

Routes into post-16 education and training – inquiry by the Children, Young People and Education Committee

Medr written submission

January 2025



Noddir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Sponsored by
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Overview

Medr was established in August 2024 as the new funder and regulator of the tertiary education and research sector in Wales.

Its establishment was the culmination of a significant process of change. In 2016, Professor Ellen Hazelkorn recommended to the Welsh Government that it should establish a regulator to provide oversight of a combined tertiary education sector. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 set the legislative basis for this change to happen, and is still in the process of being progressively enacted.

The establishment of a new arm's-length body for a combined tertiary education sector will have many positive impacts on how we fund and monitor our post-compulsory system – and the pathways in to and through the post-16 education system will be one of them.

Creating pathways that are clearer, more accessible, and easier to understand and navigate, will be a key part of Medr's work over the next five years. Our first strategic plan, which is currently under consideration by Welsh Ministers, sets out our core belief that learners thrive when they find the best learning for *them*: the right type, in the right place, and at the right time.

Medr is committed to its role in fostering a joined-up system that enables our learners to successfully identify and access the post-16 learning that is best for them and their futures.

Information on some of the specific questions posed by the inquiry is provided below, and we look forward to discussing with members.

Quality of information given to learners about the full range of post-16 options (vocational and academic routes post 16, i.e. further education, sixth form, apprenticeships and training, and onward to higher education)

The accessibility and awareness of different tertiary education routes is important to Medr. A central tenet of Medr's strategic plan will be creating one cohesive system that can be more easily understood and navigated by learners, providers and employers alike. One way that Medr will improve that system is by making it more collaborative, recognising the roles that both local authority-maintained school sixth forms and further education colleges play in our post-16 landscape, and ensuring that learners have both choice and high-quality provision.

We recognise the leading role that Careers Wales, schools and local authorities all play in providing advice and guidance to pre-16 learners, and Medr will be working to improve our understanding of the quality and nature of information provided to learners to inform their choices.

We set out a range of commitments in our draft strategic plan that will support us to do this, including the development of a learner engagement code and the establishment of a learner voice forum. These mechanisms, along with wider learner engagement activity through providers, will enable us to better understand learners' experiences of information, advice and guidance and – working with partners – help to improve the information that learners and prospective learners receive.

It is also crucial that information and guidance is available and effective for prospective learners throughout life. We recognise the importance of information provided at the transition moment from compulsory to post-compulsory education, but we are also mindful of the need to ensure we have a system that can be understood and accessed by people as they continue to train and re-train throughout their working lives.

Transition Funding

One example of a current intervention to improve information given to learners about their full range of options is the Transition Funding, initially provided by the Welsh Government and now funded through Medr.

For 2023/24, £3m of Transition funding was allocated to Local Authority Sixth Forms and FE Colleges for transition activities.

The purpose of this funding is to provide learners in years 10 and 11 with guidance on post-16 pathways to ensure that they understand all of the post-16 options available to them so that they are able to make an informed decision about the next step in their educational, training or employment pathway.

The funding allows for greater collaboration between schools and FE colleges and or/other schools and training providers. Where appropriate, activities may include a visit to an FE college, Independent Training provider, and/or any other post 16 provision, and could include participation in relevant transition activities at FE colleges, for example:

- **College Taster Days** - Learners have the opportunity to try out their preferred subjects in a bespoke taster session during the summer term.

- **Masterclasses or Interactive Workshops** - Learners have the opportunity to participate in subject-specific mini lectures or interactive workshops which link with a wide range of qualifications or careers in these areas.
- **Summer Programmes** - Learners are able to participate in a wide range of activities linked to vocational courses whilst developing positive relationships with their peers and college staff. These run in the summer holidays.

Schools have provided positive feedback and have reported increased activities relating to post-16 transition including options assemblies, attendance at careers fairs and motivational speakers. They have welcomed the flexibility to be able to utilise the funding for a range of events and activities that they would otherwise not have access to.

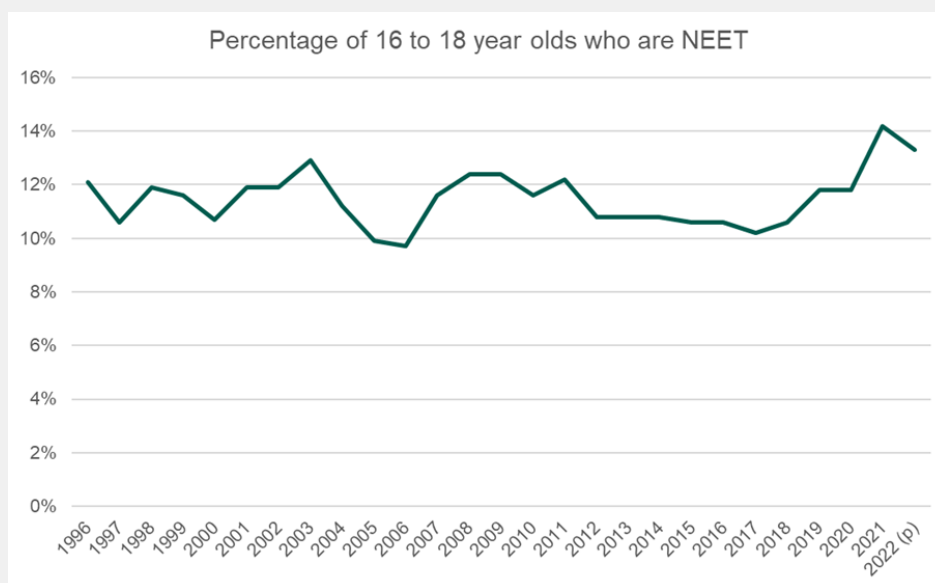
Colleges have reported equally positive feedback including the ability to reach more learners within schools, supporting them to make the right choice so that they are able to thrive and successfully achieve. They have welcomed the option to be able to trial new initiatives such as 'quiet enrolment sessions' to allow a comfortable environment for neuro-diverse learners.

A further £3m will be allocated in the coming weeks for transition activities for the 2024/25 academic year.

How effective careers support is at compulsory school age

Medr is one part of a wider system, and although we do not have responsibility for compulsory school age education, we recognise the importance of careers support for pre-16 learners as they think about transitioning to tertiary education.

Encouraging participation in tertiary education is a strategic duty for Medr set out in the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022. The proportion of 16 to 18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training has remained around or above 10% since the mid-nineties¹:



Medr is committed to reducing the number of NEETs in Wales, and more effective careers support at compulsory school age has a role to play in achieving this. However, we recognise that the persistently high level of NEETs in Wales is affected by a number of factors and will require a range of interventions to tackle.

One intervention to alleviate the number of young people who are disengaging from compulsory education is the Junior Apprenticeship Programme, which Medr funds. Junior Apprenticeships are not an apprenticeship but a form of vocational education and training for 14-16 year olds, which aim to keep learners most at risk of becoming NEET in education. Junior Apprenticeships are currently offered on a limited basis; Welsh ministers have indicated interest in extending this provision, and Medr will be working with them to explore how this aligns with other learning pathways into tertiary education.

Changes in routes post-18

Medr is committed to better understanding the participation picture across tertiary education and the factors influencing learners' ability to pursue different types of education and training. Our draft strategic plan sets out how we propose to work with partners to promote the benefits of

¹ [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\): July 2023 to June 2024 | GOV.WALES](#)

learning throughout life and to set targets to increase participation, particularly among those underrepresented in tertiary education.

The choices that learners are making at post-18 *may* be changing, but we would urge caution at drawing conclusions from the available data. We do not believe that there is conclusive data to suggest that there is a demonstrable shift from one part of the tertiary education sector to another. Medr will have an important role to play in improving our data and understandings of the choices learners are making – this is expanded on in the section on data below.

At present, there is not one set of data or analysis that presents a complete picture of participation across the tertiary education sector as a whole. The Welsh Government produces [statistics on participation in education by age](#), however there is insufficient granularity from which to draw further conclusions.

Published data for [learners in further education](#) is available up to 2022/23 and [apprenticeship starts](#) up to quarter 3 of 2023/24. These demonstrate downward trends in the numbers of 18 year olds enrolling in further education or starting an apprenticeship over the period of data available. However, we note that these data sets are not directly comparable to HESA enrolments and/or UCAS entry data.

More detail is available for higher education entry rates, and so we will examine that in further detail below.

The trends in the entry rate into higher education from Welsh-domiciled 18 year olds appear to have changed in recent years. The application rate from Welsh-domiciled learners to university has followed a broadly upwards trajectory over the period measured by UCAS, starting in 2006. In the UCAS End of Cycle data for 2024, the proportion of Welsh domiciled 18 year olds accepted into higher education was 30.1%. This is a small increase from the previous year, but is lower than the previous three years. More work is required to understand the factors influencing this.

We also note that although the broad upwards trajectory is shared with the UK as a whole, the entry rate and growth in Wales has been relatively lower since 2007.

From the available data between 2016 to 2022, the percentage of Welsh-domiciled 18 year olds enrolling to Welsh institutions has been consistently higher than those enrolling to institutions in the rest of the UK, though the gap has narrowed over the period. For the 2022/23 academic year, 50.7% of Welsh-domiciled 18 year olds enrolling to higher education enrolled at providers in Wales, as opposed to 49.3% at providers elsewhere in the UK. This represents a difference of 140 students.

UCAS data also provides opportunities to draw comparisons based on disadvantage (by using the different measures of deprivation across the UK) or on participation rates of local areas. Although there are limitations to either approach, both measures show a lower entry rate for Welsh 18 year olds in the lower quintiles (i.e. the most disadvantaged groups or those from neighbourhoods least likely to go into higher education) when compared with similar groups in England or Northern Ireland.

All WIMD quintiles had a generally increasing proportion of the population being accepted to higher education between 2015 and 2021. The proportion accepted since 2021 has dropped in all quintiles, although quintiles 2, 3 and 4 did see an increase between 2023 and 2024.

We have provided data that shows the relative performance of Wales in the indices of multiple deprivation across the U.K. in Annex A. However, this should be treated cautiously, as different parts of the UK use different methodologies to establish their respective index of multiple deprivation.

Welsh-medium provision

The provision of tertiary education through the medium of Welsh is an important part of Medr's duties. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 requires us to: encourage demand for, and participation in, Welsh tertiary education provided through the medium of Welsh; take all reasonable steps to ensure that there is sufficient Welsh tertiary education provided through the medium of Welsh to meet demand; and encourage the provision of tertiary education through the medium of Welsh.

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol have been designated by Welsh Ministers to advise us on how we carry out our duties, and we work constructively with them and other stakeholders – such as Qualifications Wales – to ensure we meet our duties.

Our draft strategic plan sets out some of our commitments in relation to the Welsh language. These include the development and implementation of a national plan to increase and improve the provision and promotion of Welsh-medium education and assessment in tertiary education, and a commitment to increase the recruitment and retention of Welsh-speaking staff.

Welsh Government statistical analysis suggests that the type of tertiary education that learners at Welsh-medium or bilingual schools progress to impacts whether they continue learning in a Welsh-medium setting. Around half of learners in year 11 in 2020/21 from Welsh-medium or bilingual schools progressed to school sixth forms, of which the majority did so in a Welsh-medium or bilingual setting. Of the learners that progressed to a further education college, the vast majority did not undertake any of their courses entirely through the medium of Welsh, though many did engage in some form of bilingual learning.²

² [Ad-hoc statistical requests: 8 to 19 April 2024 | GOV.WALES](#)

Equity of access

Medr is committed to creating a coherent tertiary education system that removes barriers and enables learners to find the best learning for them.

The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 requires us to promote equality of opportunity, particularly through promoting increased participation in Welsh tertiary education and the carrying out of research and innovation by persons who are members of under-represented groups.

We want to focus the tertiary education system in Wales around the needs of the learner, and our draft strategic plan has commitments to establish regulatory conditions to advance equity and equality of opportunity.

Analysis published by the Welsh Government in 2022³ showed that rates of progression from Year 11 to post-16 education were lower for learners eligible for Free School Meals than those not eligible. The same analysis also showed a difference in overall progression to post-16 education between those living in the 10% most deprived areas of Wales and those living in the 10% least deprived.

Regardless of which deprivation measure is used, there are large differences in the choice of post-16 pathway. Of the learners that progressed from Year 11 to post-16 education in 2021/22, 63% of learners living in the 10% most deprived areas of Wales went on to study at an FE college, with a further 9% going into work-based learning, and 30% to school sixth forms. For learners living in the 10% least deprived areas, only 35% went on to an FE college and 3% went on to work-based learning. 63% went on to school sixth forms.

Post-16 outcomes are also lower for learners from deprived backgrounds, in particular for those undertaking general education learning programmes.⁴

Further information on the suggested causes and impacts of inequity in the tertiary education system is provided in Annex B, including reports and research that may be of interest to the Committee.

³ [Outcomes for learners in post-16 education affected by the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic: August 2020 to July 2021 | GOV.WALES](#)

⁴ [Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning \(achievement\): August 2022 to July 2023 | GOV.WALES](#)

Financial support

All universities provide a range of bursaries, scholarships and hardship funds for students experiencing socio-economic or other disadvantages. Regulated providers in Wales (universities and some colleges) commit to investing between 14% to 17% of fee and access income, including to secure student financial support.⁵ Regulated providers must make financial assistance and information about financial support available to students.

Medr allocates funding to regulated providers for student financial support.⁶ Medr guidance confirms it 'strongly encourage[s] universities and colleges, working with their Students' Unions or equivalent body, to build on measures to address the ongoing cost of living increases impacting on well-being and health, including mental and physical health.'

Medr also funds the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) to provide financial help to eligible learners who are experiencing financial hardship who might otherwise be unable to attend college. It can help with course-related costs such as childcare, transport, free meals and equipment and learning materials. The total available budget for 23/24 was over £7 million; a breakdown of the categories of support, amount spent and number of learners supported can be found in Annex C.

Some examples of projects that Medr funds to improve access to post 16 education

1. Medr's Wales-wide higher education, further education and schools, regional, collaborative, [Reaching Wider Programme](#) aims to increase higher education participation from priority groups in Wales by raising educational aspirations and skills, and creating innovative study opportunities and learning pathways to higher education⁷. Medr allocates £2m annually to the Reaching Wider Programme, with an additional £500k for a Reaching Wider National Mentoring Programme.
2. The Medr-funded [myf.cymru](#) programme is a Welsh language mental health and wellbeing project and website for students. The resources have been created in partnership with Bangor University, Aberystwyth University, University of Wales Trinity Saint David and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai to support learners to prepare for university, with a focus on resources and services available through the medium of Welsh.
3. Medr, jointly with the Office for Students supports [Student Space](#). Student Space provides [advice and information](#) for students in higher education, including on mental health and wellbeing, studying in higher education, life as a Black student, life as a disabled student, student stories and signposts to support at individual universities. Information is available in English and Welsh [Ynglŷn â Student Space](#).

⁵ See Medr fee and access plan guidance - [W24/07HE: 2025/26 and 2026/27 Fee and Access Plan application guidance](#)

⁶ [Medr/2024/07 Wellbeing and health funding 2024/25 and monitoring requirements](#)

⁷ Reaching Wider Programme priority groups include young people and adults from the bottom two quintiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, post-16 young people in level 4 learning, in addition to adults without level 4 qualifications; learners with disabilities; learners from ethnic minority backgrounds; and Welsh medium learners, including supporting second language learning and Welsh cultures, care experienced learners and learners who are carers.

Post-16 destination data

Medr is committed to making data-informed decisions, and our draft strategic plan outlines our intention to make foundational improvements on how we establish baselines from which to base our planning. We intend to review and improve how we collect data from providers, and to develop systems that will allow us to better interrogate the data we do have.

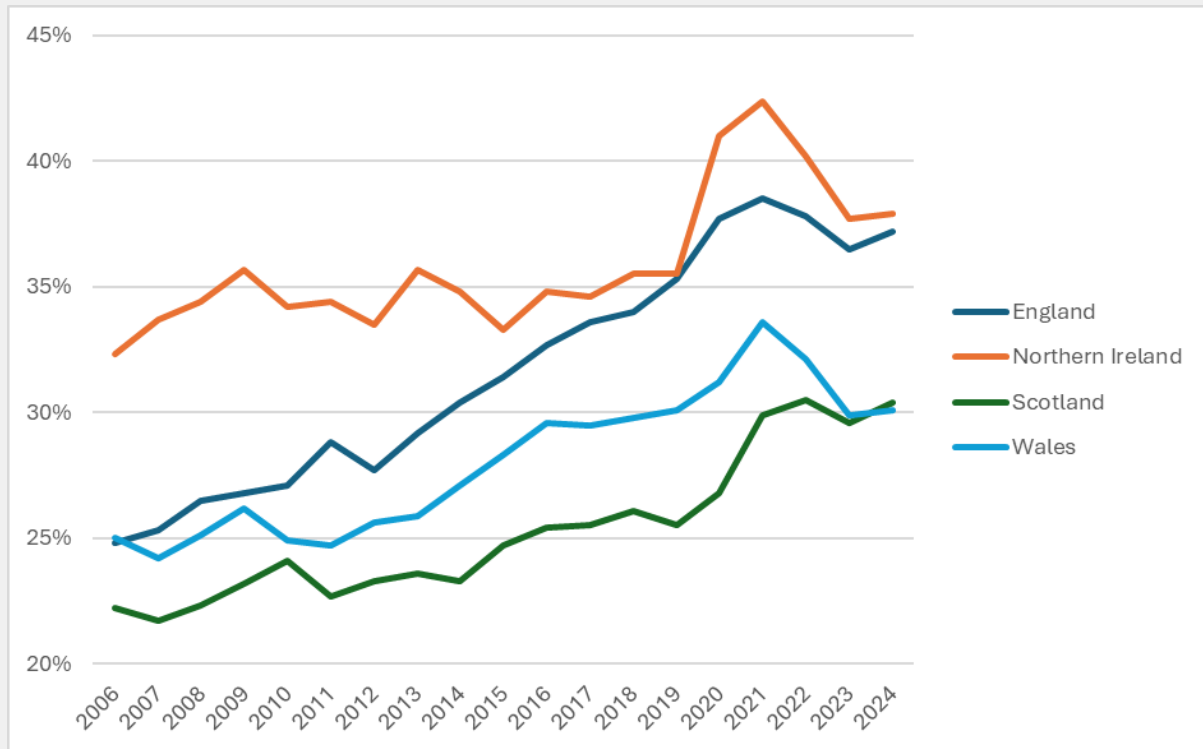
It is important to make a distinction between the collection and the analysis of data. In terms of publicly-funded provision, various data sources collected by the Welsh Government and other organisations such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency/Jisc provide rich information about learners in post-16 education and the type of provision being delivered.

Further analysis of these data, to better understand the pathways and progression of learners through the education system, is critical. On 25th February, Medr will publish a statistical analysis of progression from Year 11 to different types of tertiary education, including breakdowns by learner characteristics. Moving forward, we want to ensure that we use our data as effectively as possible, making meaningful comparisons of data across the sector and understanding the contributions of each part of the tertiary education system to our strategic aims.

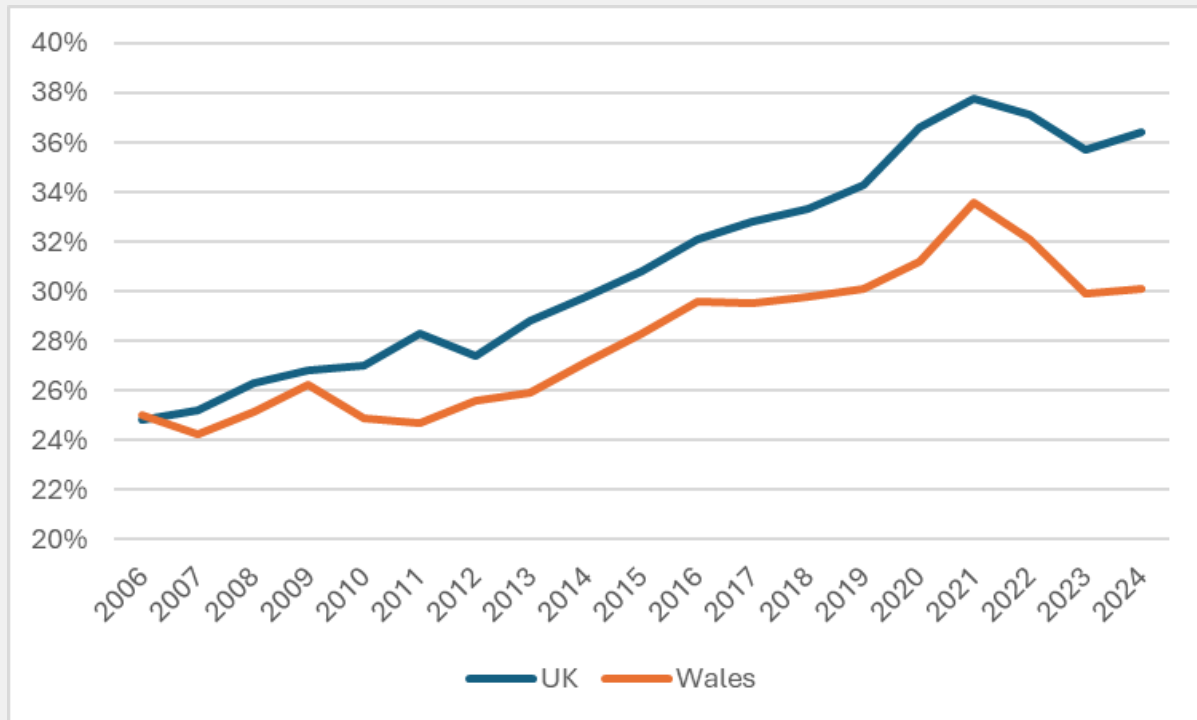
There are gaps in the data available on learners once they no longer engage with the education system. Our understanding of the national level picture is hampered by the increasing volatility in Welsh NEET estimates, particularly for the 16 to 18 cohort. It is therefore important to note that although the government-funded provision in tertiary education is rich with data, and there are opportunities to better understand and utilise that information, the tertiary education system is one part of a wider system for which important contextual information is not always available or timely.

ANNEX A

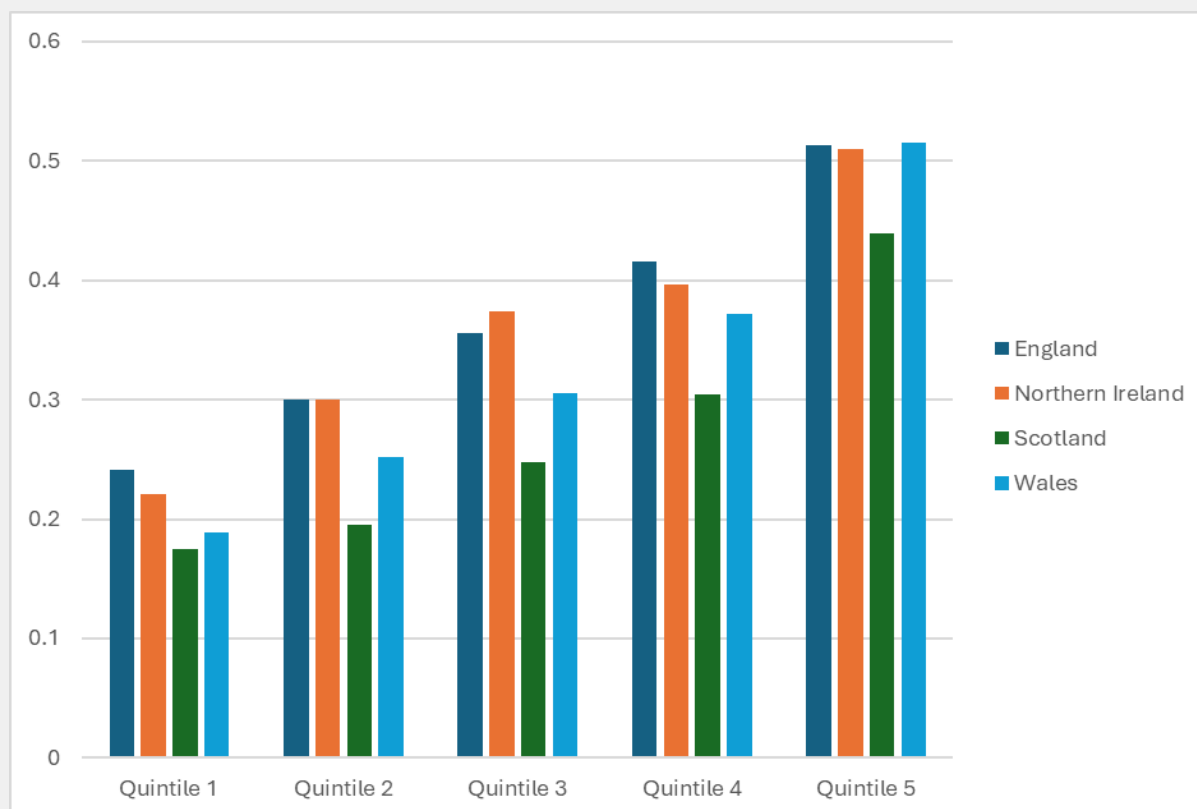
Graph 1: Participation rate for 18 year olds by country of domicile 2006 – 2024, UCAS End of Cycle 2024



Graph 2: UK and Wales entry rate, proportion of 18 year old population who were accepted, by cycle year



Graph 3: Participation rate for 18 year olds by POLAR4 quintile and country of domicile 2024.
UCAS End of Cycle 2024



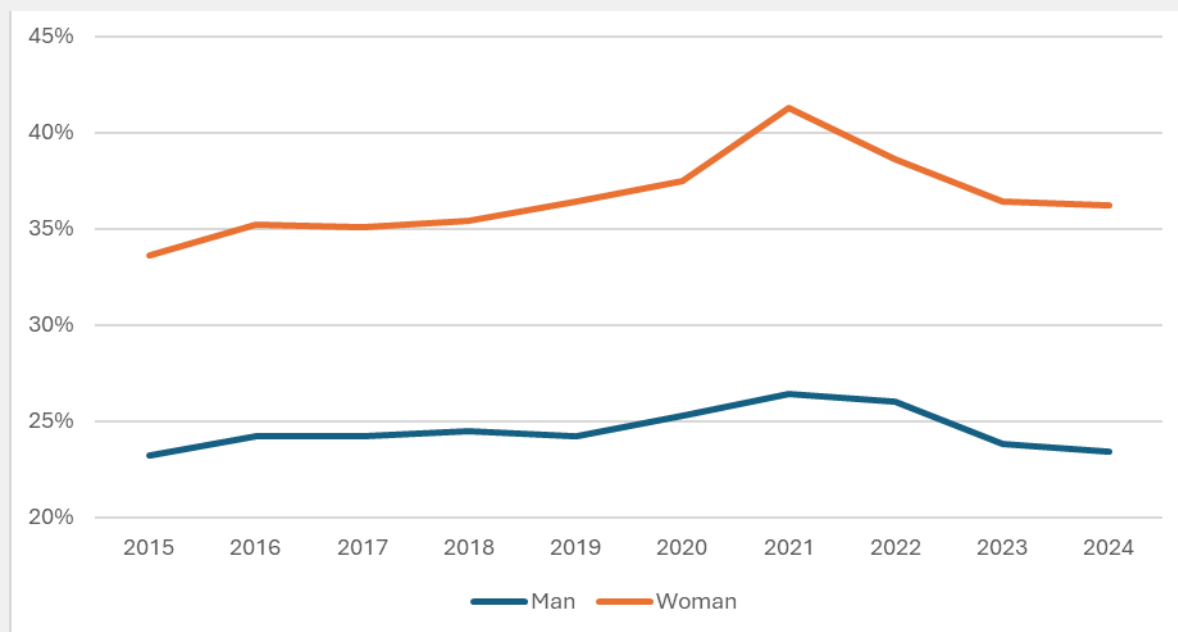
The POLAR4 measure aims to classify areas based on how likely young people are to participate in higher education. While it is a UK-wide measure, it is becoming out of date as it is based on data on students who began their studies between 2009-10 and 2013-14.

Differences in entry rates by sex (UCAS End of Cycle report data)

Table 1: Entry rates: Proportion of the 18 year old Welsh-domiciled population who were accepted, by gender and cycle year

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Man	23.2%	24.2%	24.2%	24.5%	24.2%	25.3%	26.4%	26.0%	23.8%	23.4%
Woman	33.6%	35.2%	35.1%	35.4%	36.4%	37.5%	41.3%	38.6%	36.4%	36.2%

Graph 4: Entry rates: Proportion of the 18 year old Welsh-domiciled population who were accepted, by gender and cycle year



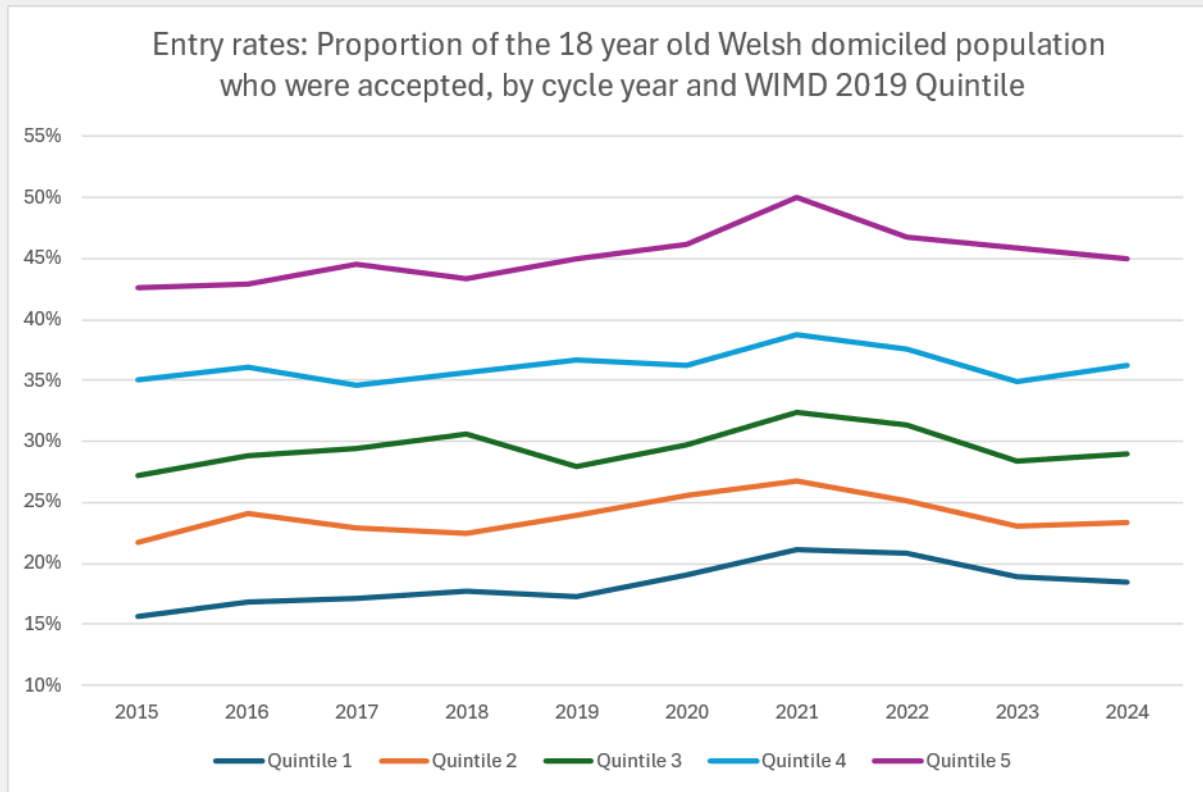
In 2024, Wales had a 12.8 percentage point difference between the entry rates of 18 year old men and women into HE – this is wider than the 10.9 percentage gap for the whole of the UK.

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and regional disparities in entry rates (UCAS End of Cycle report data)

Table 2: Entry rates: Proportion of the 18 year old Welsh domiciled population who were accepted, by cycle year and WIMD quintile

WIMD Quintile	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
1 – most deprived	15.7%	16.8%	17.1%	17.7%	17.3%	19.1%	21.1%	20.9%	18.9%	18.5%
2	21.7%	24.1%	22.9%	22.5%	23.9%	25.5%	26.7%	25.2%	23.1%	23.3%
3	27.2%	28.8%	29.4%	30.6%	28.0%	29.7%	32.4%	31.3%	28.4%	29.0%
4	35.1%	36.1%	34.6%	35.6%	36.7%	36.2%	38.7%	37.6%	34.9%	36.3%
5 – least deprived	42.6%	42.9%	44.5%	43.4%	45.0%	46.2%	50.0%	46.8%	45.8%	44.9%

Graph 5: Entry rates: Proportion of the 18 year old Welsh domiciled population who were accepted, by cycle year and WIMD 2019 quintile



To note, different parts of the UK use different methodologies to establish their respective index of multiple deprivation.

Table 3: Percentage of Welsh-domiciled 18 year old enrolments to institutions in Wales as opposed to in the rest of the UK.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Wales	55.1%	55.1%	53.9%	53.3%	53.4%	50.3%	50.7%
Rest of UK	44.9%	44.9%	46.1%	46.7%	46.6%	49.7%	49.3%

ANNEX B

Suggested causes and impacts of inequity in the tertiary education system

1. There is evidence of differential progression to and through post 16 education by learners and students. The Wales Centre Public Policy (WCPP) research [ADR-Wales-Data-Report-Understanding-inequity-in-tertiary-education.pdf](#)⁸ (October 2024) report sets out the population characteristics and the differential rates of progression to Sixth Form, FE and HE. The report concludes: *‘Overall, the analysis suggests that inequities are apparent in terms of progression, with learners with SEN status, disability, deprivation, lower socio-economic backgrounds, lower occupational backgrounds, and lower education backgrounds facing barriers to continued engagement in education post schooling.’* and *‘There were also common patterns of pathways, delineated by these same characteristics, with more affluent households more likely to progress through the entire tertiary education system.’*⁹ The WCPP report suggested that these limiting socio-economic, cultural and organisational factors are likely to have impacted progression to post-16 education at Key Stage 4 and earlier *‘creating the first barrier to continuing in education’*¹⁰.

Prior attainment and education aspirations

2. The Welsh Government report [Analysis of factors that influence post-16 learning achievement in Wales](#) (2022) confirms that absence in year 11 and prior attainment at Key Stage 4 are strong drivers of subsequent achievement at post 16 education as well as other characteristics including *‘eligibility for Free School Meals, local area deprivation, gender, and compulsory education starting age also seem to play a role in explaining post-16 achievement’*¹¹.
3. The [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer?](#) report indicates that, for young carers, findings suggest that a combination of caring responsibilities and the level of deprivation in a particular area for school-aged carers may impact participation in school. The report shows a significantly reduced level of participation in tertiary education for young carers compared to their peers, irrespective of levels of deprivation. These factors potentially affect future economic prospects¹² and *‘There are approximately 8,200 young carers in Wales, who are more likely than others of their age to live in deprived areas and experience disruption to their education’*¹³.
4. The Equality and Human Rights Commission [Education Fact Sheet - Wales](#) reports research by the CASCADE research centre, which *‘found that 13–14-year-olds with experience in care had expectations of attending university that were significantly lower than those of their peers. The same children were also less likely to be in higher education aged 20.’*

⁸ [ADR-Wales-Data-Report-Understanding-inequity-in-tertiary-education.pdf](#) The research is based on learner cohorts’ journeys through the tertiary education system in Wales between 2011/12 and 2018/19.

⁹ [ADR-Wales-Data-Report-Understanding-inequity-in-tertiary-education.pdf](#) p61

¹⁰ [ADR-Wales-Data-Report-Understanding-inequity-in-tertiary-education.pdf](#) p61

¹¹ [Analysis of factors that influence post-16 learning achievement in Wales](#) P7

¹² [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer](#) p74.

¹³ [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer](#) p54

Socio-economic disadvantage

5. [A review of evidence on socio-economic disadvantage and inequalities of outcome](#) (2021) confirms child poverty, including food poverty and poor quality accommodation, together with higher rates of adverse childhood experiences in vulnerable to socio-economic deprivation, have lifelong impacts: 'Those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to have worse outcomes in the areas of education, work, living standards, health, justice, and participation in public life. These areas all affect one another and problems in one often lead to a 'knock-on' effect on other areas¹⁴. The report confirms the intersectionality between socio-economic disadvantage and other protected characteristics compounds disadvantage¹⁵.
6. Similarly, [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer?](#) Report stated that: *'In 2020/21, just over half (52.5%) of children eligible for Free School Meals in Wales achieved 5 GCSEs grade A* to C, compared with 79.8% children not eligible for Free School Meals¹⁶.* It further noted that *'Free School Meals as a measure for deprivation excludes many children in Wales living below the poverty line but above the Free School Meal threshold (of household earnings being less than £7,400¹⁷).*

Gender

7. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) education fact sheet [Education Fact Sheet - Wales](#) identified emerging evidence that: *'male students are spread across a broader range of apprenticeships than their female counterparts. The majority, 58.6%, of female apprentices were undertaking healthcare and public services learning in 2021/22, an increase from 51.7% of all female apprentices in 2017/18.'* And *'In 2021/22, 95% of construction, 94.1% of engineering and 87.8% of manufacturing apprentices were male. In comparison, 87.9% of hair and beauty apprentices, 82.6% of health and public services, 62.7% of management and 67.7% of business administration students were female.'*

Ethnicity

8. The Careers Wales [Year 11 Pupil Destinations from Schools in Wales](#) (2023) survey (of 33,110 individuals) confirmed that 92.6% of learners from minority ethnic groups continued in full-time post 16 education in a school or FE college. A higher proportion of young people not in education, employment or training came from white backgrounds (2.1% or 642 individuals) compared to individuals from an ethnic minority (0.9% or 23 individuals).
9. The same survey may provide some evidence that the current system is not providing post 16 options attractive to learners from some white backgrounds, as they are much more like to go into the various labour market categories (9.6%) compared to those from minority ethnic backgrounds (3.6%)

¹⁴ [A review of evidence on socio-economic disadvantage and inequalities of outcome](#) p55

¹⁵ This literature review also took account of the Welsh Government's [A review of evidence on socio-economic disadvantage and inequalities of outcome](#)

¹⁶ [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer](#) p22

¹⁷ [Equality and Human Rights Monitor 2023: Is Wales Fairer](#) p34, citing [Reay, 2022](#) (2022), 'Measuring and understanding contemporary English educational inequalities', IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities,

10. The Welsh Government's [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan: 2024 update](#) notes that learners from Black ethnic backgrounds continue to achieve lower A level outcomes than other ethnic groups, although they achieve better outcomes than their peers with similar GCSE results. The report acknowledges that while differences remain in post-16 achievement for different ethnic groups, are starting to narrow.
11. A [report](#) (2022) by the Higher Education Policy Institute, found that Gypsy, Roma and Travellers communities were *'the lowest achieving ethnic groupings in the UK education system, with stark disparities in attainment apparent from early years Foundation stage onwards'*¹⁸. Analysis of Census 2021 data shows that People who identified as "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" were the most likely to hold no qualifications out of all ethnic groups (58.8%), followed by "White: Roma" (31.8%) and "Asian, Asian Welsh or Asian British: Bangladeshi" (30.9%).¹⁹
12. Within higher education in Wales, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students are under-represented. The proportion of higher education learners from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background in 2022/23 is less than a quarter of the proportion of the general population (as recorded at the 2021 census) from the same ethnic grouping across England and Wales. This picture is consistent across other UK nations. In 2021, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people were [least likely to enter higher education](#) by the age of 19; 6.3% of Gypsies and Roma, and 3.8% of Travellers had entered higher education, compared to 40% of young people.

Cost of living

13. The [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#) report, evidenced by a learner voice survey, confirms that financial issues were a common feedback theme, including costs of education, living and transport. Reported impacts of financial worries include *'disruption to education, inability to eat sufficient healthy and nutritious food, inability to meet transport costs and concerns about higher education funding'*²⁰, with learners saying: *'Worries about financing higher education so changing plans for the future especially because of a lack of money (cost of living)'. And "The cost of transport is a barrier to me having free choice to attend the college I wanted to go to"*²¹.

The Impact of Covid-19

14. We remain unclear as yet of ongoing and longer-term Covid-19 pandemic impacts on learners in compulsory and post-compulsory education, though there is evidence that some groups are more adversely affected than others.
15. The [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#) survey found almost half of respondents (47.5%) in year 11 in 2020, reported a negative pandemic impact on job

¹⁸ the Higher Education Policy Institute [report](#) (2022) p9

¹⁹ Ethnic [group](#) differences in health, housing, education and economic status in Wales (Census 2021)

²⁰ [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#). p56

²¹ The [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#) report. p54.

prospects, compared to 36% who were in year 8 at the time²². The report concludes: *'Impacts of the pandemic remain prevalent amongst learners currently in FE. Over a third of respondents indicated that their education plans changed due to the pandemic. This was particularly evident for care-experienced learners, those with disabilities or additional learning needs, and learners eligible for FSM.*

16. A decrease in poor mental health post-pandemic was among most cited reason for planned learning course changes. More than half (52.9%) of survey respondents agreed that their learning disruption was due to mental ill health, including stress and anxiety. Feelings of “imposter syndrome” amongst learners in receipt of centre-assessed grades, rather than through formal examinations, was also not uncommon, together with concerns regarding their ‘readiness’ when entering post-16 education during and after the pandemic. The report concludes that: ‘the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and had a profound impact on learners’ educational experiences and mental health.’²³
17. In higher education. A report by the [Centre for Mental Health](#)²⁴ evaluating the impact of the higher education [Student Space](#) programme²⁵ found some student groups experienced greater challenges as a result of the pandemic, including: students from racialised communities; students with disabilities; international students; and students from ‘widening participation/ access’ groups. These groups broadly align with those identified in the WCPP report on *Understanding Inequality in Tertiary Education* cited earlier.
18. The British Academy published [The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19](#). One of the report’s conclusions was: *‘The pandemic and various measures taken to address it have resulted in differential mental health outcomes. Access to support for new cases and for those with pre-existing conditions has also been disrupted, in addition to services for children and young people. Both have the potential to result in long-term mental health impacts for particular groups if there is not a renewed focus on the causes and solutions for sustaining mental health across society, including by tackling the structural and root causes of inequality.’* and:

‘The consequences of lost access to education at all levels, coupled with changes to assessments, will be felt for years to come, and wholly recovering lost education is unfeasible. This has exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities in attainment and highlighted digital inequality. Because a high-skill economy will be essential for future prosperity and for society to thrive, it will be vital to consider whether lifelong educational opportunities are sufficiently comprehensive, diverse and flexible.’

²² [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#) A total of 1,821 usable responses were received with responses. The highest proportions of respondents were from South Wales postcode districts. There were no respondents from the Gwynedd area or from some South-East Wales postcode districts.

²³ [Learner experiences in post-16 education \(2024\)](#) p56.

²⁴ [Centre for Mental Health](#)

²⁵ [Student Space](#) programme provided web-based intervention supporting student mental well-being over the pandemic

ANNEX C

Financial Contingency Fund

Total FCF Budget available for 23/24:	£7,018,878.00
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Categories of Support	Amount spent (£)	Number of learners supported
Assistance with Disability costs	110.00	2
Books	16,429.96	444
Equipment	666,404.20	4,431
Accommodation	87,962.07	127
Childcare	1,045,466.43	639
Transport (including bulk purchase)	2,727,907.34	9,708
Disabled Transport	131,082.76	57
Stationery	10,832.45	138
Exam Fees	7,647.70	107
Registration Fees	7,228.50	95
Trips	76,726.35	472
Lunch Vouchers	1,420,710.39	9,725
Disclosure Barring Checks	13,470.90	342
Other	252,783.68	1,465

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