

Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base

Extended executive summary

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The evidence paper 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base', submitted in September 2013 and finalised in June 2014, documents in detail the data used and analyses made to date by the Oxbridge Ambassador in his consideration of admissions rates for Welsh applicants to Cambridge and Oxford universities. It is a significant body of work so it is accompanied by this extended executive summary to highlight its critical findings and suggest how these should be developed.

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Critical findings¹

Over the period assessed by the paper, ‘Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base’, the academic years 2007-08 to 2011-12, Welsh-domiciled applicants to Cambridge and Oxford had lower success rates in their applications to both universities than applicants from England and Northern Ireland:

Application success rates to Cambridge and Oxford by UK region, 2008-2012²

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

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

¹ The statistics used throughout this Summary, unless stated otherwise, are provided by Cambridge Admissions Office, Oxford 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.

² Derived from data linked at <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/statistics/> and http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/undergraduate_admissions_statistics/

Applications and acceptances to Cambridge and Oxford by UK region, 2008-2012³

UCAS Cycle	Cambridge						Oxford					
	Wales Apps	Wales Accs	England Apps	England Accs	NI Apps	NI Accs	Wales Apps	Wales Accs	England Apps	England Accs	NI Apps	NI Accs
2008	241	60	9404	2697	185	62	397	84	9262	2578	125	31
2009	287	59	10006	2635	222	73	486	79	9989	2555	140	35
2010	290	65	9452	2528	200	66	436	74	11438	2510	154	27
2011	247	57	8961	2415	212	63	476	74	11180	2494	167	39
2012	269	60	9040	2499	199	57	424	75	11004	2536	128	27
Average	267	60	9373	2555	204	64	444	77	10575	2535	143	32

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 Cambridge and Oxford. 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	# Entries	# 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	35459	1351	3.8%
England	634910	27474	4.3%
NI	23025	1200	5.2%

This table shows that the percentage of students attaining 5A*s or better at GCSE is smaller in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, albeit by a relatively small margin. 5A*s are an arguably useful indicator of Oxbridge potential because the average GCSE applicant to both universities has between 5 and 6A*s.

³ Derived from data linked at <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/statistics/> and http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/undergraduate_admissions_statistics/

Average A level performance by UK region, 2008-2012⁴

Region	# Entries	# AAA +	% AAA +	# A*AA +	% A*AA +	# A*A*A +	% A*A*A +	# A*A*A* +	% A*A*A* +
Wales	13206	1221	9.2%	773	5.9%	384	2.9%	157	1.2%
England	255365	32577	12.8%	24032	9.3%	12983	5.0%	5630	2.2%
NI	10986	1741	15.9%	1127	9.9%	559	4.9%	236	2.1%

This table shows that the percentages 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*.⁵ In the 2012 UCAS Cycle, 63% of A level entrants to Oxford attained A*A*A or better, and 40% attained A*A*A*.⁶

There is an obvious pattern here. Relatively low percentages of Welsh students attain top GCSEs and A levels, and relatively low percentages of Welsh students make successful applications to Cambridge and Oxford. 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 A level is the difference-maker. However, the datasets used in 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base' 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 Cambridge only, the average AS level unit module scores at the point of application.⁷
- For Oxford only, the average attainment in subject-specific admissions tests during the early stages of the application process.⁸
- The average A level attainment of successful applicants at the point of entry.

⁴ The A level A* grade was made available from the end of 2009-10, so the A* figures are only for 2010-2012.

⁵ <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/publications/docs/admissionsstatistics2012.pdf>, p. 9.

⁶ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/document.rm?id=2690>, p. 22.

⁷ Uniquely within the UK HE sector, Cambridge reviews the average best three (Sciences) or most relevant three (Arts and Humanities) AS level UMS of its applicants, because the University has identified that these are a strong predictor of students' subsequent performance in Cambridge degrees.

⁸ In contrast with Cambridge's use of average AS level UMS, Oxford requires applicants to complete pre-interview subject-specific admissions tests, which, along with GCSE results, form the basis of its shortlisting for interview and admissions decisions.

- 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,⁹ 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, in terms of teaching, aspiration, subject availability and combinations, UCAS references, etc.; and personal preparedness, in terms particularly of revision, motivation, and super-curricular exploration. They might also include elements of the Cambridge and Oxford admissions processes which, for some reason(s), do not appropriately assess Welsh applicants. In the former cases, there would be more work to do in Wales. In the latter, there would be more work to do in Cambridge and Oxford. 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 2008-2012:¹⁰ 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 5A* 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.

⁹ 2001-2002 to 2011-12, for example, which would account for the growth in Cambridge's use of average UMS and Oxford's use of admissions tests.

¹⁰ See n. 4.

Lesser findings

‘Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base’ suggests that institution-type, in terms of maintained or independent sector, was not decisive in the relatively low success rates of Welsh applications to Cambridge and Oxford during 2008-2012. It is true that applicants from the Welsh and UK independent sectors perform more successfully in the Cambridge and Oxford admissions processes than their maintained sector counterparts, likely due to the fact that there tend to be a proportionally greater number of competitive applicants by qualification in the independent sector. However, applicants from the Welsh independent sector perform less successfully in the Cambridge and Oxford admissions processes than applicants from the UK independent sector, just as applicants from the Welsh maintained sector perform less successfully in the Cambridge and Oxford admissions processes than applicants from the UK maintained sector. Put simply, both the Welsh maintained and independent sectors are relatively suppressed when it comes to Cambridge and Oxford admissions.

A sample of Cambridge and Oxford success rates in nine representative Welsh Local Authorities¹¹ during 2008-2012 suggests that the Welsh students who enter the universities are drawn reasonably consistently from across the country. It would seem that physical and socio-economic location within Wales do not obviously affect an applicant’s chance of success.

From an analysis of attainment and admissions rates for all Welsh LAs in 2011-12, and a closer, institution-level analysis of the sample nine LAs for the same year, it is clear that both high-performing Welsh students and Welsh entrants to Cambridge and Oxford are often isolated. For example, of the 81 maintained sector schools in the sample nine LAs, 20 (25%) had one student who achieved A*A*A at A level at the end of 2011-12, and nine (11%) had two. However, it is not plainly evident from the analysis that this isolation of academic talent is preventing successful applications, though its pedagogic implications bear further thought.

It is notable that, of the 1,371 A level students in the 37 (46% of) schools from the sample nine LAs which had no students who achieved A*A*A at A level at the end of 2011-12, only five applicants – 0.004% of 1,371 – received offers from Oxford. None received offers from Cambridge. Again, in the absence of further data, this would appear to be evidence writ large of the connection between attainment and entrance.

‘Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base’ attempted to review representative Welsh LAs against comparators outside Wales, to query whether

¹¹ Cardiff, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea, Torfaen, and Wrexham.

the trends found in Wales are specific to Wales or wider phenomena. Such a review was attempted but strong concerns have been expressed that its outcomes will necessarily be distorted by local factors which cannot be accounted for consistently in the data to which we have access. There is accordingly a question about the validity of the exercise.

Conclusions

The link between low Welsh attainment at the upper end of public examinations and low Welsh success rates in applications to Cambridge and Oxford appears to be strong.

Nevertheless, it is not conclusively proven in 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base'. As far as is possible, this lack of proof needs to be addressed. We accordingly recommend further work on the link between attainment and success rates, as described above.