

Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

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

**S Gallagher, J Padley
June 2014**



This paper was originally drafted for internal use in September 2013, to build on the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales' initial report on Oxbridge Access in Wales¹, and to compile some of the data subsequently used in the Interim Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales². It is now being published, with updates, alongside the other conclusory papers and reports of the Oxbridge Ambassador project. This paper explores the key issues of admissions rates for Welsh students to Oxford and Cambridge universities; and upper-end academic attainment in Wales compared with the rest of the UK. This exploration includes examining regional and national comparative data, as well as contextual local data relating to educational performance.

¹ <http://paulmurphyp.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Oxbridge-ReportPAULMURPHY1.pdf>

² <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/learningproviders/oxbridge-project/oxbridge-final-report/?lang=en>

Contents

Introduction	2
Summary of findings	4
Section 1: Oxford and Cambridge admissions statistics	5
Section 2: Academic attainment in Wales and the UK	11
Section 3: Regional comparisons between Wales and England	24
Conclusions	27

Introduction

The Oxbridge Ambassador has been tasked to look at admissions rates for Welsh students to Oxford and Cambridge universities. This paper analyses the statistical evidence relating to Welsh application and admissions rates to the two universities for the UCAS cycles 2008 through 2012: a substantial recent sample, up to the last cycle for which there was verified data at the initial time of writing, and covering the introduction of the A* grade at A-Level in the academic year 2009-10. For the same five-year period, this paper will also consider upper-end academic attainment rates across Wales at GCSE and A-Level, and juxtapose these with analogous performance figures, and Oxford and Cambridge admissions figures, for the rest of the UK. Upper-end academic attainment is significant here because both universities have very high academic entry requirements, and any analysis of admissions figures must accordingly take into account the relevant pool(s) of realistic prospective applicants.

Both Oxford and Cambridge have flexible admissions processes which include a range of measures of academic performance and potential. For the purposes of this paper, however, we will consider two broad indicators of academic performance which we equate with potential to study at Oxford or Cambridge. These are the attainment of 5A* grades or better at GCSE (approximately the level achieved by the average applicant) and the attainment of 3A grades or better at A-Level (Oxford's minimum requirement for entry).

It is important to note two caveats to this analysis:

- (a) Oxford and Cambridge, although in some ways similar, have markedly different admissions processes. For applicants sitting modular AS- and A-Levels, Cambridge relies heavily upon average unit module scores for both interview shortlisting and subsequent selection. This position, which is unusual in the UK HE sector, has been adopted because the University has identified that applicants' average UMS are a strong (arguably the strongest) predictor of subsequent performance in Cambridge degrees.¹ In contrast, Oxford requires applicants to complete pre-interview subject-specific admissions tests, which, along with GCSE results, form the basis of shortlisting for interview and admissions decisions. Following interviews, Cambridge typically requires A-Level offer-holders to attain a minimum of A*AA, whereas Oxford's standard A-Level offers vary from AAA to A*A*A depending upon the course.² In short and to reiterate, it is not possible or desirable to describe a homogenous "Oxbridge" admissions process. Though their outcomes may be similar, the two are different and should not be conflated.

¹ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/admissions/research/> [accessed 24/03/14]

² Note the preamble to Section 2.

(b) The school and college attainment data provided by the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Government, and the UK Government is a reflection of the most up to date and consistent data currently held. However, it comes from several sources and is not currently collected or quality-assured in a uniform manner. In spite of this, we feel that the data provided and analysis conducted here is sufficient to offer an accurate comparative representation of Oxford and Cambridge admissions trends and academic attainment in Wales over the assessed period. Where they are not, the issues arising and reasons for them will be highlighted.

The statistics used throughout this paper have been provided, unless otherwise stated, by Oxford University Admissions Office; Cambridge Admissions Office; Education and Skills Statistics, Welsh Government; Statistics & Research Team, Department of Education Northern Ireland; and Attainment Correspondence Team, Department for Education UK.

Summary of findings

- (a) During 2008-12, Welsh-domiciled applicants had a statistically lower chance than UK-domiciled applicants of being shortlisted, offered places, and ultimately accepted at Oxford or Cambridge. However, this observation does not factor in any measure of applicants' examination attainment at the time of application. Differences in the relative attainment of Welsh and other UK applicants might account for the differential in success rates. Further research on this will be necessary.
- (b) The relatively small size of the independent sector in Wales does not explain (a). Although Welsh-domiciled independent sector applicants during 2008-12 had a statistically higher chance of making successful applications than their peers from the Welsh-domiciled maintained sector, they were nevertheless admitted to both universities at a lower rate than UK-domiciled independent applicants.
- (c) In the 2011 and 2012 UCAS cycles, the overwhelming majority of A-Level entrants to both Oxford and Cambridge attained a minimum of A*A*A: at Cambridge, 83% in both cycles; at Oxford, 67% and 63%, respectively.
- (d) During 2008-12, the percentages of Welsh A-Level students attaining AAA or better, A*AA or better, A*A*A or better, and A*A*A* or better were year-on-year lower than in England and Northern Ireland.
- (e) During 2008-12, the percentages of Welsh A-Level students attaining AAA or better, A*AA or better, and A*A*A or better Level all declined: 9.4% - 8.6%, 6.1% - 5.5%, and 3.2% - 2.7%, respectively. The percentage of Welsh A-Level students attaining A*A*A* or better was static (average 1.2%).
- (f) During 2008-12, the percentages of Welsh GCSE students attaining 5A* or better were year-on-year lower than in England and Northern Ireland, though the gap between Welsh GCSE performance and other UK GCSE performance was much narrower than at A-Level.
- (g) During 2008-12, the percentages of Welsh GCSE students attaining 5A* or better grew from 3.5% to 4.1%.
- (h) During 2011-12, at Local Authority level, the numbers of Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge broadly increased in line with the numbers of students who performed strongly at A-Level. However, the numbers of Welsh acceptances to Oxford and Cambridge did not follow this trend.
- (i) During 2011-12, half of Welsh Local Authorities saw fewer than ten A-Level students who attained A*A*A or better. In the same period, from a sample of nine Welsh Local Authorities, 46% of maintained sector schools had no A-Level students with A*A*A or better. 36% had just one or two such students.

Section 1: Oxford and Cambridge admissions statistics

In this section we will consider trends in Oxford and Cambridge application and admissions data for the UCAS cycles 2008 through 2012, including success rates at each stage of the application process. We will compare the success rates of Welsh- with UK-domiciled students, and investigate success rates by school type.

Given the differences in Oxford and Cambridge's admissions processes, it is advisable to show admissions data for the universities separately. The five tables below contain the admissions statistics for Welsh- and UK-domiciled applicants to Oxford and Cambridge for the UCAS cycles 2008 through 2012, including applicants classified for admissions purposes as "Other and Overseas". They identify the number of applications, the number of applicants shortlisted for interview and rate of shortlisting (for Oxford only),³ the number and rate of offers made, and the number and rate of acceptances.

Table 1.1: 2008-2012 admissions statistics for Cambridge for Welsh-domiciled applicants⁴

UCAS	# Apps	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	241	65	27.0%	60	24.9%
2009	287	68	23.7%	59	20.6%
2010	290	72	24.8%	65	22.4%
2011	247	69	27.9%	57	23.1%
2012	269	66	24.5%	60	22.3%
Average	267	68	25.5%	60	22.6%

Table 1.2: 2008-2012 admissions statistics for Cambridge for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	10179	3281	32.2%	2907	28.6%
2009	10867	3221	29.6%	2842	26.2%
2010	10312	3180	30.8%	2745	26.6%
2011	9798	2994	30.6%	2590	26.4%
2012	9832	3173	32.3%	2691	27.4%
Average	10198	3170	31.1%	2755	27.0%

³ CAO does not centrally gather shortlisting statistics so these are unavailable for this analysis.

⁴ Apps = applications; Offs = offers; Accs = acceptances

Table 1.3: 2008-2012 admissions figures for Oxford for Welsh-domiciled applicants⁵

UCAS	# Apps	# SL	% SL Rate	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	401	298	74.3%	92	22.9%	84	20.9%
2009	486	329	67.7%	85	17.5%	78	16.0%
2010	436	251	57.6%	79	18.1%	74	17.0%
2011	476	281	59.0%	83	17.4%	74	15.5%
2012	424	236	55.7%	80	18.9%	75	17.7%
Average	445	279	62.8%	84	18.8%	77	17.3%

Table 1.4: 2008-2012 admissions figures for Oxford for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# SL	% SL Rate	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	10094	7904	78.3%	2988	29.6%	2755	27.3%
2009	10894	7779	71.4%	2920	26.8%	2727	25.0%
2010	12333	8102	65.7%	2853	23.1%	2670	21.6%
2011	12107	7810	64.5%	2863	23.6%	2665	22.0%
2012	11832	7618	64.4%	2904	24.5%	2695	22.8%
Average	11452	7843	68.5%	2906	25.4%	2702	23.6%

Table 1.5: 2008-2012 average admissions figures for Oxford and Cambridge

	# Apps	# SL	% SL	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
Cam Wales	267			68	25.5%	60	22.6%
Ox Wales	445	279	62.8%	84	18.8%	77	17.3%
Cam UK	10198			3170	31.1%	2755	27.0%
Ox UK	11452	7843	68.5%	2906	25.4%	2702	23.6%

From these five tables, the following points may be noted:

- Both Oxford and Cambridge accept roughly similar numbers of UK-domiciled students each year.
- Oxford receives a higher number of UK-domiciled applicants per year than Cambridge.
- Allowing for (b), Oxford additionally receives a proportionally higher number of Welsh-domiciled applicants per year than Cambridge.
- UK- and Welsh-domiciled applicants have a statistically higher chance of being offered a place and ultimately accepted at Cambridge than they do at Oxford.

⁵ Apps = applications; SL = shortlisted; Offs = offers; Accs = acceptances

(e) Welsh-domiciled applicants have a statistically lower chance than UK-domiciled applicants of being shortlisted, offered places, and ultimately accepted at either Oxford or Cambridge.

(d) is unsurprising, given (a), (b), and (c). Oxford has on average a higher number of UK- and Welsh-domiciled applicants than Cambridge but both universities accept on average a broadly similar number from each group. It is therefore predictable that the average success rates of both applicant groups will be lower at Oxford than at Cambridge. (c) is likely attributable to each university's geographical distance from and transport links with Wales. It is quicker to get to Oxford from much of Wales than it is to get to Cambridge, so Oxford may appear more attractive to Welsh-domiciled students, especially if they wish to remain relatively close to home. Course choice may also be a factor here, but its impact would be difficult to assess.

(e) is more obviously challenging, particularly if we delve deeper into the figures shown in Table 1.5. At Oxford, after shortlisting, a UK-domiciled applicant has on average a 37.1% chance of receiving an offer and a 34.5% chance of being accepted. By comparison, a Welsh-domiciled applicant to Oxford, after shortlisting, has on average a 30.1% chance of receiving an offer and a 28.0% chance of being accepted. This arguably suggests that Welsh-domiciled applicants to Oxford are not only statistically less likely to be shortlisted than their UK-domiciled counterparts, but that they are less likely to be successful after shortlisting too.

At both universities, the typical reason for not shortlisting an applicant for interview is that – allowing for contextual factors – the applicant's academic attainment at the point of application, including pre-interview aptitude tests at Oxford, is not competitive within the gathered field. The typical reasons for not making an offer to an applicant after interview is that the applicant is holistically less strong than others, in terms of academic competence, and enthusiasm and aptitude for the chosen course. Table 1.5 implies that Welsh-domiciled applicants on average fall down in these areas, i.e., that they have on average less impressive academic records than their UK-domiciled counterparts, and that they are on average holistically less strong when they are assessed after interview.⁶

Before we address these two conclusions in more detail, by analysing upper-end academic attainment in Wales, we should also factor in admissions statistics on the type of educational institutions that applicants attend. The independent sector in

⁶ To confirm absolutely whether these two inferences are correct, we need to review the GCSE, AS-Level, and eventual A-Level attainment of Welsh-domiciled applicants to Oxford and Cambridge against their offer and acceptance rates. However, the data required to do this was not available within the original timescale of this paper, so a decision was made to proceed without it whilst acknowledging its significance for future analyses. Given its significance, this data will be considered in a discrete paper.

England is very different from that in the rest of the UK, and it could accordingly be argued that the number, size, and relative academic success of independent institutions in England (particularly in Arts and Humanities subjects) will skew Oxford and Cambridge's UK admissions figures.

The five tables below show the institution-type statistics for Welsh- and UK-domiciled applicants to Oxford and Cambridge for the UCAS cycles 2008 through 2012. They include the percentage of applicants from the maintained and independent sectors, the percentage of offer-holders from the maintained and independent sectors, and the percentage of acceptances from the maintained and independent sectors. They do not include percentages for applicants classified for admissions purposes as "Other and Overseas", whether Welsh- or UK-domiciled.

Table 1.6: 2008-2012 sector admissions statistics for Cambridge for Welsh-domiciled applicants⁷

UCAS	% Apps M	% Apps I	% Offs M	% Offs I	% Accs M	% Accs I
2008	82.2%	15.4%	80.0%	16.9%	80.0%	16.7%
2009	82.9%	15.3%	80.9%	19.1%	81.4%	18.6%
2010	78.6%	19.0%	76.4%	20.8%	76.9%	20.0%
2011	75.7%	17.4%	71.0%	26.1%	70.2%	28.1%
2012	75.8%	17.1%	80.3%	16.7%	81.7%	15.0%
Average	79.1%	16.9%	77.6%	20.0%	78.1%	19.6%

Table 1.7: 2008-2012 sector admissions statistics for Cambridge for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	% Apps M	% Apps I	% Offs M	% Offs I	% Accs M	% Accs I
2008	64.6%	33.3%	61.2%	37.8%	60.0%	39.2%
2009	65.2%	32.2%	60.0%	39.0%	58.2%	40.9%
2010	62.9%	33.0%	59.5%	38.7%	58.1%	40.4%
2011	61.2%	32.4%	58.8%	38.2%	57.4%	40.0%
2012	64.0%	29.6%	63.1%	33.9%	61.6%	36.0%
Average	63.6%	32.1%	60.6%	37.5%	59.0%	39.3%

Table 1.8: 2008-2012 sector admissions statistics for Oxford for Welsh-domiciled applicants

⁷ M = maintained schools; I = independent schools.

UCAS	% Apps M	% Apps I	% Offs M	% Offs I	% Accs M	% Accs I
2008	82.9%	17.0%	81.5%	18.5%	79.8%	20.2%
2009	80.3%	19.5%	75.3%	24.7%	74.4%	25.6%
2010	81.8%	18.1%	70.9%	29.1%	73.0%	27.0%
2011	80.9%	18.3%	72.3%	22.9%	74.3%	21.6%
2012	82.1%	17.2%	70.0%	22.5%	68.0%	24.0%
Average	79.8%	18.1%	74.2%	23.4%	74.0%	23.6%

Table 1.9: 2008-2012 sector admissions statistics for Oxford for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	% Apps M	% Apps I	% Offs M	% Offs I	% Accs M	% Accs I
2008	59.6%	39.0%	56.1%	43.3%	55.0%	44.4%
2009	59.6%	38.3%	54.5%	44.5%	53.5%	45.6%
2010	61.5%	36.7%	55.8%	43.2%	54.9%	44.2%
2011	61.5%	34.2%	57.1%	40.6%	56.6%	41.5%
2012	60.7%	35.5%	56.5%	41.0%	56.0%	41.5%
Average	60.6%	36.6%	56.0%	42.5%	55.2%	43.5%

Table 1.10: 2008-2012 average sector admissions statistics for Oxford and Cambridge

	% Apps M	% Apps I	% Offs M	% Offs I	% Accs M	% Accs I
Cam Wales	79.1%	16.9%	77.6%	20.0%	78.1%	19.6%
Ox Wales	79.8%	18.1%	74.2%	23.4%	74.0%	23.6%
Cam UK	63.6%	32.1%	60.6%	37.5%	59.0%	39.3%
Ox UK	60.6%	36.6%	56.0%	42.5%	55.2%	43.5%

From these five tables, the following points may be noted:

- (a) Both Oxford and Cambridge receive more Welsh- and UK-domiciled applicants from the maintained sector than they do from the independent sector.
- (b) Both Welsh and UK independent-sector applicants to Oxford and Cambridge experience a higher success rate than their state-educated counterparts.
- (c) Both Oxford and Cambridge receive far fewer Welsh-domiciled applicants from the independent sector than they do from the independent sector in the rest of the UK.

(a) is predictable, given that there are more students in the maintained sector than there are in the independent sector, so the maintained sector has a numerically

greater talent pool to draw upon. Allowing for (a), (b) suggests either that there are a proportionally greater number of competitive applicants by qualification in the independent sector than there are in the maintained sector, and/or that independent schools prepare applicants more effectively for the Oxford and Cambridge admissions processes and that some selectors take insufficient account of this. (c) reflects the fact that the independent sector is smaller in Wales than it is in the rest of the UK.

We might also think of this in terms of average offer and acceptance rates:

Table 1.11: 2008-2012 average sector admissions rates for Oxford and Cambridge

	% Off Rate M	% Off Rate I	% Acc Rate M	% Acc Rate I
Cam Wales	25.0%	30.2%	22.3%	26.2%
Ox Wales	17.5%	24.4%	16.1%	22.6%
Cam UK	29.6%	36.3%	25.1%	33.1%
Ox UK	23.4%	29.4%	21.5%	28.0%

This debunks a noteworthy myth, inasmuch as the summary inference from Tables 1.6-1.11 is that independent school applications alone do not explain the variation in success rates between Welsh- and UK-domiciled students. Welsh-domiciled independent applicants are admitted to both universities at a lower rate than UK-domiciled independent applicants; the same trend that can be observed for maintained sector applicants.

Section 2: Academic attainment in Wales and the UK

It is not enough simply to report the application and admissions trends at the two universities. We need to consider the pool of realistic prospective applicants too. As previously stated, both universities have exacting academic entry requirements, with a minimum standard A-Level offer of AAA at Oxford and A*AA at Cambridge. In reality, however, entrants typically present results which are much stronger than

this. In both the 2011 and 2012 UCAS cycles, 83% of A-Level entrants to Cambridge attained A*A*A or better, and 60% attained A*A*A*. ⁸ In the 2011 UCAS cycle, 67% of A-Level entrants to Oxford attained A*A*A or better, and 39% attained A*A*A*. ⁹ In the 2012 UCAS cycle, 63% of A-Level entrants to Oxford attained A*A*A or better, and 40% attained A*A*A*. ¹⁰

The trend here is clear. For Oxford and Cambridge applicants to appear competitive within the gathered field, they must demonstrate extremely strong academic potential at the point of application, because the significant majority of A-Level entrants to both universities will go on to present final results of A*A*A or better.

With this in mind, we will now look at the number and location of A-Level students attaining AAA or better (Oxford's minimum standard offer), to compare the number of high-attaining Welsh students with equivalent figures for the rest of the UK. As A-Level grades are not typically available when students apply to university (unless the students are applying post-qualification), we will also consider the number and location of students attaining 5A* or better at GCSE as an early indicator of academic potential. This latter figure is arguably more relevant to Oxford than it is to Cambridge, because Cambridge prioritises average AS-Level UMS over performance at GCSE.

As previously implied, it must be understood that the pool of realistic prospective applicants to Oxford and Cambridge is not the number of A-Level students in any given area. Rather, it is the number of those students who are anticipated to obtain at least AAA. In addition, based on the final A-Levels presented by typical entrants in the 2011 and 2012 UCAS cycles, competitive A-Level applicants should ideally and realistically be anticipated to obtain at least A*A*A. It is also important to consider A-Level combinations and desired subjects of study at university when analysing the applicant pool. However, in the absence of more detailed information about applicants' course choices, this paper will analyse academic attainment alone as a broad indicator of potential to study at either Oxford or Cambridge.

The four tables below contain upper-end A-Level and GCSE attainment figures for Wales, England, and Northern Ireland for the academic years 2007-08 through 2011-12. Note that the A-Level A* grade was only made available to students from the end of 2009-10, so A* grade A-Levels should not be expected in 2007-08 and 2008-

⁸ <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/statistics/archive/admissionsstatistics2011.pdf> [accessed 24/03/14], p. 9, and <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/publications/docs/admissionsstatistics2012.pdf> [accessed 24/03/14], p. 9.

⁹ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/document.rm?id=2692> [accessed 24/03/14], p. 18.

¹⁰ <http://www.ox.ac.uk/document.rm?id=2690> [accessed 24/03/14], p. 22.

09. The English figures are for the maintained, independent, and FE sectors, whereas the Northern Irish figures are for the maintained school sector only. This is due to the format in which these data have been made available by the UK and the Northern Ireland governments. Scottish attainment figures are not considered because the majority of Scottish students do not sit A-Levels and GCSEs and would accordingly make for ineffective comparators. In Table 2.1, the A-Level attainment figures for Wales have been separated into schools (maintained and independent) and FE, with the country's overall figures shown subsequently. This reflects the increasing closure of school sixth forms in Wales in favour of students progressing to colleges for tertiary education, and a resulting particular interest in the performance of the Welsh post-compulsory sector. Finally, as stated in our Introduction, it cannot be assumed that there is exact parity between the datasets provided by the different governments for the different educational sectors. For example, some of the figures may be for school-age students only, whereas others – particularly for FE – may include mature students too. Again though, in spite of these various issues, we feel that the data provided and analysis conducted is sufficient to offer a sound comparative representation of academic attainment and its implications over the assessed period. In each instance, and hereafter, we believe that the presented total numbers of pupils comprise students who sat one or more A-Level or GCSE.

Table 2.1: A-Level attainment for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	Year	# A-Level pupils	# AAA +	% AAA +	# A*AA +	% A*AA +	# A*A*A +	% A*A*A +	# A*A*A*	% A*A*A*
Wales (schools)	2007-08	10629	1049	9.9%						
	2008-09	10920	1096	10.0%						
	2009-10	10980	1088	9.9%	702	6.4%	355	3.2%	132	1.2%
	2010-11	10707	1046	9.8%	681	6.4%	322	3.0%	136	1.3%
	2011-12	10507	943	9.0%	608	5.8%	295	2.8%	123	1.2%
	Average	10749	1044	9.7%	664	6.2%	324	3.0%	130	1.2%
Wales (FE)	2007-08	2347	170	7.2%						
	2008-09	2613	207	7.9%						
	2009-10	2480	191	7.7%	124	5.0%	70	2.8%	31	1.3%
	2010-11	2468	157	6.4%	108	4.4%	61	2.5%	30	1.2%
	2011-12	2379	159	6.7%	95	4.0%	48	2.0%	20	0.8%
	Average	2457	177	7.2%	109	4.5%	60	2.4%	27	1.1%
Wales (all)	2007-08	12976	1219	9.4%						
	2008-09	13533	1303	9.6%						
	2009-10	13460	1279	9.5%	826	6.1%	425	3.2%	163	1.2%
	2010-11	13175	1203	9.1%	789	6.0%	383	2.9%	166	1.3%
	2011-12	12886	1102	8.6%	703	5.5%	343	2.7%	143	1.1%
	Average	13206	1221	9.2%	773	5.9%	384	2.9%	157	1.2%
England (all)	2007-08	248589	30169	12.1%						
	2008-09	254138	32039	12.6%						
	2009-10	263620	33830	12.8%	23839	9.0%	12803	4.9%	5448	2.1%
	2010-11	253312	33537	13.2%	24397	9.6%	13220	5.2%	5806	2.3%
	2011-12	257166	33311	13.0%	23859	9.3%	12925	5.0%	5637	2.2%
	Average	255365	32577	12.8%	24032	9.3%	12983	5.0%	5630	2.2%
Northern Ireland	2007-08	10070	1727	17.1%						
	2008-09	10692	1681	15.7%						
	2009-10	11819	1851	15.7%	1203	10.2%	591	5.0%	257	2.2%
	2010-11	11055	1800	16.3%	1128	10.2%	568	5.1%	254	2.3%
	2011-12	11292	1645	14.6%	1050	9.3%	519	4.6%	196	1.7%
	Average	10986	1741	15.9%	1127	9.9%	559	4.9%	236	2.1%
UK ¹¹	2007-08	271635	33115	12.2%						
	2008-09	278363	35023	12.6%						

¹¹ Not including Scotland or the Northern Irish independent and FE sectors.

	2009-10	288899	36960	12.8%	25868	9.0%	13819	4.8%	5868	2.0%
	2010-11	277542	36540	13.2%	26314	9.5%	14171	5.1%	6226	2.2%
	2011-12	281344	36058	12.8%	25612	9.1%	13787	4.9%	5976	2.1%
	Average	279557	35539	12.7%	25931	9.2%	13926	4.9%	6023	2.1%

Table 2.2: Average A-Level attainment for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	# A-Level pupils	# AAA +	% AAA +	# A*AA +	% A*AA +	# 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%
Northern Ireland	10986	1741	15.9%	1127	9.9%	559	4.9%	236	2.1%
UK	279557	35539	12.7%	25931	9.2%	13926	4.9%	6023	2.1%

Table 2.3: GCSE attainment for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	Year	# GCSE pupils	# 5A*-C +	% 5A*-C +	# 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	2007-08	37045	21518	58.1%	1308	3.5%
	2008-09	35942	21138	58.8%	1351	3.8%
	2009-10	35548	21207	59.7%	1323	3.7%
	2010-11	34561	20316	58.8%	1376	4.0%
	2011-12	34201	19686	57.6%	1396	4.1%
	Average	35459	20773	58.6%	1351	3.8%
England¹²	2007-08	653083	356783	54.6%	25911	4.0%
	2008-09	634496	351728	55.4%	26586	4.2%
	2009-10	639263	358029	56.0%	28678	4.5%
	2010-11	627093	348783	55.6%	29307	4.7%
	2011-12	620617	342238	55.1%	26888	4.3%
	Average	634910	351512	55.4%	27474	4.3%
Northern Ireland	2007-08	24172	15302	63.3%	1237	5.1%
	2008-09	23164	14802	63.9%	1190	5.1%
	2009-10	22931	15013	65.5%	1214	5.3%
	2010-11	22699	14755	65.0%	1169	5.2%
	2011-12	22157	14410	65.0%	1189	5.4%
	Average	23025	14856	64.5%	1200	5.2%
UK¹³	2007-08	714300	393603	55.1%	28456	4.0%
	2008-09	693602	387668	55.9%	29127	4.2%
	2009-10	697742	394249	56.5%	31215	4.5%
	2010-11	684353	383854	56.1%	31852	4.7%
	2011-12	676975	376334	55.6%	29473	4.4%
	Average	693394	387142	55.8%	30025	4.3%

¹² There is a noteworthy discrepancy between these figures (provided by Attainment Correspondence Team, Department for Education UK) and those given in Table 1a of [this document](#) [accessed 24/03/14], in which the percentage of pupils attaining 5A*-C appears to have risen from 65.3% in 2007-08 to 81.8% in 2011-12. According to an Attainment Correspondence Team spokesperson, this discrepancy is accounted for by the fact that Table 1a shows figures for pupils sitting “GCSE and all equivalents”, whereas the figures provided here in Table 2.3 only show pupils sitting full courses GCSEs (in line, we believe, with the figures provided by the Welsh Government and the Department of Education Northern Ireland).

¹³ Not including Scotland or the Northern Irish independent sector.

Table 2.4: Average GCSE attainment for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	# GCSE pupils	# 5A*-C +	% 5A*-C +	# 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	35459	20773	58.6%	1351	3.8%
England	634910	351512	55.4%	27474	4.3%
Northern Ireland	23025	14856	64.5%	1200	5.2%
UK	693394	387142	55.8%	30025	4.3%

From these four tables, the following points may be noted:

- (a) The percentages of student attainment in all assessed A-Level categories are year-on-year lower in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, with Northern Ireland tending to perform stronger than England at AAA or better and A*AA or better but slowing to parity with England at A*A*A or better and A*A*A* or better.
- (b) All assessed Welsh and Northern Irish A-Level results in 2011-12 are relatively low in comparison with the previous four academic years.
- (c) Allowing for (b), all assessed Welsh A-Level results have declined since 2008-09, with the exception of the percentages of students attaining A*A*A* or better in the school and all-Wales sectors (which are static).
- (d) The Welsh FE sector is performing at a lower level than the Welsh school sector in all assessed A-Level categories, with the broad exception of students attaining A*A*A* or better.
- (e) The percentages of students attaining 5A*-C or better at GCSE in Wales are year-on-year between England (lowest) and Northern Ireland (highest), but year-on-year fall behind England at 5A* or better.
- (f) The percentages of students attaining 5A* or better at GCSE have tended to grow in Wales, England, and Northern Ireland across the assessed period.
- (g) The gap between Wales and the rest in upper-end A-Level performance is significantly greater than that in GCSE performance, where the differential is relatively small.

The picture at the absolute upper-end of academic performance in Wales is in one sense encouraging. For 2009-10 to 2011-12, the percentages of students attaining 5A* or better at GCSE have grown, and the percentages of students attaining A*A*A* or better at A-Level have remained steady. (d) is not wholly the grim reading that it might appear because the FE sector provides for many students who do not sit three or more A-Levels, e.g., students sitting an A-Level alongside vocational qualifications or taking an A-Level through an evening class. Given that the total numbers of A-Level pupils in the above tables comprise the numbers of students who sat one or more A-Level at the end of each of the assessed years, one would thus expect the FE sector to appear depressed in comparison with the school sector on measures considering final outcomes in three or more A-Levels.

Beyond the above, all other assessed areas in Wales – again allowing for (b) – show a trend to decline. (a) and (e) make for bald contrasts: Wales performs uniformly less well than England and Northern Ireland in all assessed A-Level areas, and Wales hosts the smallest percentage of 5A* or better GCSE students (despite having a consistently higher percentage of 5A*-C or better GCSE students than England). The fact that Wales' 5A* or better GCSE performance rate is growing whilst its upper-end A-Level performance rate is declining is also concerning. This suggests that top-notch Welsh GCSE students are for some reason(s) not realising their potential at A-Level.

A variety of other factors could be contributing to this, and indeed may have relevance to all these statistics. These include the qualification packages available to students in different institutions and regions (e.g., the number and combination of GCSEs and A-Levels they are able to sit, and any ancillary qualifications that run alongside them), and the students' progression routes from GCSE and A-Level. Another factor in GCSE and A-Level difference could be cohort size: students at GCSE might be benefiting from being part of quite large cohorts that become much smaller at A-Level in most Welsh sixth forms. These factors are not considered here but, as in our analysis of Tables 1.1-1.5, it is important that they are flagged.

It is interesting to note that these troubling trends in Wales' upper-end academic performance do not obviously map onto Tables 1.1 and 1.3. Given (c) especially, it might be expected that the acceptance rates of Welsh applicants to Oxford and Cambridge would show a steady decline across the assessed period, but they do not (although the acceptance rate for Welsh applicants in the 2008 UCAS cycle is notably higher at both universities than in subsequent years). This lack of correlation is encouraging because it suggests that excellent Welsh students are still applying to and being accepted at both universities at a stable rate. However, given that the significant majority of A-Level entrants at both universities now attain A*A*A, a steady decrease in upper-end A-Level attainment in Wales does not bode well for future prospective applicants.

We will next drill down to Local Authority level, to map our attainment data onto Oxford and Cambridge admissions figures. Ideally, in each LA, we would find a correlation between the rate of upper-end academic attainment and the rate of successful applications to Oxford and Cambridge. However, this may not be the case. If attainment is strong but applications are low, this suggests that there may be issues of perception or aspiration to overcome, e.g., that the LA's students are academically suitably-qualified but for some reason(s) reluctant to consider an application. By comparison, if an LA's attainment and application levels are strong but its acceptance rate is low, this suggests that its students are not being prepared

for the admissions process. Both these issues could be overcome through targeted outreach provision, delivered in cooperation between the universities and local schools and colleges.

The following table focuses on the GCSE and A-Level attainment of realistic applicants to Oxford and Cambridge by Welsh LA for the 2012 UCAS cycle (the most recent cycle for which we have verified data), alongside combined applications and acceptances to both universities. It will consider the same cohort, i.e., students who completed GCSEs in 2009-10 and A-Levels in 2011-12. The “Non-Welsh-domiciled, educated in FE” row shows students who were educated in the Welsh FE sector but either were not resident in a Welsh LA or whose area of residence is for some reason unknown. Given that the figures for some LAs are small, instances involving between one and three students are suppressed to preserve anonymity. Percentage acceptance rates are not quoted, again because the numbers involved are too small to provide realistic measures.

As with the other tables in Section 2, there is not exact parity between the datasets used to compile the following table. The performance figures for Wales and England are for students from all relevant educational sectors (maintained and independent for GCSE; maintained, independent, and FE for A-Level). The performance figures for Northern Ireland are for students from the maintained school sector only. The Oxford and Cambridge admissions figures are for applicants domiciled by LA from all sectors of education (maintained, independent, and FE). The “Welsh-domiciled, educated outside Wales” row is for students whose place of residence was in Wales but whose place of education was outside Wales when they applied to university. The data is ranked from the smallest to largest number of students attaining AAA or better at A-Level at the end of 2011-12.

Table 2.5: Upper-end academic attainment and Oxford and Cambridge admissions by Welsh Local Authority for 2011-12 (2009-10 for GCSE)

Region	# GCSE Pupils (2010)	# 5A* + (2010)	% 5A* + (2010)	# A-Level pupils (2012)	# AAA + (2012)	% AAA + (2012)	# A*A*A + (2012)	% A*A*A + (2012)	# Oxb Apps	# Oxb Accs
Blaenau Gwent	802	9	1.1%	206	5	2.4%	0	0.0%	0	0
Merthyr Tydfil	692	7	1.0%	170	8	4.7%	<3	*	5	<3
Isle of Anglesey	719	19	2.6%	264	16	6.1%	4	1.5%	4	0
Torfaen	1322	28	2.1%	360	20	5.6%	6	1.7%	9	<3
Wrexham	1278	32	2.5%	317	21	6.6%	5	1.6%	18	5
Caerphilly	2158	47	2.2%	636	27	4.2%	9	1.4%	17	4
Pembrokeshire	1378	33	2.4%	504	30	6.0%	5	1.0%	18	6
Ceredigion	815	35	4.3%	343	30	8.7%	10	2.9%	19	5
Flintshire	1721	35	2.0%	595	32	5.4%	9	1.5%	20	<3
Bridgend	1608	49	3.0%	624	33	5.3%	5	0.8%	17	<3
Conwy	1374	32	2.3%	526	35	6.7%	15	2.9%	16	4
Denbighshire	1339	35	2.6%	468	35	7.5%	14	3.0%	19	<3
Neath Port Talbot	1622	39	2.4%	415	37	8.9%	9	2.2%	6	<3
Newport	1749	84	4.8%	662	50	7.6%	14	2.1%	25	5
Gwynedd	1424	64	4.5%	500	52	10.4%	7	1.4%	16	<3
Powys	1575	68	4.3%	631	56	8.9%	10	1.6%	33	11
Rhondda Cynon Taf	2867	66	2.3%	969	58	6.0%	18	1.9%	32	8
Monmouthshire	1093	92	8.4%	502	81	16.1%	29	5.8%	34	5
Cardiff	2177	117	5.4%	854	84	9.8%	32	3.7%	41	9
Vale of Glamorgan	1536	96	6.3%	743	86	11.6%	21	2.8%	44	6
Swansea	2548	118	4.6%	939	102	10.9%	36	3.8%	77	10
Cardiff	3751	218	5.8%	1610	202	12.5%	82	5.1%	133	26
Non-Welsh-domiciled, educated in Welsh FE				48	<3	*	<3	*		
Welsh-domiciled, educated outside Wales									90	21

Wales Total	35548	1323	3.7%	12886	1102	8.6%	343	2.7%	693	135
England Total	639263	28678	4.5%	257166	33311	13.0%	12925	5.0%	20044	5035
Northern Ireland Total	22931	1214	5.3%	11292	1645	14.6%	519	4.6%	327	84
Scotland Total									600	132
UK Total¹⁴	697742	31215	4.5%	281344	36058	12.8%	13787	4.9%	21664	5386

Allowing that some of these figures are too small to be statistically significant, a number of instructive observations can be made from them. With a few anomalies, the numbers of students in each LA attaining 5A* or better at GCSE and A*A*A or better at A-Level tends to increase in line with the number of students attaining AAA or better at A-Level. In other words, the pattern of higher-level achievement by LA is consistent across the range of upper-end grades. Similarly, numbers of Oxford and Cambridge applicants from each LA tend to increase in line with numbers of students in each LA attaining AAA or better at A Level, though the same cannot be said for the numbers of those applicants who are ultimately successful. Anomalously, Neath Port Talbot and Gwynedd have relatively high numbers of students attaining AAA or better at A-Level but relatively small numbers of students applying for and being accepted at Oxford and Cambridge. At face value, this suggests that there may be any combination of perception, aspiration, or possibly just information concerns in these two areas. This is an interesting finding.

Critically, Table 2.5 shows that students accepted to Oxford and Cambridge are widely distributed across Wales, and that only one LA – Blaenau Gwent – had no Oxford or Cambridge applicants in the 2012 UCAS cycle. All the other LAs had at least one acceptance at the end of the 2012 UCAS cycle, though 40% of LAs had three or fewer acceptances. In addition, half of Wales' LAs saw fewer than ten students who attained A*A*A or better at A-Level at the end of 2011-12. While Oxford and Cambridge entrants, and high-performing academics students, are therefore evidently unusual in some areas, it is equally plain that purely geographical factors are not preventing Oxford and Cambridge applicants from being successful. It is not as if admission to Oxford or Cambridge is biased towards those parts of Wales that are either closest to England or most metropolitan.

Having made these observations, the initial draft of this paper further examined academic performance and Oxford and Cambridge offer numbers by post-16 educational provider within a sample of Welsh LAs for the 2012 UCAS cycle. To do this, we identified nine Welsh LAs which represented a spread of trends across Wales, as well as being geographically, socio-economically, and demographically

¹⁴ Performance figures do not include Scotland or the Northern Irish independent sector.

diverse: Cardiff, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea, Torfaen, and Wrexham. In addition to our previously-used performance measures, we also identified the sector of the institutions considered (maintained, independent, or FE), the educational medium of the maintained schools (bilingual, English, or Welsh),¹⁵ and the percentage of each maintained school's entire cohort which was eligible for free school meals in 2011-12. Special schools, Pupil Referral Units, and very small independent providers, which host only a tiny number of GCSE or A-Level students each year, were not included. Independent schools were considered within the LA where they are based, and FE colleges were considered within the LA from which they receive the majority of their A-Level students. The Oxford and Cambridge data was provided by CAO and was not quality-assured by OUAO.

This tabulated results of this examination are not provided here because they would need to be significantly suppressed to maintain student anonymity. However, the following points may be noted from them, remembering from Table 2.1 that Wales' A-Level results in 2011-12 were relatively low in comparison with the previous four academic years:

- (a) Six independent schools located in three of the assessed LAs had relatively high percentages of students performing strongly at GCSE and A-Level. Two of these had correspondingly high overall rates of offers from Oxford and Cambridge. Four had not. In all cases, the numbers of students involved were relatively small.
- (b) Of the 81 maintained schools considered, six – 7% – had ten or more applicants to Oxford and Cambridge. These six were based in three LAs – Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Swansea – and each had a relatively large, relatively high-performing sixth form. Two of the six had an overall Oxford and Cambridge offer rate of over 20%.
- (c) Of the 81 maintained schools considered, 37 (46%) had no A-Level students with A*A*A or better, i.e., no students who were in line with the majority of Oxford and Cambridge entrants. From amongst the 1371 pupils who completed A-Levels in these 37 schools, five (0.004%) received offers from Oxford. None received offers from Cambridge.
- (d) Of the 81 maintained schools considered, 20 (25%) had one A-Level student with A*A*A or better. Nine (11%) had two such students. 15 (18%) had three or more.
- (e) Of the eight FE colleges considered, four had atypically large A-Level cohorts. Of these four, one had particularly large numbers of high-performing A-Level

¹⁵ These characteristics were taken from either the relevant LA website or, if not readily available there, the school's own website.

students and Oxford and Cambridge applicants, though its Oxford and Cambridge offer rate was lower than two of the four.

- (f) With the exception of two schools, every maintained or FE provider which had five or more A-Level students with A*A*A or better had a greater offer rate at Cambridge than at Oxford.

In the main, these points confirm what we already know or suspect. At the upper end of the attainment spectrum, significant independent providers perform strongly in examinations but not uniformly as strongly as one might accordingly predict in terms of Oxford and Cambridge offers. Larger sixth forms and FE colleges tend to have relatively larger numbers of applicants to Oxford and Cambridge since they have larger talent pools to draw upon, but again these applications are not uniformly successful.

It is notable that five of the six maintained schools highlighted in (b) as high providers of Oxford and Cambridge applicants, are amongst seven maintained schools in the sample which had five or more A-Level students with A*A*A or better. In other words, encouragingly, the providers with the highest numbers of students who are academically in line with successful entrants to Oxford and Cambridge are tending to send the highest number of applicants. (f) would seem circumstantially to reflect our previous observations about the final A-Level attainment of Oxford and Cambridge entrants, in that Cambridge A-Level entrants have recently tended to present stronger attainment than Oxford A-Level entrants.

At the other end of the attainment spectrum, (c) is a blunt statistic: nearly half of the sampled maintained sector schools did not have a single student who attained grades in line with the majority of Oxford and Cambridge entrants. The fact that 0.004% of A-Level students from those schools received offers from Oxford would seem to be a clear demonstration of the correlation between top-level examination performance and success at application. 36% of the sampled maintained sector schools had just one or two students who attained grades in line with the majority of Oxford and Cambridge entrants, in many cases from amongst substantial sixth forms. The isolation of such students is abundantly clear.

Perhaps the most notable (lack of) trend to be drawn from this latter analysis is that, with the exception of Cardiff, there was little reverse correlation between the percentage of school cohort entitled to free school meals and academic attainment. Given that it is a commonplace that upper-end academic attainment tends to be linked with the socio-economic and demographic background of an institution's cohort, it was interesting that our evidence did not consistently bear this out. Some

institutions appear to be performing strongly in spite of having relatively large percentages of their cohorts eligible for free school meals. Others do not.

Section 3: Regional comparisons between Wales and England

Alongside the conclusions drawn from assessing the nine representative Welsh LAs highlighted above, we were additionally asked to review these against comparators outside Wales, to query whether the trends we found in Wales were specific to Wales or wider phenomena. We attempted such a review but, having consulted on it, we are concerned that, although the principle of such a review may appear sound, its outcomes will necessarily be distorted by local factors which cannot be accounted for in the data to which we have access. With this caveat, our regional comparison methodology is presented below, for completeness.

To attempt a regional comparison with the nine sample Welsh LAs, we identified nine analogous English LAs by a range of quantitative data, including the LAs': distance from Oxford and Cambridge;¹⁶ population size from the 2011 Census;¹⁷ 15-19 population size from the 2011 Census;¹⁸ and POLAR3 analysis (which indicates the level of progression to HE by the LAs' school leavers).¹⁹ We also considered qualitative comparisons by attempting to match on the basis of characteristics, e.g., rural coastal areas (Pembrokeshire and Torbay); urban centres (Swansea and Kingston upon Hull); metropolitan cities (Cardiff and Manchester); and post-industrial regions (Rhondda Cynon Taf and North Tyneside). Our proposed comparators are set out in full in the following table.

¹⁶ Geographical distance and travelling time to the two universities were calculated via Google Maps.

¹⁷ Table P04, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/population-and-household-estimates-for-england-and-wales/rft-p04.xls> [accessed 24/03/14].

¹⁸ Table P04, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/population-and-household-estimates-for-england-and-wales/rft-p04.xls> [accessed 24/03/14].

¹⁹ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/polar/mapofyoungparticipationareas/> [accessed 24/03/14].

Table 3.1: Case study to identify English comparators for sample Welsh Local Authorities²⁰

Welsh Local Authority	Distance to Oxford (m)	Time to Oxford (hrs and mins)	Distance to Cambridge (m)	Time to Cambridge (hrs and mins)	15-19 population	Overall population	POLAR3 description	% FSM in secondary schools in LA	English Local Authority	Distance to Oxford (m)	Time to Oxford (hrs and mins)	Distance to Cambridge (m)	Time to Cambridge (hrs and mins)	15-19 population	Overall population	POLAR3 description	% FSM in secondary schools in LA
Cardiff	118	2,01	200	3,29	25900	346100	1-5	17.7%	Manchester	161	2,42	182	3,08	38300	503100	1-3	35.0%
Denbighshire	192	3,15	213	3,41	6000	93700	2-5	14.5%	Darlington	224	3,41	197	3,15	6400	105600	1-5	17.3%
Gwynedd	198	4,00	216	4,28	8400	121900	3-5	11.3%	Halton	161	2,33	182	3,00	8100	125800	1-4	30.2%
Pembrokeshire	214	3,43	296	5,11	7500	122400	4-5	13.6%	Torbay	183	3,02	265	4,29	7600	131000	1-5	15.0%
Powys	155	2,53	194	3,50	8000	133000	3-5	8.3%	Cornwall	223	3,29	305	4,57	31800	532300	3-5	12.2%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	135	2,28	217	3,56	14900	234400	3-5	19.4%	North Tyneside	261	4,21	234	3,55	11500	200800	1-3	13.7%
Swansea	155	2,36	237	4,04	16100	239000	1-5	18.3%	Kingston upon Hull	190	3,11	144	2,45	17400	256400	1	28.3%
Torfaen	109	1,56	191	3,24	6100	91100	3-5	15.9%	Hartlepool	238	3,57	211	3,31	6300	92000	1-4	23.0%
Wrexham	145	2,45	166	3,12	8800	134800	1-4	16.4%	Knowsley	170	2,42	191	3,08	10100	145900	1-5	34.3%

²⁰ %FSM figures are taken from <https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Local-Authorities/Free-School-Meals/PupilsEligibleForFreeSchoolMeals-by-LocalAuthority-Sector> [accessed 24/03/14], and Table 8b, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219262/sfr10-2012lat.xls [accessed 24/03/14].

In two cases, we are conscious that we elected to compare LAs with significantly different population sizes: Cardiff and Manchester, and Powys and Cornwall. In the first instance, we felt it was important to recognise Cardiff's role as Wales' capital and to compare it with an equivalent English metropolitan city. In the second, we wanted to compare two large geographical areas with communities that are relatively isolated by the absence of transport infrastructure. Allowing for these differences, we believe that our comparators are representative on the basis of the evidence gathered in Table 3.1.

Having established this framework, we trialled a comparison of upper-end GCSE and A-Level attainment figures for the nine sample Welsh LAs and the nine English comparators, alongside their Oxford and Cambridge application and acceptance figures, for the academic years 2007-08 through 2011-12. The attainment figures to which we had access were for the maintained sector only, not including independent schools, FE, or Pupil Referral Units. The Oxford and Cambridge figures were for students resident in the stated LA at their time of application.

It quickly became apparent that the discrepancy between the cohorts assessed by the attainment and the admissions data was problematic: the former, for the maintained sector only; the latter, for all students resident in each highlighted LA. Perhaps more importantly, consultation on our results identified problems in our approach which were not predictable from our data. For example, in one English LA, what appeared to be poor attainment at A-Level was wildly distorted by a preponderance of excellent local sixth forms on the border of neighbouring authorities. In consequence, whilst there were – to our knowledge – a good number of students in said LA performing strongly at A-Level, none of these registered as statistics for that LA because they were educated outside the borough. Another LA presented almost the opposite problem, of apparently outstanding but unrepresentative Oxford and Cambridge progression, resulting from the work of a particularly strong local sixth form college. In other words, local knowledge – not apparent in the presented statistics – quickly raised doubt about the validity of this approach to the comparative exercise.

What may be stated advisedly from our data was that, within the LAs where there are approximately similar 15-19 populations (i.e., all except Cardiff and Manchester, and Powys and Cornwall), there are proportionally fewer A-Level entrants in the maintained sector in England than there are in Wales (except in the case of Pembrokeshire and Torbay). It is also notable that English maintained sector students tended to attain more strongly at the upper end of A-Level than their Welsh counterparts, in line with the decline in Welsh upper-end A-Level attainment identified from Tables 2.1-2.4.

Conclusions

This paper identifies three key points for further consideration. First, during 2008-12, Welsh-domiciled applicants had a statistically lower chance than UK-domiciled applicants of being shortlisted, offered places, and ultimately accepted at Oxford or Cambridge. Secondly, during the same period, upper-end GCSE attainment was lower in Wales than in England and Northern Ireland, though it was growing. Thirdly, during the same period, upper-end A-Level attainment declined in Wales, except at the very top, where it was static.

Initially, one would predict a correlation between these points, i.e., relatively low upper-end attainment leads to relatively low progression to Oxford and Cambridge. However, as previously argued, the data presented does not confirm such a pattern. Analysis of applicant attainment data by country is required to demonstrate whether the identified attainment and progression pattern in Wales is more than a striking coincidence. As stated in n. 6, this will be considered in a discrete paper.

The other matter arising which requires further consideration is the difficulty of comparing data from Wales with data from England and Northern Ireland, when it is evident that the three are in many ways very different. The LA comparison proposed in Section 3 is broadly logical, but it is undermined by a number of distorting local factors. Acknowledging the importance of such comparisons, however, we propose a supplementary analysis to compare Wales as a whole with a like-for-like English region. Again, this will be presented in a separate paper, with appropriate justifications and supporting data.