

Explainer: Welsh participation in higher education

August 2024

What do we mean by participation, participation rate and application rate?

When referring to *participation* in higher education, we mean anyone who has secured a place at university.

The *participation rate* is the proportion of 18-year-olds going to university. The size of the population can vary year-on-year, which is why the participation rate is a more helpful indicator of trends over time, rather than the number of people going to university.

The *application rate* is the proportion of 18-year-olds applying for university. Not necessarily everyone who applies will eventually take up a place at university.

What do the stats tell us?

Two key trends are cause for concern.

The participation rate in Wales has been dropping, and is lower than elsewhere in the UK. That means 18-year-olds in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are more likely to go to university than their Welsh peers.

The latest UCAS data available demonstrates a continued drop in the proportion

Domicile	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
UK	36.0%	37.0%	37.5%	37.8%	38.9%	40.5%	43.3%	44.1%	42.1%	41.9%
England	36.1%	37.2%	37.9%	38.1%	39.5%	41.3%	43.9%	44.9%	43.0%	42.7%
Northern Ireland	48.2%	48.2%	47.7%	47.6%	46.9%	48.2%	52.3%	52.8%	51.1%	50.1%
Scotland	32.5%	32.8%	33.0%	32.8%	32.7%	32.3%	36.1%	35.8%	33.9%	33.9%
Wales	31.7%	32.9%	32.5%	32.7%	32.9%	33.6%	37.9%	38.1%	34.2%	33.8%
Total	36.0%	37.0%	37.5%	37.8%	38.9%	40.5%	43.3%	44.1%	42.1%	41.9%

of Welsh 18-year-olds applying to university.

The application rate is now **33.8%**, the lowest rate in the UK.

The gap between the rate in Wales and the rest of the UK has been increasing over time, and is now at its **widest point in 15 years**.

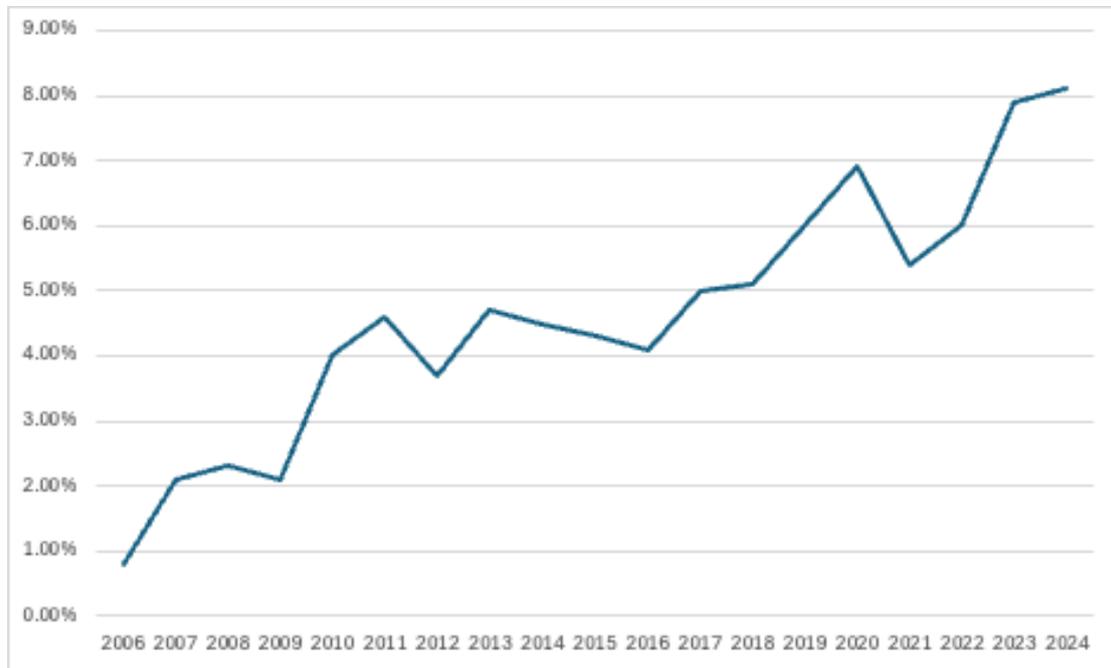


Figure 1: Gap in application rate between Wales and the UK as a whole, UCAS 30 June data

If we break it down to regions in England, only the North East of England (33.4%) has a lower participation rate than Wales (33.8%).

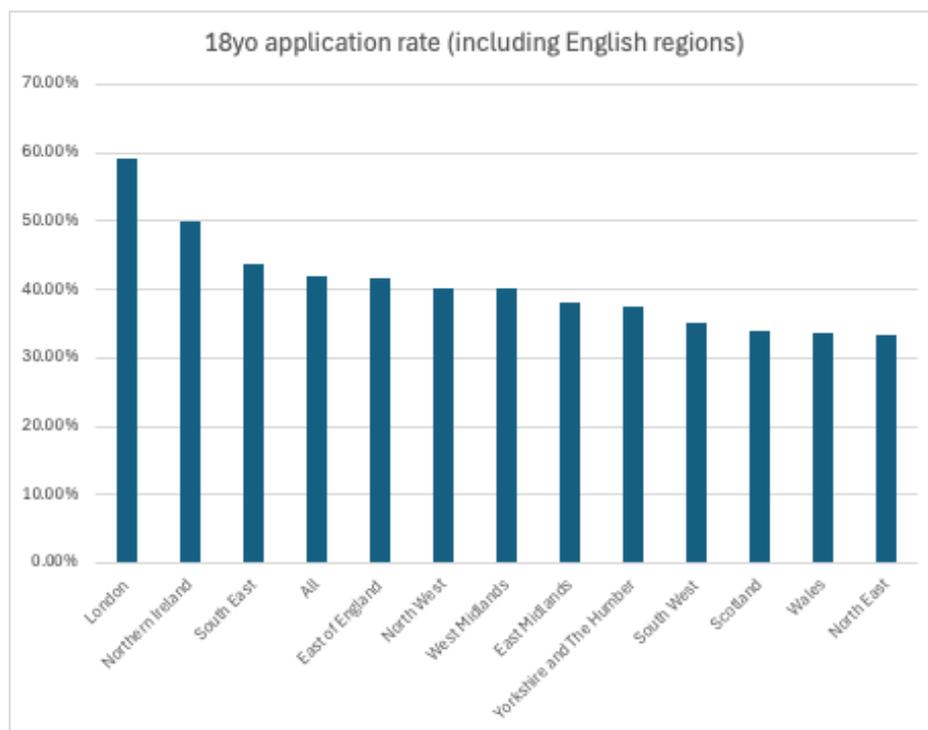


Figure 2: Application rate for 2024-25 academic year, by nation and English regions. UCAS 30 June data.

Furthermore, Wales has also seen a **drop in the application rate from quintile 1 of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation** (i.e. the most disadvantaged), whereas England and Scotland have seen an increase in application rate in the equivalent cohort.

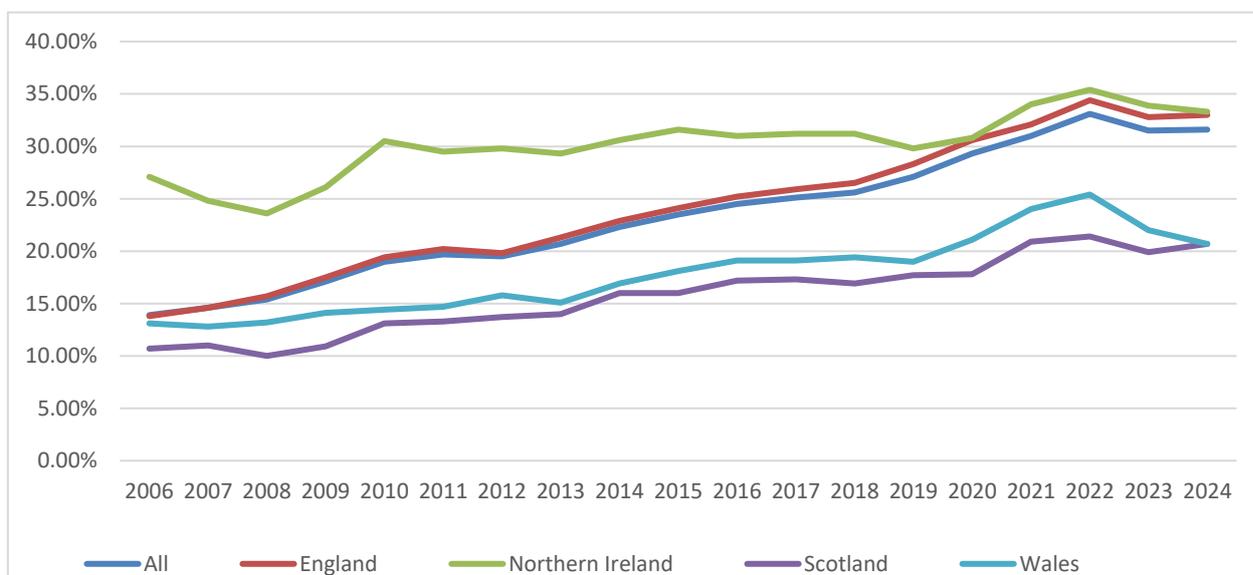


Figure 3: Proportion of those in the most deprived areas (Quintile 1) who applied to university. UCAS 30 June data.

Why is this a problem?

This trend rings alarm bells for a few reasons.

The support package on offer to Welsh-domiciled students (i.e. those living in Wales when they apply to university, rather than those studying in Wales, who could come from the rest of the UK or be international students), is the most generous of all UK nations with a particular focus on maintenance support for living costs.

So, despite the availability of grants and loans designed to facilitate access to higher education, Welsh young people are not taking up the opportunity to do so at the same rate as their peers elsewhere in the UK.

The future of the economy depends upon the nation being sufficiently equipped to capitalise on industrial, digital and societal developments, with increasing demand for graduate-level skills. If Welsh people are not gaining these skills, Wales' economy will find itself at an economic disadvantage compared to the rest of the UK which the proportion of graduates in the workforce will be higher. Wales already has a lower proportion of graduates in the workforce than other parts of the UK.

But crucially, we must remember the implications that this would have on individuals, and the opportunities that they may miss out on. There is a real chance of a generation that is be less well-qualified than their predecessors.

Why is this happening?

There could be a variety of factors at play, including a need to raise ambition or a lack of awareness of the availability of courses and financial support on offer.

Crucially, it's not just at 18 that young people are opting-out of education. Welsh Government figures indicate that an increasing proportion 16-year-olds are not progressing from Year 11 to education, training or work-based learning.

In 2017, 90% of school leavers were staying in education, training or work-based learning. [That's fallen to 80% in 2022.](#)

What can be done to address the problem?

Universities Wales would like to see Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, and the Welsh Government, commit to tackling this issue head-on, firstly by addressing the need for better data to understand where our young people are going after school and further work to understand what lies behind the choices young people are making.

Are Welsh people going to university elsewhere?

These figures relate to people normally resident in Wales wherever they may be applying to, not just those who are applying to Welsh universities.

Welsh universities attract students from Wales, the rest of the UK, and international students. But for the resilience of the future Welsh economy, it would be beneficial to have more Welsh students entering higher education.

Are Welsh young people doing apprenticeships instead?

The drop in applications to university is not explained by young people accessing other modes or types of provision.

Looking beyond the volatility in apprenticeship starts caused by the pandemic, 18- and 19-year-old apprenticeship numbers have been broadly steady over a five year period. In 2018-19, there were 6,065 apprentices aged 18 and 19 in Wales. In 2022-23, there were 5,605. [The overall proportion of the 18-19 year old population entering work-based learning has slightly decreased over this period.](#)