

The State of The Nation

**Evidence and impact of the
importance of learning beyond the
classroom in 2021**



**An analysis of learning beyond the classroom participation and
provision using data collected between May 2019 and May 2021
by Children's University.**

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Foreword



“We must stop pretending that this kind of learning is not as important, and we must systemically scale where there is clear evidence of impact.”

Five years in the planning and two years in the compiling, this report lays out all that Children’s University knows about learning beyond the classroom in England in 2021.

Our education system remains disproportionately focussed on what goes on within the classroom when what a child does beyond it holds the most potential for making a positive impact on their life. It is time now to stop pretending that this kind of learning is not as important, and we must systemically scale where there is clear evidence of impact. It is a sad fact that traditionally only things that are measurable make it into policy discourse; only when evidence is robust and quantifiable will government take note. This is the purpose of this report.

Thanks to our digital platform, *Children’s University Online (CUO)*, we have accumulated significant data that provides a snapshot of where we are as a nation today. Over 24 months, more than 20,000 children have recorded participation in over 50,000 hours of activities, from a selection of over 8,200 that our partners have quality assured and validated. This includes data collated during the COVID-enforced school closures, when many children continued their informal learning through online and at home activities alongside learning provided by their school.

The microcosm of provision and participation that is detailed in this report gives us all information to guide us. For us to grow this evidence base and get a larger and more detailed picture, we need more partners running Children’s University, more schools signing up, and more providers of learning activities beyond the curriculum and outside of school. We cannot do what we do in isolation.

Future education policy should be entirely focused on our children and young people, not on the place in which their formal learning takes place. Therefore, it should extend to include learning beyond the classroom.

As you’ll read in our recommendations - policy should go way beyond school and extend to involve parents and carers in family learning. It should engage the local community, and it should be designed and driven by local social action and citizenship. It should use local learning providers such as colleges and universities more widely to help children see their future possibilities and it must engage businesses in showing children what skills the world of work will need from them as adults and how to develop them.

Foreword

“It is time to reset the education paradigm based on lifelong learning taking place anywhere, at any time and being accessible to all.”

It should see us all taking collective responsibility for our children’s learning.

Every opportunity to learn outside school should be genuinely open to all so children from all backgrounds can actively shape their own learning and have real freedom of choice to follow their individual interests. Policy should ensure that every child has a breadth of opportunity to learn according to their passions. It should place equal value on different categories of informal learning, recording and measuring progress in ‘soft’ and non-academic skills. It should use evidence of cold spots and inequalities to inform, develop and expand provision.

It is time to reset the education paradigm based on lifelong learning taking place anywhere, at any time and being accessible to all.

.....

**Helen O’Donnell
CEO & Director of Partnerships,
Children’s University Trust
July 2021**

Executive summary

“We have over 22,000 children online, who have recorded participation in over 51,000 hours of learning beyond the classroom.”

Children’s University encourages, tracks, and celebrates learning beyond the classroom. With children spending just 9% of their waking life inside a classroom by the time they turn 18, we know that the remaining 91% of time holds unlimited potential for life-changing experiences, skills development, and social mobility.

“Learning beyond the classroom” is the term we use to describe participation in any structured learning activities outside of formal curriculum time. This is inclusive of school-based enrichment and extra-curricular activities, as well as those that take place outside of schools and run by organisations and individuals with no links to formal education. Children’s University is a unique framework that ties all of this together and offers children, schools, families and our delivery partners a chance to record the impact that can be had by harnessing the potential in the time beyond the classroom.

In May 2019, after years of successfully delivering our programme using time-honoured paper-based systems, we launched *Children’s University Online (CUO)*. Embracing digital technology was the only way we could robustly capture the breadth of evidence of our impact and get a real-time picture of provision and participation in informal learning.

Two years on, of the 110,000 children who engage with our programme each year, we now have some 22,000 children using CUO, who have digitally recorded participation in more than 51,000 hours of learning beyond the classroom. With over 8,000 activities from a variety of providers carefully validated, categorised and tagged with skills, we have a unique insight into the state of the nation and what children are doing. Importantly, this also highlights the inverse; what children are not doing, and the areas where provision is lacking.

This report uses CUO’s digital microcosm of students and activities to paint a representative picture of learning participation and provision beyond the classroom today. We want readers to use this information to ask themselves what more can be done. What opportunities does this data highlight? What gaps are apparent? What new partnerships or ways of working can improve and increase access to opportunities for young people today?

We are the only organisation to be collating this information and we are excited to use it to inform and shape better provision of activities for all children.

Executive summary

You will find this report split into three colour-coded sections.

Section 1

About Children's University and the background to this report

Section 2

The State of the Nation: Learning beyond the classroom: Provision and participation in England today

Section 3

Why learning beyond the classroom matters

Thank you for reading

Now join the conversation



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childrensuniversity.co.uk



Search "Children's University: Live" on:
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Audioboom

Key messages

Learning beyond the classroom needs a joined-up approach

Learning outside the formal curriculum can have a life-changing impact for those that participate. If society is to maximise this impact, collective responsibility is needed. Traditional extra-curricular activities fall under the remit of schools and the Department for Education, whereas public learning falls to any number of organisations. This needs pulling together.

Tackling this needs to be cross-party and cross-departmental

The Department for Education need to work alongside the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Both need to work with business and community leaders and Local Government. The impact that structured learning beyond the classroom can have on individuals and society is huge. It needs to go beyond the whims of changing governments and rotating Secretaries of State.

Children's University offers a unique way to capture data

Children's University Online (CUO) is the platform that has captured the picture of learning that this report shows. It records and validates a variety of activities for all kinds of providers, both inside and outside of schools, and categorises them and tags them with associated skills and careers links. It also enables children to record their participation. We want this information to inform an improvement of provision and access for all children.

No one else is doing this

There are many great organisations working in this space, but none are as broad reaching as Children's University. With our activity data and our tracking of participation, we are in a unique position to capture real-time pictures of both participation and provision across all kinds of learning and locations.

We always want to work with new partners

Children's University offers very few activities itself. What we do is validate existing provision and offer a framework that ties it together for participants and enables consistent reporting for schools and local partners. We cannot, and do not want to, work in isolation – we want to work with as many partners as possible who are committed to improving chances for children and young people. From small local providers, to new national partnerships with far-reaching organisations. [Get in touch.](#)

We want this report to inform an improvement for children

What opportunities do our results highlight? What new ways of working could be introduced to address cold spots? What new partnerships could improve access and provision? How can you support and improve provision of opportunities for children and young people and help us remove barriers of access?

Celebration is key!

Recognising children's efforts is always important, and we are proud to be sharing a detailed picture of participation that is categorised and broken down by skills and careers engagement. However it is important that we don't get lost in this data. Children's engagement with any learning beyond the classroom is to be celebrated. While current discourse is focused on 'lost learning' and 'education catch up', this is important to remember now more than ever.

Recommendations

As a charity that exists to support education beyond the classroom, it should be a given that we fully back and support recent calls for more funding for extra-curricular activities and enrichment provision. However, we feel it is important to add to these calls by making practical recommendations based on the content of this report. Primarily, we want to focus on how provision and participation data can clearly demonstrate the value that learning beyond the classroom should have as a policy focus in its own right.



All children must be given the same opportunity and freedom of choice to actively shape their own learning beyond the classroom



Families and carers of the most socially excluded children must be able to access as much quality learning beyond the classroom as those families for whom there are fewer barriers



Schools must be given the tools to monitor pupils' activities beyond the classroom in order to encourage wider participation by **all** children and measure its impact



Schools must be supported to evaluate in-school provision according to categories of learning, skills development and accessibility by **all** pupils



Secondary schools must be supported to use the Skills Builder Framework to enable pupils to record and reflect on their own skills development beyond the classroom



Activity providers must be encouraged to register their provision in a standardised way so gaps are identified, opportunities expanded, and impact measured



Further and higher education institutions must be encouraged to broaden their outreach provision and offer more free activities for local children and young people



Businesses must be encouraged to engage with **all** local learners and offer free, career-based activities connected to the local labour market



Local Government must be better funded to harness the power of community to co-develop and co-deliver hyper-local provision of learning beyond the classroom



Greater investment must be directed to organisations that work alongside the formal education system to improve educational and social outcomes

Recommendations

All children must be given the same opportunity and freedom of choice to actively shape their own learning beyond the classroom

By increasing the activities available to all children and removing any barriers they face, children will be encouraged to access and proactively engage in, their own learning journey beyond the classroom. Additionally, we believe all children should be able to play an active part in recording, reflecting on and measuring the impact of their own participation.

Families and carers of the most socially excluded children must be able to access as much quality learning beyond the classroom as those families for whom there are fewer barriers

Almost 40% of activities are inaccessible to children from low-income families due to associated costs and only 5% of participation in Children's University activities are those linked to family learning. More should be done to reduce inequalities in participation, including encouraging activity providers to make activities more accessible to children from socially excluded communities, and subsidising family learning opportunities.

Schools must be given the tools to monitor pupils' activities beyond the classroom in order to encourage wider participation by all children and measure its impact

With children only spending 9% of their waking life inside a classroom by the time they turn 18, schools should be supported to monitor what children do in the remaining 91%. Monitoring not only enables measurement of impact, celebration of achievement and encourages greater participation, but also highlights inequalities and gaps in access. This will enable existing provision to be harnessed and expanded and new provision developed.

Schools must be supported to evaluate in-school provision according to categories of learning, skills development and accessibility by all pupils

For the most socially excluded children, schools offer the only chance to engage in learning beyond the classroom. In order to ensure these children can access as great a range of activities as their peers, schools should be encouraged to audit and evaluate their in-school extra-curricular provision. While many schools offer a great quantity of activities, choice can be inadvertently limited by an over reliance on categories that traditionally easily lend themselves to 'beyond the classroom', such as sports.

Recommendations

Secondary schools must be supported to use the Skills Builder Framework to enable pupils to record and reflect on their own skills development beyond the classroom

Recent research, funded by Nesta and supported by the University of Sussex, shows a direct link between participation in Children's University and the use and improvement of essential skills in line with the Skills Builder Framework for those aged 11+. Running Children's University in secondary schools not only supports transition from primary to secondary, but also enables pupils to record and reflect on their development, encouraging agency in determining their future skills and work readiness.

Activity providers must be encouraged to register their provision in a standardised way so gaps are identified, opportunities expanded, and impact measured

For example, the Children's University validation process associates varied activities with a standardised set of category and skill tags, offering a uniform way of comparing and measuring impact. Alongside the National Youth Agency's National Youth Sector Census, this is one of the few ways that thematically diverse provision can be recorded, harnessed, and expanded, as per the NAHT's seven pillars of educational recovery.

Further and higher education institutions must be encouraged to broaden their outreach provision and offer more free activities for local children and young people

Only 5% of activities currently validated by Children's University involve interactions with FE/HE environments, students, or staff, despite these institutions being best resourced and staffed for developing a love of learning. Broadening provision and offering opportunities for those at a younger age will enable increased visibility of FE/HE to those most socially excluded, support the Government's National Careers Strategy, and improve access to and success in tertiary education.

Businesses must be encouraged to engage with all local learners and offer free, career-based activities connected to the local labour market

Every community should take responsibility for supporting the education of the children within it; formal schooling does not work in isolation. In order to ensure all children have the full breadth of opportunity and choice that they need in order to develop locally-relevant skills and build experiences, businesses should be supported to develop activities for local children and engage with schools in their community.

Recommendations

Local Government must be better funded to harness the power of community to co-develop and co-deliver hyper-local provision of learning beyond the classroom

Programmes like ours offer a framework for ‘joining the dots’ between school, home, and local community and encourage social action, citizenship, engagement with community institutions and the development of learning around local assets. Funding should be increased to ensure that more provision is locally-created, locally-led, and local asset-based. The impact of this on local people should be measured and future provision developed from demonstrable evidence of what works.

Greater investment must be directed to organisations that work alongside the formal education system to improve educational and social outcomes

Our education system is disproportionately focussed on what goes on within the classroom and outcomes that can be easily measured. In reality, what a child does beyond the classroom actually holds the most potential for making a positive impact on their life, yet policy, system reform and funding never reflects this. Organisations like Children’s University measure outcomes outside the classroom and are proven to improve engagement with learning back in it, using a framework for recording participation and provision. Organisations like ours are small charities with little resource and are reliant on charitable funding, yet the data we record and the impact we have – as this report shows – is very real and far reaching. By investing in these organisations, sound data could be constantly fed back into government and used as a basis for long-term planning and levelling up.

What do you think?



@CU_Trust
#CUStateoftheNation

Children's University

**A look at who we are, our history,
and how we collected the data that
informs this report**



Children's University at a glance

Our vision

A world where every child has equal opportunity to unlock their full potential through learning beyond the classroom

Mission

- **To inspire all children to love learning beyond the classroom**
 - **To remove barriers to learning beyond the classroom making it accessible to all**
 - **To engage children, their families and community in learning beyond the classroom, in and out of school, at home and online**
-

Values

Agile

We adapt to changing need and anticipate opportunities and challenges, ensuring we always focus on our Vision

Collaborative

By collaborating with those who share our Vision, we know we can achieve more for all children

Inclusive

We believe all children are able to participate and enjoy the benefits of what we offer

Responsive

We listen and learn from what children, families, educators and other experts tell us



Our desired outcomes for children

We want to ensure that every child participating in Children's University feels:

- **that learning can be fun, aspirational, and lifelong**
 - **they have enjoyed a range of new learning experiences and are motivated to keep learning in different ways**
 - **they have grown in confidence and self-belief**
 - **they have a broader range of essential skills in line with the Skills Builder Framework**
 - **they are empowered to make positive choices about their future**
 - **they can better cope with the challenges that life throws at them**
 - **they are celebrated for their commitment to learning by their family, school and community**
-

Children's University at a glance

What “social mobility” means to us

When we talk about social mobility, we are not talking about status and the traditional simplistic view of subsequent generations doing ‘better’ than the one before. For Children's University social mobility is about having the choice and ability to do so.

It is about fairness, and ensuring equality of opportunity for all children and young people to access activities that can have a positive impact on their ability to make informed choices and to progress in the same ways as their peers.

Despite our name, for us social mobility is not simply about going to university. We want all children to have the agency and skills they need for whatever future they choose beyond formal education.

Social mobility is about having choice and agency that is not dictated or limited by where you are from.

A brief background

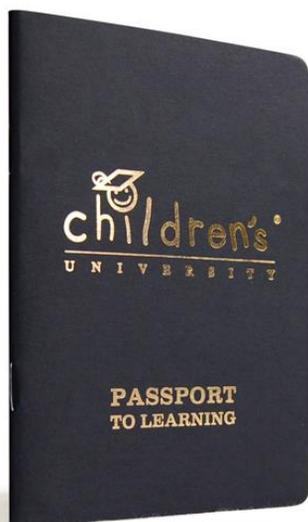
“Children’s University began in the early 1990s as a way to engage young pupils in subjects and opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them.”

Children’s University runs a long-established Passport to Learning programme that is proven to have a huge positive impact on children, as this report illustrates. We currently reach over 110,000 children each year through a consortium of 49 local delivery partners reaching 80 Local Education Authorities. 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 considered disadvantaged according to national indicators and the idea spread. In 2007, Children’s University Trust was formed with the substantial support of the King Edward’s Foundation, Birmingham, and Sir Peter Lampl, and the Sutton Trust. Children’s University Trust is now a national charity that now supports, coordinates, advocates and fundraises for Children’s University activity across the UK. Children’s University Trust built and manages CUO and authored this report.

Schools sign up to work with their local Children’s University partner and children are then issued a Passport to 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 country, applying a nationally recognised tool for encouraging, tracking and celebrating learning.



How we work with schools

“Since 2016 the programme has been developed to bring in additional value by recording categories of learning and, since 2018, skills in line with the Skills Builder Framework”

Children’s University began in primary schools and has grown predominantly as a primary school intervention. Participants are typically aged 5 – 14 years-old with the majority being aged between 7 and 12. While the number of schools participating in our programme fluctuates from year to year, typically we would expect to see around 90% of our participating schools being primary schools.

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 by recording categories of learning and, since 2018, skills in line with the [Skills Builder Framework](#)¹. We also tag activities that are linked to employers/places of employment and Further and Higher Education, in line with [the Gatsby Benchmarks \(4, 5, 6 and 7\)](#)². Schools using CUO are able to report on participation and provision in line with these tags. This additional data is especially valuable and 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 Sixth 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, and to see their interests build through categorisation of activities.

An overview of ‘Children’s University Online’ (CUO)

In 2019 we launched our digital platform, Children’s University Online (CUO), to work alongside our long-established paper passport and add value for children, families, schools and partners. It is a fun, safe, and secure online space for participants to record which activities they are doing beyond the classroom.

For learning providers



Anyone delivering or providing learning opportunities for children can submit their activities for validation using an [online form](#)³. Children’s University managers then review and approve submissions and contact the learning provider. On approval by the manager, they are given a stamp code that is unique to their activity. These codes are then given to children by the provider on completion of an activity. Each stamp equates to approximately one hour of structured learning and is simple and memorable so it can be written by a child in their passport; it is a colour and a four-digit number (e.g. Red 2431).

For children



Children collect stamp codes in their ‘Passport to Learning’ that they can then submit online. Schools that are part of our programme simply create online accounts for all participating children who are then given their own unique username and secure password. Children can log in from any internet-enabled device and view their personally unique dashboard. This dashboard gives children a place to:

- see their progress against the Children’s University Award Levels
- submit stamp codes for activities they have completed
- watch their interests and skills develop as they see the categories of learning they most engage with and;
- find new activities in their school, local area, to do at home and online.

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

This is what a child's dashboard looks like.

The screenshot shows a user interface for a child named Jayden. At the top left is the 'children's UNIVERSITY' logo. To the right are navigation links: 'Your categories', 'Your skills', 'Get help', 'Find an activity', 'Your Details', and a 'LOGOUT' button. The main heading says 'Hi Jayden!' with a hand icon. Below it, a message reads: 'This is your Children's University dashboard. Get started below!'. On the right, a blue box with a question mark asks 'Need help?' and includes a link to 'ASK A QUESTION'. The central area has two main sections: 'Add a new stamp' and 'Add your own activity'. The 'Add a new stamp' section includes a button 'ADD A STAMP' and a link 'DON'T HAVE A STAMP? CLICK HERE'. The 'Add your own activity' section lists four categories: 'Places', 'Books', 'Films', and 'Experiences', each with a 'CHOOSE THIS' link. On the right, a 'Recent stamps' section shows a list of activities: 'Build a robot Tuesday', 'Martial Arts Tuesday', 'Break dancing Tuesday', and 'STEM Club Tuesday', each with a '1 HRS' icon. At the bottom left, a 'Great work! You've done 105 Hours so far' message is accompanied by a clock icon. At the bottom right, a progress bar shows 'YOUR CURRENT LEVEL Gold Award' and 'YOUR PROGRESS: 105/130 hours'. Below the progress bar, it indicates the 'NEXT LEVEL Bronze Certificate' and a 'FIND AN ACTIVITY' button.

An overview of ‘Children’s University Online’ (CUO)

Zooming into the same image we can see a child’s general progress in hours and how it fits within the Children’s University Award levels.



Further down the same dashboard a child is shown the top skills and categories that they have developed by participating in tagged activities.



By clicking ‘View all skills’ or ‘View all categories’, a child can see how their total number of hours breaks down by the skills that have been tagged. All of this is also viewable by their schools.

An overview of ‘Children’s University Online’ (CUO)

For schools

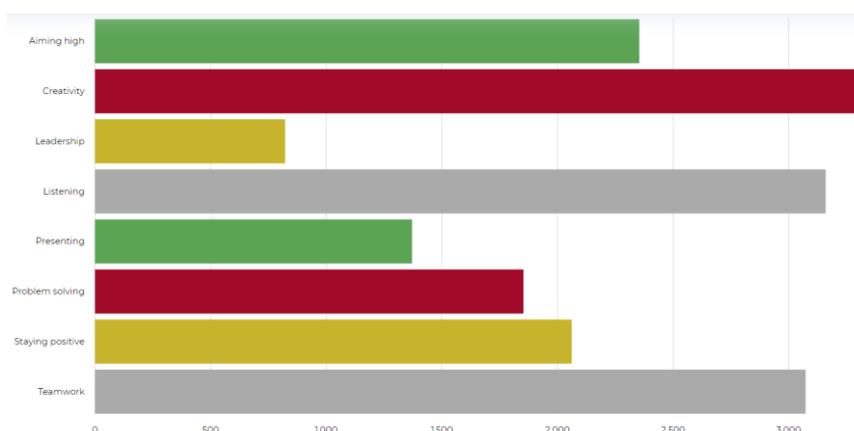


Schools are given a secure log-in to access their own school-level dashboard. Schools can then administer children’s accounts and view their pupils’ participation. They can also add and validate their own extra-curricular activities taking place within the school, at lunch time or after the bell rings.

At a glance, schools can view simple but important reports showing:

- participation by gender and age group within the school
- the school’s extra-curricular offering and participation according to skills and categories
- cold spots/areas of success and high engagement among pupils
- their pupils’ engagement with HE/FE and employers in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks

This screenshot from CUO illustrates the kind of information that is generated at a school, local and national level. Seen here is a graph showing the availability of activities (quantity) for children as per the tagged skills.



Actionable data such as this enables schools to make better decisions regarding their extra-curricular offer and can be used to demonstrate their provision to stakeholders such as parents, colleagues, Ofsted and the Local Authority. For example, in the illustration above one can see that there are significant numbers of activities geared towards developing creativity in participants. Proportionally, there are far fewer activities that will provide participants the opportunity to develop their leadership skills.

An overview of ‘Children’s University Online’ (CUO)

For Children’s University



All activity provision and participation data within CUO is visible to Children’s University Trust at a national level⁴. This means that as an organisation we have a unique insight into the state of the nation when it comes to learning beyond the classroom.

At a national level, we use this data:

- to monitor participation and help share best practice within our network
- to open access to more opportunities and broker relationships with local, regional and national providers
- to highlight nationwide cold spots/areas of success and high engagement
- to compile a national picture of provision and participation to inform policy.

No other organisation collates and quantifies information about extra-curricular activity provision on such a broad spectrum of subject areas, themes and categories and from such varying providers. Similarly, no other organisation can collate and quantify participation data from children spread as widely across the country. As our network grows, our number of activities increases, and our userbase widens, this picture of the state of the nation will only get clearer, more detailed and more important.

“No other organisation collates and quantifies information about extra-curricular activity provision on such a broad spectrum of subject areas, themes and categories and from such varying providers.”

CUO data: What we collect

Traditionally Children’s University has been a paper-based programme through which children record the accumulation of hours of participation as part of our awards scheme. However, through digital technology CUO enables us to collect additional information that gives all stakeholders a fuller and more valuable picture beyond simply duration of engagement.

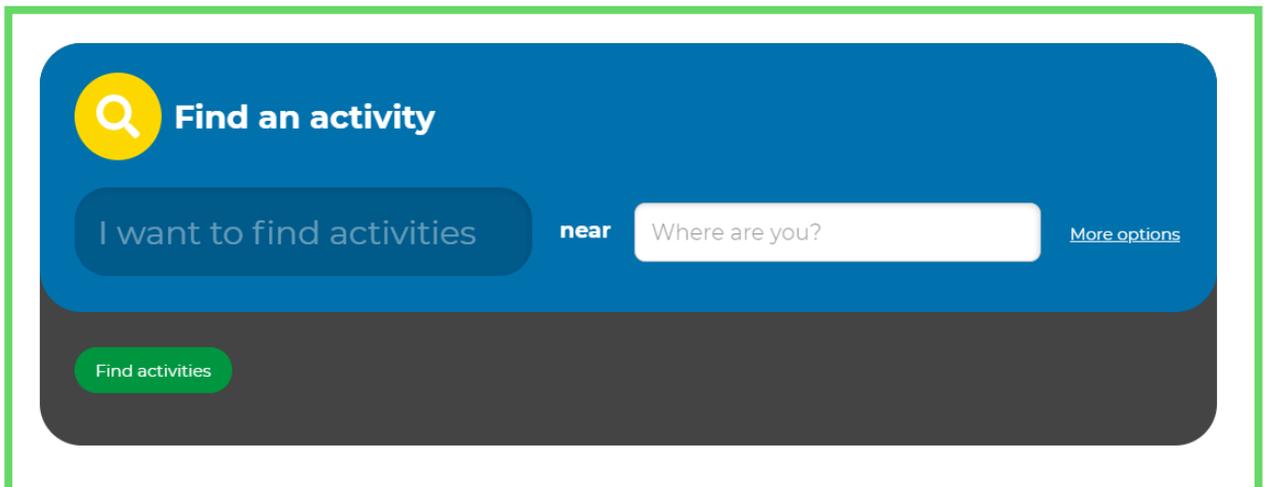
By tagging activities with the tags below and having more information about the content of a child’s extra-curricular learning, we can get a clear picture of provision. By having children set up with digital accounts, we can map their profiles with the activities they participate in. By cross referencing these varying data points we can get a vivid real-time picture of the state of the nation. We do this using the following information:

Activity information

When an activity is validated and becomes part of the Children’s University programme, we gather the following information:

- Location of activity
- Target participants – i.e. is it an activity for children in a specific area, or open to participants nationally? Is it for children of a specific age group?
- Scheduling information
- An overview of any costs involved⁵.

Children and families can search for activities online. By clicking “More options” they can then search based on any of these criteria.



The screenshot shows a search interface with a blue header and a dark grey footer. The header contains a yellow magnifying glass icon, the text 'Find an activity', a search input field with the placeholder 'I want to find activities', the word 'near', another search input field with the placeholder 'Where are you?', and a link for 'More options'. The footer contains a green button labeled 'Find activities'.

CUO data: What we collect

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?

<input checked="" type="radio"/> I don't mind	<input type="radio"/> 4 and under	<input type="radio"/> 5 - 10
<input type="radio"/> 11 - 16		<input type="radio"/> 16+

Is there a cost?

<input checked="" type="radio"/> I don't mind	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
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What type?

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

What skills can you learn?

<input type="checkbox"/> Aiming high	<input type="checkbox"/> Creativity	<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership
<input type="checkbox"/> Listening	<input type="checkbox"/> Presenting	<input type="checkbox"/> Problem solving
<input type="checkbox"/> Staying positive	<input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork	

CUO data: What we collect

Skills



Each activity is tagged with up to three of the eight essential skills of the Skills Builder Framework. Developed in consultation with teachers, other educators and employers, there are eight essential skills that are at the heart of the framework; listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, aiming high, leadership, and teamwork. The Skills Builder Partnership brings together more than 750 organisations towards a common mission, joined by shared language, principles and outcomes.

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 and shared language 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 using and introducing children to this 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.



CUO data: What we collect

Categories of learning



Each activity is tagged with up to four of the following 16 categories of learning:

- 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

These categories were chosen and defined after extensive consultation with the Children's University network and schools. They cover a broad selection of types of activity, both reflecting the content of the curriculum while also including types of activities available beyond school. At Children's University we use the term 'thematically agnostic' to describe our unique approach – i.e. we are not simply arts, or sports, or linked to one category or subject – we encompass all learning beyond the classroom. This is what makes us unique and this is reflected in the way we categorise extra-curricular learning.

This categorisation helps paint a fully-rounded picture of provision for our partners and schools, while also showing children how their interests are building in certain areas.

Engagement with Employers and engagement with HE/FE

Gatsby

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

In December 2017, the Department for Education published [Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents](#)⁶. This included the recommendation of the Gatsby Benchmarks as a means to improve careers education through best practice.

When submitting their learning activities for validation by Children's University, providers are asked:

- Does your activity demonstrate a link between learning and a career pathway?
- Will students interact with employers or a professional environment?
- Will participants be exposed to FE or HE environments, students and/or staff?

The results of these questions directly relate to [Gatsby Benchmarks 4, 5, 6 and 7](#)⁷.

Children do not see this information, but schools and partners are able to report on this and see the number of encounters beyond school that their pupils have been able to have through their participation in Children's University.

The State of the Nation

**Learning beyond the classroom:
Provision and participation in
England today**



The State of the Nation - What we know from two years of Children's University Online

Overview

Children's University Trust is in a unique position to gather data about the country-wide learning that takes place beyond the classroom. Thanks to Children's University Online (CUO), the provision and participation data we collect offers us, our partners, and policy makers an overview of what is going on. Since launching CUO in May 2019 we have been building up a detailed picture of what we know about what children are doing beyond the formal curriculum and what provision is in place. As described above, this is detailed and far-reaching data, taking in essential skills, categorisation and location of provision. It is information that has been gathered not purely for data's sake, but to encourage action. Whether that is a celebration of successes, a series of red flags around cold spots of engagement, or the highlighting of areas of work that need our focus, we want to inform and support the improvement of provision for children. Knowledge is our greatest tool in order to do this.

This is the state of the nation, as we see it.

Timeframe and reach

The picture painted by this report is entirely through the lens of Children's University. We work with 49 partners reaching into over 80 Local Education Authority Areas but still haven't reached our goal of being accessible to all children. As we grow our reach and our network grows, our number of activities increases, and our userbase widens, this picture of the state of the nation will only get clearer, more detailed and more important. This report is everything we know based on two years of work from those already part of the Children's University movement.

The State of the Nation - What we know from two years of Children's University Online

The impact of COVID-19

It would be remiss to present a picture of the past two years without acknowledging the impact of COVID-19. From the closure of schools and learning destinations, to the furloughing of partner staff and educators, the impact of the pandemic on our work has been huge. The momentum gathered in the first year of CUO was slowed down by the pandemic, but not stopped. The picture presented by this report is detailed, nuanced and complex, and the pandemic has only added to that complexity. The presence of COVID-19 and all the societal changes and limitations we have seen have only highlighted the importance of developing a love of learning that is self-led, independent and varied. While it is important to recognise the negative impacts of the pandemic and the exacerbation of existing inequalities in metrics such as attainment targets, the beauty of Children's University is that it provides a language and a space for recognising the successes made during the past year; the skills developed, the resilience that has been shown.

Sample size

The picture the following pages paints is based solely on the 22,000 participants who have begun using CUO. This does not represent all children who are part of our programme and will only get more detailed as we work with more children.

What we know

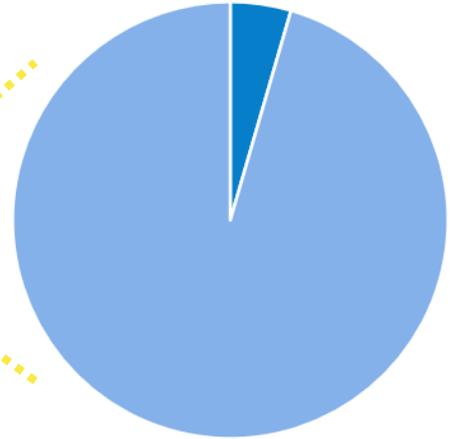
Over the following pages you will see a detailed breakdown of everything we know about the State of the Nation. Including:

- Children's Universities and our reach
- Reaching those who need us
- Our participants
- Provision of activities
- Participation in activities.

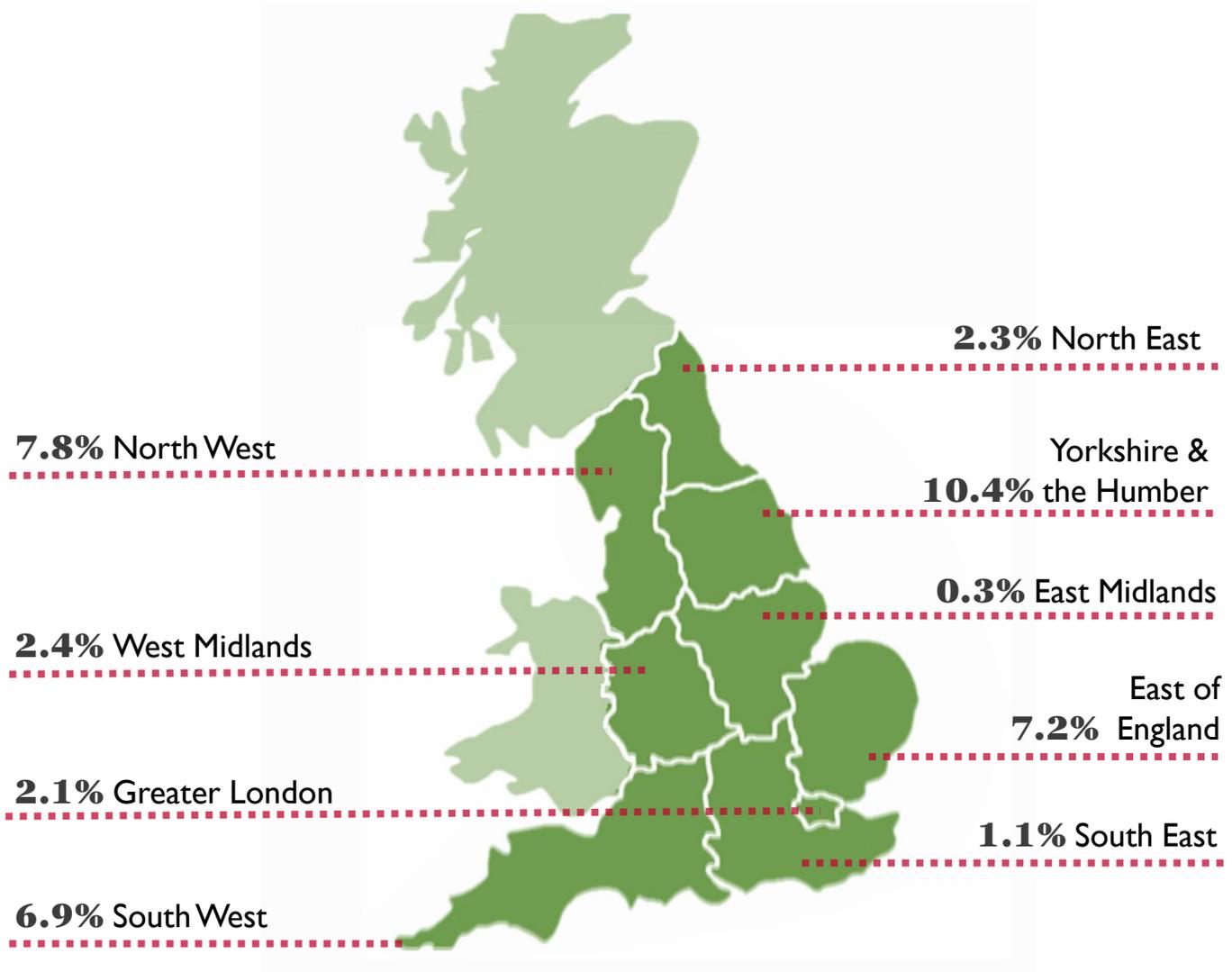
Children's University and our reach

We have 49 partners running Children's University in 81 Local Education Authority Areas

We work in over 900 schools. This is only 4.5% of the state primary and secondary schools in England



Our reach into the 9 different regions is as follows:



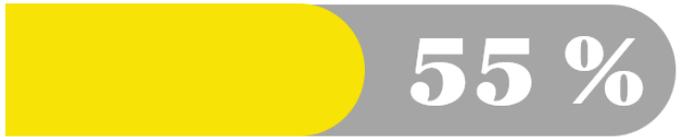
This is Children's University's presence in each region as a percentage of the total of state primary and secondary schools

Reaching those who need us

We focus our work where it is needed most. The areas in which we work are often those with unique challenges.

Our presence in English Local Education Authorities (LEAs) with a high proportion of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM)

We have a presence in 55% of the top 20% of LEAs where the primary school FSM rates are highest



We have a presence in 56% of the top 10% of LEAs where the primary school FSM rates are highest



We have a presence in 23% of the top 20% of LEAs where the secondary school FSM rates are highest



We have a presence in 19% of the top 10% of LEAs where the secondary school FSM rates are highest



Our presence in LEAs scoring poorly on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)

58%



We have a presence in 58% of the lowest scoring 20% of LEAs

56%



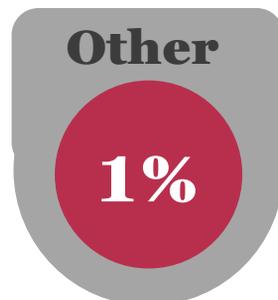
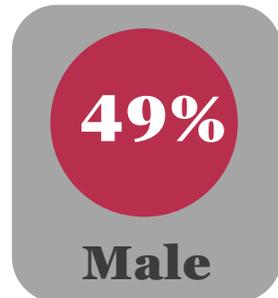
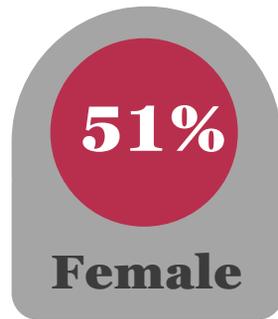
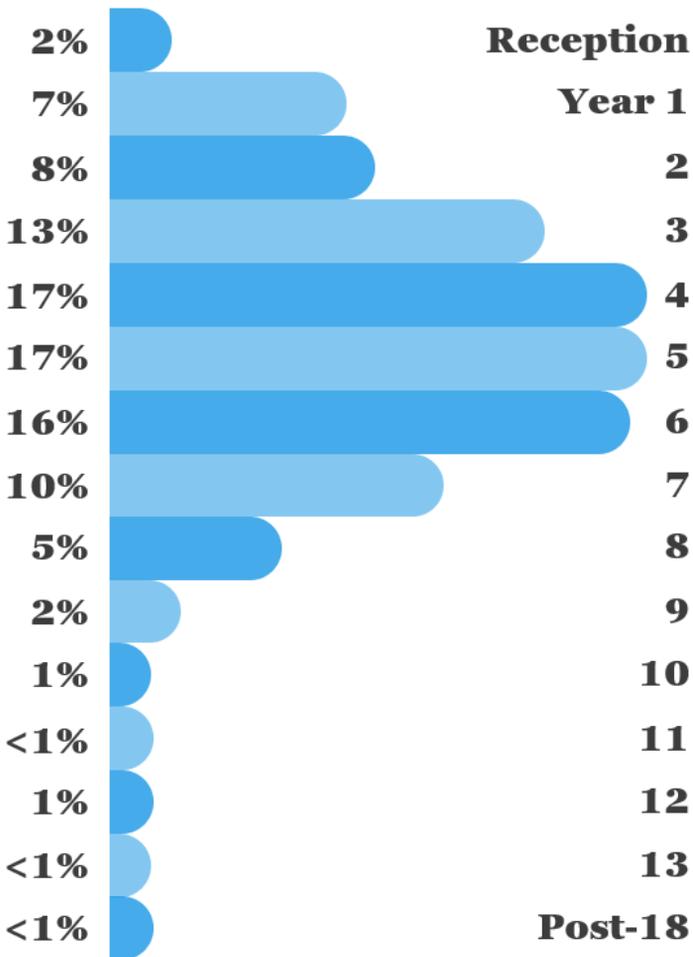
We have a presence in 56% of the lowest scoring 10% of LEAs

We operate in 9 out of the 12 Opportunity Areas



Participants

22,959 children from 900 schools have user accounts on CUO. It is their data that informs this report.*



* Online account numbers accurate as of May 2021. Children's University typically distributes passports and certificates for over 110,000 participants each year. Our aim is for all of these to become users of CUO.

Provision of activities

Children's University validates activities from all manner of providers; from major national partners to local one-person trainers. This is what our provision currently looks like.



6,355 activities

As of May 2021, 6,355 activities were validated and available to children. There have been an additional 1,922 activities that have since passed or closed (e.g. seasonal activities or short term provision). In full there have been 8,277 activities that children have been able to choose from.

61% of our validated activities are free. 39% have associated costs.

61%

39%

65% of our activities are publicly accessible by children locally and nationally. 35% are restricted to pupils of our partner schools.

65%

35%

Gatsby Benchmarks

Our activities are tagged with engagement information in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks 4, 5, 6 and 7 to support best practice careers guidance.

22%

demonstrate a link between learning and a career pathway

9%

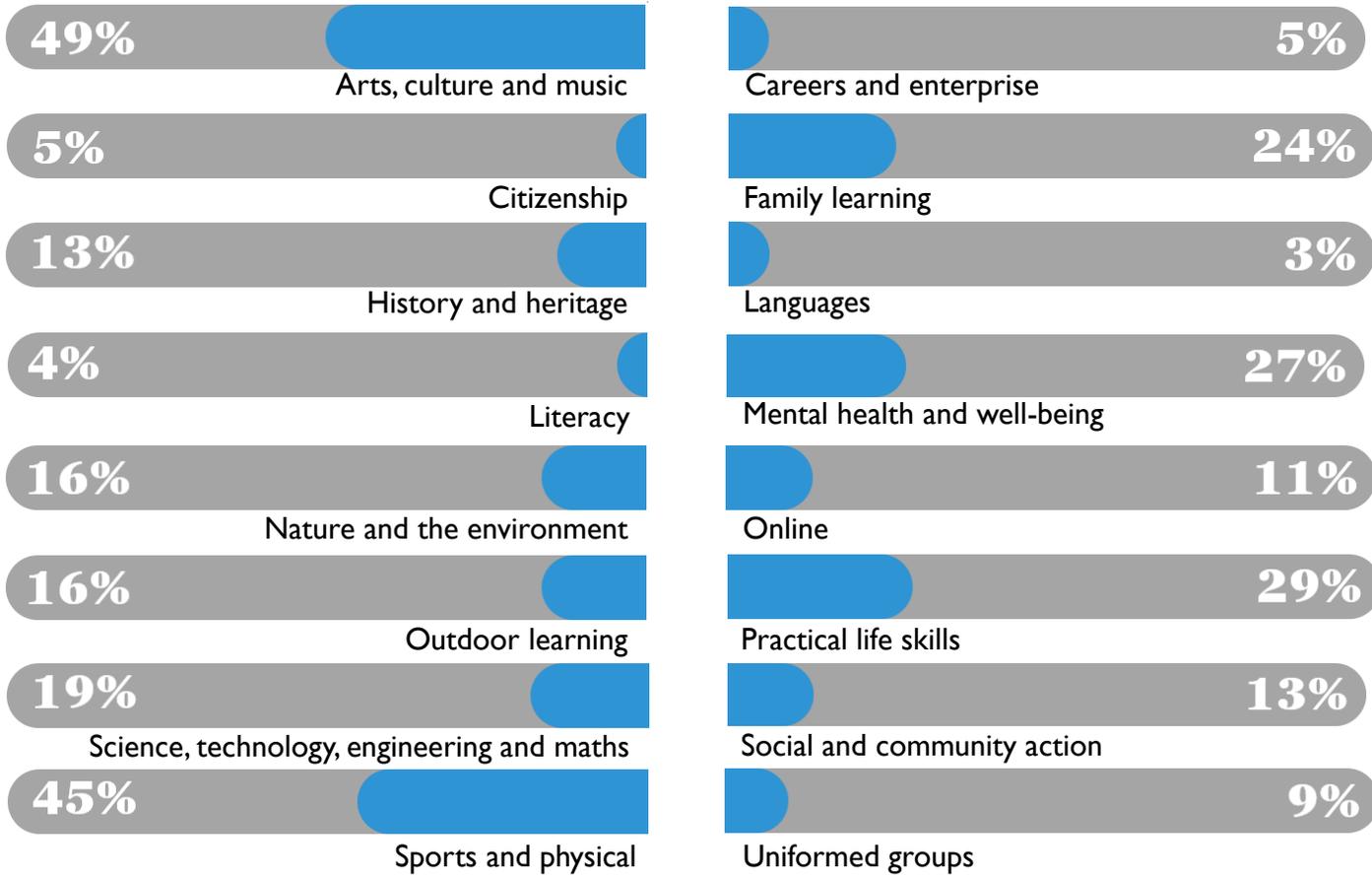
interaction with employers or a professional environment

5%

interaction with FE/HE environments, students or staff

Provision of activities

All activities are tagged with up to four thematic categories of learning. Here is a breakdown of activities tagged by category.



All activities are tagged with up to three of the Skills Builder skills. Here is a breakdown of activities tagged by skills.



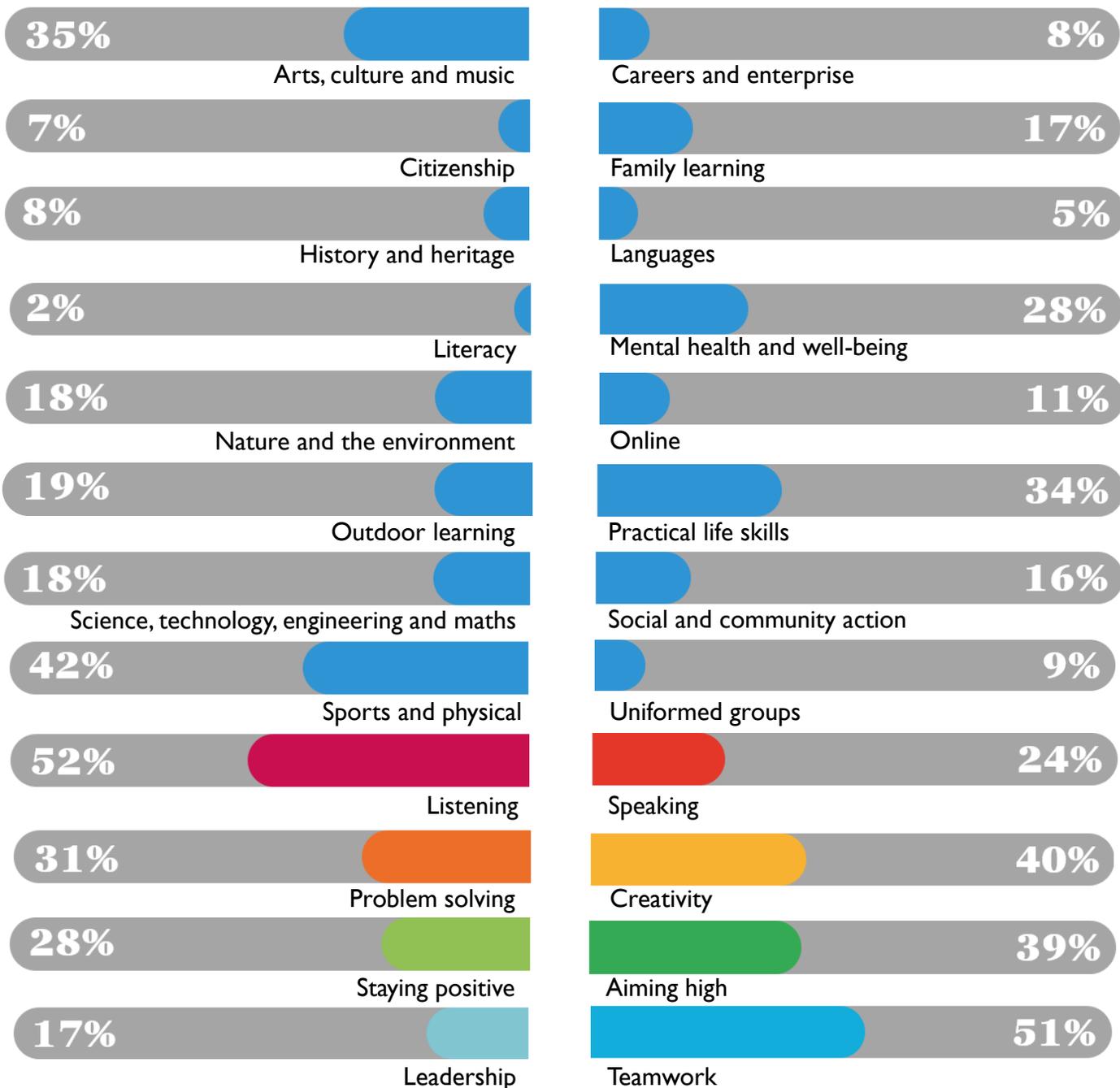
Participation



51,300 hours

Since launching CUO in May 2019, users have recorded participation in 51,300 hours of validated learning beyond the classroom.

We can see how this breaks down by thematic category and Skills Builder skill.



Why learning beyond the classroom matters

**An in depth look at the key issues
affecting children in education
and how participation in learning
beyond the classroom makes a
difference**



Why learning beyond the classroom matters

Overview



For today's children, success in the future does not simply come down to 'doing well at school'. The factors that can impact on a child's chances of success are manifold, complex and interlinked. From the skills they develop alongside their academic achievements, to maintaining good mental health and well-being in an ever-changing world; children have more pressures on them than ever before. Add to this the unique challenges and issues that have been heightened due to the pandemic and there is a perfect storm of barriers, problems and challenges that need to be overcome in order for today's children to succeed as future adults.

The data we gather and the impact we evidence is information that has not been gathered purely for data's sake, but to encourage action. We know what we do works, and we want to see a greater take-up of the Children's University offer. We want to see the movement behind us recognising the importance of extra-curricular activities and their impact on all children gather momentum and we want to see more organisations, individuals and employers join us and contribute to the impact we make. The issues and impact evidenced below are what keep us motivated.

The key issues

- **The need to develop essential skills**
- **Closing the attainment gap**
- **Mental health and well being**
- **Personal development (and the Ofsted Framework)**
- **Primary to secondary transition**
- **Place-based learning**
- **Family learning and parental engagement.**

The need to develop essential skills

The issue

“While the classroom curriculum is heavily focussed on knowledge, there is a strong case that the broader essential skills that children need to succeed are not always catered for.”

Our education system is disproportionately focussed on what goes on within the classroom. The success markers along the way — the tests, key stage milestones and exams — are all constantly reinforcing an emphasis on what happens in classrooms and the academic knowledge that children accrue. Yet by the time a child turns 18 they will have only spent 9% of their waking life in a classroom.

While the classroom curriculum is heavily focussed on knowledge, there is a strong case that the broader essential skills that children need to succeed are not always catered for. There is no shortage of evidence that what goes on outside the classroom has significant positive impact. [Sutton Trust’s ‘Life Lessons’ report](#)⁸ 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% of young people, 94% of employers and 97% of teachers said that life skills were as, or more, important than academic qualifications. Extra-curricular activities contribute to the development of these skills.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is the UK’s leading business organisation, speaking for some 190,000 businesses that together employ around a third of the UK’s private sector workforce. The CBI 2018 Education and Skills annual report, [Educating for the Modern World](#)⁹, found 44% of employers felt young people leaving school, college or university were not work ready; this comes down to these wider skills. *“The CBI has long pointed to the central importance of a positive attitude and broader skills such as resilience, communication, problem-solving and aiming high both at work and in life. Our findings show over half of businesses (60%) rate these skills as among their top three considerations when recruiting; one in five businesses (21%) see it as the single most important factor.”*¹⁰

In reality, what a child does beyond the classroom can hold the most potential for making a positive impact on their life. Not only is the time spent beyond the classroom far greater (that inverse 91% of a child’s time!) but the variety of learning opportunities and styles of learning increase the potential to develop essential skills for future life.

The need to develop essential skills

The difference we make



Children's University is a member of the Skills Builder Partnership and makes use of its framework of essential skills. Developed in consultation with teachers, other educators and employers, Skills Builder define 8 essential skills that cover the full breadth of skills that young people need. The Partnership brings together more than 750 organisations towards a common mission, joined by shared language, principles and outcomes.

All activities that are validated by Children's University are tagged with up to three skills from the framework. As such, all child participants can see the skills they use and build through participation, while schools and local Children's Universities can see the breadth of the local provision of activities by the skills that are tagged.

In January 2021, with the support of the University of Sussex and Nesta, we [published the results](#)¹¹ of a research project investigating skills development with Children's University participants aged 11+¹². By building a survey mechanism into CUO, we evaluated the skills used and the skills improved as reported directly by young people.

We set out to find:

- the percentage of respondents that felt they used the skills our validation stated;
- the percentage of respondents that felt they did use the skill that our validation stated and felt they improved;
- of those that did improve, what percentage stated that they felt they had 'strongly improved'.

Results showed significant evidence that participation in Children's University has a direct impact on young people's use and improvement of essential skills.

- When Children's University is tagging activities with skills from the Skills Builder Framework, 92% of young people felt these were accurate
- Of these, 94% felt that their use of these skills were also improving
- 73% of them told us that they felt they were strongly improving.

The need to develop essential skills

In action

The Skills Builder essential skills are fully embedded in CUO with all activities having skills associated with them. Alongside this we encourage the practical application of Skills Builder resources by all of our partners. For example, in Croydon during lockdown, the local Children's University offered at-home challenge sheets based around the essential skills with a new set of challenges issued for completion each week. In Bexley, all Children's University schools are encouraged to find activities on the Skills Builder resource hub to encourage the development of essential skills.



To see how Sheffield Children's University puts skills into action, click the image above to watch on YouTube, or visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lxeNR3m3_0

Closing the attainment gap

The issue

“The gap in academic attainment between rich and poor students, and those facing other forms of disadvantage, continues to be very real.”

Sadly, the gap in academic attainment between rich and poor students, and those facing other forms of disadvantage, continues to be very real. Statistics from the [2020 EPI Annual Report](#)¹³ show the rich-poor attainment gap in primary schools is 9.3 months growing to more than 18 months at GCSE¹⁴.

COVID-19 has since exacerbated that attainment gap like never before. Although the effects of the pandemic have been felt by all, those from disadvantaged backgrounds have seen a significant negative impact in terms of learning and opportunities. A recent [rapid assessment from the Education Endowment Foundation](#)¹⁵ (EEF) demonstrates this impact with an estimate that the attainment gap will “widen by 36%”¹⁶ due to the pandemic. [Research from the Sutton Trust](#)¹⁷ in October 2020 also showed that children from lower socioeconomic groups suffered on average a 13% greater loss of learning than children from higher socioeconomic groups as a result of the school closures earlier in the year.¹⁸

The difference we make

Participation in Children’s University is proven to have a positive impact on attainment and contribute towards closing this gap. In 2017 the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) published the results of [a three-year evaluation into the efficacy of Children’s University](#).¹⁹ The primary focus of the evaluation was to look at maths and reading results at KS2, through a randomised control trial. Half of the participants took part in the Children’s University programme for the two years prior to KS2 SATs, while the control group did not.

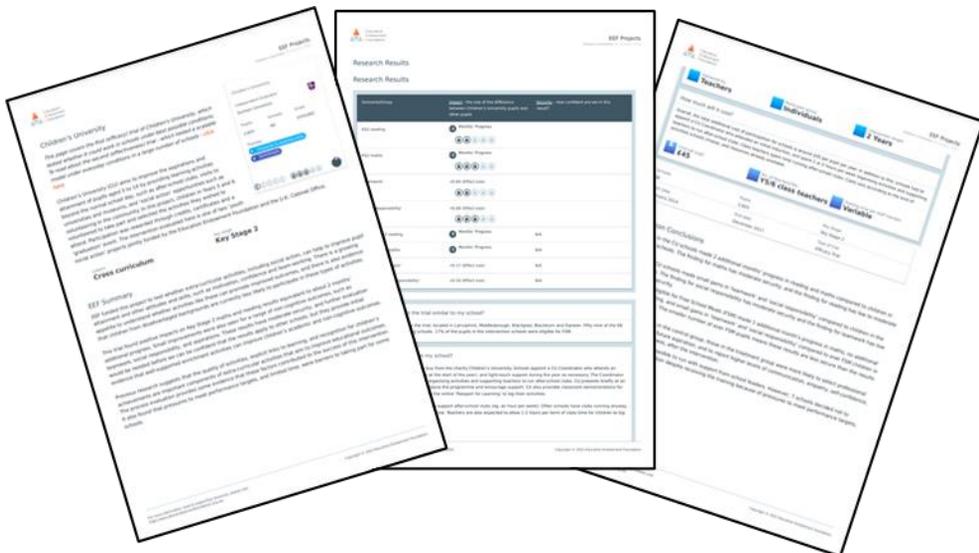
The results revealed that participants in Children’s University schools made 2 additional months’ progress in reading and maths compared to children in the other schools. For those participants on free school meals (FSM), this positive impact increased to 3 months in maths.²⁰

Closing the attainment gap

Results from the trial were so strong that in 2018 EEF named Children’s University one of just 18 ‘Promising Projects’; a term given to those interventions demonstrating significant impact. In 2019 work began on a scaled-up ‘effectiveness trial’, seeking to replicate the earlier EEF funded research with greater numbers of participants. In January 2022, after pandemic-induced delays, over 200 schools will be part of this new evaluation run by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) and funded by EEF.

In action

Sheffield Children’s University is one of our most established and long running partnerships. Run out of Sheffield City Council and part of the flagship South Yorkshire Futures social mobility project, the impact and evidence of what works is one of the driving forces for the programme locally. Each year the team at Sheffield Children’s University publish their own report evidencing the impact of out of school learning accredited and celebrated by Children’s University in Sheffield. In their [2018 publication](#)²¹ they reported that “64.8% of CU participants achieved the expected standard in Reading, Writing and Maths, improving on the local and national average, compared to 59.9% of non CU pupils.”



To read a summary of EEF’s evaluation of Children’s University, click the image above or visit childrensuniversity.co.uk/evidence

Mental health and well-being

The issue

**“1 in 6
5-16 year-olds
have a mental
health problem –
a 50% increase
since 2017.”**

Research shows that mental health issues have become much more prevalent in children’s lives in recent years. [The Good Childhood Report 2020](#)²³ mirrors this and found, “Since 2009, children’s happiness with their lives has been in decline”²⁴. More specifically, this report found that areas such as appearance and school were the areas children are the most unhappy with, with boys being at the forefront when it came to unhappiness with school and schoolwork²⁵. This data was collected before the pandemic, and the situation has only worsened. In fact, in July 2020 the NHS published updates to their 2017 Mental Health and Young People Survey. They showed that 1 in 6 5-16 year-olds have a mental health problem – a 50% increase since 2017²⁶.

During the pandemic, the importance of good mental health has been particularly prevalent. According to a [WHO survey from October 2020](#)²⁷, COVID-19 “has disrupted or halted critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide.”²⁸ This figure is especially concerning because of the increase in need for these services throughout the pandemic. “Bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones.”²⁹

The difference we make

Children’s University encourages children to participate in activities beyond the classroom that have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. As evidenced above, 27% of the activities that are validated as part of our programme are categorised as mental health and wellbeing. This means that those running these activities are actively aware of the potential impact on mental health in the design and delivery of their activities.

Even beyond the activities that are explicitly designed with mental health and wellbeing in mind, the evidence base for the positive impact of extra-curricular activities is strong. In 2016 [research from the University of Edinburgh](#)³⁰ found that people who had participated in Scouting or Guiding were less likely to experience mood disorders or anxiety later in life. Uniformed groups make up 9% of our activities and 9% of our participation.

Mental health and well-being

Leading mental health charity Mind, publish [their top recommendations for young people on their information hub](#)³¹. The top 10 tips directly link to the validated activity provision we promote. These include ‘get creative’ (62% of our activities are focused on creativity), ‘learn something new’, ‘be active’ (45% of our activities are categorised as sports and physical, with a wider number relating to outdoors), ‘help others’ (13% of our activities are focused on social and community action), ‘do things you enjoy’, and ‘connect with others’.

In action

At Children’s University we aim to develop positive attributes and attitudes in young people, including self-confidence and wellbeing. In 2017 the University of the First Age (UFA) ran a [Young Researchers and Evaluators research project](#)³² with Children’s University participants in Birmingham. Supporting children to do their own research into the impact of Children’s University on their peers, the report found that over 78% of the children asked felt their participation in activities with Children’s University “helped them to be more relaxed in school”³³



Personal development (and the Ofsted Framework)

The issue

“This framework contains guidance on evaluating quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, leadership and management, but also personal development.”

In September 2019 after a public consultation that ran between January and April of the same year, [Ofsted launched a new inspection framework](#)³⁴. This framework contains guidance on evaluating quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, leadership and management, but also personal development. This is particularly noteworthy for Children’s University.

Alongside the school-wide inspection, inspectors are now tasked with making a judgement on the personal development of learners by evaluating “*the extent to which:*

- *the curriculum extends beyond the academic, technical or vocational. It provides for learners’ broader development, enabling them to develop and discover their interests and talents*
- *the curriculum and the provider’s wider work support learners to develop their character – including their resilience, confidence and independence – and help them know how to keep physically and mentally healthy.”*³⁵

To support schools in responding to these markers, the DfE published a [Character Education Framework Guide](#)³⁶. This framework gave schools a non-statutory series of 6 benchmarks to work through with a view to reflecting on provision and plan for development.

The difference we make

Children’s University is all about what goes on beyond the classroom and extending learning “beyond the academic”. Through CUO we show participants and their school’s the availability of opportunities and participation data in order to show “beyond the academic” interests developing. The sustained use of Children’s University and our award programme is intended to help establish interests and help children develop talents.

Using CUO and the reporting data that is available to them, schools can demonstrate the extent to which they are catering to the personal development of learners. Should they wish to, schools can show Ofsted all that is available to their pupils and all that their pupils are doing.

In action

In response to the DfE's Character Education benchmarks in November 2019, Children's University provided its schools with [a template](#)³⁷ through which they could look at their own provision and help plan for development, with the Children's University programme as a key tool. We recognise that schools that are part of our programme are already demonstrating a commitment to character education. This framework is still available to all schools.



Primary to Secondary transition

The issue

“The transition from Primary to Secondary school is a key stage in a child’s education, but it can be challenging and worrying.”

The transition from Primary to Secondary school is a key stage in a child’s education, but it can be challenging and worrying. This can be due to shifts in workload, friendships, and routine. [Research from the Nuffield Foundation](#)³⁸ found that a successful transition from primary school to secondary school was based on two things; “being academically and behaviourally involved in school, and feeling a sense of belonging to school.”³⁹ Without these factors, a child may struggle with the transition. The transition may also have an impact on a child’s mental health. [A study from the Scottish Government](#)⁴⁰ found an “Increase in pupils’ anxiety during transitions was associated with decreased connectedness to school and decline in perceived school belongingness over time”. This mirrors the research previously mentioned, that a sense of belonging to the school seems to be one of the common factors when it comes to a negative transition.

The difference we make

We are keen to see growth in the number of secondary schools signing up to Children’s University, particularly where primary schools are involved and act as feeder schools. When secondary schools and their primary feeders both use Children’s University as a framework for extra-curricular engagement, this acts as a consistent touchpoint for those children faced with new teachers, environments and peers. This responds directly to the Nuffield Foundation’s need for pupils to remain “behaviourally involved” throughout the transition.

With the support of [SHINE’s Flying High programme](#)⁴¹ (focussed on “Supporting children who do well at primary school to stay on the path to success as they move to secondary.”) Warrington Children’s University is leading the way in exploring Children’s University as a tool for easing transition. By mirroring activities in both primary and secondary schools, and running specific Children’s University-validated sessions on-site in secondary school during pupils’ final years in primary, it is hoped that academic results show the significant role that our programme plays in easing this transition.

Primary to Secondary transition

Despite the pandemic putting an end to some of these in-person sessions, Warrington Children's University continues to link specific secondary schools locally with their feeder schools using online specially-produced interactive 3D maps of the schools with extra-curricular activities embedded. At the end of this project, a toolkit will be produced and shared with the wider Children's University network in order to share best practice.

In action

In 2020 Bristol & South Gloucestershire Children's University worked with Future Quest to create [a workbook](#)⁴² specifically for children transitioning from Primary School to Secondary school. This workbook consists of numerous activities for the children to complete, with the aim to support and prepare them for the change, but to also provide them with the skills they may need in their futures.



As part of our SHINE project in Warrington, primary students drew pixelated images in the FabLab linked to the secondary school which they were due to attend. FabLab staff got involved with the students to show them new software and get them used to the new environment.

Place-based learning

The issue

“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.”

In 2019 The Social Mobility Commission published [‘An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility’](#)⁴³. 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.”*⁴⁴

Geography plays a very real part in dictating what is available to children and young people, and in turn, how well placed children are to access opportunities. On a simplistic level, there is a huge disparity in the assets communities have within them. Museums, cultural institutions and high quality sporting facilities, for example, are likely to be more accessible to those in or near major cities, than those in rural and coastal communities. But this is just part of the story. Industry can often be reliant on a hyper-local workforce, but businesses’ engagement with local communities varies enormously. Similarly, the commitment that is shown by local government to its community assets is disparate and an aspect of local government where funding is often tight.

The difference we make

Children’s University is focused on connecting children to the opportunities that surround them. Our programme offers a framework that enables local delivery partners (typically HE/FE Institutions, or Local Authorities) to pull together local activity provision in a consistent and locally relevant way.

Our managers will typically be engaged with their community library service, local museums and other learning destinations, as well as Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs) and local business leaders. Using data from CUO, Children’s University Trust is able to highlight under-represented types of learning locally, and give local schools the opportunity to monitor what pupils do beyond the school gates.

In action

Essex and Suffolk Children's University is run by a local charity that places itself at the heart of the communities in which it works. In partnership with local cultural institutions, a Colchester cultural trail was organised to encourage children to visit local arts and culture venues. Similarly, during the first lockdown of 2020 the local Children's University worked closely with the Association of Suffolk Museums in order to bring museum resources to children who were unable to visit local places of interest. Worksheets and challenges were created and shared with local schools – engaging children with local sites even when they were shut.

Sheffield Children's University is managed by Sheffield City Council. The team ensure that they work closely with schools and parents to gather as much information about the local provision that children engage with. All public clubs and providers get validated by the team and they work with providers to create a Festival of Fun in the summer months. Typically this is during the summer holidays and involves local learning providers working with Sheffield Children's University to showcase their provision and offer free activities. During the 2020 summer break, this included 70 different activities that were all downloadable or emailed to parents and included Zoom sessions and Facebook Live events. Pre-COVID, showcase events have been held in the city centre. Their work is locally-created, locally-led, and local asset-based.

Family learning and parental engagement

The issue

“The gaps in education attainment between the poorest and the richest at aged 11 was only 14% directly the effect of schools.”

Families and carers have a huge impact on the chances that children and young people have in their education. In a 2010 report published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation - [Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?](#)⁴⁵ – data showed that the gap in education attainment between the poorest and the richest at aged 11 was only 14% directly the effect of schools⁴⁶. Parental attitudes, behaviours and background all played a greater role. If children are to succeed, their families and carers need to be engaged in their education and play a part in establishing a love and respect for learning that extends beyond the classroom.

However, engaging wider families in a child's education is challenging with barriers that need addressing. If learning beyond the classroom is the place for parents to shine, then the fact that this report shows that almost 40% of opportunities for children come with related costs is a real blocker. Alongside that, only 5% of activities fall under the category of family learning.

While there is no doubt that there is a vast amount of opportunities for families to engage with learning together, more needs to be done to remove costs and to put these activities in front of families. Similarly, more needs to be done to ensure parents have the support they need – both financially and in the form of information – in order to make the most of opportunities that exist for them and their families.

The difference we make

When we talk about learning beyond the classroom, we know that this is learning that takes place in a spectrum of environments. Much of the provision that we encourage young people to take part in is delivered within schools (35% according to this State of the Nation report) but the majority falls outside of that environment. As such, it must be assumed that parental engagement is required in order for young people to participate more widely.

Family learning and parental engagement

However, we are keen not to simply assume levels of engagement by families and carers, and so we actively categorise learning that is explicitly aimed at families. By measuring this, we are able to monitor how this grows over time and take appropriate action. With just 5% of provision currently aimed specifically at families, we know that we need to do more. Similarly, by recording whether activities require costs to access, we are able to monitor at least one barrier of access.

Fundamentally, as an organisation, one of our key desired outcomes for children is that they feel celebrated for their commitment to learning by their family, school and community. At all Children's University graduations (COVID-allowing) parents' attendance is a key part of what makes them special. They provide an opportunity for our delivery partners to directly share more information about the ethos of Children's University, and importantly, get children and young people to recognise the role that their parents and carers play in making their education possible.

In action

Children's University Trust is committed to doing more to engage families and carers and to actively advocate on their behalf. We are members of the [Learning with Parents' Parental Engagement Forum](#)⁴⁷, that brings together policymakers, educational organisations and researchers. The Group promotes parental engagement as a tool to narrow the disadvantage gap. Learning with Parents presented to our network at our most recent conference (online due to COVID).

While we work to engage with parents, families and carers in order to improve the chances of children and young people, including families in our graduations has a very real impact on them directly. Blackburn Children's University work closely with parents and engage with families as a key part of their graduation ceremonies. After attending her niece's Children's University graduation and being invited into the University Centre in Blackburn for the first time, [one adult was inspired to sign up to a BA \(Hons\) Education Studies course](#)⁴⁸. Opening up spaces and opportunities for all is a key part of Children's University.

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Thanks

Children’s University Trust introduced CUO as a tool to support our network and to gather data to inform reports such as this. Without the patience and understanding of our network of partners as they faced the introduction of new ways of working and the various teething problems inherent in any new digital project, this report would not be possible. Thank you to all existing and former Children’s University Managers who contributed in some way.

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Thanks to you for reading this. Should you still be here reading this final page, you are almost certainly engaged enough with the same issues as us to play a part in joining our movement. Do get in touch.

Now join the conversation



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