



# The children university model and beyond – a pilot study

Maria Zajac\*

*SGH Warsaw School of Economics was the first location of the Children's University of Economics established by the Foundation for the Promotion and Accreditation of Academic Education (FPAKE) in 2008. At present, it coordinates the activity of CUE (pl. EUD) in seven academic centers around Poland as well as the operation of the Academy of Young Economist in its six locations. SGH is also the place of annual meetings of the Association of Children's Universities in Poland and the Congress of Children's Universities. Such an active involvement established a natural background for the research project on the extra-curricular children education in general and the activity of children's universities in particular.*

## Introduction

The idea of organizing academic classes for young learners originated in the German city Tübingen in 2002. Since then it spread widely out – all over the world. No exact data on the number of existing children's universities are available, but the search over that internet proved that they operate in many countries on different continents. During the pilot study, we managed to identify examples of such initiatives in North America (Canada, US), in South America (Brazil, Peru), in Asia (China, India<sup>1</sup>), in Africa (Egypt), in Australia and numerous European countries. On the official website of the European Children's Universities Network<sup>2</sup> the total number of over 350 locations in more than 40 countries worldwide is indicated. However, it is not clear how up to date and how complete these data are. On the other hand, in the Public Member Directory<sup>3</sup> of EUCU.net there are 81 such children universities registered.

The overview of the already operating initiatives shows that this phenomenon is changing dynamically.

Some new instances appear while the others – especially those created within the scope of various project stop their actions because of the lack of funding. The proper estimation of the number of CUs is even more difficult because some initiatives combine numerous entities. There are groups which have its units in different cities like for instance UniKids or Polish Academy of Children. The first one operates in 31 places around Poland, whereas the second in 21 locations, including the Polish 'branch' in Amsterdam, Holland<sup>4</sup>. Also, some universities coordinate actions on the same subject area delivered in different locations, e.g., Children's University of Economics coordinated by SGH in 7 sites.

## Methodology of the pilot study

It is worth to stress that the aim of the pilot was mostly a recognition of the subject. In the beginning, we attempted to find the answers to some general questions. How broad is the reach of such initiatives? What data is available and where? Whom can we contact to obtain the necessary information? Therefore, the primary source was the internet search, the individual mail contacts with the leaders of local initiatives as well as the presentations from the meetings or seminars on the extra-curricular children education. Altogether we visited and analyzed 30 websites (in Polish, English, German, Spanish, and Portuguese), contacted via e-mail 15 university leaders and carried out two individual interviews. The first and most straightforward conclusion from that study is that there is such a variety of ideas worth sharing that the research should be continued, and its results made publicly available.

\* SGH Warsaw School of Economics

<sup>1</sup> This university although having the name Children's University seem to play a different role, than other initiatives described in this publication (<http://www.cugujarat.ac.in/Index>)

<sup>2</sup> <https://eucu.net>

<sup>3</sup> <https://eucu.net/page-808561>

<sup>4</sup> <https://padholandia.wordpress.com>

# The children university model and beyond – a pilot study

## Study questions and initial findings

During the pilot study three questions became the focus of our attention:

- What are the most common children's university models?
- How are the children's universities organized?
- What subjects do they cover?

Our goal was to collect data that would allow identifying various concepts applied by the children's universities in different countries as a preliminary stage for further, more in-depth research.

## Models

First of all, one may observe that many initiatives follow the 'German model,' i.e., the participants of the lectures are children and youth aged 6–13, with some variations like 5–12, 7–14 and alike. The most common organizing body is the university, although the actual spectrum of other institutional initiators is quite broad, like for instance the science centers, the local community authorities, the school or library or even individual teachers passionate about enhancing the students' possibilities to develop their interests. The latter was the case in one of the Polish rural schools where the teacher alone initiated the extra-curricular classes and, in this way, tried to convince parents, the local community as well as the private university in the neighboring city that the kids need such kind of support.

A slightly different (or modified) approach one can find in the 'British model', which could be met mostly in the UK and in Australia, although its followers can be found in other countries as well.

## The form of the meetings

- The most commonly observed form of participation in the children university classes is lectures and workshops. Usually, the university staff is engaged but there are also initiatives in which children become the lecturers (some Austrian examples, and in Poland the CUs associated with the Polish Academy of Children<sup>5</sup>, e.g., Maly Medyk project presented in this issue).
- There are initiatives which include less traditional forms like outside activities to be described in the *Places* section later in this article.
- Children also can record their questions to the scientist and place them on the university portal (e.g., Brazilian Children University from Belo Horizonte<sup>6</sup>).
- There are also examples of incorporating the in-the-city tasks as it is the case at the MCYU operating in Hamilton, Canada (the paper belongs to this issue as well).

## Participants

- Very often the classes for children are accompanied by the meetings or lectures for their parents or caregivers.
- Also, the involvement of volunteers recruited among the 'regular' university students is quite common in the analyzed children's universities.
- In some initiatives, the groups of participants are recruited among schools and then the teachers also take part in the classes. Moreover, they continue the tasks during the school classes. Such approach one can observe in the Australian or British children universities, and among the Polish initiatives like Maly Medyk project for instance.
- The Canadian example of MCYU also shows the involvement of local organizations, community members and school boards, and the whole families that complete the given tasks together.
- In some institutions, the whole cohort of students participates in the classes together but in some others, the learners belong to different groups depending on their age, and the tasks are adjusted to those groups. The Children University of Interesting History can serve as an example here – students may belong to the group of Observers, Explorers, Discoverers, Travelers, and Creators respectively (a case study provided in the article illustrates how the tasks the students get correspond to their age group).

## Funding and fees

There are four typical sources of funding the activity of children's universities, and their share is unequal. These are:

- the universities own money;
- grants established by the public bodies like government, local authorities, charities;
- international and national projects and grants;
- fees paid by the participants.

It must be stressed, however, that even if the fee is mandatory, it is usually a small amount of money, established taking into consideration that it cannot prevent the young learners from participation in the children's university classes. In many universities, students do not have to pay any fee.

## Places

The most common places for the classes are universities – their lecture halls, scientific and research labs and workshop spaces. However, the learning does not have to be limited to the university campus. Numerous examples can be indicated to prove that

<sup>5</sup> <http://academyofkidspoland.wixsite.com/polskaakademiazdzieci>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.universidadedascrianças.org/#projeto>

statement. These can be 'workshops in the city' which are part of Canadian MCYU program. The classes can also be delivered on the theater stages or dance halls when they include drama and dance. In the model implemented by the British and Australian Universities the concept of so-called learning destination is applied. The term refers to such places as galleries and museums, landmarks, historical sites and properties, zoos, wildlife and countryside locations and many others. At the beginning of every semester or series of classes student gets the learning passport, a little book where they collect the stamps every time, they accomplish a particular activity.

It is worth to mention in this context that the indicated places also organize the educational activities and projects on their own. For instance, the National Museum in Cracow implements the project MAMBA – the acronym of which comes from the Polish name Mała Ambasada Muzealna and can be translated into English as Little Embassy of Museum. Within the scope of the project children aged 6 to 13 attend a one-semester preparatory course, familiarize with the chosen artists and their artworks to eventually play the role of an exhibition guide in the museum.

### Graduation and the follow-up

Collecting the stamps or the lecturers' signatures in the students' pass is the typical form of confirming the completion of classes at the children's universities. Most universities establish the specific amount of such stamps required for being eligible to get a diploma at the end of an academic year or holiday course. In some institutions, there are also final tests. However, their role is not to evaluate the children's knowledge but to award the most active or most diligent students instead. In some institutions, students graduating from the children's university may continue their learning path and step on the next level of their education as it is the case at SGH for instance. The Academy of Young Economist is the follow-up of the Children's University of Economics although its completion is not a requirement. One may start the AYE not being previously a student of CUE.

Another example of how to motivate young people to continue their adventure with the university are different levels of certificates. For instance, the MCYU offers three types of completion certificates – a Certificate of Knowledge, Bachelor of Knowledge and a Master of Knowledge diplomas (more details in the MCYU paper).

In turn, the Children University Foundation offers different specializations corresponding to the age of students – the topics of the classes depend on the group characterized by the action-name, i.e., Discovery (6–7 years), Inspiration (8–9 years), Understanding

(10–11 years), Master and Apprentice (12–13 years), Developing a passion (14–16 years)<sup>7</sup>.

### Other forms of non-formal education

The described pilot study also drew our attention to other forms of non-formal education. We decided to present some of them in the current edition of e-mentor as we believe that they represent significant trends, which emerged in response to the challenges of contemporary education.

#### Makers movement

The first example – makers movement – arose from the individual attempts of people who wanted to find either a space or a companion for developing their passions and hobbies. The makerspaces became very popular in some countries (e.g., in the UK and US), but in many others, the makers movement is still at the very early stage, what is also the case in Poland. The brief report included in this issue based on the research carried out by the British and Polish educators underlines particularly one aspect of the makers movement. It is the role of mentors in young people's education. The study based on the biographical research methodology allowed to collect data confirming that *school is not enough* and that *the role of mentors in extra-curricular establishments is crucial for young people to progress*. This particular report refers to the study on developing the digital skills of young learners, but the makers movement is worth to be studied more in depth because of its significance for many areas of education. The purpose why we mention it here is to illustrate one of the possible directions of further research.

#### Education in nature

Another vital aspect of contemporary education is the children's limited contact with the natural environment. Anna Komorowska quotes in her paper the term 'nature- deficit disorder' coined by Richard Louv<sup>8</sup> and describes several initiatives aimed at bringing children and the whole families closer to nature.

In the described pilot study, we managed to collect only a few examples from Poland and the US, but the assumption that similar efforts are undertaken in other countries seems to be fully justified. Hence, further research on this issue is necessary as well. For example, a closer look at Scandinavian countries, known from their still popular practices of spending time outside seems to be a promising direction.

#### When to start children's education?

The American example of learning in nature – Tinkergarten<sup>9</sup> – is called by its founders Megan and Brian Fitzgerald 'the healthiest classroom of all'. The reason

<sup>7</sup> The names of the specializations translated by the author.

<sup>8</sup> <http://richardlouv.com/about/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://tinkergarten.com>

# The children university model and beyond – a pilot study

for starting the initiative was the same as mentioned above – to prevent the nature deficit by providing *a play-based early learning program to children aged one through eight and their parents or caregivers in local parks and green spaces across the country*<sup>10</sup>.

In Autumn 2018 Tinkergarten started classes even for babies aged 6–18 months. The curriculum expands along with the children growing up, and its founders claim that they would like to serve people ages 0–100+ because they see such needs. It is highly likely that initiatives like this will be in focus of research in the very near future.

---

## Conclusions

---

The idea for our study originated from the interest in the activities of children universities. However, it soon started to evolve into much broader research which should be continued. Therefore, presented observations and ideas constitute only the introductory overview of the subject.

This final section of the paper aims to outline some regularities observed:

- Generally, two approaches named in this report, the German model (originated in Tübingen in 2002) and the British model coexist. The first one has been adopted by many European countries (apart from the UK), whereas the second dominates in the UK and also in Australia and some Asian countries. Some CU operate even in a mixed model, i.e., some elements of action like university lectures, for instance, are borrowed from the German concept, while the others, e.g., the ‘in the city workshops’ from the British model;
- The universities based on the British model have a common body – the Children University Trust. In the UK it is the National University Trust whereas the University of Adelaide in South

Australia coordinates the so-called Australasia Children’s University. The common feature of the universities belonging to the Trust is the same approach to teaching and learning;

- In Europe, the European Children’s Universities Network (EUCU.net) has been established first in 2008 as a part of the EU funded project, and in 2011 it started to operate as an independent body. Children’s universities associated with EUCU operate independently – the network plays a role of the experience exchange platform; Some universities from other continents (both Americas and Africa) have joined it as well.
- In the German models – usually (although not always) universities are the centers of learning and children individually join the university while in the British model – the university cooperates with schools. It is possible to enter the CU individually, but it must be agreed in every case separately and depends on the possibility to manage that;
- The vital part of non-formal education in recent years become the outdoor classes – in Europe, they are mostly individual movements, while in the US some country-wide initiatives like Tinkergarten exist. What they have in common is the active involvement of parents in children’s education – they not only participate with their children in outdoor activities but become the leaders of classes as well;

Last but not least – the characteristic feature of all the initiatives mentioned in this report is paying attention to stimulating children’s curiosity and imagination, to ‘waking up’ their awareness about the beauty and richness of the world around them and making them passionate about discovering it. That is a significant response to the challenges that the education systems worldwide face nowadays.

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.childrenandnature.org/2018/05/03/not-just-tinking-around-the-story-of-tinkergarten/>

---

**Maria Zajac, Ph.D.**, graduated in computer science from the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. She spent almost 30 years teaching at the university. Passionate about the effective use of ICT in education became fond of e-learning as soon as it appeared in mid-nineties of the twentieth century. For many years served as an e-learning expert and teaching advisor, at the same time researching the challenges that contemporary education faces and the role the technology may play to improve it. Collaborated with E-mentor academic journal since 2004, in 2016 took over the responsibility for the editorial office. Strongly believes that one can learn any time and any place and that learning may be fun.