



Overseas Study Pilot: Scoping Report

Executive Summary

1. Research aims

1.1 OB3 Research in conjunction with the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) of Cardiff University, was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a scoping study to provide evidence to support the development of an overseas study pilot scheme. The objectives of the study were to:

- review current numbers of Welsh-domiciled students studying overseas
- undertake a literature review of worldwide practice in outward mobility funding schemes
- explore the characteristics of students studying overseas and those aspiring to do so
- explore the barriers to and benefits of overseas study
- review current funding provisions in Wales and overseas
- develop and appraise options and make recommendations for proceeding with the pilot.

2. Method

2.1 The study was undertaken between January and May 2018 and involved:

- an inception stage which included an inception meeting with Welsh Government officials
- desk based research which included a detailed literature review of existing research into outward mobility of UK-domiciled students and a review of published sources of data covering current trends in overseas study
- preparing research instruments to include three semi-structured discussion guides for use with a range of contributors

- interviewing five students who are currently studying or have recently studied overseas and organising and conducting two focus groups with 13 current sixth form students considering overseas study
- conducting face to face interviews with 16 policy and strategic stakeholders to explore possible models for the overseas pilot
- facilitating an options appraisal workshop with Welsh Government officials to consider possible approaches and models for an overseas pilot.

3. Background and Policy Context

- 3.1 Across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), governments and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have agreed a collective target of 20 per cent of graduates undertaking a study or training period abroad by 2020. To meet this goal, many countries are shifting their focus from the numbers of students participating in mobility, to the accessibility of opportunities for all.
- 3.2 The new UK strategy for Outward Student Mobility 2017-20 was launched by Universities UK International and outlines a commitment to ensure that 13 per cent of UK-domiciled, full-time, first degree students take part in an international placement as part of their HE programme by 2020 (doubling the current rate)¹.
- 3.3 Erasmus has been one of the European Commission's flagship programmes, and almost three million students have benefitted from the funding it offers them to study part of their degree in another European country. Whilst this has enabled many European Union (EU) students to study at UK HEIs, the UK HE sector has also collaborated with nearly 100 partner institutions across the EU.
- 3.4 Promoting student mobility is a key focus of the HE strategy in Wales² as it 'brings benefits to individuals, communities, universities, the economy and Wales as a nation'³. Welsh Government's HE policy statement also discusses the important role of outward mobility schemes, including Erasmus, and identifies a need to ensure that the uptake of such schemes is more consistent across Wales-based Universities and that more support is provided to enable students from 'widening access backgrounds to overcome barriers to participation in international learning experiences'⁴.

¹ Universities UK (2017), UK Strategy for Outward Student Mobility 2017-2020, p.7

² Welsh Government (2013), Policy statement on higher education

³ Ibid. p.14

⁴ Ibid. p.14

3.5 The recent Diamond Review⁵ of HE funding arrangements in Wales made two specific recommendations on cross-border study (which are subject to relevant regulation) including that: ‘Student support should be portable and available to Welsh domiciled students that choose to study anywhere in the UK or EU’⁶ and for the ‘Welsh Government to explore [the] possibility of running a pilot scheme to establish whether it is possible or desirable to extend the student support package beyond the UK’⁷.

4. Key Findings

- 4.1 There has been a steady growth in the overall numbers of Welsh domiciled students studying, volunteering or undertaking work experience abroad over the last four years, with the numbers almost doubling from 795 in 2013/14 to 1,430 in 2016/17. However, the number of Welsh domiciled students studying, volunteering or undertaking work experience abroad remains low at under 2 per cent of the total Welsh domiciled student population.
- 4.2 The review of funding shows that there are several different funding sources which Welsh-domiciled students can access to support overseas study, but access varies depending on the institution at which the student is studying, the duration of planned study and destination country in which they wish to study. Whilst there are many sources available, it is piecemeal and there is no clear one-stop-shop for information nor is there clear signposting to all available funding streams which could be explored.
- 4.3 Study opportunities in Europe of between 3 months to 12 months in duration can currently be covered via Erasmus+, whilst shorter or longer study opportunities have less options of financial support currently available. Scholarships and bursaries are available to cover full degree study abroad, but again this varies depending on the destination and institution concerned with no guaranteed way of funding overseas study for Welsh domiciled students.
- 4.4 The international review found that a wide variety of support is available for outward mobility from government-led schemes, although the majority of examples uncovered provide funding towards the cost of short overseas visits or for a small number of modules. Very few government-funded schemes cover the full cost of outward mobility. Unsurprisingly, countries which offer portable grants and loans for overseas study have higher levels of outward mobility.

⁵ The Independent Review of Student Support and Higher Education Funding In Wales, chaired by Professor Sir Ian Diamond

⁶ This recommendation was made prior to the outcome of the Brexit referendum vote

⁷ Review of Student Support and Higher Education Funding In Wales (2016)

- 4.5 Where countries have decided to invest in outward mobility schemes, there seems to be specific motivations for doing so. These motivations result in more targeted outward mobility schemes and determine the destination countries. Some schemes, focus on economic capacity-building (Northern Ireland), whilst others aim to capitalise on emerging economies (Norway), or increase national security (USA).
- 4.6 Outward mobility is seen as providing students with life-changing experiences and opportunities to develop new skills that will improve their career prospects.
- 4.7 The main drivers for individuals looking to spend time studying overseas is to improve future employment prospects and to gain new experiences. Whilst interest in overseas study is on the increase, barriers remain, and funding and information to enable overseas study are the predominant reasons that these opportunities remain elusive for some students.
- 4.8 The research suggests that outward mobility can provide benefits to the home country, particularly in terms of returning students bringing back knowledge, expertise and links to international networks. However this 'multiplier effect' and the actual impact on the home country's economy remains largely anecdotal at best.
- 4.9 The findings from interviews with Welsh domiciled students interested in or currently undertaking overseas study generally concur with the wider literature reviewed. It suggests that those who are interested in overseas study are often academically able students, most often (though not exclusively) from higher income backgrounds with international experience within the family.
- 4.10 The US is a popular destination for full degree study abroad amongst Welsh domiciled students, and the broad range of subjects studied as part of undergraduate degree programmes there appeal to many students who are unsure about the subject in which they wish to specialise. Those who do go to study in the US do so primarily through undertaking their own research, although organisations such as the Fulbright Commission⁸, and access to such support via the Seren⁹ network can provide much needed practical guidance. The majority of those who go on to study overseas do access scholarships (either merit-based or needs-based) which cover the vast majority of the costs associated with overseas study.

⁸ The Fulbright Commission is a joint initiative between the UK and US governments to support greater number of students to study overseas in their respective countries. It provides a number of financial and advisory provisions for UK students interested in studying at accredited higher education institutions in the USA.

⁹ The Seren network is a Welsh Government funded scheme which supports Wales' brightest sixth form students to gain access to leading universities.

5. Options for an Overseas Study Pilot

5.1 During the fieldwork conducted for this scoping study a number of options for an overseas study pilot were discussed and explored during a series of interviews with key stakeholders and at a subsequent workshop with Welsh Government officials to test emerging ideas.

5.2 When drafting the various options, a series of guiding principles were followed, which acknowledge the general feedback received via the fieldwork:

- all options are in relation to **undergraduate level study** only
- Options are **not restricted to ‘full degree portability’** – although this is the Diamond Review recommendation, it was very apparent from the desk based review and the fieldwork that short mobility options were able to achieve other important outcomes and could provide better and more equal opportunities
- all options would be able to be **funded by a grant or scholarship**, rather than a student loan covering tuition fees. This is because HMRC regulations do not allow for student loans to be adapted for overseas study
- options should focus on providing overseas study opportunities **through the medium of English**
- options are **not subject specific** – any student studying any discipline could apply. For some of the options, this could include FE and HE level study
- the options are **not means-tested** – all options would be open to all eligible students
- there is **flexibility** across several of the options to develop hybrid versions or to adapt the option depending on the strategic focus which the Welsh Government wishes to pursue.

5.2 The figure below outlines the continuum of options developed for an overseas study pilot.

Figure 5.1 Continuum of options for overseas study pilot



5.3 The five options for an overseas study pilot were refined during the options appraisal workshop and are outlined in more detail below:

Option 1: Raising awareness of existing funding opportunities

Brief Outline:	Raise awareness of overseas study options and signpost sixth form students in Wales to existing funding opportunities
Rationale:	Key existing barrier is lack of access to information on study opportunities and funding available (particularly for full degree study abroad)
Target Audience:	Sixth form students (via Seren Network)
Duration:	n/a
Location:	Promotion of overseas study as a concept. Does not preclude any study destination but could focus on the most prestigious e.g. US Ivy League or Top 20 International Ranking HEIs
Administration:	Seren Network

Option 2: Short Term Study Model

Brief Outline:	Provide a scholarship for Welsh domiciled students to undertake short term study (less than 3 months) abroad to cover living costs
Rationale:	Supports UK-wide International Mobility Strategy target for increasing outward mobility Low cost per head enables a number of grants to be issued. Responds to current gap in funding support.
Target Audience:	Any Welsh domiciled student studying at undergraduate level at a UK HEI
Duration:	Up to three months study/volunteering/work experience abroad
Location:	Any location worldwide (depending on strategic priorities of Welsh Government)
Administration:	British Council? Relatively low administrative burden. No major governance/QA issues

Option 3: Strategic Partnerships Model

Brief Outline:	Provide a scholarship to enable Welsh domiciled students to study part of their course at an overseas University in a strategic partnership with a Welsh HEI.
Rationale:	To build on the existing strategic partnerships that already exist between Welsh HEIs and key overseas Universities.
Target Audience:	Any (Welsh domiciled) student studying at a Welsh HEI who wishes to study some modules abroad.
Duration:	At least one semester of study. Could include one year placement/sandwich year options.
Location:	(e.g.) Swansea University and Texas based Universities, USA or Xiamen University, China and Cardiff University
Administration:	Funding provided directly to Welsh HEIs involved in the pilot. No major governance and QA issues as 'home' HEI should ensure alignment with their existing requirements/procedures.

Option 4: Trade Connections Model

Brief Outline:	Provide a scholarship to enable Welsh domiciled students to study abroad for one year at a HEI in an area of economic trade importance to Wales
Rationale:	To capitalise on emerging economies; or to strengthen relationships between key areas of strategic importance for the Welsh economy.
Target Audience:	Any Welsh domiciled student studying at undergraduate level at a UK HEI Relatively high cost per head so fund up to 15 students per year at most?
Duration:	Sandwich or 'gap year' scheme (one year)
Location:	3-4 HEI institutions at locations of strategic international trade and investment importance to Wales in Europe (e.g Germany); specific regions overseas (e.g. Chicago, USA) or specific countries overseas e.g. Canada, China
Administration:	Dependent on strategic priority but could link to Global Wales scheme (administered by British Council) or Fulbright Commission (if focused on America). Could be a reciprocal partnership with the identified HEIs abroad.

Option 5: Full degree portability model

Brief Outline:	Provide portability of funding (maintenance grant/loan) to study a full degree abroad
Rationale:	Responds more directly to Diamond Review recommendation (especially if institutions are outside EU)
Target Audience:	Welsh domiciled students who wish to study full degree abroad
Duration:	3-4 years (depending on length of undergraduate study at overseas country)
Location:	Focus the pilot on 3-4 publicly funded Universities (to be identified) in specific regions/countries of strategic importance to Wales. Choose locations with low/no tuition fees.
Administration:	Student Loan Company? Fulbright Commission (if US focused)? QA via direct contact with participating institution due to low numbers

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 6.1 The evidence suggests that Welsh domiciled students are less likely than their UK counterparts, and certainly less likely than European or international students generally, to undertake overseas study. The evidence suggests that even when Welsh domiciled students study abroad it is for a shorter period of time, and to countries that are either relatively close to home (in Europe) or in countries further afield with a similar culture (USA and Australia).
- 6.2 When taking into account that the research into the characteristics of students who choose to study overseas demonstrates that independent school-educated individuals and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to study overseas, it is no surprise that Wales is under-represented and that actual and latent demand here, although impossible to accurately quantify, is certainly very low.
- 6.3 In terms of barriers, two specific issues stand out. Firstly, it is one of funding an overseas mobility experience. And secondly it is one of receiving timely, accurate and inspiring information to generate interest and enable the individual to make the step into the unknown.

- 6.4 The research has demonstrated that there are several conflicting views on what an overseas study pilot should and could set out to achieve, but there is relative agreement that any approach needs to be wider than the initial Diamond Review recommendation that generated the study in the first instance.
- 6.5 As a result of the findings of this scoping study, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1

When developing an overseas study pilot the Welsh Government should look to ensure that the model opens up opportunities for all current Welsh domiciled students. As a result, funding opportunities for shorter-term study should be the main focus of any intervention.

Recommendation 2

Welsh Government should look to develop an overarching strategy for its overseas mobility activities aimed at linking 'Wales and the World'. This strategy should clearly articulate the rationale for such activity and link with the relevant educational and economic development priorities of the Welsh Government. The strategy should also set specific targets regarding the proportion of Welsh domiciled students experiencing overseas study, in line with both the UK and EU approach. This will be crucial in ensuring that any future overseas study options, funded by the Welsh Government can be evaluated against clear strategic aims and objectives and expected outcomes.

Recommendation 3

Whilst it is important that any pilot schemes are closely aligned with Welsh Government economic priorities, some caution is required as Welsh Government strategic areas of interest overseas can change over time. The pilot should therefore focus on areas that are likely to remain of high importance over the coming decade so that funding interventions remain highly relevant.

Recommendation 4

A small working group to include British Council, HEFCW, Welsh HEIs and Welsh Government officials (from HE and economic development departments) should be set up to scope out the strategy and its underpinning financial interventions for overseas study.

Recommendation 5

Welsh Government should seek to support a suite of 'Wales and the World' pilot initiatives, based on some, all or a hybrid of the five options outlined in this report. This would enable

the pilot to address a number of existing gaps in provision, but ensure that each model or option clearly links with the Welsh Government policy objective that it intends to achieve and ensure that collectively any new and existing activity (e.g. by individual Welsh HEIs) all work towards the same strategic aim.

Recommendation 6

In addition to supporting financial intervention for an overseas pilot, the Welsh Government should also develop a Wales-wide campaign within schools, sixth forms and the FE sector to raise awareness of the benefits of overseas study and promote existing (as well as new) funding sources prior to attending University.

Recommendation 7

It is an important principle that any options for a pilot study to be considered should not replace or fund any provision which is currently available. Whilst new activity, funded by Welsh Government, should have a strong strategic economic development focus, that should not replace important funding and activity in relation to individual development or educational attainment via overseas study that is already in place, particularly within HEIs.

Recommendation 8

The focus of any investment via a pilot scheme, whilst not means-tested, should ensure that Welsh domiciled students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to take advantage. This points to more investment in shorter study periods abroad rather than investment in full-degree portability options. The Welsh Government should also explore how funding could be aligned to the level of maintenance grant provided to students, so that more support for living costs when studying overseas can be provided to those who most require it.

Recommendation 9

Due to the uncertainty over the future of overseas mobility schemes such as Erasmus+ post Brexit, we recommend that any interventions are not fully implemented until there is more clarity. This will help ensure that the focus and funding available will be utilised in the most effective way. We therefore recommend that the awareness raising aspects for existing scholarship opportunities and the pilot options that are not dependent on Brexit decisions (e.g. for short term study) should be rolled out from 2018/19 but that longer-term funded pilot options should be delayed by one full year, with the promotion of opportunities during 2019/20 and the first cohorts of students undertaking overseas mobility in 2020/21.

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

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