

Reach for the stars: The Seren network and Welsh Oxbridge applications

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Seren is a network of regional hubs designed to support Wales' most able young people to achieve their academic potential and gain access to leading universities, including Oxford and Cambridge. This article follows the [recent post](#) about stretching potentially high achieving pupils in Wales.

Oxbridge Ambassador Project

In May 2013, Paul Murphy, the former Secretary of State for Wales, was appointed as the Welsh Government's Oxbridge Ambassador, to identify the reasons why Welsh applications and admissions to Oxford and Cambridge Universities had declined.

The aims of the project were:

- To review research and data on applications and admissions to Oxbridge;
- To identify barriers to student choice;
- To evaluate existing initiatives to encourage applications to Oxbridge.

Establishing the Seren Network hubs

In [June 2014](#), Paul Murphy presented the [Final Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales](#) to the then Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis. The primary recommendation of the report was to establish:

a national network of partnership hubs ... to ensure that schools and colleges can learn from each other, and share resources to support their most academically able students.

These hubs would ensure consistency in the support for the students with the greatest potential throughout Wales. Along with schools and colleges, Oxford and Cambridge Universities would be expected to contribute to the hubs. The Welsh Government



accepted the recommendation and the Seren network was established in [January 2015](#).

The report contained 15 other recommendations, including:

- The Welsh Government to raise standards, at GCSE, and more critically, at AS and A Level;
- The Welsh Government, along with Oxford and Cambridge, and through the hubs, to ensure access to reliable and accurate information to dispel incorrect perceptions about studying at Oxbridge and to increase awareness of the financial support available to students from Wales;
- Hubs and universities to develop guidelines on sharing academic super-curricular best practice between schools, colleges and universities;
- Universities to improve feedback to help teachers in Wales understand the admissions tests and interview process.

Structure

On [15th January 2015](#), the first three pilot hubs were launched, which were then expanded throughout Wales. At the beginning of the academic year 2016/17, there were [eleven hubs](#) in Wales, supporting more than 2,000 students. Every eligible student in Wales now has access to a hub.



The Seren Network hubs

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Flintshire & Wrexham | 6 | Cardiff |
| 2 | Swansea | 7 | Neath Port Talbot, Powys & Bridgend |
| 3 | Rhondda Cynon Taff & Merthyr Tydfil | 8 | Conwy & Denbighshire |
| 4 | Pembrokeshire & Carmarthenshire | 9 | Anglesey & Gwynedd |
| 5 | EAS Consortia (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport, Torfaen & Monmouthshire) | 10 | Ceredigion |
| | | 11 | Vale of Glamorgan |



Each hub is a partnership of schools and Further Education colleges, supported by the Welsh Government and [some of the UK's leading universities](#), including Oxford, Cambridge, Russell group and Sutton Trust 30 universities. The institutions work



together closely to develop a support programme for young people in their region, led by a hub co-ordinator. Students cannot apply directly to be part of the Seren Network, but are nominated by teachers, based on GCSE results. In [March 2017](#), the [Minister for Lifelong Learning and Skills](#) announced a new collaboration between Jesus College, Oxford University and the Seren network. Jesus College will host a free [summer school](#) for students from Wales in August 2017, the first such programme aimed solely at Welsh students.

Aims

The Seren network aims to raise aspirations and provide support to students and teachers to ensure more able and talented young people achieve their potential and progress to the UK's top universities. In order to do this, the programme seeks to:

- Challenge students to extend their knowledge beyond the A Level curriculum, through running subject specific workshops;
- Offer practical support and advice regarding UCAS applications, university interviews and assessments;
- Link students with leading UK universities, providing information on courses, summer schools and workshops;
- Support schools and teachers in providing information, advice and activities for high achieving students.

Policy context

The need to raise standards, amongst more able and talented pupils in particular, is a key aim of the Cabinet Secretary for Education's policy initiatives. The OECD report [Improving schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective \(PDF 3.57 MB\)](#) (2014) identified a weakness in the Welsh education system: there is 'a high and increasing proportion of low performers' and 'a low proportion of high performers.' As our previous [blog article](#) explained, whilst the proportion of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs has increased, the proportion achieving 5 or more A* or A grades has fallen. This was illustrated by Wales' 2015 [PISA results](#) which showed that performance at the higher levels of proficiency is lower than the OECD average and lower than other countries in the UK. The report recommended that more needs to be



done to stretch more able and talented pupils. This problem was highlighted in the Oxbridge Ambassador's Final Report:

[The] 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 [school categorisation] or other performance measures.

The Cabinet Secretary told the discussion forum on [The national mission of education reform – everybody's business](#), hosted by Positif on 9 May 2017, that the Welsh Government was actively looking at a targeted scheme to stretch more able and talented pupils, involving the Seren Network. Kirsty Williams also referred to the success of the network in her statement on Post-compulsory Education and Training Consultation on [20th June](#):

Our Seren programme, for instance, gives us a really good example of what can be achieved.

Attainment and Oxbridge applications

As well as discussing the problem of low levels of high attainment in the Welsh education system, the Final Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales noted that Welsh students don't do as well in the Oxbridge admission process, compared to other students in the UK. The document [Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base: Extended executive summary](#), part of the Oxbridge Ambassador Project, suggested other possible factors that could merit further data collection and analysis. These could include: educational support, in terms of teaching, aspiration, subject availability and combinations, and UCAS references; personal preparedness in terms of revision, motivation and super-curricular exploration.

Oxford University publishes admissions statistics, divided between undergraduate and postgraduate study, including statistics [by region](#). The table below shows that the success rate of Welsh undergraduate students has increased since 2013 and that the average success since 2014 has been 19.5%.



Table 1: Oxford University admissions statistics

	Applications from Wales	Acceptance	
	Number	Number	%
2015	394	77	19.5
2014	411	80	19.5
2013	384	55	14.3
2012	425	75	17.6

Cambridge University publishes [annual admission statistics](#) for undergraduate study, also including statistics by region. The table below shows that from 2013–16, applications from Welsh students represented 1.6% of applications made to the university. The percentage of offers made to Welsh students declined slightly from 2.0% in 2014 to 1.6% in 2016. The overall success rate increased from 19.6% in 2013 to 26% in 2014, but decreased to 20.7% in 2016.

Table 2: Cambridge University admissions statistics

	Applications		Acceptance and success rates		Success rate of Welsh applications (%)
	Number from Wales	% of total applications	Number of students from Wales	% of total successful applications	
2016	276	1.6	57	1.6	20.7
2015	257	1.6	63	1.8	24.5
2014	269	1.6	70	2	26
2013	255	1.6	50	1.5	19.6
2012	269	1.7	60	1.7	22.3

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Image from Welsh Government's [Supporting Wales' brightest](#) (2017)

Table 1: [University of Oxford Application statistics – UK Regions](#)

Table 2: Source: [University of Cambridge](#)

