

Research Report

Wrexham and Flintshire Children's University: Pilot Study Evaluation Report

Fuller, K. & Edwards, N.

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Wrexham and Flintshire Children's University

Pilot Study Evaluation Report

Dr Kirsty Fuller and Natalie Edwards

Summer, 2023

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Wrexham University

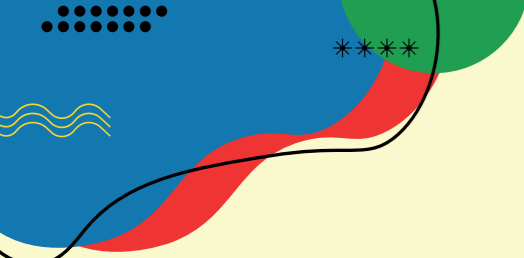
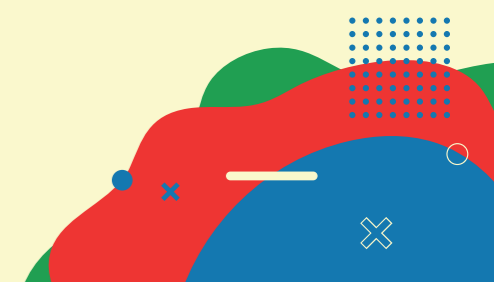


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Introduction

Children's University (CU) is a charity that works in partnership with schools to foster a love of learning in children through participation in extra-curricular activities offered by the school as well as partnership organisations. Its aim is to create a "level playing field of opportunity" for children of all backgrounds (Children's University, 2022) by informing future provision, highlighting barriers to participation, and playing a key role in improving accessibility and opportunities for young people (Nolan & Howard, 2022, p. 7).

Wrexham and Flintshire Children's University (WFCU) is part of the Children's University Trust, which is the charity at the heart of the Children's University network. Wrexham & Flintshire Children's University was re-established in March 2021 following the recruitment of the Project Manager, Natalie Edwards. It is managed by Wrexham University in partnership with the Wrexham & Flintshire Public Service Board, which includes Coleg Cambria, Wrexham County Borough Council, Flintshire County Council and GwE. WFCU is a key project within the Civic Mission of Wrexham University which has a central aim to work with partners to help end social inequality across the region by 2030.

"WFCU is a key project within the Civic Mission of Wrexham University which has a central aim to work with partners to help end social inequality across the region by 2030."



At the relaunch of the project, Wrexham University was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the pilot of the new iteration of

the WFCU, running from September to May of the 2021-2022 academic year. This evaluation has taken the form of a small case study, which will consider

the experiences of those taking part to ascertain opportunities and actions for moving the project forward with more funding and participation across North Wales.

Pupils participating in the pilot were challenged to achieve 30 hours of extracurricular activity.

For participation in two hours of extra-curricular activities per week, they received their first certificate, the Bronze Children's University Award and were invited to attend a graduation style celebration event in July 2022. Schools were asked to run the pilot for 16 weeks with an additional 25 holiday challenges provided by the Children's University project team to ensure ample opportunity for the Bronze award to be achieved.

Aims

- Establish the impact it has had on participants by gathering data from pupils and staff, pre- and post-pilot, on participation levels in extra-curricular activities
- Ascertain whether the infrastructure of the Children's University is fit for purpose prior to the wider educational roll out of the project
- Identify areas for improvement



Context

There is a wealth of research attesting to the value and impact of the Children's University across primary and secondary age ranges.

An evaluation commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (Gorad, et al., 2017) found that across 68 schools, children in schools participating in the CU made favourable progress in comparison to other schools. They had gained two months in maths and reading, made gains in teamwork skills and social responsibility and were more likely to choose professional occupations as their future aspiration. Children eligible for free school meals also made gains in maths

“...children and young people who are members of the CU consistently perform better (academically) than their non-CU counterparts.”

results provide “compelling evidence” of the link between participating in CU activities and academic performance, attendance

and teamwork, which were not seen in non-participating schools. They also reported higher levels of communication, empathy, self-confidence, resilience, and happiness after the intervention.¹

Hamshaw (2020) reports on the educational impact of Sheffield Children's University (now expanded into South Yorkshire CU). The

and attitude (p.23). At each award level, Bronze through Gold and into the 100 and 200 hours awards, attendance improved (p.9 and p.16) and overall, children and young people who were members of the CU consistently perform better (academically) than their non-CU counterparts. This finding is consistent with Nolan and Howard (2020), who conclude that their research² provides “significant evidence that participation in Children's University has a direct impact on children's use and improvement of essential skills” (p.25).³

¹ A follow up study was commissioned by the EEF, the report on which is pending publication in the spring of 2023

² Focused on 11+ age range

³ See Nolan and Howard (2022) for a comprehensive overview of literature



Further significant outcomes of participation in the CU across a range of measures parallel to measure of academic outcomes were found by Rose and Rose (2018). Findings included the CU playing a role in engaging learners who may have less enthusiasm for learning. This in turn was deemed to be linked to the experience of trying something new and/or the sense of reward for participation in activities. This opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities also influenced the aspirations of the children involved through broadening experiences. Awareness of the university was raised, including through

graduation, particularly among those who reported no family knowledge/experience.

Though not a specific focus of this evaluation at the outset, Nolan and Howard (2022, p. 31) cite evidence of the potential positive effects on mental health and wellbeing of participating in CU activities, for example, that participation in Scouts and Guides as having lower reported incidences of anxiety or mood disorders (Dibben, et al., 2016) and that involvement in organised physical activities saw higher attainment and better social and emotional outcomes for children (Tanner & Todd, 2016).



Partners and Approach

Eight schools were recruited from across Wrexham and Flintshire by the project manager to take part in the pilot of the WFCU. Within the sample, there were three Welsh-medium and five English-medium schools, three primary schools, two secondary schools, two alternative providers for secondary age learners, and an independent school. Among these was a provision for students with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). One of the schools caters for the primary and secondary age range.

“The aim was to gauge a baseline of engagement with school and extra-curricular activities as well as thoughts about future careers and study.”

Approval for the research to be undertaken was granted by Wrexham University RESC¹ and the research was carried out following the guidelines.

All children and CU school coordinators taking part were also invited to participate in the evaluation. The data consisted of a questionnaire with a ten-point scale, open written responses, and guided discussion points to engage the children at the launch of the CU in school. The aim was to gauge a baseline of engagement with school

and extra-curricular activities as well as thoughts about future careers and study. This questionnaire was created by the Project Manager and Project Researcher based on a literature review. The team digressed slightly from other CU's questionnaire by reducing the size, as they wanted to spend more time to engage the students.

On completion of the pilot, the questionnaires were reissued, and at this post-pilot point responses from CU coordinators in school were also collected. The data collected here were practical

and formative to inform the expansion and upscaling of the initiative.

Practical challenges² of engaging schools with data collection meant that not all children participated in all phases of data collection; 103 children responded to the pre-pilot questionnaire, which was administered in schools at the point of introduction to the CU and 73 to the post-pilot questionnaire, which was offered online.

The Impact of the Wrexham and Flintshire CU Pilot

One goal of the evaluation was to establish the impact CU has had on participants by gathering data from pupils and staff, pre and post pilot, on participation levels in extra-curricular activities.

The data collected show a positive impact on enjoyment of school, learning new things, and working with others. The latter two categories linked to increased levels of engagement when completing activities with the CU.

There was a slight decrease in enjoyment of learning overall, though this downturn was not sustained in the question that linked learning new things to the CU.

Participant responses

Over 90% (66) of the children said that they would join the CU again if asked, with only 9.6% (7) saying no.

When given the opportunity to respond freely about their experiences, 19 children commented positively:

“THANK YOU FOR MAKING US ALL HAPPY DOING ALL YOUR FUN ACTIVEITY (sic)”

“I would recommend it”

“Fe wnes fwynhau y profiad yn fawr” (“I really enjoyed the experience”)

CU school coordinator responses

The feedback from seven group leaders/CU school coordinators was also positive overall. Graduation, as a chance to celebrate the achievements of the children, was noted to be a highlight and the support from Natalie throughout the process was praised.

The impact on confidence was also noted. One respondent commented that some children had “become aspirational. More confident in going places.” Another added that they saw improvement in social interaction and the development of many creative and social skills.



¹ Wrexham University Research Ethics Sub-Committee

² These included time constraints on visits, number of support staff available to assist with the completion of the questionnaires and workload/time constraints with schools.

Project Manager reflections on children's experiences

At the launch sessions in schools, most teachers seemed very excited and engaged with the project and had a lot of energy

and willingness to make it a positive experience for all.

One setting identified a pilot group as having young people with particularly challenging behaviour and were concerned about positive participation, yet this group proved to be most engaged and excited about the CU. A further positive of the CU is that it motivates children and young people in different ways; for some, it was the reward at

"... young people with particularly challenging behaviour...proved to be most engaged and excited about the CU."

the end of the pilot, while others looked forward to doing more activities outside of school and those different from the usual offerings. Others still appeared motivated by activities that were career and future-based.

Parent feedback was received informally by the project manager at the graduation ceremony. The day was enjoyed by all, and parents reported being proud of their children's achievements. Nevertheless, it was clear that there was not a thorough understanding of the project, indicating that there is room for improvement in communication with parents to increase the overall impact of the project.



CU Infrastructure

The evaluation aimed to determine whether the infrastructure of the Children's University is fit for purpose before the wider educational roll out of the project and to identify areas for improvement. In addition to identifying practical and immediate feedback which will inform the administration of the next phase of the project roll out, the initial pilot project has also uncovered layers of potential which underscore the possibilities that the CU has for bringing elements of the community together. This is all to work collaboratively to support children and young people by engaging them in learning.



Participant level (children)

Most of the children who responded did not note any barriers to participation in CU activities. The few who did mentioned barriers such as the prices/cost of activities, motivation, confidence, health, and lack of access to technology at home.

As noted by the project manager in their reflections, the graduation drew positive feedback and mirrored the positive response to the community activities and social experiences and visits.

School level (CU coordinators)

The group leaders/CU school coordinators noted that though the online dashboard was "useful, simple and good to use" for the adults, the learners struggled, and some needed lots of support.

Feedback from the CU school-based coordinators indicated that some consideration may be needed to support schools to further support children with ALN, for example, to input data, or how the dashboard may be simplified for more accessible recording.

Time remains a key issue for staff, particularly in providing a sufficient level of support for the children to access the dashboard and be successful logging hours, but also in administrative tasks. Support from the Project Manager was fundamental to the success of the pilot and maintaining this will be important for the success of the partnerships.

Areas for Improvement

Feedback from CU school leaders identified several actionable areas for improvement, including more community updates to help motivate schools involved and parent training for the dashboard (to support recording of activities).

The idea of an open day to launch the CU at the beginning of the year was also suggested, which reflects the positive responses to social and community-orientated events, including the University Campus activities and the graduation event.

The overall value of the online engagement activities and role of the newsletters and holiday activities may need reconsideration given the relatively low take up of these.

Linked to this feedback about the online activities, an incidental point to note from the



data is the generally lower ratings (across all 1-10 scale points) of enjoyment of learning online. Even children who had responded positively overall shifted to lower ratings on this point. Our purpose with this question was to determine how willing children might be to engage with the CU online platform, yet, notably that just over 20% of respondents (22 children) rated their enjoyment as one and two out of ten. In other categories, the highest number of respondents selecting the lowest ratings was 7% (7 children). Reflecting this lower enjoyment ratings for online learning, almost all of the activities listed as being favourites of the experience were practical and sociable ones.

Project Manager reflections on the CU pilot

There were challenges in engaging with the children and young people across the range of settings, particularly the higher age groups. The younger children tended to be more excited, engaged, and mature. The older pupils seemed to be more hesitant emotionally and more educationally immature, which made it challenging to engage them with the project. In addition, the level of literacy varied greatly and had an impact on how the children and young people could engage independently.

Moving forward, there is an opportunity to build on the experience and prepare

differentiated materials that will be beneficial in the launch of future projects (and research).

Linked to the literacy challenges, a barrier was the time required; schools generally needed more support than the community groups to implement the project. It was the face-to-face interactions in the settings that were key to building quality relationships and connections. It was noted that the extra support provided to the schools increased engagement as we could track the activity hours being gained in each setting, and there was an increase in hours after every visit conducted to a setting.



“The overall value of the online engagement activities and role of the newsletters and holiday activities may need reconsideration given the relatively low take up of these.”

Strategic Next Steps and Research Considerations

During completion of the project and write-up of this report, Wrexham and Flintshire Children's University (Wrexham University) was successful in a HEFCW Strategic Investment Funding bid to expand the pilot and branch out to include all North Wales. Thus, North Wales Children's University was formed, with the HEFCW award stipulating engagement with a minimum of nine North Wales' 50 state secondary school as well as a minimum of 10% of the region's 335 primary schools, reaching over 1000 pupils. Alongside this, there was the requirement to deepen collaborations across North Wales' two universities, bringing together civic engagement and widening strengths of Wrexham and Bangor Universities. Considering these requirements and the outcome of the pilot evaluation, the team have identified and addressed key steps and future considerations:

- Data collection – accessibility: the reading of the questionnaires and whether support is available to complete them. These were designed to be accessible and have verbal and scripted elements, but time and support was sometimes limited, which affected their completion. Moving forwards, the team will make further efforts to take the children through the questionnaires.



- To close the technology gap and enable all children to participate, we are hosting more events in communities and are mindful of the types of activities going into the newsletters for young people to complete at home, so there is a mixture of activities that require less technology.
- Reductions in staff may impact willingness and/or ability to run the project, which is already time consuming for school staff. Consequently, we have provided admin support to schools for the next rollout of CU and used online software to streamline the information and parental consent process.

- Reduction of economic barriers - costings and possible sponsorship of activities – this will also serve to widen community involvement. Although it is difficult to fully reduce economic barriers, we have attempted to engage more learning destinations, indicating a denser geographical choice of destinations that might mean less distance to travel for the families.
- Review engagement strategy - how to engage with those most at risk of disengaging from school, children and young people with ALN and those who are part of marginalised communities. We have employed a team of CU staff to conduct the CU rollout, which allows more staff per classroom to engage the pupils during quantitative data collection. We have also included an ethnicity question on the next survey so we can further identify disadvantaged children due to the negative impacts of social inequalities often experienced by diverse ethnic groups.
- Review communication strategy – consider how to streamline and make communications more accessible to parents and efficient for schools. We will work with the wider team and the Research Office at Wrexham University to devise a new communication strategy.

“We will work with the wider team and the Research Office at Wrexham University to devise a new communication strategy.”

- Sustainability – plan how to make the sustainable long term and across a multiple county. This would require investment and careful personnel planning. The scheme is currently heavy on staff time, so the scheme will need to expand funding sources and identify potential ways to save costs.
- Progress HEFCW's stipulation of delivering the project jointly with Bangor University: a Bangor University Project Manager has been employed, and a research sub-group has been created including researchers from Wrexham and Bangor.



- Research potential – effects of CU involvement on wellbeing and mental health, social skill development, aspirations, and future trajectories. For the CU rollout, and in addition to the pilot questions, we have added questions on ethnicity and a block of validated questions that were used in Durham's CU (Siddiqui, Gorard, & See, 2017), to measure concepts such as happiness, teamwork, and confidence. Furthermore, we have included a unique code so that we can compare children's scores on the items across multiple time points. We also plan to conduct a thorough process and implementation evaluation with Bangor University that will include collecting qualitative data from all vested parties of CU.

In conclusion, the CU pilot was successful and provided a wealth of important information on how to improve the CU rollout, alongside showcasing the positive impact of children participating in extra-curricular activities to enhance their love of learning.



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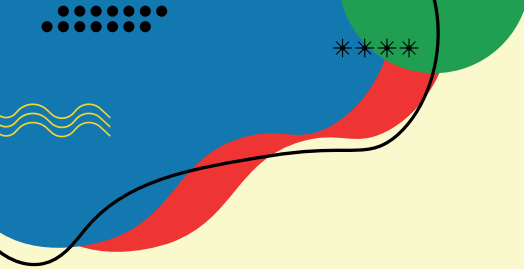
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