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Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Buffy Williams MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament
Ty Hywel
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1SN

14 June 2024

Dear Buffy,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Children, Young People, and Education Committee regarding concerns about participation in higher education.

I recognise that there is a significant challenge around participation, but it is broader than higher education and I can assure you that it is one that I take very seriously.

Participation in higher education has fallen recently and, as tuition fees are the main source of higher education institutional income this is of great concern to the sector. However, it is not yet clear whether this is a trend or a post-covid correction in the participation figures following the higher than expected entry rate during the pandemic.

The Committee's letter was prompted by Universities Wales and therefore understandably concentrates on the participation of 18 year olds in higher education. However, as I have stated at the outset, my concern is broader and is about post-16 education participation more generally. We are aware that our percentage of young people who are NEET is higher than the other UK nations and the higher education participation rates are lower for the most deprived areas relative to more affluent areas in Wales.

To fully understand what lies behind these issues, one of the first actions I am undertaking is to ensure we have a full understanding of the participation trends in post-16 education more generally. This will require the linking of various datasets to provide insights into the profile of learners who do and do not continue in post-compulsory education and whether this profile has changed over time. This is not captured when utilising educational datasets in isolation.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The data referred to in the Committee's letter is from UCAS which publishes data on 18 year old entry rates by domicile, calculated by dividing the number of acceptances by the estimated base population. Since 2014 the entry rate for Wales has increased by 2.8 percentage points. The entry rate peaked for Welsh-domiciled students in 2021 at 33.8%. Other UK nations also saw a peak in participation between 2021 and 2022. This was likely as a result of impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic including teacher assessed grades and fewer opportunities for employment or travel.

There is a comparison in the letter of participation rates by index of multiple deprivation (IMD) areas between Wales and England. We note that caution should be applied when comparing IMD participation rates as policy divergence, socioeconomic and geographic factors should be taken into account when comparing HE participation across UK nations.

Furthermore, there is currently no UK-wide measure of multiple deprivation and therefore it can be challenging to compare access to HE of those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, across UK nations. The Higher Education Statistics Authority are developing a new measure designed to be used across the UK called the Socioeconomic Index for Small Areas (SEISA). This may provide a more robust way to compare participation by area-based deprivation in the future and will be tested and appraised by analysts within the Welsh Government and decisions will be made about where to appropriately apply it.

The Welsh Government recognises the role that part-time study plays in widening access for specific groups. The Diamond Reforms to student finance in Wales, implemented from 2018/19 academic year, reformed support for part-time students and consequently, Wales currently has the most generous support package for part-time students. The result is that we have the highest proportion of part-time enrolments, of all first year undergraduate enrolments, compared to other UK nations: 34% in the latest (2021-22) figures as compared to 16% in England.

In relation to the regional disparities noted, UCAS do not regularly publish the regional breakdown for Wales but data is available for entry rate by Welsh Parliamentary Region for 2022. This indicates a large regional difference between South Wales Central and other regions. The geographical spread of HE providers may contribute to this gap as South Wales Central is home to five HEIs whereas South Wales East does not have any based in the region, only satellite campuses. Evidence from a study by White and Lee on geographical differences in participation rates in England supports this.¹

In their letter to the Committee, Universities Wales state 'Increasing numbers of students from England choosing to study in Wales is masking participation challenges among Welsh domiciled young people.' There is some evidence to support this claim in that as a proportion of the total base population, 3% of all English first year undergraduate students chose to study in Wales in 2021-22 (latest HESA data), an increase of 0.5% since 2017-18. The figure for Welsh-domiciled undergraduate students choosing to study in Wales in 2021-22 is 71%, a decrease of 3.1% over the same time period.

As a proportion of the total undergraduate enrolments to Welsh HEIs in 2021-22, 36% were English-domiciled students compared to 33% in 2017-18. The proportion of Welsh domiciles is 54% of undergraduate enrolments in Welsh HEIs in 2021-22, the same proportion as in 2017/18. Work is already underway to analyse the participation rates of Welsh-domiciled learners in higher education as part of the evaluation plan for the Diamond reforms. I will publish this plan shortly.

¹ White, P. M., & Lee, D. M. (2020). Research in Higher Education, 61(7), 825-848.

In addition, a series of research projects are planned which will focus on the experiences, beliefs and perceptions of children and young people around tertiary education, higher education specifically and the financial support available. These research activities will contribute to work on the evaluation of the Diamond Reforms.

This work will complement the data linking research to understand some of the underlying drivers of trends seen in the data. The research aims to understand further the factors influencing decision-making of young people from various groups regarding tertiary education and higher education specifically, and perceived barriers around post-compulsory higher education. This research is part of the evidence plan for 2024/2025 and outputs are expected in 2025, although interim findings may be available at an earlier date.

This is a very important issue and it is one that I am taking very seriously. That is why, as well as using data to better understand post-16 participation, I will work with colleagues across government to address this. Furthermore, I will also draw upon external expertise to provide insight and inform our policy response and I am considering the best way to do this. I will provide a further update to the Committee in due course if that would be helpful.

I want to see all our children and young people fulfil their potential and for more to undertake post-16 education. I will make a further announcement on this in the Autumn.

Yours sincerely



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