

Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

Comparing Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge with the north-east of England

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June 2014

This report compares admission rates to Oxford and Cambridge universities from Welsh students, compared with those domiciled in the north-east of England. In order to explain the disproportionate admission rates, we also consider educational attainment at GCSE and A level in Wales with comparative figures from the north-east of England.

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Background

In “Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base” (TEB) we compared Welsh attainment at GCSE and A level with that in England and Northern Ireland. We also compared application and admission rates to Oxford and Cambridge from these regions. The results demonstrated a clear variance in proportional attainment and admission rates.

We know however, that these regions are not directly analogous. England has a population of 53.5m compared with Northern Ireland’s 1.8m and Wales’ 3.1m¹. In addition to this, the educational systems in each region are substantially different. England has a large independent school sector along with pockets of socially or educationally selective schools; Northern Ireland has retained a selective school system resulting in a high number of grammar schools. Wales has no educationally selective state schools and a very small number of grammar schools.

To address this, we attempted to compare a selection of demographically similar Welsh and English local authorities (LAs). This was not successful, as the area of interest was often subject to factors which could not be controlled for – for example a successful sixth form just outside the LA boundaries which attracts students to travel outside of the LA, therefore excluding them from the attainment records within that authority. We have opted therefore, on the advice of the Welsh Government Chief Economist, to conduct a further comparison study between Wales and the Northeast of England.

¹ www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk--england-and-wales--scotland-and-northern-ireland/mid-2011-and-mid-2012/index.html

Admissions statistics

First we compared the applications and admissions to Oxford and Cambridge between 2008-2012. A summary of our findings is below, with an annual breakdown by region for each university presented in appendix A.

Table 1.1: 2008-2012 average admissions figures for Oxford and Cambridge by region²

	# Apps	# SL	% SL	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
Cam Wales	267			68	25.50%	60	22.60%
Ox Wales	445	279	62.80%	84	18.80%	77	17.30%
Cam NE	262					68.2	26.03%
Ox NE	244.2	165.8	67.90%	61.6	25.23%	54.8	22.44%
Cam UK	10198			3170	31.10%	2755	27.00%
Ox UK	11452	7843	68.50%	2906	25.40%	2702	23.60%

We can see from this summary table that the Northeast has a slightly lower average success rate for Oxford and Cambridge admissions than the UK as a whole, but a much higher success rate than Wales.

Why is this? There are several mitigating factors which may be affecting applicant performance in the Northeast:

1. The Northeast has a number of public schools which could have a disproportionate impact on Oxbridge progression; or alternatively an individual school or small group of schools, irrespective of school type, may be particularly successful in supporting applicants, and this may skew results for the whole region.

We have access to school level data for Oxford only (see appendix B), but a quick check of this shows that Northeast comprehensive schools have had a 41.5% success rate after shortlisting compared to a 36% success rate for independent school applicants in the region. In Wales comprehensive students achieved a 29.6% success rate compared to a 34.9% success rate for independent school candidates. Successful Northeast candidates came from 35 different schools or colleges, 9 of which were outside the Northeast region and successful Welsh candidates came from 48 different schools, 15 of which are not in Wales.

One school in Newcastle provided 27 successful applications, the highest number from a single institution in the Northeast while a Cardiff school provided 16 successful applicants, the highest number from a Welsh institution.

² Shortlisting information is not routinely collated by Cambridge, and so is provided here for Oxford only.

In the Northeast, 4 of the 35 different schools produced 10 or more successful applicants (73 in total) while in Wales 6 of the 48 schools and colleges produced a similar number of candidates per school (78 in total).

This suggests that while there is a slightly smaller density of schools and colleges in the Northeast region, there is no disproportionate impact from a single school or small group of schools.

2. Alternatively, academic attainment in the Northeast may be higher overall. It could be expected that the more AAA+ students in a region, the higher the likelihood of successful Oxbridge admissions.

We will examine this in the next section.

3. Finally, there may be other factors which exist across the region: an embedded programme of support for gifted and talented students, an effective network of careers advisors to support progression to higher education, more effective outreach work by national and local universities – any of these factors could contribute to an explanation for the increased success rate of applicants to Oxford and Cambridge.

Without further regional knowledge, we cannot investigate this in this paper.

Academic attainment

We examined GCSE and A level attainment in the Northeast in order to conduct a comparison with data previously reported in the Further Evidence Paper. As previously, we have identified 5A*s at GCSE as a good demonstration of the relevant academic ability to competitively apply to Oxford or Cambridge. We have analysed A level results broken down between AAA – A*A*A*. From these data we can report the following:

1. The Northeast has a lower proportion of AAA students than Wales, a slightly higher proportion of A*AA and A*A*A students, and a very slightly lower proportion of A*A*A* students. Without testing for statistical significance, we can say that the differences in performance are so narrow as to be relatively unremarkable.
2. The Northeast and Wales both have a much lower proportion of AAA-A*A*A* students than England, Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole. The proportional gap in performance between all cohorts decreases as the grade threshold increases.

Why are applications to Oxford and Cambridge so successful from this region if the applicant pool isn't as well qualified? This suggests that academic attainment is not the only contributing factor to the reduced success rate of Welsh students. If we look at overall numbers rather than proportions, we can see that the number of successful admissions to Oxford and Cambridge in the Northeast is 615, or 24.2% of that regions AAA and above students. For Wales the equivalent is 685 admitted students, or 11.2% of the AAA cohort.

3. Wales has very good average GCSE attainment. The proportion of students achieving 5A*-C grades is higher than the UK average, and higher than England and the Northeast, and is second only to Northern Ireland. Attainment at the top end of the GCSE spectrum however, is weaker in comparison with the other regions. The proportion of Welsh students achieving 5A* grades at GCSE is lower than those in England, Northern Ireland and the UK average.

The average GCSE attainment in Wales is good news, and is likely reflective of Welsh Government efforts to support students at risk of failure within the education system. More students proportionally, are achieving a good set of GCSEs than in most other areas of the UK. It is important however to ensure that this focus on the middle does not allow high achievers to fall behind and fail to reach their potential. The proportion of students achieving five excellent GCSEs is lower than expected in comparison with the rest of the UK, suggesting that these academically more able and talented students may require more attention from the education system in future.

4. A smaller proportion of students in the Northeast achieve 5A*-C grades and 5A* grades at GCSE than in all other regions analysed. This difference is bigger than that in A level attainment and the gap in performance has almost gone by the Oxford and Cambridge admissions stage. Are the most academically capable students in the

Northeast identified and support throughout their education, despite much lower average levels of attainment? Or is another intervention adding educational value to the student cohort at A-level in this region?

It is difficult to know what conclusions to draw from this comparison because, within the time available, we were not able to access attainment data for Oxford and Cambridge applicants from the North East of England. This lack is critical because, as shown in our accompanying paper 'Welsh attainment and admission to Oxford and Cambridge: the evidence base' 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 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.

Appendix A: Annual admissions data for Oxford and Cambridge by region 2008–12

Table 2.1: 2008-2012 admissions statistics for Cambridge for Welsh-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	241	65	27.00%	60	24.90%
2009	287	68	23.70%	59	20.60%
2010	290	72	24.80%	65	22.40%
2011	247	69	27.90%	57	23.10%
2012	269	66	24.50%	60	22.30%
Average	267	68	25.50%	60	22.60%

Table 2.2: 2008-2012 admissions statistics for Cambridge for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	10179	3281	32.20%	2907	28.60%
2009	10867	3221	29.60%	2842	26.20%
2010	10312	3180	30.80%	2745	26.60%
2011	9798	2994	30.60%	2590	26.40%
2012	9832	3173	32.30%	2691	27.40%
Average	10198	3170	31.10%	2755	27.00%

Table 2.3: 2008-2012 admissions statistics for Cambridge for NE-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	243			69	28.40%
2009	301			76	25.25%
2010	270			67	24.81%
2011	261			65	24.90%
2012	235			64	27.23%
Average	262			68.2	26.03%

Table 2.4: 2008-2012 admissions figures for Oxford for Welsh-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# SL	% SL Rate	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	401	298	74.30%	92	22.90%	84	20.90%
2009	486	329	67.70%	85	17.50%	78	16.00%
2010	436	251	57.60%	79	18.10%	74	17.00%
2011	476	281	59.00%	83	17.40%	74	15.50%
2012	424	236	55.70%	80	18.90%	75	17.70%
Average	445	279	62.80%	84	18.80%	77	17.30%

Table 2.5: 2008-2012 admissions figures for Oxford for UK-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# SL	% SL Rate	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	10094	7904	78.30%	2988	29.60%	2755	27.30%
2009	10894	7779	71.40%	2920	26.80%	2727	25.00%
2010	12333	8102	65.70%	2853	23.10%	2670	21.60%
2011	12107	7810	64.50%	2863	23.60%	2665	22.00%
2012	11832	7618	64.40%	2904	24.50%	2695	22.80%
Average	11452	7843	68.50%	2906	25.40%	2702	23.60%

Table 2.6: 2008-2012 admissions figures for Oxford for NE-domiciled applicants

UCAS	# Apps	# SL	% SL Rate	# Offs	% Off Rate	# Accs	% Acc Rate
2008	217	167	76.96%	70	32.26%	62	28.57%
2009	202	150	74.26%	46	22.77%	40	19.80%
2010	265	179	67.55%	66	24.91%	60	22.64%
2011	278	170	61.15%	62	22.30%	53	19.06%
2012	259	163	62.93%	64	24.71%	59	22.78%
Average	244.2	165.8	67.90%	61.6	25.23%	54.8	22.44%

Annex B: Admissions to Oxford by school type 2008–12

Table 3.1: 2008-12 admissions figures for Oxford from NE-domiciled applicants by school type

School type	# Apps	# SL	% SL	# Offs	% Offs/SL	% Offs/Apps	# Accs
Comprehensive	613	412	67.2%	171	41.5%	27.9%	152
FE Institutions	52	23	44.2%	7	30.4%	13.5%	5
Grammar	1		0.0%			0.0%	
Independent	371	278	74.9%	100	36.0%	27.0%	90
Individual/unknown	32	17	53.1%	6	35.3%	18.8%	5
Overseas schools	3	1	33.3%		0.0%	0.0%	
Sixth Form College	149	98	65.8%	24	24.5%	16.1%	22
Grand Total	1221	829	67.9%	308	37.2%	25.2%	274

Table 3.2: 2008-12 admissions figures for Oxford from Welsh-domiciled applicants by school type

School type	# Apps	# SL	% SL	# Offs	% Offs/SL	% Offs/Apps	# Accs
Comprehensive	1388	848	61.1%	251	29.6%	18.1%	232
FE Institutions	236	150	63.6%	35	23.3%	14.8%	30
Grammar	3	2	66.7%		0.0%	0.0%	
Independent	402	281	69.9%	98	34.9%	24.4%	91
Individual/unknown	37	21	56.8%	9	42.9%	24.3%	8
Other Maintained	14	7	50.0%	3	42.9%	21.4%	3
Other UK Institutions	3	1	33.3%		0.0%	0.0%	
Overseas schools	8	7	87.5%	1	14.3%	12.5%	1
Sixth Form College	132	78	59.1%	22	28.2%	16.7%	20
Grand Total	2223	1395	62.8%	419	30.0%	18.8%	385

Annex C: Attainment at A level and GCSE 2008–12

Table 4.1: 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* +
Wales (schools)	2007-08	10629	1049	9.90%						
	2008-09	10920	1096	10.00%						
	2009-10	10980	1088	9.90%	702	6.40%	355	3.20%	132	1.20%
	2010-11	10707	1046	9.80%	681	6.40%	322	3.00%	136	1.30%
	2011-12	10507	943	9.00%	608	5.80%	295	2.80%	123	1.20%
	Average	10749	1044	9.70%	664	6.20%	324	3.00%	130	1.20%
Wales (FE)	2007-08	2347	170	7.20%						
	2008-09	2613	207	7.90%						
	2009-10	2480	191	7.70%	124	5.00%	70	2.80%	31	1.30%
	2010-11	2468	157	6.40%	108	4.40%	61	2.50%	30	1.20%
	2011-12	2379	159	6.70%	95	4.00%	48	2.00%	20	0.80%
	Average	2457	177	7.20%	109	4.50%	60	2.40%	27	1.10%
Wales (all)	2007-08	12976	1219	9.40%						
	2008-09	13533	1303	9.60%						
	2009-10	13460	1279	9.50%	826	6.10%	425	3.20%	163	1.20%
	2010-11	13175	1203	9.10%	789	6.00%	383	2.90%	166	1.30%
	2011-12	12886	1102	8.60%	703	5.50%	343	2.70%	143	1.10%
	Average	13206	1221	9.20%	773	5.90%	384	2.90%	157	1.20%

North East England (all)	2007-08	5,776	422	7.30%						
	2008-09	6,058	473	7.80%						
	2009-10	6,132	546	8.90%	374	6.10%	172	2.80%	67	1.10%
	2010-11	6,116	557	9.10%	391	6.40%	202	3.30%	80	1.30%
	2011-12	6,003	546	9.10%	384	6.40%	186	3.10%	66	1.10%
	Average	6,017	508	8.44%	379	6.30%	185	3.07%	70	1.17%
England (all)	2007-08	248589	30169	12.10%						
	2008-09	254138	32039	12.60%						
	2009-10	263620	33830	12.80%	23839	9.00%	12803	4.90%	5448	2.10%
	2010-11	253312	33537	13.20%	24397	9.60%	13220	5.20%	5806	2.30%
	2011-12	257166	33311	13.00%	23859	9.30%	12925	5.00%	5637	2.20%
	Average	255365	32577	12.80%	24032	9.30%	12983	5.00%	5630	2.20%
Northern Ireland (schools)	2007-08	10070	1727	17.10%						
	2008-09	10692	1681	15.70%						
	2009-10	11819	1851	15.70%	1203	10.20%	591	5.00%	257	2.20%
	2010-11	11055	1800	16.30%	1128	10.20%	568	5.10%	254	2.30%
	2011-12	11292	1645	14.60%	1050	9.30%	519	4.60%	196	1.70%
	Average	10986	1741	15.90%	1127	9.90%	559	4.90%	236	2.10%
UK ³	2007-08	271635	33115	12.20%						
	2008-09	278363	35023	12.60%						
	2009-10	288899	36960	12.80%	25868	9.00%	13819	4.80%	5868	2.00%
	2010-11	277542	36540	13.20%	26314	9.50%	14171	5.10%	6226	2.20%
	2011-12	281344	36058	12.80%	25612	9.10%	13787	4.90%	5976	2.10%
	Average	279557	35539	12.70%	25931	9.20%	13926	4.90%	6023	2.10%

³ Not including Scotland or the NI independent sector

Table 4.2: 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*A* +	% A*A*A* +
Wales	13206	1221	9.20%	773	5.90%	384	2.90%	157	1.20%
North East England	6,017	508	8.44%	379	6.30%	185	3.07%	70	1.17%
England	255365	32577	12.80%	24032	9.30%	12983	5.00%	5630	2.20%
Northern Ireland	10986	1741	15.90%	1127	9.90%	559	4.90%	236	2.10%
UK	279557	35539	12.70%	25931	9.20%	13926	4.90%	6023	2.10%

Table 4.3: GCSE attainment for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	Year	# GCSE pupils	# 5A*-C +	% 5A*-C +	# 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	2007-08	37045	21518	58.10%	1308	3.50%
	2008-09	35942	21138	58.80%	1351	3.80%
	2009-10	35548	21207	59.70%	1323	3.70%
	2010-11	34561	20316	58.80%	1376	4.00%
	2011-12	34201	19686	57.60%	1396	4.10%
	Average	35459	20773	58.60%	1351	3.80%
North East England	2007-08	32,112	15478	48.20%	642	2.00%
	2008-09	30,670	15120	49.30%	644	2.10%
	2009-10	29,528	14616	49.50%	709	2.40%
	2010-11	29,305	14535	49.60%	791	2.70%
	2011-12	28,554	14277	50.00%	771	2.70%
	Average	30,034	14813	49.32%	715	2.38%
England ⁴	2007-08	653083	356783	54.60%	25911	4.00%
	2008-09	634496	351728	55.40%	26586	4.20%
	2009-10	639263	358029	56.00%	28678	4.50%
	2010-11	627093	348783	55.60%	29307	4.70%
	2011-12	620617	342238	55.10%	26888	4.30%
	Average	634910	351512	55.40%	27474	4.30%
Northern Ireland	2007-08	24172	15302	63.30%	1237	5.10%
	2008-09	23164	14802	63.90%	1190	5.10%
	2009-10	22931	15013	65.50%	1214	5.30%
	2010-11	22699	14755	65.00%	1169	5.20%
	2011-12	22157	14410	65.00%	1189	5.40%
	Average	23025	14856	64.50%	1200	5.20%
UK ⁵	2007-08	714300	393603	55.10%	28456	4.00%
	2008-09	693602	387668	55.90%	29127	4.20%
	2009-10	697742	394249	56.50%	31215	4.50%
	2010-11	684353	383854	56.10%	31852	4.70%
	2011-12	676975	376334	55.60%	29473	4.40%
	Average	693394	387142	55.80%	30025	4.30%

⁴ There is a noteworthy discrepancy between these figures (provided by Attainment Correspondence Team, Department for Education UK) and those given in Table 1a of https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219342/sfr02_202013nt.xls [accessed 30/08/13], 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).

⁵ Not including Scotland or the NI independent sector

Table 4.4: Average GCSE attainment, 2008-2012 for 2007-08 to 2011-12

Region	# GCSE pupils	# 5A*-C +	% 5A*-C +	# 5A* +	% 5A* +
Wales	35459	20773	58.60%	1351	3.80%
North East England	30,034	14813	49.32%	715	2.38%
England	634910	351512	55.40%	27474	4.30%
Northern Ireland	23025	14856	64.50%	1200	5.20%
UK	693394	387142	55.80%	30025	4.30%