



Seren Network Evaluation

Executive Summary

1. Research aims

1.1 OB3 Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a formative and process evaluation of the Seren Network to inform decisions about the criteria for young people's participation and the design and delivery of the programme at national and local levels. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Assess how each Seren hub is operating to include consideration of engagement criteria, programme costs, participation levels and programme of provision
- Identify the barriers and enablers to delivery for Seren hubs and participants
- Assess the extent to which hub activities contribute to the Seren Network objectives
- Design a methodology and make recommendations for undertaking a final impact evaluation of the programme.

2. Method

2.1 The evaluation was undertaken between July and November 2017 and involved:

- an inception stage, including attendance at an inception meeting with the study Steering Group and preparing an evaluation inception document
- desk based research, including a detailed literature review of Welsh Government policy and strategy documents and programme operational documentation
- a review of published sources of data covering current trends in terms of A level attainment, top university applications, enrolments and first year retention of Welsh students

- preparing research instruments, including semi-structured discussion guides and three web based surveys
- conducting face to face interviews with policy and strategic stakeholders
- conducting telephone interviews with Higher Education Institution (HEI) representatives
- undertaking a package of qualitative fieldwork across the 11 hubs which included fieldwork with hub co-ordinators and other senior representatives from the hubs as well as interviews with 77 participants and 34 representatives from schools and Further Education Institutions (FEIs)
- deploying three bilingual web based surveys and securing responses from 168 participants, 35 parents and 23 FEI/school representatives
- interviewing five parents
- considering possible approaches for undertaking a final impact evaluation of the Seren network, to include possible Counterfactual Impact Analysis approaches, and setting out recommendations on a possible methodology to adopt.

3. The Seren Network

3.1 The Seren Network was established in direct response to the need to halt the decline in the number of successful applications being made by students in Wales to attend Oxford and Cambridge Universities. During 2013, Paul Murphy MP, the former Secretary of State for Wales, was appointed the Welsh Government's Oxbridge Ambassador and was tasked with undertaking research to understand the factors which accounted for the decline and to put forward a series of recommendations to address the issues. In his final report¹ the Oxbridge Ambassador recommended that 'a national network of partnership hubs should be established to ensure that schools and colleges can learn from each other, and share resources to support their most academically able students'². This recommendation effectively laid the foundations for the establishment of the Seren Network.

3.2 The Seren Network was established to support the academically brightest A level students to progress to leading UK universities, frequently referred to as those in the Russell Group³ and Sutton Trust 30⁴.

¹ Welsh Government (June 2014) Final Report of the Oxbridge Ambassador for Wales

² Ibid., p.11

³ The Russell Group represents 24 self-selected member universities³ who are considered leading research universities across the UK. They are the University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, Durham University, University of Edinburgh, University of Exeter, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, University of Oxford, Queen Mary University of London, Queen's University

- 3.3 The Network consists of 11 geographically bound hubs. Three pilot hubs were launched in January 2015 and the remaining nine hubs were established over the course of 2015/16 with the last established in November 2016. Each hub comprises a partnership of schools and FEIs who draw upon the inputs of leading universities. Each hub received an equal amount of funding (£50k) for their initial two-year delivery period.
- 3.4 More than 2,000 students had engaged with the Seren Network during 2016/17 and the number of participants engaged at the hub level varies from around 100 to nearly 300 students.

4. Key Findings

- 4.1 During 2015/16, 702 Welsh domiciled students applied to study at Oxbridge and 143 students accepted a place. The evaluation found that there is a clear rationale for intervention targeted at increasing the number of Welsh domiciled students applying to, and securing, a study place at an Oxbridge institution given Wales' historical under performance compared to other UK regions. Recent UCAS⁵ data points to a six per cent annual increase in the number of Welsh domiciled students applying for HE courses with an October 2017 deadline (i.e. most Medicine/Dentistry/Veterinary course and courses at Oxford and Cambridge universities), in line with a similar increase at the UK level⁶.
- 4.2 The evaluation found that the rationale for intervention is less conclusive for supporting students into other top universities, given that three-quarters of top achieving Welsh domiciled students already enrol at a Russell Group university. The historical downward trend in the number of Welsh domiciled applicants studying for Medicine would suggest that there may be a need for targeted intervention to support students applying for specific, competitive university degree places.
- 4.3 A key finding of the evaluation was that there was a common understanding that the purpose of the Seren Network was about providing super-curricular experiences, raising student aspirations, expanding their horizons and encouraging them to consider a wider range and more competitive institutions than would otherwise have been the case. There

Belfast, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London, University of Warwick and the University of York

⁴ In 2011, the Sutton Trust identified the 30 most highly selective UK universities for the purposes of supporting students to access. Of the 24 Russell Group universities, 22 are also included within the Sutton Trust 30 and only Queen Mary University of London and Queen's University Belfast are not. University of Bath, University of Lancaster, University of Leicester, University of Reading, Royal Holloway, University of London, University of St Andrews, University of Strathclyde and the University of Surrey are the additional eight universities within the Sutton Trust 30 that are not Russell Group member universities.

⁵ <https://www.ucas.com/file/130736/download?token=EDhCX9xV> accessed 20 November 2017.

⁶ At the UK level an increase of 6 per cent from 39,440 during 2016/17 to 41,970 during 2017/18 was reported.

was less consensus in terms of the 'end game' for participants and the target universities which Seren was focused upon.

- 4.4 A further key finding of the evaluation was that Seren had been established in response to a political drive as opposed to being an initiative which stemmed from Welsh Government policy. The initiative quickly evolved during its establishment phase to encapsulate a much broader agenda than what was originally set out via the Welsh Government's Oxbridge Ambassador research.
- 4.5 A key finding of the evaluation was that the initiative had been able to establish a positive brand identity during its initial delivery period and that it would take further time for the brand to become better recognised amongst target audiences.
- 4.6 Drawing upon participant feedback, the evaluation found that Seren makes a positive contribution to raising aspirations, boosting confidence and encouraging students to think more ambitiously about their university choices. The evaluation also found that Seren had been of value in helping participants make better decisions about their preferred university course and to make them realise the importance of reading widely around their subject area. Participants point to the most useful aspect of the Seren Network provision as being presentations delivered by guest speakers.
- 4.7 The evaluation found that the number of HEIs which have engaged with individual Seren hubs has varied from four to eight. Cambridge University, followed by Oxford University, were the most commonly cited of HEIs to have been engaged by local hubs. Feedback from interviewed HEIs who were involved with Seren was overall very positive and the institutions recognised the value of engaging with the initiative.
- 4.8 The evaluation found that the Seren Network currently lacks common processes to collect and share participant data and that developing data collection processes and a data sharing agreement was an immediate priority for the initiative.
- 4.9 Very little data was available to evidence the difference made by the Seren Network upon the number of students applying to higher tariff universities due to the fact that 2017/18 represents the first full year of delivery and the absence of any robust counterfactual data. Participants were of the view that the Seren initiative had been able to make the greatest difference to them in terms of getting them to think more ambitiously about their university choices and raising their aspirations. The majority of surveyed participants also thought that their involvement with the Seren Network would help them prepare a stronger application to universities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 5.1 The evaluation concludes that since its piloting during 2015/16, the Seren Network initiative has been successfully expanded over a relatively short timeframe so as to offer a full programme of pan-Wales provision by the start of the 2017/18 academic year. The evaluation also concludes that the initiative has adopted an appropriately flexible, bottom-up approach which has allowed local hubs to design a programme of provision to address local contextual circumstances and needs. As a result, Seren has been able to add value to and address gaps in existing provision, with the greatest level of added value being in place for schools which did not have a particularly strong track record of supporting students into leading universities. A successful feature of the Seren initiative has been the significant in-kind contribution and goodwill offered by schools, FEIs and HEIs.
- 5.2 The evaluation concludes that the Seren Network has the potential to make a contribution towards Welsh Government policies of widening access to and participation in Higher Education. However, Seren is taking Welsh Government policy in an interesting and somewhat different direction to existing policies which are primarily focused on widening access to Higher Education amongst disadvantaged students and strengthening Higher Education institutions in Wales. The evaluation concludes that very little reference is made to the Seren Network within any existing Welsh Government educational and Higher Education policies and that this should be addressed in the future.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Welsh Government reviews and clarifies the aims and objectives of the Seren Network, particularly in terms of the initiative's target universities. We further recommend that the aims and objectives of the Seren Network be better reflected within mainstream educational and Higher Education Welsh Government policies in the future.

Should the outcome of this review be that the Seren Network should indeed focus on all leading universities and all types of academic courses, then we would further recommend that all hub provision be aligned to this broad aim, and that provision at a local level is reflective of this.

Related to this, the Seren Network should seek to clarify what constitutes a successful outcome for participants and define and report upon the performance indicators (in terms of the range of university and course applications, offers and acceptances) which are within the initiative's remit. In this respect we would recommend that consideration

be given to agreeing a definitive list annually of universities, departments and courses to be included in the Seren Network which could include those universities and courses identified as leading institutions and provision via the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), in addition to Russell Group and Sutton Trust 30 institutions, as well as including all Higher Education Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary courses.

- 5.3 The evaluation concludes that the evidence which underpins the need for Seren is based upon a recent downward trend in the number of applications and enrolments by Welsh domiciled students at Oxbridge institutions as well as those opting to study Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary courses. Recently published UCAS data points to a recent increase in the number of Welsh domiciled students applying to these institutions and courses during 2017/18. The evaluation found that a large number of hubs have focused their provision on Oxbridge and these courses, yet participant expectations of Seren have been much wider given that they have been recruited on the basis of 'good' GCSE grades rather than their intention to apply for Oxbridge or to study STEMM degree subjects. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the extent to which Seren has met participant and parental expectations has been mixed.
- 5.4 The findings of the evaluation point to an inherent tension between the objectives of the Seren Network to actively encourage participants to study outside Wales on the one hand and the broader objectives of the Welsh Government to support the Higher Education sector in Wales on the other. There is currently a lack of clarity around the role which Welsh HEIs should have within the Seren Network although all hubs are very much dependent upon their contribution in order to achieve their local objectives. The participation of Welsh HEIs could potentially dilute the success of Seren, if success is only measured by the number of participants studying at 'high tariff' universities.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Welsh Government formally acknowledges the involvement and role of Welsh HEIs as delivery partners within the Seren Network and engage with them to scope out their role in order to alleviate the current tension across the Higher Education sector in Wales.

- 5.5 The evaluation found that Seren hubs are making appropriate use of allocated funding and that a fairly modest amount of annual funding per hub has resulted in significant in-kind investment from partner organisations to the initiative. Whilst the funding was always intended as initial pump-priming funding the feedback suggests that hubs are not well

established enough for this funding to be withdrawn at this stage. In addition, hubs do not yet have HEI entry and enrolment data to be able to make any informed decision about the impact of the initiative upon university applications and enrolments at their local authority level.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Welsh Government continues to provide pump-priming funding to local hubs for at least a four-year period until an impact evaluation can offer robust evidence on the difference being achieved by the initiative.

We would further recommend that the funding awarded by Welsh Government to each hub gives due consideration to:

- a. the number of participants supported by each one and
- b. a rural weighting for those hubs which incur greater travel costs.

For the purposes of calculating funding amounts we would suggest that the number of participants per hub be considered by band size.

We also recommend that Seren hubs implement a common process for capturing the annual value of in-kind contributions made by schools and FEIs to the Seren Network.

- 5.6 The evaluation found that the criteria set for participants to join their local Seren hub was commonly based upon GCSE attainment although there was significant variation in the grades which participants were required to achieve in order to join. This varied from a low of 5 B grades and four A* GCSE grades to a high of 6A* across the hubs and two hubs adopted a points based system for calculating eligibility. It has been appropriate for local Seren hubs to establish their eligibility criteria so as to accommodate local contextual issues but the evaluation concludes that this has created inconsistent access for students across Wales. Hubs which have set higher academic eligibility criteria have excluded pupils from participation and this should be addressed going forward.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Seren Network adopts common minimum eligibility criteria for participants to be able to join the initiative regardless of where they are located. Ideally, this criteria would be based on an agreed points based methodology (as is already adopted by two of the hubs) rather than a method of using a minimum number of A* or A grades.

Having established this criteria, we further recommend that each hub is awarded some

degree of flexibility and discretion to increase or decrease their points based threshold to reflect local circumstances and needs.

- 5.7 The evaluation found that participants had very mixed experiences from one hub area to another. Whilst it is important that all hubs are able to respond to their local needs in a flexible manner, we conclude that participants deserve to be able to access a minimum 'offer' from Seren and that their committed engagement with the initiative is formally recognised in some way. The evaluation concludes that participant and parent expectations of Seren have been raised at the outset of Year 12 but have not necessarily been met across all hubs.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Welsh Government, in conjunction with the Seren hubs, set out a common operating framework for the initiative going forward whilst retaining some of the flexibility and responsiveness of local approaches adopted to date. We recommend that a common operating framework:

- Specify the minimum participation and commitment required on the part of participants
- Set out a minimum offer or core provision which participants could expect to access in terms of content and quantity
- Monitor attendance at local events and adopt common processes for dealing with low attendance and student turnover
- Offer a scheme completion certificate to those participants 'graduating' from Seren.

- 5.8 It is understandable that each local Seren hub has been focused on establishing its own individual governance arrangements and provision to date. The significant efforts deployed by a wide range of local partners, including schools, FEIs and local authorities in particular to help establish their local hub and make provision available is to be commended. The evaluation concludes that effective regional collaborative working across hubs is evident in some cases at present and that there is scope to build upon and replicate this good practice in the future. The fieldwork revealed that there are significant opportunities for many hubs to further their collaborative work, using the Seren co-ordinators meetings as a conduit for doing so.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Seren Network, via the Seren co-ordinators meeting, identifies further opportunities for collaboration between hubs. This would include building upon the initial efforts deployed to develop a co-ordinated programme of provision and promoting provision via social media channels so as to maximise the opportunities that participants have to access events held in neighbouring hubs, particularly subject specific masterclasses.

- 5.9 The evaluation concludes that there are many other opportunities for the Seren initiative to disseminate its existing resources and provision to a wider audience. Non-Seren participants from Years 12 and 13 as well as younger learners would benefit from being able to access resources and view seminar/event content via a digital platform.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that the Welsh Government and Seren hubs identify which elements of current provision could be made available on an universal basis to a wider audience in order to maximise access to the information provided via the Network. We would recommend as a starting point that a small number of seminars and lectures be offered as webinars, and that lecture capture technology be used and other online resources developed in order to disseminate content via a range of digital platforms, including via Seren's social media channels and via other partners such as Careers Wales and FEI platforms.

- 5.10 The evaluation found that the focus of a number of Seren hubs has primarily been upon encouraging participants to consider applying to Oxbridge institutions and providing support around a small number of competitive degree subjects, primarily STEMM⁷ subjects such as Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary studies. Positive feedback was gathered by those participants who are interested in these pathways but clearly not all Seren participants want to pursue these options.

Recommendation 8

We recommend that those hubs who don't currently offer a broad range of subject specific master classes to their participants explore opportunities for doing so. This could be achieved via a more regional approach to planning and delivering such provision and by collaborating with neighbouring hubs so as to secure an adequate number of

⁷ Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine

attendees at events.

- 5.11 The evaluation found that HEIs provide considerable resources to the Seren Network. Given that 11 hubs are now in place and are gathering momentum in terms of developing contacts with target HEIs and the fact that the evaluation found that participants want to engage with a broader number of HEIs, it can be expected that the demand upon target HEIs to further their engagement with Seren will increase. The evaluation recommends that the liaison with HEIs be carefully managed as a result and that the needs of HEIs to be able to identify Seren students as they apply to their institution be taken into consideration. Accessing this information would help ensure HEIs maintain their existing level of commitment to the Seren Network in the future.

Recommendation 9

In terms of engaging with HEIs we would recommend that the Seren Network adopts a more co-ordinated and transparent approach to engaging HEIs with a view to adopting a Memorandum of Understanding with partner HEIs which would outline what each partner would bring to the initiative, including an agreement on the part of Seren to share data with HEIs on those participants with whom HEIs have engaged. We would recommend that as a minimum HEIs be provided with participant level information to enable them to better capture and report upon the effects of Seren internally and to external partners.

- 5.12 The evaluation found that contributors were broadly satisfied with the boundaries established for the 11 Seren hubs, other than in the case of a very large geographical hub covering the three local authority areas of Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend and Powys. The evaluation found that this hub did not function as effectively as some of the others, largely due to the large area which it served. The evaluation did not however reveal an ideal solution to resolve the challenges faced by this hub.

Recommendation 10

We recommend that the Seren Network reviews the boundaries in place for the Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend and Powys hub. We would suggest that the Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend hub is retained and that new arrangements be put in place for Powys by September 2018.

- 5.13 Most Seren hubs have been reliant upon schools and FEIs to communicate on their part with participants and parents. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that the evaluation

identified ineffective local communication with participants and parents. We conclude that there is scope to improve the way hubs communicate with their target audiences.

Recommendation 11

We recommend that individual Seren hubs improve the way they communicate with parents and participants and where it is not the case at present, direct communication with participants and parents be adopted. We would further recommend that further efforts be deployed to disseminate information about planned events via existing social media channels.

- 5.14 The evaluation also concludes that there is scope to improve the quality and consistency of the data which Seren hubs capture for participants and the lack of a common process across the Network was noteworthy.

Recommendation 12

We recommend as a priority that the Seren Network implements a data sharing agreement and adopts a common participant data capturing approach and reporting process, to include the adoption of standard paperwork to record participant registration details and outcomes.

- 5.15 In approaching a final impact assessment of the Seren Network, the evaluation concludes that it is entirely feasible that a counterfactual impact assessment be undertaken but acknowledge that constructing an accurate control group for participants in the Seren scheme is dependent upon accessing good quality data for participants.

Recommendation 13

We therefore recommend that participation in Seren is recorded as a learning programme within the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR). The advantage of this approach is that the data collected on Seren participants will be covered by the privacy protocols embodied within LLWR⁸. At the time of writing, the LLWR Privacy Notice is being reviewed to ensure that it is in line with the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)⁹ and will be updated prior to the application of the new legislation in May 2018. It is our contention that in line with Article 6(1) of the new GDPR which

⁸ <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/170510-llwr-privacy-notice-2017-en.pdf#>

⁹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=EN>

outlines the conditions under which data can be processed, Seren hubs are engaged in the performance of a task that is being ‘carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller’. By including Seren within LLWR, this will ensure that any protocols implemented for the Seren Programme meet the requirements of the new legislation. We also recommend that the Welsh Government undertakes a review to consider the legal basis upon which data collected from Seren participants can be processed.

- 5.16 The fieldwork found that whilst national level Seren provision is consistently made available bilingually and complies with the Welsh Government’s Welsh Language standards the level of consideration given to the Welsh language varies significantly across the Seren hubs. However, the evaluation recognises that the Seren Network has a role to equip participants to study outside Wales. Nevertheless, the evaluation concludes that greater efforts could be deployed by all hubs to better meet the Welsh language requirements of participants.

Recommendation 14

We recommend that greater efforts be deployed by all Seren hubs to ensure that the Welsh language requirements of participants are consistently met. We would recommend that all hub communication to participants and parents be prepared bilingually and that specific resources be developed by the Seren Network to support students studying through the medium of Welsh for English language entry examinations and interviews.

- 5.17 The evaluation concludes that there would be benefit in promoting Seren, and what it stands for, to younger students across secondary schools. The evaluation found that this is already being done across some hubs and recommends that future activity in this area be delivered in the most cost-effective manner with the objective of raising aspirations in relation to HE amongst a large number of students and informing them in advance of the Seren Network and how they could become involved with the initiative. The evaluation concludes that an important aspect of this work will be to raise aspirations amongst identified MAT learners in particular and to persuade them from an early age of the importance of reading widely around their subject interests and to engage them in additional super curricular activity.

Recommendation 15

We recommend that the Welsh Government, in conjunction with the Seren hubs and other partners such as Careers Wales, explore cost-effective methods of targeting

students at Key Stage 3 and 4 with a view to raising aspirations, informing prospective participants about the Seren Network and providing advice to ensure that appropriate GCSE and A level subject choices are made.

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Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-seren-network/?skip=1&lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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