During the February half term, Farah visited IntoUniversity Leeds East to meet with the Redman-Poku family who were keen to share their experiences of the centre. Aysha and Afreya have regularly attended IntoUniversity since the centre first opened in November 2014 and have been involved in a range of programmes available to them. Witnessing Aysha and Afreya’s dedication and hard work inspired their mother, Naoise, to pursue her own dreams and she recently enrolled onto an English course at the University of Leeds.

Aysha and Afreya’s story

Aysha and Afreya heard about IntoUniversity Leeds East through their mother, Naoise, who first encountered IntoUniversity through a poster advertising the opening of the centre. When Naoise attended the open day with her mother and youngest daughter, she was taken aback by this ‘amazing opportunity’ and strongly encouraged Aysha and Afreya to attend.

Aysha is a Year 12 student at Notre Dame Catholic Sixth Form and is studying for her A-Levels in Philosophy, Ethics, Sociology and English Language. Younger sister Afreya is in Year 9 at Abbey Grange Academy and is currently focused on her upcoming exams. Afreya mentions that her favourite subjects at school are PE and Music, and she also reveals that she plays the steel pans and loves to sing.

After a hesitant start for Aysha and a reluctance to engage with the team at IntoUniversity Leeds East, Naoise requested for Aysha to receive some one-to-one support with her Sixth Form application. This was a huge turning point for Aysha who started to communicate more with the centre staff. Since then, she has taken full advantage of all the opportunities available to her at IntoUniversity. When asked why they both like attending the Leeds East centre, Aysha and Afreya agree that they thoroughly enjoy seeing their mentors and appreciate ‘the full attention’ they receive not only from their mentors, but also from the centre staff.

Aysha speaks fondly of mentor Katie, a Law student at the University of Leeds, and states that while she was in Year 11, ‘[Katie] helped me put together a revision timetable, she spoke to me about my future, career options and we looked through university brochures’. Afreya feels she has gained a new friend in her mentor, Caren, an Accounting and Finance student at the University of Leeds. Alongside her meetings with Caren to discuss academic life, Afreya is especially grateful for the social aspects of the meetings, and particularly enjoyed making a chocolate cake in her recent meeting with Caren.

It was the hardest adventure of my life. But I did it.

As someone who initially needed encouragement to try new things and meet new people, Aysha has significantly broadened her horizons. Her confidence has continued to develop and, in the 2015 summer holidays, Aysha was fortunate to have the opportunity to travel to Canada for three weeks of my life. But I did it. ’Afreya proudly reflects on the experience: ‘It was the hardest adventure of my life. But I did it.’

Naoise’s story

Naoise reveals that ‘once [the girls] came for the first time [to Academic Support] that was it. They are really very focused.’ She is clearly very proud of Aysha and Afreya’s progress and is excited for her younger children to experience the same opportunities. Another of Naoise’s daughters, Amira, recently started at St Peter’s C of E Primary School and – now old enough – began her journey with IntoUniversity Leeds East in September 2015. Naoise recalls how committed Amira is to Academic Support: ‘Amira loves it. She will not miss a session. It was my birthday last week and I said “Amira, we’re having a day off.” She said to me “no – don’t phone!” She loves it!’

Inspired by her daughters, Naoise returned to education in September 2015 by enrolling on to an access course at the University of Leeds to study English. Naoise explained that she became unsure of her abilities during the application process but she was encouraged to keep going by thinking of her daughters: ‘At each point, I have thought about them. I thought about how hard Aysha works because she’s so determined. I kept thinking, well she’s working really hard – if she can do it then I should be able to. She just doesn’t give up, she just keeps going.’

Naoise, and the rest of the Redman-Poku family, are clear advocates for the IntoUniversity Leeds East centre. When asked whether she would recommend IntoUniversity to another parent, without hesitation she said: ‘Oh 100%, yeah! I tell everyone.’
From 1 to 21: expanding the IntoUniversity network across the country
Insight

Feedback from our Nottingham stakeholders

As a national charity, it is important for us to understand and engage with those we serve on a local level. This allows the charity to grow and improve as well as enabling community members to voice their opinions.

We recently carried out an independent consultation with IntuUniversity stakeholders based in Nottingham – from community organisations to volunteers, parents, students, and teachers – about their involvement with IntuUniversity.

Community groups and volunteers
Community groups speak with passion about the value of our three Nottingham IntuUniversity centres to the surrounding area. They view the charity’s services as a significant contribution to the vitality of their neighbourhood. The importance of trust is a strong theme discussed by community members, particularly in Broxtowe and St Ann’s, with many applauding the long-term approach of the programme.

‘The advantage of IntuUniversity over other projects is the long-term approach. I’ve worked in communities from the inner city and outer rim for 25 years. Other projects talk, good and give up quick, so the fact that IntuUniversity is well organised and funded, and has a long-term view and not a short-term view, is just as important as the work they’re doing’ – The Bishop of Sherwood.

Linda, a Secondary Academic Support Tutor, is particularly effusive, saying that the mentoring system is brilliant. Access to mentors is invaluable for the young people who come.

Another theme that emerges in conversation is IntuUniversity’s reinforcement of positive values and the effectiveness of role models. In addition, increased confidence and resilience are mentioned, particularly among tutors and mentors.

Karen, an Academic Support Tutor, says she enjoys ‘seeing students grow in confidence, achieving things [they] have not achieved before...I see lots of children trying things...they don’t say “I can’t.” They say “I’ll try.”

Teachers
When talking about particular students or groups of students, teachers are confident about attributing student success to IntuUniversity’s work.

Steph Pearson, from Melbury Primary School, tells us about the progress of one of her pupils: ‘One pupil didn’t come to Melbury until she was in Year 3, when she was considerably behind. She made progress and... particularly accelerated progress in Year 6. And while I would like to think that was down to our teaching. I then discovered she had been going to IntuUniversity’s academic support twice a week...she absolutely smashed her SATs.’

Parents
As with teachers, many parents see IntuUniversity as contributing to raising attainment. Other parents comment on improved confidence or motivation, for example Majda’s mother (IU Nottingham West) comments, before Majda was very shy, and now IntuUniversity has helped her get confident. At parents’ evening, they used to say ‘she is very good but very shy,’ and now teachers say “she puts her hand up, and contributes.”

The strongest and most consistent theme that parents value is IntuUniversity’s provision of support that they can’t offer at home: ‘I’m unable to help them to read a book or write, so coming here really helps them.’

One grandparent comments on the pastoral role of IntuUniversity in supporting her grandchildren through difficult personal issues including mental health and child protection problems: ‘The IntuUniversity staff were magic.’

Students
The pastoral dimension of IntuUniversity’s approach is also commented on by most students. Rohanna remarks that ‘the staff always ask how my day was. They talk me through my work, they are very patient.’

Students themselves report positively on the direct impact of IntuUniversity programmes on their learning, aspirations and attainment. Amir, who attends IntuUniversity Nottingham Central, explains IntuUniversity give you a yearly grades target. That helped me go from a C in Maths to an A in Maths GCSE, and I would not have been able to do so on my own.’

Amir also said that mentoring ‘made my targets more achievable. They help me consider what I want to be and then plotting a path to help you achieve that.’

Lucy Goodwill
Lucy Goodwill is IntuUniversity’s Volunteer Development Manager and has been working for the charity since September 2014. Lucy has a degree in English Literature from Oxford Brookes University and a PGCE in Secondary English, Media and Drama. She previously worked for CLIC Sargent.

If you were to ask me at any given time over the last decade what my greatest passions are, there is one thing I can guarantee would always make the list: volunteering. For me, it has proven to be a transformative experience that has given me so much.

I wasn’t really sure about volunteering when, aged 15, I signed up to help with a project in my local area, as a shy teenager, it was taking me far out of my comfort zone. As it turns out, that one experience has shaped not only the path I’ve taken in my career but also the person I’ve become. In the space of just one week I gained new skills, made new friends and left feeling I’d achieved so much more than I had initially imagined possible. Since then I have gone on to volunteer on a wide range of projects, and I couldn’t imagine a better job than one where I empower others to do the same. The power of people’s time to make positive change not only for worthwhile causes but also for themselves is something which motivates me every day.

When I saw the role of Volunteer Development Manager advertised at IntuUniversity I knew I had to go for it. I am hugely passionate about education and the charity’s mission really aligned with my own values. Add to that an innovative programme with volunteering at the heart of it and I was sold.

Student volunteers help to bring university to life for our students, showing them around their campuses, answering questions and providing opportunities for young people to get a taste of university life. Volunteers from our corporate partners offer an insight into life beyond education, opening up the doors to their offices, running employability programmes and telling students about their careers. Through tutoring and mentoring, people from all walks of life share their experiences and academic skillssets, providing our young people with inspirational role models.

Without this dedication of time, expertise and care so much of our vital work simply could not happen.

My role is to oversee all volunteer engagement across the charity. I make sure that we use volunteers’ time effectively, that volunteers are valued and that the impact and experience for all involved is of the highest quality. I lead on the way we communicate about volunteering, engaging new volunteers, and how we recognise our volunteers through training and events, supporting our staff to develop skills in volunteer management. I work closely with universities and businesses in London, oversee a volunteering team of 14 delivery staff across the charity and run a number of our corporate volunteering programmes. No two days are the same for me and I love that about my job.

Since I have been in post volunteering has developed a great deal at IntuUniversity. I have ambitious plans to do even more to realise the potential value volunteering has to support our students, as well as supporting our Head Office behind the scenes. If you already volunteer with us, thank you so much for everything that you do. If you don’t but would like to find out more, please visit our website at www.intouniversity.org/volunteer to learn more about our opportunities.
Spotlight

‘We have grown from helping a handful of individuals to a point where we are genuinely changing society for the better.’

The IntoUniversity programme began as a local project at the North Kensington centre. By 2006, the co-founders, Rachel Carr and Hugh Rayment-Pickard, knew from the burgeoning numbers and feedback from users that they had an extraordinary project on their hands. The question naturally arose: was this a one-off or could they replicate this success across several centres? They convened a symposium and invited politicians, educationalists and local community members to debate this question. I was – and am – part of the Bicester Village group that has expanded to multiple locations across Europe, so I had a sense of what it is to be part of a growing company and was in favour of expansion.

I went home and had a sleepless night thinking: ‘this is a terrific idea. The educational gap is neither fair nor good for society. My kids are helped to aspire to go to university and receive all the benefits and those two dear people said yes. So off I went to Sirdar Road and presented Rachel and Hugh with £30,000.

It seemed like a fateful moment. Rachel looked at Hugh, Hugh looked at Rachel. There was a long pause. Then Rachel said, laughing, ‘oh dear, now we really have to do it!’

And from that little acorn, seeing a handful of students, we have in less than ten years grown into this wonderful organisation with 21 centres. This year we will serve more than 21,500 young people.

What has driven and sustained this growth? Firstly and simply it is a terrific idea. The educational gap is neither fair nor good for society. A child who is doing well at primary school and who has a lot of support can be transformed by one of our centres. Over the next five years, we hope to extend our reach to more young people by opening additional centres and by expanding our programmes to best suit the needs of our students.

There is still much more to do. We have grown from helping a handful of individuals to a point where we are genuinely changing society for the better. Many consider us the most impressive charity driving social mobility in the country.

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As Trustees, we work closely with Senior Management to plan the pace of expansion. It is wonderful to be part of a growth story. An organisation that is not growing feels as if it is shrinking. Expansion is inspiring and as well as fundamentally helping more young people, it is attractive to funders who want to see an idea that is succeeding on a meaningful scale. It also creates a great atmosphere among our staff who see that if they succeed there is plenty of space for them to grow into very responsible roles at a young age. However, we Trustees are also very mindful that our expansion must be sustainable. Growth requires financial and management resources and so we try to find the right balance, carefully calibrating the number of centres we open each year so we are going as fast as we can without becoming overstretched.

Looking back, it is hard to believe how much we have grown and achieved in less than ten years. It is a remarkable narrative and we are truly indebted to our founders, our staff, our volunteers and our funders who make it possible for us to pursue this inspiring vision: closing the UK’s opportunity gap through education.