing the qualitative and quantitative

When looking at the individual free text responses to the skills surveys, we made a subjective judgement about the ‘relevance’ of the statement written. The free text is a response to the statement: *“Tell us how you used this skill”*. Responses that were deemed to directly relate to the skill or used the language of the skill’s definition were counted as ‘relevant’, whereas simple descriptions of the activity or other non-related phrases were marked as not relevant. Using ‘Creativity’ as an example:

*“I used my creativity skills to make a nice poem about Autumn.”* – was deemed directly relevant to creativity.

*“It was lots of fun and it was very interesting.”* – was deemed not directly relevant to creativity.

While this is a largely subjective differentiation, it is interesting to compare the rates of relevance by skill, alongside the extent to which respondents felt that they had used each skill.



What could be inferred from this is that the greater the gap between the use of skill and the relevance of comments may in fact be highlighting where understanding around the skill is weakest. This is based on the assumption that respondents should be able to respond to the phrase *“Tell us*

*how you used this skill*” more accurately and with greater relevance if they have a clear understanding of the skill.

Looking at those skills showing the smallest gap – ‘Creativity’ and ‘Listening’ – one could argue that these are skills that are widely recognisable and potentially more familiar for participants.

Using the same logic to look at those skills with the greatest gap – ‘Aiming high’ and ‘Staying positive’ – it could be argued that the definitions of these skills are more nuanced and less widely understood independently.

As above, this is a combination of quantitative data and subjective interpretation of the qualitative data gathered but does pose some points for consideration.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this project we have specific recommendations for stakeholders within education and the Children’s University Programme.

### **Recommendations for schools**

- This research provides significant evidence that participation in Children’s University has a direct impact on children’s use and improvement of essential skills. Sign up to get involved with Children’s University [childrensuniversity.co.uk/get-involved](https://childrensuniversity.co.uk/get-involved)

### **Recommendations for Children’s University Trust**

- Replicate this research annually to monitor change and reflect ongoing changes in CUO and the educational landscape
- Should results vary significantly (5%+), work with Skills Builder to best respond to changes

### **To increase skills understanding at a child level:**

- Build into the CUO dashboard more information around the Skills Builder essential skills
- Introduce Skills Builder branding and specify ‘why’ this information is important
- Add links for further exploration around the Skills Builder Framework
- Highlight the relevance of each child’s skills profile by encouraging engagement with their least developed skills and celebrating their most developed

### **To increase skills understanding at a local level with delivery partners:**

- Provide additional training and clarification around Skills Builder as part of the validation process
- Build in Skills Builder awareness into CUO Training
- Provide materials for reference when talking about skills and the Skills Builder Partnership

### **To increase skills understanding of Skills Builder with learning providers:**

- Add Skills Builder information and definitions into the online validation form
- Encourage local partners to discuss skills development with learning providers as part of the validation process
- Actively encourage providers to discuss skills as part of their activity delivery with child participants

## **Recommendations for Skills Builder**

- Work with Children’s University Trust on an audit of the above, ensuring all available resources are maximised
- Consider definitions of skills and the potential for misunderstanding<sup>11</sup>
- Share the findings of this report with members of the wider Skills Builder Partnership
- Work with Children’s University Trust on a replication of this research annually

## **Thanks**

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This report would not have been possible without extensive support from the University of Sussex. With particular thanks to Dr Lucy Roberts.

Children’s University is very proud to be a member of The Skills Builder Partnership. Embedding the essential skills into our work to the extent described within this report has been made easier with thanks to Tom Ravenscroft, Bella Audsley, Elnaz Kashef and Tom Varley.

Finally, thank you to the pupils, schools and local Children’s Universities who played a part in this research.

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that the renaming of the skill ‘Presenting’ as ‘Speaking’ was done for this reason prior to the completion of this research.