



Children's Universities and their Potential with Regards to Access to Post-Secondary Education

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In all societies, access to education and core qualifications are key to individual prosperity and societal development. However, recent data confirms that access to education remains biased and that, in many countries, children and young people are still faced with barriers that hinder a higher educational attainment than that of their parents, as recently revealed in the OECD "Education at a Glance" report 2014¹. In face of the vast differences in educational mobility throughout the OECD countries, it appears obvious that educational inequality is much more determined by structural and cultural criteria than by interest and children's ability to achieve their full potential. Like many other sources of evidence before, the recent OECD report stresses again the strong link between social background and educational opportunities, which still prevails – and even more important, that social mobility through education could grind to a halt in many of the countries.

On the other side, educational establishments are increasingly challenged with emerging changes: teaching and learning with technologies, a continued financial crisis and the related struggle for adequate resources, and an ongoing competition in the authority of knowledge production in an information society are just some of the issues which call upon universities and academics to present and justify their contemporary relevance. Moreover, there are increasing expectations on universities in face of the grand global challenges to contribute to the benefit of society. One of the central criteria to assess the ability of higher education establishments to adapt to these change processes will increasingly be how quick and efficient universities manage to strategically incorporate a genuine Third Mission besides teaching and research. This will allow them to engage with the society around them in a sustainable way and consider the social dimension of academia, e.g. with a view to future student populations.



If universities are claiming to remain undisputed knowledge institutions in the times to come, profound and fundamental shifts are required to manage this process of rapid evolution. Children's Universities can be suitable incubators to facilitate these change processes – and at the same time put a spotlight on educational opportunities for the share of population whose access to higher education is not a well-beaten pathway.

Parallel to the highly dynamic last decade of developments in education, the term "Children's University" has become a widespread synonym for science awareness and outreach programs at universities and other settings with a strong link to academia. Typically, Children's University programs include science-related lectures, workshops, hands-on tutorials and similar activities which take place as summer programs, after-school activities or on weekends. These programs are prepared by academics, sometimes with student involvement.

These activities are tailored to the needs and demands of children typically aged 7-14 years and – ideally – match their commonplace curiosity with professional scientific interest. As a basic principle and irrespective of other objectives, Children's Universities aim to raise interest in science and research from an early age, to provide a first glimpse into the academic world and to possibly spark interest for later careers in science, arts and humanities. In order to support this, the scientific subjects tend to make reference to the living world of children and their current experiences with everyday phenomena - this is what many Children's University concepts have in common.

This may sound simple, but as Children's Universities are positioned right in the center of academic teaching, learning, research and public engagement, they have a huge potential for initiating a sustainable change in society by addressing future generations. They are a unique opportunity for universities to directly engage with children and young people through a mutual dialogue which empowers children and young people through eye-level encounters while enabling the higher education sector to reflect on its policies and practices using a channel that goes well beyond the boundaries of the traditional mission of universities and academic research institutions.



The structural changes which may be induced through Children's Universities range from innovation in academic teaching, enhancement and recognition of science communication skills among students and academics, and the creation of commitment to the social dimension and responsibility of universities among faculty members in general. Children's Universities cover all relevant areas of academia – from science and technology and medical science to humanities, cultural science and arts. Their huge potential, still partially untapped, is to serve as an experimental site and playground for didactical innovation at universities. In this regard, Children's Universities can enhance organizational learning and initiate a cultural shift at universities through the building of long-term relationships with children across all social backgrounds from an early age and by taking children seriously as actors in the relationship between science and society.

Looking back some decades, comparable university outreach programs could be identified already at that time, but the highly innovative aspect of Children's Universities is rooted in the fact that, within a relatively short period and encouraged by some lighthouse initiatives, a large number of universities implemented such programs of informal learning for children for the very first time and soon reached a critical mass. Currently, over 380 Children's University-type activities have been identified by the European Children's Universities Network (EUCU.NET, www.eucu.net) in 40 countries all over the world and the numbers are still on the rise. Based on this survey conducted in 2013, these programs do involve more than 500,000 children each year and engage up to 15,000 academics as scientists, lecturers and researchers. These figures demonstrate that the Children's University approach goes far beyond being a fashion for university public relation departments.

Meanwhile, Children's Universities are making even more progress from pilot initiatives towards more institutionalized programs. Notwithstanding that the concept of Children's Universities as a vehicle for institutional change is very recent, they assist universities to engage with authentic, innovative and sustainable approaches to learning which respond to both the needs of the local conditions and the global dimension.



They encourage universities to consider their role within the communities around them and to become aware of the needs and perceptions of their potential future students – irrespective of their educational achievements so far or their cultural, social and economic origin.

Children’s Universities are still developing the appropriate mechanisms to address those who are currently under-represented within higher education, but more and more initiatives are linking university objectives with the social inclusion agenda and serving as incubators for universities to re-consider their role in and for society. In this regard, Children’s Universities may be deemed a “subversive” means to inscribe the idea of the social agenda into the consciousness of higher education sector decision makers some of whom see them as something exceptional in a university’s mission unrelated with the “serious” debate of higher education reforms and related policies.,

The European Children’s Universities Network will keep advocating the basic idea of this approach on regional, national and international levels. As an active community of experts and practitioners, we will keep pushing the sense of responsibility within university-related science engagement programs for and with children and young people in the context of the social dimension. EUCU.NET is a network of commitment and exchange of best practice. Impact analysis and learning from research will be a growing focus of our activities in the coming period with the aim to incite established academia to consider the Children’s University and its effects as a relevant subject which needs to be promoted in academic research.

What Children’s Universities need the most - after this first stage of accelerated implementation - is the chance to get continuous funding and to be structurally embedded in university development strategies based on the profound empirical evidence of their sustainable effects on the progress of the higher education sector.

This will consciously help to underpin with obvious facts what the European Commission has stated about the relevance of Children’s Universities in 2008 in its EUCU.NET evaluation summary report, namely that “[...] *Children’s University represents the most radical approach to open Universities towards the general public.*”



Chris Gary was initially trained as a mechanical engineer and has studied sociology at the University of Vienna. After some years in applied vocational training research, he joined the team of the Vienna University Children's Office as a project developer and coordinator. He has initiated the formation of a European Children's Universities Network with support from the European Commission, of which he is General Secretary since its establishment as a non-profit membership association in 2010. He has designed and conducted national and transnational projects in the area of outreach and science engagement, notably under FP6, FP7, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+. Furthermore he has organized conferences on this subject in a number of European countries, has been a speaker at international events and authored numerous articles about science communication.

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ⁱ OECD (2014), Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing.
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