



**Wales Centre for Public Policy**  
**Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru**

# Understanding inequity in tertiary education

**Expert reflections on  
the challenges and how  
to overcome them**



Luke Sibieta, Joshua Miles, Vikki Boliver and Ellen Hazelkorn

[www.wcpp.org.uk](http://www.wcpp.org.uk)

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# Introduction

**The Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Centre for Public Policy to provide evidence to inform Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, in fulfilling its strategic duty to promote equality of opportunity in tertiary education in Wales. To do this, ADR Wales has conducted data analysis and WCPP has produced an evidence review.**

As presented in this document, leading experts were asked to reflect upon this research and their own expertise to explore: What steps, if any, might best be taken to encourage different patterns of access, participation, progress, achievement, and outcomes? How might these activities promote a general duty, capability, or aspiration to provide fair opportunities for pupils, students and apprentices in further education, higher education, apprenticeship providers, sixth forms and adult learning centres?

As part of its remit, Medr has a strategic duty to promote equality of opportunity for under-represented groups in tertiary education. The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) were asked to provide evidence to support Medr in discharging this duty, by:

- Undertaking data analysis looking at the proportions of learners across tertiary education with protected or supported characteristics and how these compare to relevant comparator populations;
- Reviewing interventions that have been put in place across the other nations in the UK and the Republic of Ireland to promote equality of opportunity in tertiary education; and
- Suggesting policy interventions or approaches that could help to tackle disparities identified in the data analysis.

We have published a series of outputs to answer these questions including a data analysis (Huxley and Davies, 2024); an evidence review covering existing policy approaches (Nesom et al., 2024); a policy briefing that presents the key findings from the data analysis, informed by our additional outputs and other relevant work (Robson et al., 2024) and this series of thinkpieces recommending policy interventions and approaches (Boliver, 2024; Hazelkorn, 2024; Miles, 2024; Sibieta, 2024).

# About these thinkpieces

**The thinkpieces presented in this document respond to the research question,** What steps if any might best be taken to encourage different patterns of access, participation, progress, achievement, and outcomes? How might these activities promote a general duty, capability, or aspiration to provide fair opportunities for pupils, students and apprentices in further education, higher education, apprenticeship providers, sixth forms and adult learning centres?

**Authors were asked to reflect on the data analysis carried out by ADR Wales; the findings of WCPP's evidence review; and their own expertise to answer this question.**

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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>About these thinkpieces</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>More data and earlier focus key to tackling post-16 inequalities in education and training</b> (Luke Sibieta)	<b>4</b>
<b>Equity in Tertiary Education in Wales: an adult learning perspective</b> (Joshua Miles)	<b>9</b>
<b>Contextualised admissions: a key to widening participation in tertiary education in Wales</b> (Professor Vikki Boliver)	<b>14</b>
<b>Widening Participating &amp; Transforming Lives: What Works?</b> (Professor Ellen Hazelkorn)	<b>18</b>



# More data and earlier focus key to tackling post-16 inequalities in education and training



**Luke Sibieta**

Luke Sibieta is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Fiscal Studies attached to the Education, Employment and Evaluation sector. He is also a Research Fellow at the Education Policy Institute. Earlier this year, he authored the IFS report: Major Challenges for Education in Wales which covered areas including low educational outcomes and high levels of inequality.

## The creation of Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, represents a step change in the organisation of post-16 education and training in Wales.

This blog discusses some of the main challenges facing policy makers on post-16 education and training in Wales. This includes relatively low levels of higher education participation, lower levels of participation in academic education for boys and gaping socio-economic inequalities. It also examines the best ways in which policy could respond. In so doing, it draws on a range of new evidence on post-16 education and training across the UK. This includes the extensive evidence and policy review produced by Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP), innovative analysis of inequalities in post-16 education and training produced by WCPP/ADR Wales and joint work between myself and [EPI/SKOPE](#) colleagues on post-16 education and training across the UK.

### Lower participation in school sixth forms and higher education in Wales

One of the key defining features of post-16 education in Wales, as compared with the rest of the UK, is the lower rate of participation in school sixth forms and higher education. In our recent [EPI/SKOPE](#) report, we show that only 35% of 16-17 year olds in Wales are in school sixth forms. This compares with 45% in England, over 60% in Northern Ireland and 63% in Scotland (or up to 79% if you count dual registrations in Scotland). A much larger share of young people are in colleges in Wales (over 50%).



**More pupils in Wales attending college and undertaking vocational college can be a strength to Wales, but the merits of the Welsh approach depends on the consequences of different education pathways for students and young people.**

It is highly likely that these differences in type of provision reflect the relative availability of school sixth forms and colleges across Wales. In rural areas in particular, pupils are unlikely to have a significant amount of choice between school sixth forms and colleges, and will probably still travel a large distance to attend a post-16 setting. This matters as it will likely affect the type of educational qualifications that young people receive. Colleges are more likely to offer vocational courses, whilst school sixth forms are more likely to offer academic courses, such as A Levels. For example, young people in school sixth forms predominantly take A level course, whilst A levels only represent about **28%** of courses taken by young people in colleges in Wales. Partly as a result, the WCPP/ADR Wales report shows that over 50% of young people in Wales are doing vocational courses, with 32% registered for A Levels. In **England**, by contrast, 47% of young people were studying A Level in 2022.

Given these differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that we also see lower levels of participation in higher education in Wales too. As we show

in our **EPI/SKOPE** report, about 37–38% of 18-year olds in England were participating in higher education in 2023. Figures for Scotland are calculated on a slightly different basis, but probably aren't that far below that seen in England and Northern Ireland. In Wales, by contrast, only about 30% of 18-year olds were in higher education in 2023. There will be many reasons for this lower level of higher education participation, but one of the key reasons will be the greater focus on vocational courses and colleges. Universities are more likely to have admission requirements based around academic qualifications like A Levels.

### **Crucial to understand the consequences**

The fact that more pupils go to colleges in Wales and take vocational course need not be a disadvantage. Indeed, having more pupils in high-quality technical courses learning valuable skills can be a strength. The merits of the Welsh approach therefore depend on the consequences of different education pathways for students and young people.

While the current data don't show us where learners on vocational pathways in Wales end up, we do see worrying outcomes for some Welsh young people. We have already seen that they are less likely to attend higher education. They are also more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET). Nearly 11% of 16–18 year olds in Wales were classified as NEET in 2022–23, compared with 8% in England, 9% in Scotland and 5% in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the economic outcomes for young people in Wales from

working-class backgrounds are quite poor. They are less likely to hold Level 3 or A Level equivalent qualifications (56% in Wales compared with 60–65% in the rest of the UK). They are also less likely to be in employment (71% in Wales as compared with 74–78% in the rest of the UK).

Getting an even deeper understanding of the outcomes and consequences of education pathways in Wales would require more data than is currently available. In particular, it requires education administrative data to be linked with earnings, employment and benefits data from HMRC and DWP. This data is already available in England in the form of the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset and is already providing new insights on what shapes educational and earnings inequalities. It should be an urgent priority to make such data available for Wales too.

## Concerning levels of inequalities

There are longstanding and persistent concerns about inequalities in post-16 education and training in Wales and the UK. This is evident in all analysis



on this subject. The WCPP/ADR Wales report shows that only 15% of children eligible for free school meals are in school sixth forms in Wales and only 9% are taking A Levels. Furthermore, in one of the most valuable features of this innovative report, they show that these inequalities stretch to large difference by parental occupation, parental education and other elements of deprivation. Whilst clearly concerning, it will be important for Medr to continue this analysis and regularly publish socio-economic differences in access to different forms of post-16 education and training. This will drive public debate, and ultimately policy change.

We also see clear socio-economic differences in access to higher education. Our [EPI/SKOPE](#) report shows that only about 15–16% of young people from deprived areas in Wales and Scotland attend higher education. In England, this figure is higher at about 20%, but lower at 13% in Northern Ireland. Clearly, there are UK wide issues in enabling the most deprived pupils to go to higher education.

One of the other clear emerging inequalities in post-16 education and training are differences by gender. Girls are much more likely to attend school sixth forms (37%) than boys (30%) in Wales. Boys are more likely than girls to be taking vocational courses. From our [EPI/SKOPE](#) report, we also see that boys in Wales are much less likely to go to higher education (24%) than girls (36%), and the share of boys going to higher education in Wales has barely budged at all over the last 15 years.

These differences in education participation are evident all across the UK, and indeed across most economically developed countries. However, because Wales has a lower



overall rate of higher education participation, Welsh boys have the lowest levels of participation in higher education across the UK. Again, this is almost certainly connected to the fact that more Welsh boys take vocational courses after the age of 16.

### **Best policy responses are likely to focus on what comes before age 16**

In their extensive review of the evidence, WCPP show that there is actually a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of many schemes to widen participation in further and higher education amongst young people. This is sadly not that surprising. Most of the evidence here shows that it is what happens before the age of 16 that plays the largest role in shaping later education choices. Once you [account](#) for prior attainment up to age 16, socio-economic differences in higher education participation and outcomes either vanish or disappear entirely. This suggests that the best way to widen participation in further and higher education is to narrow inequalities within the school system.

Unfortunately, there is clear evidence of persistently high inequalities in the school system Wales, and higher than other parts of the UK. The recent [PISA](#) results painted a very worrying picture of the level of reading, maths and science skills in Wales, both as compared with the rest of the UK and the rest of the world. EPI [analysis](#) of GCSE results has shown pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales are about 22-23 months behind in terms of their educational progress as compared with their more advantaged peers, which compares



with a smaller disadvantage gap in GCSE results of about 18 months in England. This disadvantage gap has hardly budged at all over the last decade in Wales.

My recent IFS [report](#) further argues that higher inequalities in the school system in Wales are unlikely to reflect higher poverty in Wales, a different ethnic mix of pupils, statistical biases or differences in resources. Instead, they are more likely to reflect differences in policy and approach. Moreover, there is very little evidence that ongoing and planned changes to the curriculum, assessments or the school year could make things better or narrow inequalities. Indeed, there is a clear risk that such changes could widen inequalities still further. Without new efforts, a change of policy direction and extra resources to tackle the attainment gap in schools, socio-economic differences in further and higher education will remain large.

Gender differences in education participation and course type are probably even harder to change. Whilst girls do outperform boys in the school system, this difference is not nearly enough to explain why girls are so much more likely to take academic



courses or go to higher education. Such differences are more likely to reflect more deep-seated gender norms and attitudes.

## Policy conclusions

In conclusion, this wealth of new evidence actually seems to point to a number of consistent key findings and implications. First, Medr should be tracking inequalities in participation and course choices in a regular and systematic way. Such analysis could make use of new linked administrative and census data, should cover as many aspects of inequalities as possible, and should really allow for comparisons with the rest of the UK and other countries. This will inform public debate and create the pressure to narrow these inequalities. Second, we need to develop a better understanding of the consequences of different participation and course choices, and inequalities in those choices.

This will only be possible with education administrative data linked to HMRC and DWP data on earnings, employment and benefits. Such data is already available for England in the form of the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset. Creating the same for Wales should be an urgent priority. Third, we should be realistic about the effects of participation policies focused on over 16s and young adults. Such policies might shift young people's participation, subject and course choices a bit on the margin. However, it is what comes before age 16 that has the biggest impact on post-16 education and training decisions. Tackling the gaping and stagnant levels of inequalities in school-level education attainment in Wales would have a much bigger effect on post-16 education and training choices. Welsh Government and Medr should work with schools to mitigate inequalities in pre-16 attainment as a key starting point.



# Equity in Tertiary Education in Wales: an adult learning perspective



## Joshua Miles

Joshua Miles is the Director for Wales at the Learning and Work Institute which is an independent policy and research organisation focused on lifelong learning and better work. He leads on the Institute's activity in Wales and works in partnership with the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders.

## A key role and opportunity for Medr

**The introduction of Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research has the potential to dramatically reshape approaches to promoting equity in tertiary education in Wales. There are several reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the new body and how it could transform the post-compulsory landscape.**

The new body has attached to it various duties that give a strong sense of purpose. Beyond the duty relating to promoting equality of opportunity, these duties will all have a bearing on equity in tertiary education in some form and provide a strong starting rationale for Medr's funding and regulatory policies. The challenge for Medr in this will be how to operationalise these duties and turn them from important sections of statute to action in the real world.

The existence of a body with the financial and regulatory oversight of all modes of provision (sixth form, further education, adult community learning, work-based learning and higher education) is itself a potential benefit. In practice, Medr can and

should be examining issues such as equity thematically with a firm understanding of how changes to one element of the post-compulsory education and training (PCET) sector can have a positive (or negative) impact on another and how this could support progression for learners.





To take a real-world example, in 2021 [Clare Palmer won the Essential Skills for Life Award](#) at the Inspire! Adult Learning Awards. Clare left school with no qualifications and spent most of her working career as a hairdresser and care assistant. Between the ages of 14 and 41 she hadn't engaged with formal learning, but returned to community learning to join maths and English classes. She persevered with her essential skills and after completing a Level 3 Diploma in Health and Social Care, Clare gained more self-belief and subsequently decided to take her passion for care a step further and apply to university to become a social worker.

That's an example of how lifelong learning can change someone's life, through adult and community learning, further and higher education. But Clare's story is the exception not the rule. If Medr is to achieve its duty to promote equality of opportunity, then examples like Clare's need to become a more common-place feature of our post-compulsory landscape and that means much clearer progression routes and stronger outreach and promotion efforts for both 16–25 year olds and adult learners.

Medr will have to manage two clear policy aspirations. The first, is perhaps obvious to all involved in the PCET conversation to-date and is largely

reflected in the data analysis provided by WCPP/ADR Wales: to send school leavers off on the journey of life equipped with the skills, qualifications, and a sense of self that they need to fulfil their potential. There is growing evidence of inequity in access to and participation in PCET in Wales among school leavers based on a range of socio-economic factors.



**For Medr to achieve its duty to promote equality of opportunity, much clearer progression routes and stronger outreach and promotion efforts are needed for both 16–25 year olds and adult learners.**

## **Inequities in PCET in Wales**

As the WCPP/ADR Wales analysis highlights, this is an area fraught with inequalities at the moment with the characteristics of learners varying significantly by types of qualification and the place at which the student undertake them. For instance, the proportion going to sixth form declines from 43% for those with no deprivation to 13% for those with 4 dimensions of deprivation. The inverse is true of FE colleges where we see an increasing prevalence of FE participation the more dimensions of deprivation a learner has.

There are also inequalities in participation between Wales and the UK more broadly. A recent Education Policy Institute Report (EPI) report in particular only serves to reinforce the specific

challenges facing Wales. This [research](#) found that the proportion of 16–18 year-olds not in education, employment or training in Wales is on the rise (from 6% in 2021/22 to 11% in 2022/23), that participation in higher education at 18 is lower than other UK nations (30% vs 49% in Scotland), and that there is a large gender participation gap at HE with young Welsh men the least likely to go to university (24%).

While unacceptable, none of this is particularly surprising and many of these trends are likely to have existed for some time. The question then, is what can be done about these trends, for clearly opportunity in tertiary education is not at present equally distributed.

As the EPI [report](#) notes, identifying the ‘policy cause’ of disproportionate inequality of outcome in Wales is not an easy task. But the urgency of their conclusions should at the very least encourage Medr to take the issue seriously. If we are to tackle these inequalities then an honest look at the system as a whole will be needed, including constructive challenge on the impact of the last decade of hard budget choices on outcomes across the post-compulsory sector.

## Adult education

The second policy aspiration Medr will need to manage is less talked about but equally important. That is in the words of the former Education Minister Jeremy Miles, to deliver a [Second Chance Nation: where it’s never too late to learn](#). Translating such a laudable ambition into practical action is no mean feat. We’re all accustomed to an entitlement to education into our early adulthood, but the same entitlement is less apparent as we age.

Again, the [legislation](#) setting up Medr provides a clear steer for the new organisation in this regard in that a duty to lifelong learning sits at the very top of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act and section 94 of the legislation makes securing ‘proper facilities’ for education and training for eligible persons over 19 a duty for the first time.

This sounds like a subtle change but in practice has significant consequences. The previous legislation, the [Learning and Skills Act 2000](#) only placed this duty on 16–19 provision which in effect meant that full-time provision in FE (largely 16–19 year olds) received better treatment when finances tightened compared to part-time provision and adult community education (19+). This is borne out by the [participation statistics](#) which [show](#) that while work-based learning and full-time FE numbers were largely static over the last decade, part-time FE declined from around 110,000 learners in 2012/13 to a low point of just over 42,800 in 2020/21 before recovering slightly in recent years. Similar [trends](#) are evident in adult community learning with 31,427 unique learners in 2012/13 and a low of 5,555 in 2020/21 before a slight recovery. Undoubtedly the pandemic had an impact on the severity of the lows, however the trend was downward across the decade and the recovery in recent years has taken us to pre-pandemic learner numbers, substantially below levels at the beginning of the last decade.

This change is important because inequality of access beyond the age of 19 is far less measured and understood. When the cohort is population-wide, understanding the reasons for learning (or not), the impact that learning has on individual

outcomes and the prior experiences that shape learning preferences is incredibly difficult. We know from our own previous [research](#) that the trigger point for learning can often be complex and varies across socio-economic background and levels of attainment.

Learning and Work Institute publishes an annual Adult Participation in Learning Survey that can begin to answer some of these questions. The 2023 [survey](#) found that almost half of adults in the UK participated in some form of learning (49%), although this was lower in Wales at 41%. Interestingly, participation appears to have increased markedly in England, whilst remaining relatively static in the other nations. In line with previous surveys, age, social grade, labour

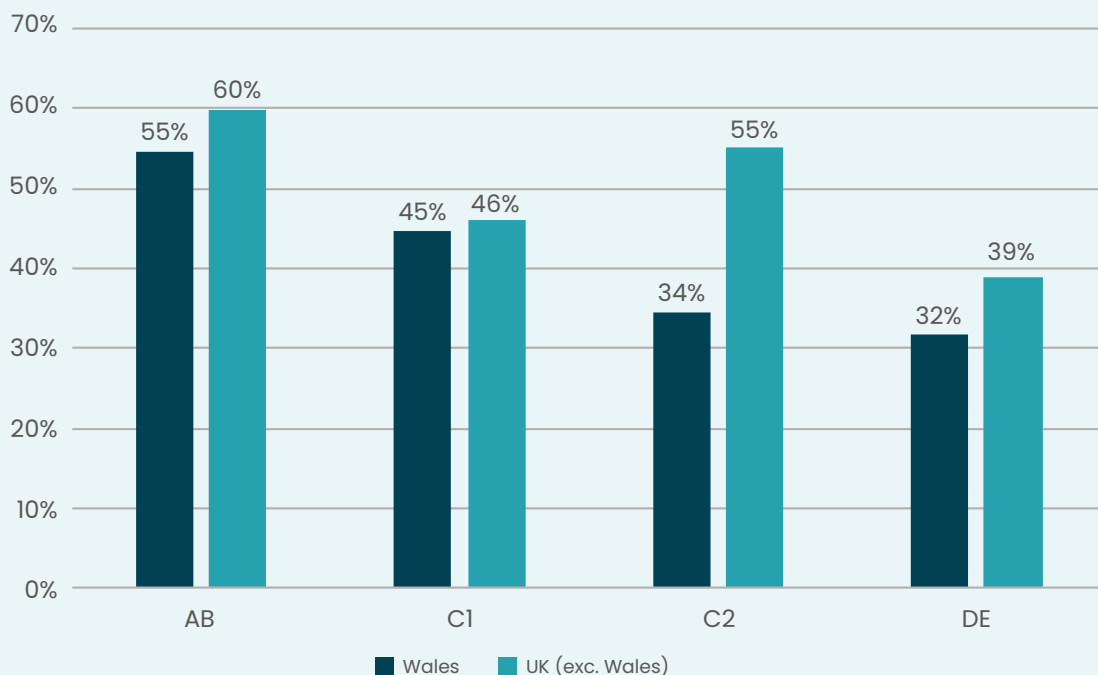
market status, and the age at which respondents completed full-time education are all significant predictors of participation in learning.

With respect to age, participation in Wales was lower in every age cohort although the gap narrowed as the cohorts aged with the larger gaps at younger age cohorts (17-19 where the gap between Wales & UK was 15%). There is a much clearer deterioration of participation by social grade or 'class' in Wales compared to the UK as a whole (see figure 1).

In essence, you're least likely to be participating in adult learning if you left school with few qualifications, are on the margins of the labour market or in low skilled work.

**Figure 1 – participation in learning by social grade**

(AB is upper or middle class, C1 is lower middle class, C2 is skilled working class, DE is working class and low income)





## Overcoming barriers to adult learning

Turning to barriers to learning, across the UK learners are most likely to identify work and time pressures (24%), the cost of learning (16%), lacking confidence to learn (13%), being put off by tests and exams (12%) or feeling too old (12%). While percentages may have increased, the pattern of reported challenges has seen little variation compared to previous surveys. Interestingly, a higher proportion in Wales (14% compared to 10% in the UK as a whole) cited disability or ill-health as a barrier to learning which highlights the overlap with health policy on learning (and employment) outcomes.

Turning this into practical policy action that Medr can pursue is a challenge but could include ensuring provision in Wales is flexible to meet work and time pressures, reducing the costs of learning particularly for those in lower social grades and ensuring the methods of learning are accessible, particularly at lower levels where self-confidence in learning is lower. Crucially, there needs to be a considered effort at awareness raising and promotion amongst disadvantaged groups with positive messaging tackling concerns around engaging with learning and reinforcing its benefits. These would also be important to help Medr meet its duty to promote lifelong learning, as [previous WCPP work has argued](#).

There are likely to be other barriers that can be addressed by Medr beyond the limitations of the data in the Adult Participation in Learning Survey.



It is therefore crucial that in developing its own capacity, Medr is able to generate a strong evidence-base upon which to make decisions on funding and regulation to tackle inequality of opportunity. It must also then put this into action in the way it commissions provision to take effect.

The Welsh Government has a strong policy commitment to lifelong learning with an ambition to create Wales as a 'second chance nation'. The WCPP and ADR Wales reports provides a strong foundation for an evidence-based approach to this and I hope Medr is proactive early on in driving this agenda forward.



# Contextualised admissions: a key to widening participation in tertiary education in Wales



## Vikki Boliver

Vikki Boliver is a Professor of Sociology at Durham University. Her research focuses on social inequalities of access to the most prestigious universities. She is a leading expert on the use of contextual data on the socioeconomic circumstances of prospective university students to inform more equitable admissions decisions.

## Inequality in and prior to tertiary education

**A recent WCPP and ADR Wales report showed that young people in Wales in receipt of free school meals (FSM), that is, from households on a low income, were far less likely to progress to tertiary education in comparison with their non-FSM peers, at rates of 19% and 43% respectively.**

The reasons for this are complex, but chief among them are lower achievement levels at GCSE for FSM pupils as compared to non-FSM pupils which impacts on subsequent rates of pursuing A-level qualifications at upper secondary level (15% vs. 31%) and ultimately achievement of the grades at A-level or in other key stage 5 qualifications that are needed to be eligible, let alone competitive for, entry to tertiary education programmes.

The magnitude of the pre-university attainment gap is evident in data from the National Pupil Database of young people in England and Wales, which shows that the average FSM pupil achieved a GCSE Attainment 8 score of 36–38, roughly equivalent to Cs and

Ds across 8 GCSEs, compared to a score of 50–51 for the average non-FSM pupil, roughly equivalent to Bs and Cs across 8 GCSEs. Similarly, the highest-performing 10 percent of FSM pupils had, by age 19, achieved key stage 5 qualifications with points equivalent to BCC or better at A-level, compared to AAA or better for the highest-performing 10 percent of non-FSM pupils.

Until recently, tertiary education regulators and many providers alike have interpreted the socio-economic gap in pre-university attainment as reflecting intrinsic individual and social group differences in academic ability, and therefore suitability for university. This deficit approach to interpreting the lower pre-university attainment of



socio-economically disadvantaged young people has severely limited the perceived scope for higher education providers to achieve more than the most minimal improvements to the socio-economic diversity of their student intakes. As a consequence, despite millions of pounds being spent annually on widening participation and outreach interventions across the UK for several decades, [progress](#) on diversifying the undergraduate population remained largely stagnant until recently, especially at the most academically selective institutions.

In line with the deficit approach to interpreting the lower pre-university attainment levels of socio-economically disadvantaged applicants, traditionally a fair admissions process has been conceived of as one in which all prospective students are judged impartially against the same appropriately demanding academic criteria. This emphasis on equal treatment, also known as procedural fairness, rests on the mistaken assumption that all individuals have enjoyed equality of opportunity to demonstrate their ability through the formal examinations system

regardless of their socio-economic circumstances or other ascribed (as opposed to achieved) characteristics. However, genuine equality of opportunity to translate ability and effort into academic achievement is more myth than reality in societies characterised by a high degree of socio-economic inequality.

Indeed, evidence abounds that the socio-economic gap in pre-university attainment is rooted far less in individual deficit than in structural inequality. A [study](#) of the attainment trajectories of school pupils in England found that while pupils from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds who were high achievers at age 7 continued to be higher achievers throughout their schooling careers, high achieving 7-year-olds from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds fell steadily down the attainment distribution over time. By age 16, socio-economically disadvantaged pupils who had been high achievers at age 7 had in fact been overtaken by their more advantaged peers whose attainment had been merely average at age 7. This is hardly surprising. Why wouldn't young people with the

most economic, cultural and social capital find it easier to meet university academic entry requirements than their less well-resourced but no less able and hardworking peers?

## **Contextualised admissions: a commitment to equitable opportunity**

Growing recognition of the structural causes of the socio-economic gap in pre-university attainment has prompted a welcome [shift](#) across the UK tertiary education sector away from traditional thinking on fair access to tertiary education as being about admitting only the “brightest and best” regardless of socio-economic circumstances. Instead, regulators and tertiary education providers are increasingly recognising the importance of considering prospective students’ pre-university attainment in light of the socio-economic circumstances in which they were obtained.



**Contextualised admissions policies are more *equitable*, offering reduced academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils, and recognising that formal qualifications are not socially neutral measures of ability and suitability for tertiary education.**

The introduction and expansion of contextualised admissions policies involving reduced academic entry requirements for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants [demonstrates](#) a commitment to genuinely *equitable* opportunity, rather than mere formally equal opportunity, by recognising that formal qualifications are not socially neutral measures of ability and suitability for tertiary education and so must be contextualised. Contextualised admissions practices recognise that fair access to tertiary education cannot be achieved by requiring all applicants to meet the same high academic entry standards regardless of circumstances. Instead, (re)distributive policies and practices are required, which have the explicit aim of achieving a more even and hence more socially just allocation of the valuable resource that is a tertiary level education.

Recent developments in England demonstrate how effective the widespread use of contextualised admissions policies can be, particularly when adopted by the traditionally more academically selective institutions, and especially if undergirded by ambitious widening participation targets set by the higher education regulator. A recent [study](#) of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) submitted to the English regulator, the Office for Students, showed that England’s top-third most academically selective universities had committed to widening participation targets set by the regulator that were more ambitious than ever before. In contrast to Outcome Agreements submitted in previous years to the Office for Students’ predecessor, the Office for Fair Access, these APPs articulated





more structural explanations of socioeconomic inequalities in prior attainment and set out plans to introduce or make bolder use of contextualised admissions policies as a key means of achieving the new targets. Crucially, these APPs indicated that providers were willing to take on more of the responsibility for supporting socioeconomically disadvantaged students to succeed once admitted to the institution.

Early evidence indicates that contextualised admissions policies have had a substantial positive impact on widening participation at England's most academically selective universities. The [ratio](#) of entrants to these institutions from areas with high rates of higher education participation as compared to areas with low HE participation areas declined from 7.9-to-1 in 2015 to 5.6-to-1 in 2021. The ratio of entrants who are non-FSM and FSM has been slower to decline, most likely because FSM has not been the measure of socioeconomic

disadvantage prioritised by the Office for Students. Nevertheless, the [ratio](#) of the rates at which non-FSM and FSM young people entered more selective universities in England diminished from 3.8 to 3.1 over the same period.

### Applying contextualised admissions in Wales

The English case strongly suggests that a similarly substantial step-change in widening participation could be achieved in Wales through the bolder use of contextualised admissions policies, alongside improved support for students' learning at university, underpinned by the setting and monitoring of targets for both widening participation and student success by the Welsh tertiary education regulator. The 2022 Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act has laid down the regulatory framework to make this possible for Wales.

# Widening Participating and Transforming Lives: What Works?



## Ellen Hazelkorn

Professor Ellen Hazelkorn authored the 2016 report which has led to the establishment of Medr. She is Joint Editor, Policy Reviews in Higher Education and Professor Emerita, Technological University Dublin. She is advising the Irish government on its policy: Progressing a Unified Tertiary System for Learning, Skills and Knowledge, and is also currently working with the World Bank, UNESCO, the European Investment Bank and the Portuguese higher education sector.

## The wicked problem of widening participation

Despite years of increasing and widening participation strategies, there is [evidence](#) of widening inequality gaps and growing divergences in educational opportunities and outcomes across countries. In every country where [data](#) is available, participation in higher levels of education continues to be unequal from a social background perspective.

A recent report says Wales experiences 'lower levels of education participation and outcomes amongst young people' than elsewhere in the UK and the participation gap has increased over the years. This is [evidenced](#) by the high and increasing share of young people who are not in education, employment or training in Wales... [and] low levels of higher education participation, with Welsh boys having the lowest levels of higher education participation. This is visible in lower shares of

young people achieving A level or equivalent qualifications, degree level qualifications and lower labour market outcomes for young people in Wales.

Yet, to be able to respond to the ongoing transformational changes brought by the digital and green transitions, Wales will [require](#) more and more people with a least a Level 4-6 QCFW qualification. This is a considerable step [change](#) from the 41.4% of people who do so today. Wales must consider how well prepared the tertiary education system is to meet the tasks set by the Welsh Government for '[A More Equal Wales](#)' and to '[continue](#) and intensify work on widening participation and take steps to ensure a more equitable and excellent system for all.'



## Widening participation and improving outcomes

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) is to be congratulated on calling out the wicked problem of inequality in educational opportunities and outcomes for Medr's attention. So how will the evidence and proposals presented in *Understanding inequity in Tertiary Education in Wales* and *Widening Participation in Tertiary Education* help Medr address these issues?

*Understanding inequity in Tertiary Education in Wales* reconfirms many studies that show inequalities across society are highly correlated with unequal access to education. And, access to higher levels of education is strongly correlated with, inter alia, socio-economic and parental

occupation, race/ethnicity, disability, deprivation and gender, and are firmly embedded/reproduced by societal structures, including education beginning from an early age. To what extent is further education (FE) and higher education (HE) part of the problem or part of the solution?

*Widening Participation in Tertiary Education* compares policies and actions taken by the respective governments and higher education institutions across the four UK nations and the Republic of Ireland. The table below summarises the main initiatives, along with a brief assessment of their effectiveness to date, albeit context always matters.

Policy/Actions	Effectiveness
<b>Widening Participation Plans</b>	Promising – Underpinned through performance funding, but little evaluation has been undertaken.
<b>Learner financial support</b>	Mixed – and the absence of information about or access to financial assistance can be a limiting factor.
<b>Institution level performance funding</b>	May be effective for older institutions and promising for newer institutions but it is open to institutional game-playing if not rigorously monitored
<b>Foundation and access courses, including pathway programmes</b>	Likely effective and the anecdotal evidence is overwhelmingly positive.
<b>Articulation Agreements</b>	Mixed, as it may reinforce socioeconomic divisions if all HE institutions do not participate and can reduce learner choice.
<b>Contextualised admissions or RPL (recognised prior learning)</b>	Modest with good potential, as only some HE institutions have adopted this approach, and interpretation of prior experience can vary considerably across institutions.
<b>Outreach by HEIs to secondary schools</b>	Engagement activities are increasing but their impact is inconclusive.
<b>National awareness campaigns</b>	National campaigns are light-touch and low-cost, and have limited effects on aspirations and actual enrolment.



The most noticeable feature of this study is that all policies have mixed success, both individually and collectively. Poor data and the absence of agreed definitions leading to inadequate evaluation are common problems across all jurisdictions which explains – but doesn't excuse –, knock-on failures by governments and institutions here and internationally.

Widening participation plans are a must-have but they must be set within national targets, be rigorously monitored and have real bite. The Fees and Access Agreements currently operating in Wales are little more than expressions of weak aspirations with no recourse for failure. People criticise performance funding but without such mechanisms, HEIs openly engage in game-playing. Using consistent definitions of key terms like 'equality of opportunity' across Medr will help set challenging and ambitious targets.

The report focuses on widening participation with the focus principally on more people entering higher education/university and places insufficient attention on alternative tertiary education opportunities or on what institutions are doing to support learner success once they get there.



Enrolling learners without ample focus on learner outcomes, progression and completion, and employability is meaningless. It encourages an environment in which learners are prey for predatory behaviour by better-resourced universities and takes the pressure off institutions to ensure all the necessary learner supports are in place. The funding system, of course, is a perverse driver of such actions.

Articulation agreements and educational pathways between further and higher education have become an increasingly common approach to widening participation, with variations internationally on the model. Formalising learning pathways at the national level can provide a coherent system-level approach which goes far beyond bilateral articulation agreements between FE and HE institutions. They enable learners to enrol in institutions nearer their homes – which usually have more flexible delivery approaches conducive to different personal and working arrangements.

But the problem with this overemphasis on academic higher education as the only path to success thus reinforcing a vertically stratified

system. This is despite warnings by the OECD and others that a tertiary degree is not only a university qualification; advanced vocational/higher technical qualifications are needed more than ever. Moreover, access and foundation programmes open the potential for further colonisation of the further and vocational education route by the academic; it may also be a lot more expensive.



**The FE sector must be an equivalent alternative, not second best for those who cannot, or do not wish to, access university. FE and HE must be genuine co-equal partners rather than part of a hierarchical and stratified system. Crucially, Medr must break down its own silos between FE and HE and become true boundary-spanners.**

The FE sector must be an equivalent alternative not second best for those who cannot, or do not wish to, access university. Moreover, Medr – given its remit for research and innovation – should recognise the vital role FE plays in the innovation system, in knowledge diffusion and in raising the overall productive and absorptive capacity in high-tech as well as low-tech sectors.

Insufficient attention also has been given to adult learners. Given the very large proportion of people in the Welsh labour force aged 18–24 years qualified up to Level 3, it is likely

that they will still be working by 2050 and beyond. It is also likely that with changes in the retirement age, the number of people over 60 years active in the labour force will continue to increase. This has huge implications for the composition and diversity of the learner cohort – and for the need for continual upskilling, reskilling and repurposing qualifications for everyone. We need to rethink all learners as lifelong learners.

This is the widening participation agenda of the future – to which serious change is required beginning now. Insufficient demand for the pilot Lifetime Learning Entitlement (LLE) scheme in England well illustrates that financial incentives will do very little to tackle embedded societal and education obstacles to participation without advancing innovative flexible modes of learning and assessment, removing barriers between full- and part-time, introducing new educational opportunities, etc.

This relates to the report's call for greater information about what's available, including financial support. Information deserts contribute massively to inequalities. Overcoming elite capture of the education system requires more than signposting. Inequality starts much earlier in the education system. Personal development and access to good education, training and careers begins in preschool. Another factor is the 'primacy of Sixth Forms and A-level study as pathways to [HE] entry' – hence, the extent to which the 'secondary' system itself reinforces inequalities by tracking students. Along with considering whether to raise the compulsory education age to 18 years, greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring all learners

acquire higher-order cognitive, communication and interpersonal skills, complex problem-solving, creativity, fluency of ideas and active learning alongside specialist knowledge necessary for life and work into the future. These may not be Medr's issues but they impact Medr's responsibilities.



To meet the Welsh Government's goal of creating 'a more flexible tertiary system with learners at the heart of the system, embracing both further and higher education' necessitates empowering Learner Agency – providing an educational roadmap to enable learners of all backgrounds and abilities to customize their route towards a chosen career, into employment and back into the system when the time is right. This is an essential tool rather than a nice-to-have.

## Lessons for Medr

Medr stands on the cusp of history. Many governments are rethinking their tertiary systems, but Medr is already at the starting gates – and the world is watching.

Medr is an important step forward, but it is not sufficient in itself. A single agency has many benefits; it is a one-stop-shop for everyone to have a conversation with a focus on learner success and careers.

But Medr must go further. It must grasp the concept of tertiary as an opportunity to rethink how education and training, and research and innovation works for Welsh society and the economy, and those who are likely to avail of its many services and facilities throughout their lives over the coming decades. FE and HE must be genuine co-equal partners rather than part of a hierarchical and stratified system; this has implications for funding which cannot be allowed to become a dog-fight in a tight-financial situation but rather be strategically aligned with overall objectives for the system. Crucially, Medr must break down its own silos between FE and HE and become true boundary-spanners.

Finally, strong strategic leadership and coordination from Medr is vital. It has the statutory responsibilities to ensure the system meets the policy objectives to widen participation and improve outcomes for all learners regardless of how they enter the system.





## About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Welsh Government, and Cardiff University, the Centre is based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.



## Equity in Tertiary Education in Wales

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