

Ms Amanda Wilkinson
Director, Universities Wales

Jayne Bryant MS
Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee
Senedd Cymru

12 March 2024

Dear Jayne Bryant MS

We are writing to you as Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee to express concerns about the level of participation of Welsh young people (Welsh-domiciled) in higher education.

UCAS' reporting on application and entry rates to higher education across the UK shows that for Welsh domiciled students the rates are worse than in England and the UK more broadly, where comparisons can be made. We would like to draw the committee's attention to this data and are happy to work alongside the Committee wherever needed to identify the issue, possible causes and solutions.

Higher Education provides benefits for the individual in terms of lifelong well-being as well as boosting the economy and providing a workforce fit for the future. Projections show that 400,000 extra graduates will be needed to meet demand in Wales by 2035, with 11m extra graduates needed across the UK.

Welsh performance in comparison to the rest of the UK

The percentage of Welsh domiciled 18 year olds entering higher education in 2023/24 was 29.9%, meanwhile in London that percentage is 49.5%. That is the outlier, but students from NI enter at 40.2% and in the South East of England, it's 38.5%. The only part of England with a lower rate than Wales is the North East of England at 28.9%. Scotland is not directly comparable due to their cap on student numbers and different qualifications system.

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and regional disparities in entry rates

In the UK overall, those in IMD category Quintile 1 (the most deprived) enter at a rate of 26% whereas in Wales it's 18.9%. Young men in Quintile 1 fare even worse, entering at 21.2% in the UK but only at 14.9% in Wales. Within Wales, there is regional disparity as Q1 students from South Wales are more likely to access HE than those in Mid or North Wales. For example, Q1 students provide 22% of the market in South Wales East, but only 11% of the market in North Wales.

Cross-border flows

The data reveals that students from England are increasingly choosing to study in Wales. In 2019, fewer than 10,000 students chose to move from England to Wales, in 2023 this number was more than 12,000. This has partly masked the participation challenges among Welsh domiciled young people. The number of those from Wales who participate in HE in either England or Wales institutions has dropped since 2019.

Institutions in Wales already invest significant time and effort into outreach programmes in local schools and colleges, and evidently Wales is an attractive place for students to come and study (as evidenced by Wales being a net beneficiary of the cross-border flow).

Possible causes

There is no definitive data. Cultural factors may play a part, particularly messaging on the value of higher education from government and media. It is likely that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are the most susceptible to this messaging as they are unlikely to have family members with direct experience of higher education.

Policy asks

We would like to understand better what the cause(s) may be in order to help deliver a brighter future for our young people. Destination data for 16-17 year olds is currently patchy and provides limited answers. More research in this area would be welcome. As the concept of tertiary education develops in Wales, ensuring that we understand the journeys of our young people will be ever more important to ensure we tackle the pressing participation challenges we already face.

In bringing this to the attention of the Children, Young People and Education Committee we hope to highlight the seriousness of the issue and its implications. Universities Wales would welcome the opportunity to engage with you further in exploring how this challenge might be addressed.



Amanda Wilkinson

Director, Universities Wales