

Gold star graduation for Rotherham youngsters

It might be ten or even fifteen years before they get their degree diplomas. But scores of Rotherham schoolchildren donned their caps and gowns for a special graduation ceremony at University Centre Rotherham in June.

The evening was a celebration of learning beyond the classroom, with the 100 pupils in attendance having participated in the Children's University. This aspiration-raising project encourages school-aged children from as young as five to take part in a variety of experiences outside of school hours to broaden their overall learning.

invited to the graduation ceremony to celebrate their achievements.

The children at the graduation were cheered on by their proud families and schoolteachers who have supported their journeys this last year. There were also guest appearances from Rotherham United's Miller Bear and Gullivers' Gully Mouse.

"Kids get the chance to develop new interests, acquire a broad range of skills, become resilient and, most importantly, have fun."



Kassi

Kassi Leigh, a year six pupil at St Mary's Catholic Primary School in Maltby, was one of the first graduates to arrive at the event. She was excited to wear her cap and gown, having earned her gold award thanks to doing over 100 hours of extra-curricular activities such as rugby and acting.

Her proud mum said Kassi came home with more merits every week and being part of the Children's University really encouraged Kassi's schooling in her final year of primary

school.

This was the first year that the Rotherham Children's University graduation ceremony has been held at UCR's town centre campus. Rotherham School Improvement Service (RoSIS), who manage Rotherham Children's University, have partnered with RNN Group to further raise awareness of the opportunities young people have to further their education in the town.

University can feel like a somewhat intimidating and unattainable world for some families, so it was important for the Rotherham Children's University team to create a sense of belonging for their participants. All the guests at the graduation had a tour of the facilities at UCR to see what their futures could hold.

"Children's University is all about raising aspirations of children for what they could achieve. This has been the right connection and a great opportunity for us to keep growing the Rotherham Children's University. The UCR campus is located right in the heart of the town, within easy reach of many disadvantaged areas.

"University isn't just about those kids who are able to go off to Oxford or Cambridge. UCR is great as it's so inclusive and students can still get a degree without leaving home. We were really impressed with UCR's focus on creative careers like performing arts or media make-up; it shows these children that degrees aren't just limited to academic subjects," said Fiona Radford, business manager at RoSIS.

This mirrors the main ethos of

Children's University. It's not about academic achievements. Kids get the chance to develop new interests, acquire a broad range of skills, become resilient and, most importantly, have fun.

Learning skills like listening, leadership and problem solving helps them better cope with any challenges in the future. Children's University is particularly good for kids who are disengaged in school as they are supported to explore their interests which helps restore their confidence and motivation in learning. And data shows that children who take part make more progress in their learning at school and are much more likely to do better than they were expected to in their SATs and GCSEs.



Rafeeq

Firas Waznay's two sons, Rafeeq and Sam, are pupils at Coleridge Primary School who both received their gold award at the graduation.

"As parents, we both had good educations and we want the same for our children. It's free to get involved but I don't mind paying for clubs for my children to go to rather than them have more toys. We

have got to invest in them as they are the future of our country. What I like about Children's University is that it has kept them off their games consoles and got them out of the house using their brains. Rafeeq is nine but he's already finding out for himself what he likes to do which is swimming, football and boxing."

Many of the learning destinations are paid-for clubs that children might already attend, like Scouts, youth clubs or swimming lessons. But the Rotherham Children's University team also send out a termly newsletter with ideas for free activities families can do at home or in the community for those children who might be held back by things they can't access outside of school.



Rachel

Rachael Goucher is the curriculum lead and year two teacher at Kiveton Park Infant School, one of the schools signed up to Rotherham Children's University. Their school tries to promote free activities where they can and set challenges during the school holidays, as well as offering credit-boosting activities during breakfast and after-school clubs which has helped improve pupils' attendance.

"We have really pushed the idea from our youngest pupils starting school in Reception and many children get over 100 credits by the time they leave us at age seven. We look at areas where participation isn't as high and tailor our activities towards that, such as a yoga or wellbeing session for mental health awareness. Last year we had a hands-on session at Northern General Hospital where the children learned about doctors, illnesses and medical treatment.

"It's definitely raised attainment and was mentioned in our recent OFSTED report; the inspectors were really excited about it, particularly the link to careers, and were interested to hear what the children had been learning away from the classroom."



Sarah

With experiences beyond the classroom, children in Rotherham have thrown themselves into a huge variety of activities such as music, theatre, sport, science, and history, taking advantage of local facilities to see what opportunities are on their doorstep.

Sarah Anne Bush is a music teacher from Swinton who is one of the newest Rotherham Children's University learning destinations. She's encouraged her existing

students to sign up to the Children's University but has also been working with schools in her local area to get them on-board for the next academic year.

"It's been rewarding to give students an experience. I teach from my home seven days a week and my students get a stamp in their passport after each lesson. Because I'm part of the national Children's University, I even have students from Hampshire who I teach over Zoom and they still get the credits. I try to make learning to read and play music fun and creative and I'm proud that all my students have got a distinction this year in their exams."

Rotherham Children's University is part of the wider South Yorkshire Children's University which covers schools in Sheffield and Doncaster and is soon launching in Barnsley. There are over 200 learning destinations involved and over 100 schools currently signed up to take part. But they are always happy to hear from anyone wishing to express an interest for the 2023/24 academic year.

Find out more at www.childrensuniversity.co.uk

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