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Final Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

June 2014

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Audience	Young people; parents/carers; teachers; universities; Welsh Government; local authorities; school governors; employers; politicians.
Overview	Paul Murphy MP was appointed as Oxbridge Ambassador to establish the reasons behind the decline in Welsh applications and admissions to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The final report builds upon the findings of the interim report that was published in December 2013, and takes into account all of the feedback received to date. The report summarises the findings of the project based on an analysis of relevant data and a broad consultation with students, teachers and other key stakeholders. The report identifies some of the main issues around raising standards, boosting self-esteem and sharing best practice in building up our most able and talented young people, presents recommendations to address them and identifies areas of effective practice.
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Additional copies	This document can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at www.wales.gov.uk
Related documents	<i>Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales</i> (2013) www.wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/report/131212-interim-report-en.pdf Supporting research papers (2014) www.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/oxbridge-project/oxbridge-final-report/?lang=en Authored by Murphy, Gallagher and Padley.

Contents

Foreword	2
Acknowledgements	5
Terms of reference, executive summary and primary recommendation	10
Section 1: Summary of methodology	14
Section 2: Analysis of data	15
Section 3: Feedback from schools and colleges	20
Section 4: Conclusions	27
Annex A: Summary of supporting recommendations	28

Foreword

Nearly 50 years ago I was very fortunate to be accepted to read Modern History at Oriel College, Oxford. I came from a working class family from Torfaen and was the first to go into higher education, so it was a great privilege, not simply to go to university, but to go to one of the best in the world. My time at Oxford transformed my life and when I became Secretary of State for Wales in 1999 I was asked to be involved in Access Cymru, which was a fine initiative geared to encouraging Welsh students to go to Oxford University.

In more recent years, I have been troubled by the fact that fewer young Welsh men and women are applying to go to Oxford and Cambridge and that fewer are being accepted. My concerns were backed up by the statistics I uncovered when I decided three years ago to compile a short report on this issue for the then Minister for Education and Skills in Wales, Leighton Andrews AM.

The proportion of our brightest students applying to Oxford and Cambridge is too low and, for those who do apply, our success rate is lower than other parts of the UK. In the 2011–12 admissions cycle, only 19.5 per cent of our applications to the UK's top two universities were successful, compared to a success rate of 25 per cent for England and Northern Ireland.

When I met with Leighton Andrews, he suggested that I might become the 'Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales' and look in greater depth at the issue and what could be done to turn the tide. His support and encouragement for this work has been mirrored by his successor, Huw Lewis AM, and Huw's deputy, Ken Skates AM.

I hope that the recommendations contained in this report will address the issue of declining applications to Oxford and Cambridge and that in the fullness of time more young people from Wales will go to those universities.

That isn't to say that we do not have some very fine universities in Wales, because we do; nor is it to imply that the Russell Group Universities in the UK are not very fine institutions, because they are. Neither is this work meant to disparage the value of other vital routes to fulfilling and worthwhile employment, like apprenticeships or part-time courses that give students the chance to learn while working.

My view is simply that our brightest Welsh students should be given every opportunity to go to two of the finest universities on the planet. Furthermore, I believe that focussing on some of the key themes in my report – raising standards, boosting pupils' self-esteem and sharing best practice in building up our most able and talented young people – will have gains that extend far beyond just Oxbridge application and entry levels.

I have received huge encouragement from across Wales, not least from young people themselves, who share my view. Over the last 18 months my team and I have travelled the length and breadth of Wales, meeting hundreds of students and teachers. In addition, we have visited the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and the relevant constituent colleges

on numerous occasions. The support we have had from politicians and civil servants, academics and teachers, students and parents/carers has been both encouraging and moving and I would like to pay tribute to all those who have contributed to this study. I am only sorry that I cannot list everyone personally in the acknowledgements that follow, but to do so would take a great many pages.

As with any report, I would discourage the temptation to interpret my findings through a negative 'Who's to blame?' lens. We should avoid attaching blame either to teachers, governments or the universities themselves, as if one factor can explain away the whole issue and fit conveniently into a snappy headline. Such gross oversimplifications would achieve nothing for our young people and would have no positive impact on the statistics. Instead, the factors at work are complex and nuanced, and require everyone involved to work together to bring about an improvement.

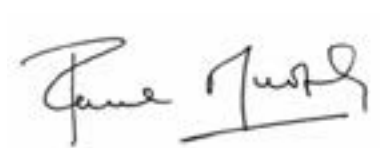
As someone who taught for 17 years in Ebbw Vale, none of the recommendations in my report are intended to criticise the current contributions of staff in our schools and colleges. I realise how stretched staff are as they try to deliver the best possible education for all their pupils. Neither should we be too downbeat in our assessment of what schools and colleges are currently doing – there are lots of extremely impressive examples of good practice right around Wales, with staff going the extra mile to help their students as they approach their university applications. So my recommendations should be seen as a positive attempt to help equip and enable schools and colleges and to spread that best practice and get the best outcomes from valuable staff time and to ensure the every pupil receives the very best support, wherever they live in Wales and wherever they chose to study.

Lastly, I want to draw your attention to two opportunities we are presented with in Wales thanks to the policy initiatives of the Welsh Government. Firstly, unlike current proposals in England, Welsh Government intends to maintain AS levels as standard at the end of Year 12, leading to A levels at the end of Year 13. Welsh Government also intends to keep AS and A level uniform mark scheme (UMS) scores that Cambridge in particular find valuable in differentiating between exceptionally bright candidates. Welsh students will still be able to present these scores as they apply, giving them an extra chance to prove their ability, which can only be to their advantage.

Secondly, the more generous settlement for Welsh students in terms of fees and grants is something which should be commended. Welsh students going to Oxford and Cambridge, or indeed to any Welsh or English university, will not face having to pay the £9,000 fees that their English and Scottish counterparts will. Students from lower and middle income families will also have a better system of grants to help with living costs. I have met some Welsh pupils who are not aware of this situation, so initiatives to further promote this policy are welcome.

Over the course of my work I have also encountered the misconception that going to Oxford and Cambridge would be more expensive than other universities. It is important to disprove this, as I would hate for any prospective Welsh Oxbridge student to be needlessly put off by financial worries. This is simply not the case; both universities have very reasonable accommodation, travel costs in both cities are low and both universities have bursaries to help students – some of which are reserved for Welsh students.

We sometimes have a habit in Wales of talking ourselves down. I will have none of that. The Welsh pupils and students I have met over the course of my study are as bright as any anywhere. Whatever path they choose in life, our job is to equip them to aim for the stars. The completion of this report is only the first step in achieving this. However I present my report to the Minister for Education and Skills with every confidence that by working in partnership we can implement these recommendations for the good of every one of our young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Murphy', written in a cursive style.

The Rt. Hon Paul Murphy MP

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I would also like to thank Teach First for their time and input and Future First for all of their work engaging with alumni and organising our hub events.

Finally, this work would not have been possible without the Oxbridge Ambassador Team: Nia Jones, Sinead Gallagher, Dr Jonathan Padley, Anthony Hunt, Briony Robinson, Michelle Playle, Kara Richards, Robert Boardman and James Cruikshank. I have been very lucky to have such an able team and have thoroughly enjoyed working with you all.

Terms of reference, executive summary and primary recommendation

Terms of reference

In 2012, I was asked by Leighton Andrews AM, then Education and Skills Minister for Wales, to consider the reasons for the apparent decline in Welsh admissions to Oxford and Cambridge universities. Furthermore I was asked to conduct some research into how Wales might overcome these reasons in order to increase the number of successful applications in the future.

Executive summary

There have been two distinct strands of work within this project; each playing a vital role in determining the overall picture. In the first strand, we have analysed data made available by Welsh Government, Oxford and Cambridge universities, and UCAS. This has helped us to understand the educational context in which we are discussing Welsh applications and admissions to Oxford and Cambridge, and to identify the level of disparity between Welsh admissions and others from the UK. The second strand of work has been consultative: I have personally spoken with hundreds of young people, teachers, alumni and other interested parties in order to gather their opinions and feedback on their understanding of the issues. Their input has been utterly vital in helping me to explain the trends identified in the data analysis.

Welsh attainment at the upper-end is not as high as it should be when compared proportionally with the rest of the UK. Between 2008 and 2012, an average of 9.2 per cent of Welsh A level students achieved three A grades or better, compared with an average of 12.7 per cent of UK A level students¹. In the same period, an average of 3.8 per cent of Welsh students achieved five A* grades or better at GCSE, compared with an average of 4.3 per cent of UK students². National attainment in Wales, however, is not the whole story. Wales' strongest students, measured by examination results, are actually applying to Oxford and Cambridge, but are not getting through the universities' admissions processes. Our applicants' results at GCSE are on a par with others from the UK, but they fall behind when post-16 attainment is considered, through AS level UMS scores and admissions tests. In the North East of England, attainment levels are on average below those in Wales, yet applicants from the North East are admitted to Oxford and Cambridge at the average rate for the UK – a lot higher than Welsh applicants. This does not mean that attainment levels are irrelevant, but rather that high achievers must also be supported through programmes of super-curricular activity which develop the key skills necessary for progression to Oxford, Cambridge and other competitive universities. Our academically more able and talented (MAT) students³ – our potential Oxford and Cambridge applicants – must therefore be

¹ Table 2.2 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base' (see www.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/oxbridge-project/oxbridge-final-report/?lang=en)

² Table 2.4 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base' (see www.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/oxbridge-project/oxbridge-final-report/?lang=en)

³ www.learning.wales.gov.uk/improvementareas/anandinclusion/moreableandtalented

supported to thrive and develop, to explore their subject outside of the classroom, and to think and engage critically with academic issues. Teachers have a role to play in supporting these students, but they must be informed and supported in turn by the universities and by Welsh Government. There must be space in the curriculum and some funding made available for MAT students. School and college leaders must be recognised for their efforts to raise attainment in high-achieving students.

Primary recommendation

I believe that to make the necessary impact a national network of partnership hubs should be established to ensure that schools and colleges can learn from each other, and share resources to support their most academically able students. Initial consultation suggests that 12 such hubs should be fit for purpose, though the final number is to be confirmed. Welsh Government, schools and colleges, and universities must act to reduce the element of chance in MAT provision which currently exists in our education system: many pupils have benefited from a particularly enthusiastic teacher, an extra-curricular class, a summer school or a knowledgeable family friend. This is useful for the individual but there is no consistency of provision throughout the education system. These hubs will ensure that there is consistency in the future.

Along with schools and colleges, Oxford and Cambridge would also be expected to contribute to these hubs, offering advice and support where appropriate. Each hub would be required to provide a minimum standard of support, with each able to adapt according to local need. These partnerships should embed super-curricular support with a view to:

- maximising attainment potential
- inspiring high-achievers to aspire to progress to Oxford, Cambridge and other leading universities, using positive role models and clear information and advice
- supporting this progression through academic enrichment activities, specialist support for interviews and tests, and information dissemination.

For example, members of each hub could make a commitment to provide effective mock interviews for Oxford and Cambridge applicants within its region. I have observed elements of best practice throughout my research, involving super-curricular academic programmes using a combination of teachers, alumni, local universities and Oxford and Cambridge. It is important to note that I am not simply recommending that existing programmes are replicated in other areas, bearing in mind practical issues of scalability. Instead, I intend that evidence of success should be shared across Wales, and that each hub should approach the task in its own way, taking account of local expertise and of local issues.

Oxford and Cambridge will play a key role in these hubs: listening to local needs, being a proactive partner in developing programmes of support, and assessing the effectiveness of existing programmes where advice is sought.

The hubs will provide single points of contact on both sides: a point of contact within Oxford and Cambridge for outreach to each region, and a single regional contact who will disseminate communications from universities, to include Oxford, Cambridge, and other higher education (HE) institutions. These people will be critical to the success of the partnerships, and their responsibilities in this area should be recognised and reflected in their job descriptions. A Welsh Government webpage could list key contacts for every region and each region would be expected to publicise their activities in a suitable manner.

A limited amount of funding could have a significant impact on this work. I propose that Welsh Government should allocate short-term funding to local authorities on a match-funded basis to 'pump prime' activity for the first two years of each hub. Based on Oxford and Cambridge's experience of delivering comparable initiatives, it is possible that a phased rather than immediate national rollout may be advisable, so a medium-term funding commitment should be considered.

Welsh Government is responsible for providing guidance on supporting MAT students. For the purposes of this report, I am specifically considering the needs of the most academically-talented students. Welsh Government has issued guidance on supporting this group within schools but the extent to which this is observed and implemented within schools and colleges is currently unknown. I await the outcome of the Welsh Government's MAT report, due to be published later in the year, which will be inviting interested parties to tender to identify academic, practical, and artistic/creative MAT provision within schools, further education (FE) institutions and local authorities in Wales. I hope this review will provide useful information which can be utilised by each hub in the manner that best suits its area. Schools and colleges can share expertise and resources, and can build on each other's experiences. Students will benefit from participating in a MAT programme of a critical size, to boost their own academic self-confidence, and help them to self-assess their abilities and knowledge.

Assembling students in some areas of Wales will be geographically challenging. For these I suggest that technological solutions, for example video-conferencing and/or other remote delivery approaches, are considered, again in consultation with each hub's membership.

These proposed hubs will provide a framework for national activity, such as a programme of engagement for Welsh alumni of Oxford and Cambridge (and other leading universities) who wish to support prospective applicants from local schools and colleges. Such engagement will be administered principally through the hubs, so it can respond effectively to the needs of each community.

Finally, ongoing assessment of the success of each hub will clearly be necessary, especially given that each hub will be built on the same principles but will likely be operationally different. All concerned need to feel that they are participating in responsive, developing partnerships, over which they have ownership, and in which they can see – in forensic detail – what is and isn't working for their individual areas.

I have made a number of additional suggestions for future developments throughout this report. These should be considered by the Welsh Government and the universities as part of any future work related to the primary recommendation of developing the hub model of practice. A full summary of these recommendations can be found in Annex A.

Section 1: Summary of methodology

1. The research underpinning this report has not been a formal academic exercise, but rather a comprehensive study by me and my team. We have applied a logical and thoughtful methodology to our research. Consequently this report should be taken as a fact-finding piece of work which may be of use alongside other evidence in helping Welsh Government to determine future policy developments.
2. Our quantitative research has been based on information provided by Welsh Government, the Departments for Education in England and Northern Ireland, UCAS, and Oxford and Cambridge universities. Full details of our data analysis, including data sources and methodology, can be found in the research papers published alongside this report.
3. Our qualitative research took the form of a consultation exercise. We identified schools and colleges which we asked to visit and speak with teachers and students. We selected schools and colleges from different areas of Wales, and included those with above and below average attainment levels, and with above and below average rates of admission to Oxford and Cambridge. I spoke with teachers on an individual and collective basis using focus groups. In some schools and colleges I spoke with groups of students and had the opportunity to question them directly. In other areas, student feedback was collected through activities delivered by Future First. The feedback and viewpoints we collected may be regarded as a selection of opinions. I feel however, that the consistency with which issues were raised, alongside the methodology for selecting schools and colleges suggests that this feedback is an accurate reflection of the opinions of our teachers and students.

Section 2: Analysis of data

4. During the course of this project, I have learned that the admissions processes at Oxford and Cambridge are in some ways similar and in some ways different. Both universities interview all the applicants they shortlist, for instance, but these applicants are shortlisted in different ways. For applicants sitting modular AS levels and A levels, Cambridge relies heavily on average UMS scores for both interview shortlisting and subsequent selection. In comparison, Oxford requires applicants in the majority of subjects to complete pre-interview, subject-specific admissions tests. These, alongside GCSE results (when available), form the basis of Oxford's shortlisting for interview and admissions decisions. These divergent uses of attainment are important. They have significant implications for understanding the pattern of Welsh applications to Oxford and Cambridge.
5. In my interim report and in the paper published alongside this report 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base' (TEB), upon which the interim report's statistical observations were based, I noted that, for the period 2008–12, Wales-domiciled students were less likely to apply successfully to Oxford and Cambridge than their peers from England and Northern Ireland. For the same period, I also demonstrated that relatively small percentages of Welsh students attained GCSE and A level grades which were in line with those achieved by realistic Oxford and Cambridge applicants. Finally, and perhaps most critically, I highlighted that, while upper-end GCSE performance in Wales improved from 2008 to 2012, upper-end A level performance declined. I speculated that there could be a relationship between these admissions and attainment trends, but did not then have the data to confirm or deny such a relationship.
6. My interim report also raised a number of then-unanswered questions. Mindful of the relatively low percentages of Welsh students attaining very strong grades at GCSE and A level, do Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge present relatively low attainment when they apply or are they actually suitably qualified? Can we explain the disparity between admissions rates for Welsh applicants, compared with others in the UK? Is a comparison between students from Wales, England, and Northern Ireland sufficiently robust, or is there an argument for comparing Wales with, for example, a distinct region of England? I have now had access to the data necessary to answer these questions.

Do Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge present relatively low attainment when they apply or are they actually suitably qualified?

7. Having analysed new data from Oxford and Cambridge, I can confirm that, on average, in a number of critical measures, Welsh applicants to both universities do indeed present relatively low attainment when or soon after they apply.
8. For the period 2009–12, Welsh applicants to Cambridge on average presented 4.7 A* grades at GCSE; higher than England and Northern Ireland. However, they also

presented average UMS scores across three subjects of 88.7 per cent at AS level; lower than England and Northern Ireland. Put another way, Welsh applicants to Cambridge on average fell from top at the end of Year 11 to bottom at the end of Year 12, and were lower than English and Northern Irish applicants in the attainment area that Cambridge considers most critical, i.e. average UMS scores.

9. For the period 2008–12, Welsh applicants to Oxford on average presented the same number of A* grades at GCSE as UK applicants, or just below. The bulk of applicants in both groups attained 5–10 A* grades. The bulk of entrants attained 7–11 A* grades. However, for the period 2010–12 (Oxford has been extensively using admissions tests since 2010), Welsh applicants were uniformly less strong than UK applicants in a variety of admissions tests, both before and after shortlisting. From good GCSE grades at the end of Year 11, Welsh applicants to Oxford did not go on to attain commensurate performance in admissions tests in Year 13.
10. There is some good news here. Despite the fact that Wales overall exhibits relatively low upper-end performance at GCSE, Welsh applicants to both Oxford and Cambridge are actually fundamentally in line by GCSE with applicants from across the UK. However, those same Welsh applicants are tending to do less well after GCSE, both in average UMS scores (Cambridge) and in admissions tests (Oxford). This bears out the clear pattern of declining upper-end performance in Wales after GCSE which I identified in TEB.

Can we explain the disparity between admissions rates for Welsh applicants, compared with others in the UK?

11. Yes, we can. It seems highly likely that the relatively low admission of Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge can in large part be attributed to their relatively low attainment in the post-GCSE assessments which the universities consider critical.
12. There remains a question, however, about whether the difference between Welsh and UK success rates can be explained by attainment disparity alone. For the period 2008–12, Wales-domiciled applicants to Cambridge had a 22.6 per cent success rate, compared with 27 per cent for the UK. For the same period, Wales-domiciled applicants to Oxford had a 17.3 per cent success rate, compared with 23.6 per cent for the UK. Cambridge is not able to provide attainment figures for shortlisted applicants but Oxford can, and I found from these that shortlisted Welsh applicants to Oxford were less likely to receive offers than shortlisted UK applicants with comparable numbers of GCSE A* grades. Relatively low performance in admissions tests may have contributed to drawing down these shortlisted Welsh applicants, but it seems likely that relative underperformance at interview will have played a part too.

Is a comparison between students from Wales, England and Northern Ireland sufficiently robust, or is there an argument for comparing Wales with, for example, a distinct region of England?

13. In TEB, I made the argument that a straightforward comparison of success rates between Wales, England and Northern Ireland masked differences in the education systems offered in these three countries. I also found that a comparison between Welsh and English success rates at a local authority level was problematic, so I have made an additional comparison between Welsh success rates and the success rates of applicants from a comparable English region: the North East.⁴
14. In this new comparison, I identified that students in the North East on average perform below the overall UK average at the upper-end of GCSE and A level attainment. On key measures (five A* grades at GCSE, three A grades at A level, three A* grades at A level), attainment in the North East was lower during 2008–12 than equivalent Welsh performance. In spite of this, the success rate of North East applicants to Oxford and Cambridge was much higher than the success rate of Welsh applicants in the same period, although the success rate of North East applicants was very slightly below the UK average. On the basis of this evidence, the North East appears to have a lower overall baseline of academic attainment, yet its students are admitted to Oxford and Cambridge at a broadly average rate for UK applicants.
15. When examining the reasons for this disparity, I considered the possibility that several schools or colleges in the North East might be particularly successful at supporting applicants to Oxford and Cambridge, and therefore artificially inflating the admissions figures for the region. During 2008–12, I found that four schools in the North East supplied 10 or more successful Oxford applicants. Six Welsh schools supplied the same, suggesting that there is not necessarily a dominating group of North East schools. The largest cohort from a single school in the North East was 27, and the equivalent in Wales was 16. Successful North East applicants came from 35 different schools and colleges, and the equivalent for Wales was 48 schools and colleges.
16. It is difficult to know what conclusions to draw from this comparison because, within the time available, I was not able to access attainment data for Oxford and Cambridge applicants from the North East of England. This lack is critical because, as shown here, what may be said of a region's overall cohort may or may not tally with what may be said of that region's applicants to Oxford and Cambridge. Here, it seems likely that North East applicants are performing more strongly after GCSE than applicants from Wales, in spite of the relatively low upper-end attainment overall of the North East in comparison

⁴ The North East region includes the following local authorities: Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle Upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar and Cleveland, South Tyneside, Stockton-on-Tees, Sunderland.

with Wales. Further study to clarify this comparison would be instructive. Whatever the results of such further study, however, I do not believe it would detract from the crucial patterns that we have identified in Wales.

Welsh entrants to Oxford and Cambridge

17. From these new analyses, a further question arises about whether Welsh entrants to Oxford and Cambridge are as strong as entrants from the rest of the UK. The answer, I am pleased to report, is a resounding yes. For the period 2009–12, Welsh entrants to Cambridge presented an average UMS score across three subjects of 93.3 per cent at AS level at the point of application, exactly the same as English entrants, and only 0.1 per cent behind UK entrants (93.4 per cent). For the period 2010–12 (A* grades at A level have been awarded since 2010), Welsh, English and UK entrants to Cambridge attained the same average number of A* grades at A level: 2.7. For the same period, Welsh offer holders at Oxford who sat more than three A levels attained the same average number of A* grades at A level as UK entrants: 1.9.
18. This last is a real success story for Wales. It tells us that the students from Wales who are progressing to Oxford and Cambridge are every bit as good in post-GCSE attainment as their peers from across the UK. It also suggests that we can be positive about the fairness of the universities' admissions processes, because both institutions are admitting students of a consistent, exceptionally high standard.

Conclusions

19. From my new research and TEB, I can now say authoritatively that, for the assessed periods, Welsh students performed below their English and Northern Irish peers in upper-end GCSE and A level attainment. I can also assert that, while Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge on average performed as well as or better than their UK counterparts at GCSE, they on average performed less well than their UK counterparts in admissions tests at Oxford and in average UMS scores at Cambridge. It has not been possible to quantify the relative impact of the interview on shortlisted Welsh applicants, but this will invariably play a role in the final assessment of each student, albeit more so at Oxford than at Cambridge.
20. Making these observations is not to attribute responsibility for them to any one sector. Oxford and Cambridge need to continue explaining the particularities of their respective admissions processes to their target audiences in Wales (students, teachers and parents/carers), to ensure they recruit realistic applicants. Welsh Government, through schools, colleges and teachers, needs to drive up student attainment, both at GCSE but more critically at AS and A level. As part of this educational drive, it is imperative to facilitate discursive approaches to study, incorporating verbal academic argumentation

and critical thinking, in order to boost the performance (and confidence) of Welsh students both in academic (admissions) tests and conversation. Such an approach will not only advantage academic Welsh students in applications to Oxford and Cambridge, but, perhaps more importantly, ensure that they are well prepared to apply to other competitive-for-entry academic HE institutions as well.

Section 3: Feedback from schools and colleges

21. Throughout this project I have been grateful to travel across Wales to talk to enthusiastic young people and motivated, energetic teachers. A full list of my consultative work is outlined earlier in this report. Many points were raised multiple times in a range of locations, suggesting that experiences across Wales are relatively consistent. I am encouraged by the efforts made in schools and colleges to support students in their aspirations, but remain convinced that more can be done to embed such provision in a structured and enduring manner, removing the chance factor from our education system.

MAT student support

22. The most common issue raised was that of structured support for academically MAT students. Many schools and colleges now have a member of staff with responsibility for MAT support schemes, but the nature, depth and reach of these schemes varies immensely. In some schools and colleges I heard about effective and embedded schemes which identified students early, and offered them extra support as a MAT cohort. These involved extra classes (for example, an additional GCSE taught in lunchtime classes), after-school academic extension activities, field trips and other initiatives intended to complement classroom teaching and to stretch and challenge academically able students.

HE+ is a collaborative initiative being piloted by Cambridge University with groups of state schools and colleges in several regions of the UK. The project supports Year 12 students by offering a range of academic extension activities, as well as focussed advice and guidance about applying to higher education. HE+ uses a consortium model, consisting of a hub school or college partnering a number of schools and colleges in its local area. Each consortium is connected with a college in Cambridge, usually the one linked with the consortium's region through the University's Area Links Scheme.

The Swansea HE+ consortium was established two years ago; the first consortium outside England. Its hub is Gower College Swansea, and it works with Bishop Gore School, Bishop Vaughan Catholic School, Gowerton Comprehensive School, Morriston Comprehensive School, Olchfa Comprehensive School, Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe and Ysgol Gyfun Gŵyr. Swansea HE+ is connected with Churchill College, the college in Cambridge which has outreach responsibility to South Wales.

Since it started, the Swansea HE+ has worked with over 450 Year 12 students, all of whom achieved excellent GCSEs at the end of Year 11. The students participate in subject-specific seminars, subject-specific master classes with Cambridge academics and trips to explore Cambridge University. The seminars are delivered monthly after school, mainly by lecturers and associated staff at Gower College Swansea but with increasing contributions from teachers in the schools. The master classes are run on a

Saturday in spring term, giving students the opportunity to work with Cambridge staff for a day without disrupting normal lessons. The trips to Cambridge incorporate visits to Open Days and a variety of the university's colleges, departments and facilities. They also include advice before the summer break at the end of Year 12 on how students can effectively prepare for university applications at the beginning of Year 13. With the exception of a small contribution towards transport for the Cambridge trips, the entire programme is free to students, thanks to financial support from Cambridge and the goodwill of consortium staff.

HE+ is not a Cambridge recruitment project. It is designed to encourage participants to explore their potential HE destinations, to expand their academic horizons, and to aim for the best results they can in their examinations. We look forward to seeing where students from the Swansea HE+ move to, when they start university later this year.

23. Teachers report that they understand the value of this type of activity, but that it is often difficult to find time and resources to support it. I heard about many externally-provided opportunities (for example, courses and activities) for students, but funding limitations make attending these difficult. Likewise, restrictions in timetabling make it difficult for teachers to find space in the school day to provide extension activities for a subset of students. The Welsh Baccalaureate was raised repeatedly as a concern for teachers, as it does not currently meet the requirements of academically MAT students, and thus takes up space in their timetable which could be better used for other activities. I am sympathetic to this, but am aware that the Welsh Baccalaureate will be reintroduced in 2015 as a new qualification. I am hopeful that the revised syllabus will provide the timetable space required to support academically MAT students.
24. I understand that guidance for schools and colleges on supporting MAT students has been issued by Welsh Government, but more work is necessary to understand how this is being interpreted and applied. All MAT provision within schools and colleges must be evaluated, to ensure that resources are achieving their intended outcomes. Teachers need to be supported in identifying MAT students, in the messages that these students are given, and in the structured programmes that these students are offered. This is an issue beyond Oxford and Cambridge. Effective MAT programmes will enhance the preparation of potential Oxford and Cambridge applicants, but will also benefit all MAT students, regardless of their proposed post-school or post-college destination.
25. Guidance for a MAT support programme must be realistic. Many teachers I spoke to had concerns that MAT support within their schools and colleges is achieved through voluntary contributions from staff, giving up free time to provide MAT activities. While laudable, this is not a sustainable model of delivery. Resource must be provided in a manner through which all eligible individuals in all schools and colleges can benefit. Small amounts of funding can make a significant impact, for example the cost of a

minibus to attend an open day, but this funding must reach schools and colleges. In my primary recommendation, I suggest that funding should be provided to local authorities which can then distribute it to schools and colleges in the area, with an emphasis on sharing resources and working in partnerships.

26. Schools and colleges must be recognised and rewarded for this additional effort. Welsh Government is currently focussed on increasing average levels of attainment in schools and colleges, with particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy. However, to ensure that schools and colleges prioritise support for their most academically able students, consideration must be given to recognising upper-end achievement externally, either through banding or other performance measures. Ensuring that schools and colleges create the expectation that all students should strive to achieve their best because they aspire to progress and enjoy their educational experience, will only complement Welsh Government's drive to increase standards.

Perceptions of Oxford and Cambridge

27. Perceptions of Oxford and Cambridge as institutions which are somehow 'different' can be damaging to prospective applicants' aspirations. Even if the applicants themselves are not concerned, they may be subject to negative opinions from peers, family, the media and sometimes even teachers. Overwhelmingly, teachers are supportive and encouraging of their pupils' aspirations, but in a few isolated cases I have been told of teachers actively discouraging a prospective Oxbridge applicant based on incorrect information or untrue perceptions of the universities. I want teachers, parents/carers and students to have easy, reliable access to accurate information to ensure that student decisions are based on facts and not hearsay.
28. I was surprised to learn that visiting the universities was not always sufficient to remove these negative perceptions. Students reported that they enjoyed visiting and meeting with current undergraduates who 'appeared to be normal', but they retained a sense that they had not seen the whole picture and so negative perceptions remained. Current undergraduates told me that the idea of applying to Oxford or Cambridge was one that became normalised through a series of encounters: visits to open days; attendance at outreach events; discussions with teachers, peers and former students who had themselves applied; etc. All these interventions cumulatively reassured the prospective applicants about the admissions process, and normalised their aspiration to apply. This normalising effect seems to happen quicker when there is a critical mass of students with similar aspirations and levels of attainment.
29. In some schools and colleges, academically MAT students participate in a formal scheme, such as an honours programme. In others, they form a self-declared group of high achievers who share similar aims. The effect of other students who value

academic achievement and have high aspirations for university study appears to be overwhelmingly positive. In some cases this critical mass is gathered by the university or a third party. Oxford and Cambridge both deliver successful academic summer schools which bring together large groups of Year 12 students from across the UK. The intensive nature of these summer schools and their duration (normally one week) provides the same 'critical mass' benefit as a distinctive school programme. Charities are also involved in delivering this type of outreach work: the Sutton Trust funds a large programme of summer schools in partner universities (of which Cambridge is one), and the Teach First Higher Education Access Programme for Schools (HEAPS) brings high-achieving students together as a cohort to take part in academic extension activities outside of school.

30. Financial concerns were raised at times by prospective applicants and their teachers. Particularly in areas of economic disadvantage, I heard concerns about the cost of university in general. This is understandable, but sad to hear as both Oxford and Cambridge go to some lengths to ensure that no successful applicant should be unable to take up a place due to lack of funding. Bursaries at Oxford and Cambridge for students from low income backgrounds are among the highest in the UK, and, as Welsh Government pays for two thirds of the tuition fee, Welsh undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge enjoy some of the most generous cumulative financial support packages in the UK. Several Cambridge colleges offer a small number of scholarships exclusively for Welsh students. Oxford, Cambridge and Welsh Government, through schools and colleges, must ensure that prospective applicants and their parents/carers receive up-to-date, clear information about available funding, and about the particular nature of student loans and their repayment (which is linked to future earnings, unlike most other forms of debt).

The Moritz-Heyman Scholarship programme at Oxford⁵ is generously funded by Cardiff-born Sir Michael Moritz and his wife Ms Harriet Heyman. This scholarship programme offers financial support to students along with opportunities to take part in volunteering activities and access to at least one internship during summer vacations. Students from low income households (household income of £16,000 or less) are eligible for the scholarship and recipients are allocated up to £9,000 per year of financial support in the form of non-repayable bursaries and fee reductions.

Information from Oxford and Cambridge

31. I highlighted the issue of information provided by the universities in my interim report, and I feel that this is a fundamental issue to address in this report as well. Oxford

⁵ www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/fees-and-funding/oxford-support/moritz-heyman-scholarship

and Cambridge have different admissions processes from the rest of the UK higher education sector. Their strength is that they are considering a much wider range of information about each applicant, and each application accordingly receives significant time and attention from a number of academic tutors. The drawback to this is that their admissions processes can appear to be difficult to navigate, requiring special preparation from applicants. Teachers must be supported in preparing their students if this is not to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

32. The information provided to teachers must start with feedback. A significant number of teachers reported that they received inadequate feedback on their students' applications. These teachers are working hard to understand the admissions processes, and to support future generations of students. Mindful of the differences between the universities' admissions processes, teachers must be able to understand the impact of admissions tests, UMS scores, tutors' reactions at interview, and the overall context and performance of each application. To inform a teacher that there were better students on the day is not particularly supportive or helpful. I have seen examples of good practice from both universities and recommend that they address the issue of feedback by ensuring that this good practice is extended. This will hopefully ensure consistency in the quality of, and the process by which, feedback is offered to applicants and teachers.
33. Further efforts must also be made to ensure that teachers and applicants are aware of the complexities of the Oxford and Cambridge admissions processes. For instance, while an Oxford admissions test is an assessment of aptitude for a subject, there is still useful preparation that an applicant can undertake. Such preparation must be understood by teachers and students. Likewise teachers must understand and convey to applicants the importance of GCSE and AS level results, of UMS scores and of super-curricular exploration of the target subject. Teachers must also be equipped with the relevant information to combat common myths, such as college choice affecting the chances of an application being successful. The two universities must support teachers in applying this information to create and deliver effective support programmes for prospective applicants, to embed such activities as academic mock interviews, super-curricular subject exploration, critical thinking and verbal academic discussion. It is not enough for the universities to provide this information freely. They must ensure that the messages are getting through to the right audiences. This is why both university involvement in the proposed partnership hubs, and the personnel who act as regional links between each hub and the universities, will be critical.
34. In the course of this project I visited several Welsh-medium schools and colleges, and recommend, on the basis of conversations with students in these schools and colleges, that Oxford and Cambridge consider providing some introductory material for prospective applicants in the medium of Welsh. This is not to suggest that the universities commit themselves to the Welsh Language Act but rather to actively

welcome and encourage students from an underrepresented group 'on their own turf' as it were.

Outreach work in Wales and for Wales

35. The two universities conduct a huge amount of outreach work in Wales and for Welsh students and teachers, through large university activities and smaller, longer-term college initiatives. While efforts have been made to record the scope of this work, less is known about the impact that individual activities or programmes have made. There are differing reports from teachers about whether activities serve a valuable purpose for their pupils. At present, if the activity is not deemed to be worthwhile, then teachers will refrain from participating: there is not a consistent feedback mechanism whereby teachers and students can have an input into developing the activity provided for their benefit. In the proposed hub network, I suggest that Oxford and Cambridge become interactive partners with the schools and colleges in each region, to establish what the students in that area need and how this can be provided.

As far as possible, Oxford and Cambridge do their best to respond when specific outreach needs are brought to their attention. A recent example of such collaborative working for Wales began in April 2013, when the Head of Sixth Form at Caerleon Comprehensive School attended the residential Cambridge Teachers' Conference at Churchill College. Afterwards, the teacher got in touch with the college to ask whether Cambridge might be able to provide some on-the-ground support for mathematics teachers in Wales who work with Year 13 students holding university offers including a condition in STEP (Sixth Term Examination Paper). It was agreed that the best format for such support would be a free local training day for mathematics teachers, and a programme was devised by Colm Caulfield, Reader in Applied Mathematics at Cambridge, Teaching Fellow (and formerly Admissions Tutor) in Mathematics at Churchill College. The day was hosted at Caerleon Comprehensive School in December and was attended by over forty teachers, some of whom travelled from as far afield as west Pembrokeshire. Feedback from the event was very positive and connections after it, especially between Cambridge and Further Mathematics Support Programme Wales, have continued to make a positive impact in the region.

Alumni engagement

36. I was pleased to meet with over one hundred alumni of both universities in the course of this project, and to hear from many more who wrote to me. There is a great will to support the next generation of Welsh students, and we must utilise the expertise of alumni to do this. Their role can be critical: alumni can show our students that 'people like them' can go to universities like Oxford and Cambridge and achieve great things

in their careers. They can offer guidance on academic issues, for example, providing mock interviews or discussing a common area of academic interest. However, alumni should not be expected to provide up-to-date admissions information, as the nature of the admissions process in each university is that it is constantly being updated and developed.

37. Some coordination is necessary to ensure that alumni can volunteer to be involved easily, and they can fit this in with their work and other personal commitments. Schools and colleges must be able to access alumni according to their needs, which may fluctuate each year. Oxford and Cambridge are in the best position to advertise this opportunity to Welsh alumni and to encourage them to get involved, perhaps with hubs subsequently taking over the administration of these interactions. I suggest that thought be given to the question of how this alumni network can be set up to ensure longevity and sustainability. I have the contact details of over one hundred alumni who are ready and willing to get involved to support current students. This is a truly fantastic opportunity and it must not be lost.
38. I have been grateful to work with Future First, a London-based charity which links schools and colleges with their alumni. Future First have run a series of regional events in Welsh schools and colleges which have invited Oxford and Cambridge alumni from that area back to talk about their time at university and their subsequent careers. Feedback from these events has been positive, and has emphasised the benefit of bringing students from different schools and colleges together for super-curricular activities.

Section 4: Conclusions

39. I have been enthused by the depth of feeling this issue has attracted across Wales, and inspired by the commitment of so many teachers and school and college leaders who are trying to do the very best for the students in their care. I have met a huge number of articulate, inquisitive and energetic young people who deserve all the support they need to reach their potential, wherever that may lead them. I commend the staff of Oxford and Cambridge who have consistently demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that the universities are accessible to the most academically talented students, regardless of background. I believe that a strong will for development and evolution of practices and processes exists among all these interested parties. I hope that the relatively straightforward task of reorganising and coordinating our resources will serve to remove the element of chance from the system, to ensure that every student can benefit from information, support and encouragement to pursue their ambitions. My education at Oxford University was a life-changing experience, and I want this opportunity to be available to many more Welsh students in the future.

Annex A: Summary of supporting recommendations

Recommendation	Owner(s)
Establish a network of hubs including pilot regions	Welsh Government
Develop guidelines on academic super-curricular best practice	Hubs, universities
Develop Oxbridge support programme components	Hubs, universities
Create best practice guidelines for teachers on mock interviews	Universities
Identify a single point of contact within hubs for communication with Welsh Government and universities	Hubs
Ensure schools and colleges are aware of guidance on MAT support	Welsh Government
Consider development of technological solutions for rural areas	Welsh Government, hubs
Evaluate existing provision for MAT students and Oxford and Cambridge applicants	Hubs, universities, Welsh Government
Introduce recognition of schools and colleges which increase upper-end attainment through banding, funding, Estyn or other	Welsh Government
Ensure students and parents/carers are aware of general Welsh Government undergraduate finance package, and of specific financial support at Oxford and Cambridge	Welsh Government, hubs, universities
Ensure more consistent, useful feedback to students (and their teachers) who apply to the universities	Universities
Ensure better communication of admissions information to teachers	Hubs, universities
Provide preliminary Welsh-language materials to introduce Oxford and Cambridge to potential Welsh applicants	Universities
Ensure future outreach activity includes an evaluation plan	Universities through hubs
Create mechanism for alumni to volunteer and help	Welsh Government, universities, hubs
Create training for alumni on their role	Universities, hubs