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Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

December 2013

Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

- Audience** Young people; parents/carers; teachers; universities; Welsh Government; local authorities; school governors; employers; politicians.
- Overview** Paul Murphy MP was appointed as Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales by the Minister for Education and Skills in May 2013. The appointment was made as data appeared to show that there had been a decline in recent years in Welsh entrants to the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This interim report sets out the statistical evidence base focusing on the attainment of Welsh students, and their application and admissions rates to Oxford and Cambridge. The report also summarises feedback from interested groups, highlights the importance of alumni to the project, and identifies best practice before setting out conclusions and next steps. The Oxbridge Ambassador's final report to the Minister for Education and Skills will be published in the summer of 2014 and will contain further evidence along with recommendations to address the issues.
- Action required** To contribute your views on the *Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales (December 2013)* and to the Oxbridge Ambassador Project more widely, please visit the 'Have your say/Get involved' section of the Oxbridge Ambassador website at www.wales.gov.uk/oxbridgeambassadorproject
- Further information** Enquiries about this document should be directed to:
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- Additional copies** This document can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at www.wales.gov.uk

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Introduction

I have been pleased to spend the last six months, following my appointment as Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales, gathering evidence from teachers, students, parents/carers and political representatives across Wales. As I outlined in my original report¹, the number and proportion of Welsh students applying to and being admitted to Oxford and Cambridge Universities has decreased in recent years. This is a worrying trend which must be addressed. Oxford and Cambridge are two of the best universities in the world and while their distinctive teaching styles and course content will not be appealing to all students, those Welsh students who are capable of flourishing in these systems deserve the opportunity to compete on a level playing field with all other applicants. I am delighted that many Welsh students will go on to study at our own universities in Wales, and more will undertake other routes into further and higher education, apprenticeships and employment. My primary concern is that all Welsh students have the opportunity to follow their own individual educational path of choice, whatever that may be, and that they all receive the clear information, support and encouragement that they deserve.

In this interim report, I will outline the evidence gathered to date. I will identify the key themes that have emerged from discussion and analysis of the statistical evidence. These themes will determine the focus of my next six months of activity and my final recommendations which I will submit in summer 2014. This report will not pre-suppose the outcomes of my final report, as further consultation and evidence gathering will be necessary. I am hopeful that my final recommendations will have a wider impact beyond Oxford and Cambridge applications and admissions. I believe that encouraging and supporting achievement and aspiration across the Welsh education system will offer significant benefits to all students regardless of their level of education or route of progression. My recommendations will form one small part of a much larger national drive towards breaking down socio-economic and cultural barriers to attainment, and ensuring that every student can meet their full potential, irrespective of background.

I am very grateful for the positive response to my appointment, and in particular to the many teachers, parents/carers, students, politicians and others who have taken the time to write to me. All correspondence has been useful in helping me to identify and analyse the key areas of the overall issue of Oxbridge admissions. I have also been grateful for the support received thus far from Welsh Government officials and from Oxford and Cambridge Universities. It is clear that this is a complex and multi-faceted issue which will require consideration of school policy in relation to examinations, curriculum and student support; of the university's outreach and admissions policies; and of the perceptions and attitudes of students, teachers and parents/carers across Wales.

¹ <http://paulmurphyp.co.uk/oxbridgereport/>

Section 1: The statistical evidence base

I have reviewed the statistical evidence provided by the Welsh Government and the two universities. This relates to the attainment generally of Welsh students, and their application and admissions rates to Oxford and Cambridge. In doing this I have tried to identify the key barriers for Welsh students progressing to the two universities. At this point it is necessary to mention that Oxford and Cambridge do not follow one single admissions process. There are differences in approach, with Cambridge relying heavily on Unit Module Scores in AS level qualifications, and Oxford requiring candidates to complete pre-interview subject-specific aptitude tests. There are also some differences in conditional offer levels. In short, it is not possible to describe a homogenous 'Oxbridge' admissions process.

In analysing the data, I asked several questions:

1. Are Welsh students achieving the grades they need to make a competitive application to Oxford or Cambridge?
2. Of those who do achieve the grades, are they applying in the numbers we might expect, compared with other areas of the UK?
3. Of those who do apply, how do they fare throughout the admissions process in comparison with other students?

My initial findings cause some concern, but taken alone do not show the complete picture.

Excerpt from the summary of the *Further Evidence Paper*²

Over the period in which data is assessed³, the academic years 2007–08 to 2011–12, Welsh-domiciled applicants to Oxford and Cambridge had lower success rates in their applications to both universities than applicants from England and Northern Ireland.

Application success rates to Oxford and Cambridge by UK region, 2008–2012⁴

UCAS Cycle	Oxford			Cambridge		
	Wales	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	England	Northern Ireland
2008	21.2%	27.8%	24.8%	24.9%	28.7%	33.5%
2009	16.3%	25.6%	25.0%	20.6%	26.3%	32.9%
2010	17.0%	21.9%	17.5%	22.4%	26.7%	33.0%
2011	15.5%	22.3%	23.4%	23.1%	27.0%	29.7%
2012	17.7%	23.0%	21.1%	22.3%	27.6%	28.6%
Average	17.4%	24.0%	22.3%	22.6%	27.3%	31.5%

It is important to set these success rates within the context of numbers of applications and acceptances.

² The *Further Evidence Paper* outlines the attainment, application and admissions data for Welsh students from 2007–2012. This has been produced by Welsh Government officials and will be published in full as part of the final report in summer 2014.

³ The statistics used throughout this summary, unless stated otherwise, are provided by Oxford University Admissions Office, Cambridge University Admissions Office, and the relevant departments of the Northern Irish, UK, and Welsh governments. Unless stated otherwise, the included figures are for all relevant educational sectors – maintained, independent, and further education – except in the case of Northern Ireland, where the presented performance figures are for the maintained school sector only. Where total numbers of GCSE and A level entrants are given, we believe these include candidates who sat one or more of the given qualification in the given period.

⁴ Derived from data linked at www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/statistics/ and www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/undergraduate_admissions_statistics/

Applications and acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge by UK region, 2008–2012⁵

UCAS Cycle	Oxford						Cambridge					
	Wales applications	Wales acceptances	England applications	England acceptances	Northern Ireland applications	Northern Ireland acceptances	Wales applications	Wales acceptances	England applications	England acceptances	Northern Ireland applications	Northern Ireland acceptances
2008	397	84	9,262	2,578	125	31	241	60	9,404	2,697	185	62
2009	486	79	9,989	2,555	140	35	287	59	10,006	2,635	222	73
2010	436	74	11,438	2,510	154	27	290	65	9,452	2,528	200	66
2011	476	74	11,180	2,494	167	39	247	57	8,961	2,415	212	63
2012	424	75	11,004	2,536	128	27	269	60	9,040	2,499	199	57
Average	444	77	10,575	2,535	143	32	267	60	9,373	2,555	204	64

From this data, we can see – predictably – that the number of acceptances from a region grows with that region’s number of applicants. Northern Irish applicants perform relatively well when applying to Cambridge, and Welsh applicants perform relatively poorly when applying to both Oxford and Cambridge. The question is, why?

The answer that seems likely is attainment. On a number of key measures of upper-end academic attainment, the performance of students in Wales across the assessed period was lower than the performance of students in England and Northern Ireland.

Average GCSE performance by UK region, 2008–2012

Region	Number of entries	Number of students attaining 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	35,459	1,351	3.8%
England	634,910	27,474	4.3%
Northern Ireland	23,025	1,200	5.2%

⁵ Derived from data linked at www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/statistics/ and www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/undergraduate_admissions_statistics/

This table shows that the percentage of students⁶ attaining five A* or better at GCSE is smaller in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, albeit by a relatively small margin. Five A* are an arguably useful indicator of Oxbridge potential because the average GCSE applicant to both universities has between five and six A*.

Average A level performance by UK region, 2008–2012⁷

Region	Number of entries	Number of students attaining AAA +	% AAA +	Number of students attaining A*AA +	% A*AA +	Number of students attaining A*A*A +	% A*A*A +	Number of students attaining A*A*A* +	% A*A*A* +
Wales	13,206	1,221	9.2%	773	5.9%	384	2.9%	157	1.2%
England	255,365	32,577	12.8%	24,032	9.3%	12,983	5.0%	5,630	2.2%
Northern Ireland	10,986	1,741	15.9%	1,127	9.9%	559	4.9%	236	2.1%

This table shows that the percentages⁸ of students attaining top A level results in Wales are also smaller in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, with a much more pronounced differential than at GCSE. These A level measures are significant because AAA and A*AA are the minimum standard offers currently set by Oxford and Cambridge, respectively. For information, in the 2012 UCAS Cycle, 83% of A level entrants to Cambridge attained A*A*A or better, and 60% attained A*A*A*. In the 2012 UCAS Cycle, 63% of A level entrants to Oxford attained A*A*A or better, and 40% attained A*A*A*.

There is an obvious pattern here. While the performance-gap at GCSE between Welsh students and students from England and Northern Ireland is slight, the gap at A level is more significant, and fewer Welsh students make successful applications to Oxford and Cambridge. Given that the upper-end A level performance differential between Wales, England, and Northern Ireland, is markedly greater than the GCSE performance differential, it seems likely that it is A level results that are making the difference. However, the datasets used in this paper are insufficient to prove whether this pattern is more than a coincidence. To investigate in more detail, the following data (if it is held) must be sought, for all relevant applicants, by region and year, from the two universities:

- the average GCSE attainment at the point of application
- for Oxford only, the average attainment in subject-specific admissions tests during the early stages of the application process

⁶ In all three regions, the total number of entries represents the number of students completing one or more GCSE.

⁷ The A level A* grade was made available from the end of 2009–10, so the A* figures are only for 2010–12.

⁸ In all three regions, the total number of entries represents the number of students who complete one or more A levels, including those in the FE sector.

- for Cambridge only, the average AS level unit module scores at the point of application
- the average A level attainment of successful applicants at the point of entry
- the average A level attainment of unsuccessful applicants at the end of the relevant UCAS cycle.

This additional data, perhaps over a longer period than previously analysed, would allow us to draw more substantial conclusions.

If Welsh applicants do not match their English and Northern Irish counterparts in public examinations and admissions tests, then attainment is highly likely to be the key problem holding back the success of their applications. If Welsh applicants match or outperform their English and Northern Irish counterparts in public examinations and admissions tests, then we must look beyond attainment to explain why Welsh applicants are relatively unsuccessful. Possible difficulties might include: educational support, aspiration, subject availability and combinations, UCAS references, and personal preparedness, in terms particularly of revision, motivation and super-curricular exploration. They might also include elements of the Oxford and Cambridge admissions processes which may not appropriately assess Welsh applicants, for example the interview or in Oxford's case, the aptitude tests. In the former cases, there would be more work to do in Wales. In the latter, there would be more work to do in Oxford and Cambridge. At the moment, however, we do not know where to concentrate. Additional research is required.

As an addendum on attainment, the percentages of Welsh A level students attaining AAA or better, A*AA or better, and A*A*A or better all declined during 2008–2012⁹: 9.4% to 8.6%, 6.1% to 5.5%, and 3.2% to 2.7%, respectively. The percentage of Welsh A level students attaining A*A*A* or better was static, at an average of 1.2%. This overall tendency for decline in upper-end A level is against an increase in the percentages of Welsh GCSE students attaining five A* or better during the same period, from 3.5% to 4.1%. This reverse trend is disquieting, especially because it is not obviously matched by a similar pattern in either England or Northern Ireland. Further consideration is needed here too.

[End of excerpt]

⁹ The A level A* grade was made available from the end of 2009–10, so the A* figures are only for 2010–12.

To return to my original questions, we can answer as follows.

1. Are Welsh students achieving the grades they need to make a competitive application to Oxford or Cambridge?

Not in the proportions we might reasonably expect. Attainment at the highest end of the spectrum, at both GCSE and A level, is not high enough in comparison to England and Northern Ireland. Not enough students are achieving the top grades required to competitively apply to Oxford and Cambridge. I will be working with officials in the coming months to ensure that this group is given consideration in the context of Welsh Government's overall drive to raise attainment in schools.

2. Of those who do achieve the grades, are they applying in the numbers we might expect, compared with other areas of the UK?

Again, not in the proportions we might reasonably expect. There is, however, less disparity here, with an average 58% of Welsh AAA candidates applying to Oxford or Cambridge, compared to 61% of English applicants and only 20% of Northern Irish (Northern Ireland having both a low proportion of applicants and a high proportion of AAA students).

3. Of those who do apply, how do they fare throughout the admissions process in comparison with other students?

This is the particularly concerning answer, as it appears that Welsh students' success rates when they do apply to both universities are disproportionately lower. As outlined above, it will be necessary to consider this in greater detail to attempt to understand the reasons behind these figures. These may relate to the applicant pool in terms of academic qualification and choice of subjects; it may be an issue of support, encouragement and preparation, or it may relate to details within the universities admissions processes. I will conduct this research for inclusion in my final report, and will propose solutions based on the data analysis.

I am also aware that comparison between Wales and England or Northern Ireland does not always produce reliable results. The figures above are of interest, but given the difference in demographics and educational systems, I would also like to compare Welsh attainment and application figures with distinct areas of England, for example the North East. I believe this will produce an even more authoritative analysis of the current situation.

Section 2: Feedback from interested groups

I have, with officials, attended close to 30 meetings and events at which I have heard feedback from students, teachers, parents/carers and other interested parties on the issue of university admissions in general, and Oxbridge specifically. We have visited schools and colleges, both those with history of submitting Oxbridge candidates, and those with little or no experience. I have also discussed these issues at conferences and with the Welsh Government's Schools Practitioner Panel. I have visited both universities and have spoken to senior management, tutors and admissions staff. I have also had very interesting and fruitful discussions with current Welsh Oxford and Cambridge students. These groups have made many insightful points about the issues facing Welsh students today. A full list of consultation events will be provided alongside my final report, but suffice to say at this point, we have attempted to ensure a wide range of feedback is or will be heard from all areas in Wales.

There have been several themes which have arisen throughout this consultation, which suggests that these are issues with a wide scope and may have a direct impact on the application and admission rates.

Self-esteem and academic self-confidence

In a broad sense, there are two aspects of the admissions process where this is a major factor. The first is the decision to engage with the process to begin with. Students report that they believe Oxbridge students to be of elite academic ability, and they find it difficult to calibrate their own academic capabilities in order to decide whether or not to apply. Encouragement from informed adults, whether parents/carers, teachers or friends, may play a sufficient role here, but some students have also reported that they have benefited from engaging with other students of a similar ability, either through university-led programmes such as summer schools, or through school honours programmes for high academic achievers.

The second aspect of this is the commitment to pursue the admissions process to the extent that the student ends up in Oxford or Cambridge. I have heard several troubling accounts of students who have doubted their own academic capabilities and suitability to study at either university despite holding a conditional offer. It is clear to me that issues of self-esteem are prevalent throughout the whole admissions cycle and I will be submitting proposals which will address this in my final report.

Structured support

Encouragement is very important, but there are also specific support mechanisms which students who are considering applying to Oxford or Cambridge should be able to access. I am aware from discussions with teachers that there are many and varied calls on resources and time and so I am keen to identify solutions which are easily embedded into existing school commitments and are realistic for teachers and other staff to deliver. To do this, I am very interested to identify examples of best practice, whereby schemes are set up within schools or partnerships of schools to properly support these students.

I have had the pleasure of attending several events run by outreach staff at Oxford and Cambridge, designed for teachers and students. The two universities are committing significant funding towards delivering outreach activity and resources, and I want to ensure that this is sufficiently targeted in audience and content, and that it is being taken up by schools across Wales.

Perceptions of Oxbridge

Some of the students I spoke with consider Oxford and Cambridge to be elitist institutions, where background and social class are important. Indeed many of the current Oxbridge students I met recognised some of these perceptions. For them however, the reputation of Oxford and Cambridge as elite academic institutions was more important, and helped them to overcome any concerns they had about the social side of life as an Oxbridge student. All of them happily report that these preconceptions were removed when they eventually joined the university, but they are concerned at the impact of these perceived barriers on other students. As highlighted above, potential applicants need support and encouragement, so it is not just the perceptions of the student that need concern us, but also those of parents/carers, peers and teachers. For example, parents/carers are more likely than students to be aware of the cost of university and have concerns about this. As Welsh Government covers a large proportion of tuition fees for Welsh students, it is vital that parents/carers are aware of this support.

Information provided by the universities

Many teachers have commented on the nature of the Oxford and Cambridge admissions processes, which are perceived to be somewhat more complicated than those at most other UK universities. The use of GCSE and AS level results, subject-specific aptitude tests, written work and interviews are features of either or both universities' admissions processes. The universities assert that these additional elements of the application process allow them to give greater and fairer consideration to each individual applicant to ensure the very best are offered places.

It is inevitable however, that teachers wish to further understand how this information is used so they can better support their students. In particular the issue of feedback was raised, with teachers reporting that clear feedback which reflects on the student's personal application experience can be very useful for both supporting the applicant through a rejection, and also for benchmarking expectations and preparing future applicants for the admissions process. Conversely, no feedback, or that of superficial detail, can reaffirm suspicions or perceptions that the process is not fair or objective and that there is some sort of 'secret knowledge' needed to navigate the admissions hurdles. I will discuss these issues further with Oxford and Cambridge admissions tutors.

Further to these themes, there are several issues which I had expected to hear about but which have not yet come up in much detail. I believe that these may also be relevant to the overall question around Oxbridge admissions for Welsh students and I will attempt to solicit opinion in these areas in more detail in the following months.

Experience of outreach work

I have had the pleasure of attending several events run by the two universities. I am aware of the wide range and varied nature of activity that is delivered regionally and at each university. I would like to know more about how this activity is received by Welsh students and schools. Is uptake as high as it should be, and if not why aren't students and teachers attending events? Could these be organised differently in order to encourage attendance? Both universities commit significant effort to communicating with all prospective applicants. In addition to this, several colleges have outreach officers who are tasked with working in Wales. Are communication lines between the two universities and Welsh schools as good as they can be? If not, how can these be improved?

Student experience of the admissions process

I have heard much about student perceptions of the two universities, and I have heard from teachers about the admissions processes. I am unsure whether the nature of the Oxford and Cambridge admissions processes are an active disincentive to students who have the academic capability of applying.

Information provision

I would like to know more about how students gather information. There are many sources of information about university in general, and Oxford and Cambridge in particular. Where are the trusted information sources for students – do they rely on teachers and parents/carers, or do they conduct their own online research? If so, are the two university websites the primary source of knowledge, or are 'unofficial' channels such as The Student Room and Facebook deemed to be more objective and therefore useful? Before a student can make an informed decision, it is vital that they can access relevant information, and I believe this may be a barrier for Welsh students considering an Oxbridge application.

Section 3: Alumni

In my own experience, I benefited immensely from a teacher who was himself an Oxford graduate. While I am not advocating any requirement that teachers must be Oxbridge graduates, it remains that exposure to an Oxford or Cambridge alumnus with which a student has something in common, serves to demystify the institutions in an important way. I believe that current Oxford and Cambridge students, along with recent graduates, could play a key role in normalising this educational path for Welsh students. Many students I have met expressed in very positive terms their experiences of meeting with current Oxbridge students, either as part of school visits, at summer schools, or through friends of friends.

The idea that 'someone like me' can achieve a place at a leading university can be extremely powerful, particularly for those with no similar role models in their lives. I am pleased to be working with Future First, a London-based educational charity which aims to create alumni networks in state schools. While having a broader focus than this project, Future First are nevertheless facilitating five school events across Wales in which we will invite alumni back to schools to talk of their experience at university and in their subsequent careers.

I also intend to meet with alumni of Oxford and Cambridge to discuss these issues in more depth and to consider whether there is a formal role that this group can play in supporting Welsh students. This will inform my final report.

Section 4: Identifying best practice

I have been encouraged to observe several existing programmes in Wales and in England which I believe represent best practice in stretching and challenging more able and talented students, and preparing students for competitive universities and courses and particularly for Oxbridge entry. In Coleg Cambria in Wrexham, the Honours Students are identified in Year 12 as high academic achievers and those who pursue applications for Oxbridge, medicine or dentistry courses are given additional support for these admissions processes. The highest achieving mathematics students are given extra tuition to stretch and challenge them. In Gower College Swansea, staff deliver an academic extra-curricular programme for students from the college and surrounding schools. In both cases, high-achieving students are brought together as a critical mass. This is important for several reasons: students don't feel isolated and are less likely to try to suppress their academic talent; students can support and academically challenge each other; and the group is of sufficient size that it warrants dedicated resource.

I will continue to seek examples of best practice in encouraging and supporting students. I will take particular interest in programmes, events or initiatives which may be easily replicable by schools in other areas of Wales.

Conclusions and next steps

As I said in my introduction, it is not my intention to suggest proposals for overcoming barriers to Oxbridge for Welsh students at this point. Further work is needed to assess new areas of the statistical data, and to gather feedback on some of the points raised earlier in this report. I will however, outline my proposed next steps.

I will direct my team to conduct the further data analysis outlined in Section 1. We will attempt to demonstrate the reason for the lower progression rate for Welsh Oxbridge applicants and our proposals for reversing this trend will reflect this evidence base.

I will continue to receive feedback from students, teachers, parents/carers, and alumni on the issue of barriers, perceptions and support. I will draw attention to the areas highlighted above, in order to ensure that my final report contains proposals which reflect the reality on the ground, and which attempt to address the real and perceived barriers to Oxbridge entry.

I will continue to engage with Oxford and Cambridge Universities, in order to ensure that they receive the relevant feedback from students and teachers and consider whether changes are necessary within their systems and processes.

I will consult with alumni about the role they might be able to play in inspiring, advising and supporting high-achieving Welsh students.

Finally, I look forward to submitting my final report to the Minister for Education and Skills in summer 2014. I will be recommending a series of proposals which I feel will best work towards breaking down the barriers to Oxbridge entry for Welsh students. These proposals will relate to all involved parties: schools, parents/carers, the two universities and Welsh Government. My proposals will be achievable and realistic. They will be based on evidence gathered, and they will be firmly embedded into existing education policy. Most importantly, I will submit the proposals which I feel will, over time, demonstrate the most impact – that is, they will reverse current trends, and ensure that more Welsh students in future can study at Oxford and Cambridge Universities if that is the path they choose.