

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Applications by Welsh pupils to Oxford and Cambridge Universities](#), HC 1085

Monday 27 March 2017

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Members present: David T. C. Davies (Chair); Byron Davies; Chris Davies; Glyn Davies; Dr James Davies; Stephen Kinnock; Craig Williams.

Questions 1-47

Witnesses

I: Dr Sam Lucy, Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges, University of Cambridge, and Dr Samina Khan, Director, Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, University of Oxford.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Sam Lucy and Dr Samina Khan.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon, Dr Lucy and Dr Khan. Thank you very much for coming along here this afternoon. Hopefully you have had a good briefing of what we are doing, but this is a fairly informal session. Feel free to answer the questions as you want and enlighten us a bit. We are aiming for about 45 minutes, so if I start to twitch a bit then that might be an indication that we are running a bit short of time.

I have been through the briefings that we have and also Paul Murphy's report, which I am sure you are aware of. What I would like to try to find out is if you could set out for us how many Welsh students applied for Oxford and Cambridge Universities last year and, of those, how successful they were so we can put that on the record. Also when we are dealing with these statistics, are we talking about all pupils who live in Wales or just pupils from state schools in Wales? I was not quite clear from all of the statistics I was reading what was what, so maybe you could clarify that.

Dr Lucy: I can give you both figures.

Chair: Yes, that would be great, thanks.

Dr Lucy: If we are looking at this application round just gone, at Cambridge we had a total of 297 applicants who are resident in Wales. We had 219 applications from those who are at maintained non-selective schools. In both of those groups, either Wales overall or those just at non-selective schools, our offer rate is about 26%, so just over a quarter of all who applied were made offers. That is the round that is still going on, so we have to wait until the summer to see if they have made those conditional offers.

Q2 Chair: That is 26% overall, is it?

Dr Lucy: Overall.

Q3 Chair: How does that break down for the 219 who went to a state school and the 78 to an independent?

Dr Lucy: For that group, 26.13% got an offer. For the group overall, it is 25.6%.

Chair: It is similar then.

Dr Lucy: It is on a par, yes.

Dr Khan: I have data for a complete admission cycle. I have a different year to Dr Lucy. I have the previous year's data, but I can send you the new one afterwards. For 2016 the number of applications from Wales was 426 and that was an increase on the previous year. The number of offers made was 104, which is the important thing for the university and who



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they select. In actual numbers, the offers have gone up over the last four years for Oxford.

Q4 **Chair:** Was that 104 offers to students in state schools in Wales?

Dr Khan: That is all Welsh students. I can give you the state schools in a minute. I can also give you the offer rate for 2016. The offer rate for 2016 for all Welsh students was 24%.

Q5 **Chair:** How does that compare with the UK?

Dr Khan: For England and the UK average, it is 25%.

Q6 **Chair:** So, almost there. I suppose the interesting thing for us would be a breakdown between the state pupils living in Wales and independent school pupils, if you have that.

Dr Khan: I do have that. The offer rate for Welsh state schools is 20% and for Welsh independent schools it is 24%, but there are more students applying from the state sector than from the independent sector in Wales.

Chair: That is very helpful. Thank you very much. Does anyone want to come back on that?

Q7 **Byron Davies:** Could I, Chair? The last set of data you gave us was Welsh state school 20% and independent 24%. How does that compare with the UK?

Dr Khan: The split for state and independent in the UK? The England state offer rate is 23% and independent is 29%.

Byron Davies: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. That was a good question. Stephen, did you want to come in on this point?

Q8 **Stephen Kinnock:** Yes, just on the numbers, Chair. The number of comprehensive pupils getting into Oxbridge has fallen from 96 in 2008 to 76 in 2012, whereas from independent schools over the same period the number has remained pretty much stable; in fact, it has gone up slightly from 28 to 29. Does that reflect your understanding? I am just checking that those numbers are right from the information that we have here.

Dr Lucy: That was in 2012?

Stephen Kinnock: Between 2008 and 2012 the number of pupils getting into Oxbridge from comprehensive schools seems to have dropped quite significantly from 96 to 76, whereas from independent schools it has gone up slightly from 28 to 29.

Dr Lucy: From our perspective, the last four years have seen an upturn. Our acceptance numbers have risen over the course of the period since 2012.

Stephen Kinnock: For comprehensive?



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Dr Lucy: Yes.

Stephen Kinnock: Since 2012?

Dr Lucy: Since 2012, yes.

Stephen Kinnock: Okay. These figures just stop at 2012.

Dr Lucy: Yes, and obviously the last four years has seen an awful lot of activity focusing on increasing the pipeline.

Dr Khan: Likewise for Oxford, since 2012 we have seen an increase in offers being given to state schools. At the moment where it resides, and has for the last two years, is that six out of 10 offers are made to state schools.

Q9 **Glyn Davies:** Is that the amount overall? Up until 2012 you have talked about the position probably deteriorating from our perspective and improving afterwards, for which we do not have the figures. Would the same trend apply across the UK? Would that have improved over the last four years as well?

Dr Lucy: No, because our admissions numbers stay stable. We have made very similar numbers of offers over the last four years.

Q10 **Glyn Davies:** That should be seen as a discouraging trend up until 2012 and perhaps a more encouraging trend since?

Dr Lucy: Yes, I think so.

Q11 **Craig Williams:** Could we look at your application process? Walk us through that and, in particular, what elements differ between your universities and others.

Dr Lucy: I am happy to speak to this. We have been doing all our Oxford and Cambridge student conferences, so I have given this talk many times in the last few days. We have some extra elements to our process, one of which is assessments, usually pre-interview in the case of Oxford—

Dr Khan: Shall I talk about Oxford and if you talk about Cambridge, that probably makes things clearer?

Dr Lucy: Yes. At Cambridge we either ask applicants to take an assessment pre-interview—this year it is on 2 November—or take an at-interview assessment. For some subjects we have the submission of written work and for all subjects an interview for the candidates who are selected for interview.

Dr Khan: For Oxford we have what is called the common framework for admissions. That sets out the principles under which we admit. We also use the SPA policy in terms of fair admissions. Selection is merit based and in a gathered pool. We look at everybody together. No applicant should be disadvantaged or advantaged compared to which college they are applying to. We have standard offers for courses. We also say that



finance should not be a barrier to applying to Oxford, so we do offer bursaries on a needs basis. We have a devolved admission system, so it means the admissions decisions are made by the academic tutors in the colleges. We have an earlier application deadline—ours is 15 October, as it is for Cambridge—for anybody wanting to do medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences.

We have pre-interview admission tests and they take place on about 1 or 2 November. The offer is merit based, so it is based on your results. The whole process is looking at the pool together and the applications are very much focused on the academic ability and the suitability of that person for the course rather than looking for extracurricular activity about sports or whatever else it might be.

- Q12 **Craig Williams:** Thank you for making that clear. Moving on, I am going to ask about the Welsh Government's position. In 2013 the Welsh Government appointed Lord Murphy to be their ambassador to both your universities. Do you know of any other Governments that have done anything similar and can you perhaps comment more broadly on whether it has worked, how it has helped?

Dr Lucy: I personally do not know of any other Governments. You might do.

Dr Khan: In the UK, there is nobody that has quite set up a hub and spoke Seren network similar to what the Welsh have. Other Governments—for example abroad in Singapore and so on—do look at pulling together the best students from their state schools and set up similar communities, but it is quite different. I have not seen examples of that elsewhere in the way the Seren network has been set up.

- Q13 **Craig Williams:** Do you want to comment on it?

Dr Lucy: The Seren network? Yes, I think it is an excellent idea. We have a similar sort of organisation for some of our outreach work in the rest of the UK, which is our HE+ network. It models Seren very closely in the sense of having a hub school that centralises, resources and draws in the pool of talent from surrounding schools. I think it is a really good model and we are using it, from the Cambridge perspective, as the locus in which pretty much all of our outreach work in Wales happens.

- Q14 **Byron Davies:** I am not sure to what extent you can comment on what I am going to ask you. Paul Murphy has said that too many Welsh applicants appear to suffer from a lack of academic self-confidence. He also said the students from the south Wales valleys are five times less likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than students in some of the more affluent English counties. What are your observations on those comments?

Dr Lucy: I am not a great believer in a lack of academic self-confidence, but I think there can be a deterrent effect. By hearing, potentially,



teachers—although I think that is dying away—parents, friends, neighbours talking about it as an unattainable goal, I think that—

Q15 **Byron Davies:** Do you think this a particularly Welsh thing?

Dr Lucy: No, I think it is probably a UK-wide thing. Both Oxford and Cambridge have a sort of mythology that surrounds them that is often not terribly warranted. It can be viewed as something incredibly difficult and not something to attain. That is why we do so much outreach work to try to combat those sorts of views.

Dr Khan: I think there is a lack of confidence from certain students. We observe it right across the UK; it is not just a Welsh issue. We particularly notice it with students who come from schools where there is limited structure or support or help, and there isn't from their home lives either. They do question their ability and I think there is much that can be done with outreach. That is why I think Seren is great because it is normalising very unusual admissions processes or unusual places for those who could aspire to apply.

What Oxford tries to do in our admissions process to help us to identify those who may lack confidence, who have not had the support to apply to a selective university, is use contextual information. We use information on their school. We know if it is a low-performing school and that is flagged on the application process that the selecting tutors will see. We also use postcode information. If it is an area of poor progression to higher education, that gives us an indicator. We also use an indicator that says the person is from a socially and economically disadvantaged area. They are also flagged if they have been in care, and if they have two flags when we are shortlisting for interview and they are at the threshold level, what we tend to do is pop them into the interview pool because we know there might be a lack of confidence or a lack of aspirational support. We give them the opportunity then to shine.

Looking at the national pool of Welsh students—because I have looked at the pool of three-A-plus students from Wales—and the pool from the regions of England who then apply, Wales is fifth out of the 11 for applications to Oxford. There is aspiration and confidence, you could say, and I think initiatives like Seren will help boost that.

Q16 **Chair:** Can I go in a little bit more about the interview and this whole confidence issue? My perception would be that if you have two people who have an equally good academic record but one of them has been to an independent school, quite often—and this I have found in the course of my work—they seem at that age to have a bit more self-confidence and perhaps more of an ability to get through an interview process than somebody who has not had that. I am not making any criticism of this at all. It is a good thing to have that confidence, but for some reason, in my admittedly unscientific view, a lot of independent school students seem to be a little bit more confident when it comes to being interviewed at the age of 18. Is that an unfair assessment on my part or do you pick that up



as well?

Dr Lucy: I think it misinterprets slightly what the interview is trying to do, which is to run them through academic material. All the self-confidence in the world will not help you if you do not actually know the underlying material or you cannot use what you already know to work out something that you have never seen before. I think what can be challenging is a lack of understanding of what the interview is trying to get at and that again is where something like Seren can help because you put on sessions talking about the interviews. Surface polish does not impress interviewers.

Q17 **Chair:** I am just giving you my perceptions and you are very free to put me right here. I might have perceived that you are looking to separate people with good academic qualifications by perhaps asking a few trick questions, as you might get in the big job interview and that sort of thing, but you are not doing that at all? You are just going specifically—

Dr Lucy: No. You are more likely to be asked to sketch a function and then use that function to work something out. As I say, polish is not going to help you there. Knowing your maths will help you a great deal.

Dr Khan: Having been in interviews and interviewed, you can quite easily pick out those who have been well coached and who quickly trip over themselves because they think they are following a formula to get to a right answer. Quite often we are not looking for a right answer. We are looking for those with the mental agility to be able to switch from one idea to another, who are not rigidly sticking to one route. That is very difficult to prepare for.

Q18 **Byron Davies:** You would not agree with Paul Murphy when he says that many Welsh students were put off applying to Oxford and Cambridge due to its perception as an elitist institution?

Dr Lucy: I think it is academically elitist. It is selecting at the very highest levels of attainment and potential. I think it is a great shame if they are put off by a perception that it is socially elitist because that is one of the things that we are trying to make sure does not happen, that it is not social skills or social background that gets you in. It is your academic talent.

Dr Khan: I was part of the very small group who met Paul Murphy when he came to Oxford when he was doing his initial research. We gathered a number of Welsh students who were on undergraduate courses for him to quiz, and one of the things that really did shine through was the reasons why they had applied to Oxford. They could have gone to other very good universities and it really was for the academic content. In particular, some of them were very much driven to apply because of the academic who was there whose particular area of research they were very interested in finding out more about. It concurs with what Dr Lucy was saying.



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Q19 Dr James Davies: We just heard that coaching for interview is not necessarily a useful thing. Having said that, there is a perception that those who have been to a school or a college with a tradition of sending their pupils to leading universities have a head start. To what extent do you think that is true, whether through coaching or otherwise?

Dr Lucy: It is absolutely not about coaching, but I think understanding the sorts of qualities that we are looking for and having a familiarity with the process that you are going to be asked to do can make you a bit more relaxed and feel a little bit more at ease in the process.

The other thing that you should be aware of is that many independent and highly selective schools are quite restrictive about who they will allow to apply. They pick and choose who to encourage to put in applications. I think that can explain some of the disparities between success rates. You are not looking at completely equal fields applying. You are looking at a selected field and a field where perhaps on the maintained side everybody is encouraged to have a go because you never know. There is a sense of selection there as well, and those schools have a great deal of experience of the academic qualities that we are looking for and will encourage those sorts of students to apply to us.

Q20 Dr James Davies: When I was at Cambridge I took part in the Target Schools campaign. Is there a danger that that is self-perpetuating in terms of the communities it targets or do you feel it is a great success?

Dr Lucy: This is the student union Target Schools campaign?

Dr James Davies: It is run by the student union.

Dr Lucy: I think probably since your time—I cannot quite age you—there has been an enormous expansion in the work that the colleges are doing. We have an area links scheme and you have the same. Every school in the UK, not just in Wales, is teamed up with both an Oxford and a Cambridge college. We now have very intensive relationships with all of the schools in our link areas to do this sort of work. It is not the student union going out and targeting particular schools. I think it does still exist but it works now in collaboration with the colleges and the schools liaison officers.

Q21 Dr James Davies: Yes, I checked that it did. Independent schools are less numerous in Wales than elsewhere in the UK. Do you think that is a reason why the number of applications from Wales is lower than some other areas? Are there other factors that we have not discussed so far that you think are relevant for the lower number of applications?

Dr Lucy: From Cambridge's perspective, I do not think the presence of independent schools skews it terribly much. About 25% of applications from Wales come from independent schools, largely one or two of them it has to be said. It is about 30% for the rest of the UK, so it is not a huge imbalance. Quite often they stop at Oxford before they get to Cambridge.



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Dr Khan: Yes, I think geography helps us ever so slightly, which is great. I think it is less about the independent/state split. One of the things that perhaps does not go in the favour of Welsh applicants is that a high proportion of them apply for the most competitive subjects at Oxford compared with English students, and the Northern Ireland students as well. That is where information, advice and guidance on what course they should be applying for, maybe broadening their horizon about the range of options available, would be helpful.

The other thing to say is I think independent schools make much more use of their alumni network. If they have had students who have gone to Oxford and Cambridge, they do tend to bring them back as role models and so on. There is perhaps a lack of that in state schools. It has an enormous impact when young people see somebody who is similar to them, from their own background, who has aspired and achieved. I think that is something worth bearing in mind, in particular for the development of the Seren network.

Q22 **Chair:** If I can come back on one thing, you said that there is no point in coaching towards the interview process because you can see through that. Isn't that exactly what the education hubs are doing within Wales in giving people the experience of what the interview is likely to be?

Dr Lucy: That is familiarisation. That is not coaching. That is taking bright people and explaining what the process is, what the interview is for and making sure they have a realistic sense of what is involved. Coaching is trying to take someone who is not as bright and put some kind of sheen or polish on them to get them through the process. It is that sort of coaching I am talking about.

Dr Khan: There is a lot to be said about getting young people to be able to articulate their thoughts and to debate and discuss at a very early age, not two days before you have been called to an interview at Oxford or Cambridge. Introducing that sort of skill in schools helps them, whether it is for an interview for Oxford or Cambridge or just life in general. Getting them to talk about something that they are very interested in and that is academic is what we mean more than coaching for the interview.

Q23 **Chair:** Is there more of that these days? Without ageing myself, I do not really recall many things like that going on when I was in school. Is that standard now?

Dr Lucy: There seems to be more of it. There has certainly been a growth in the personal research project, whether it is an extended essay or an EPQ or the version that we have within the Welsh Bac. There is the sense of personal research exploration that an awful lot of people are now doing. Talking to people about that project will invariably involve that, but also it is always part of the sessions in the Seren network to be talking about the sorts of academic interests you have with other people who share them, which is a really key thing.



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Dr Khan: I personally think there could be more on that.

- Q24 **Stephen Kinnock:** Just a quick follow-up on this question on the proportion of independent school people going to Oxbridge and comprehensives. UK-wide about 7% of the school population is at an independent school.

Dr Lucy: At 16, yes.

Stephen Kinnock: At 16, yes.

Dr Lucy: The A-level population I think is about 18%.

- Q25 **Stephen Kinnock:** Well, let's go with 18% then. The proportion of undergraduates at Oxbridge from private schools when I was at Cambridge was about 60%—

Dr Lucy: Yes, it is about 63%.

Stephen Kinnock: And about 70% in Oxford.

Dr Lucy: From independent schools?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes.

Dr Lucy: No. Now our undergraduate population is about 62% or 63% state.

- Q26 **Stephen Kinnock:** Okay, 62%, so you have 18% of pupils at A-level and then 62% in Oxbridge?

Dr Lucy: Yes.

Stephen Kinnock: There is obviously a massive disparity between—

Dr Lucy: Yes.

- Q27 **Stephen Kinnock:** Do you think that the aim should be for there to be the same percentage at Oxbridge as there are at independent schools? So, should there be parity, with 18% of students because 18% are the school population?

Dr Lucy: I think you have to look at attainment.

Dr Khan: Yes.

Dr Lucy: We both recruit populations of students who average two and a half A stars at A-level by the time they have finished, and that is despite some differences in our application processes. When you look at the proportion of students who are falling into that band of between two and three A stars at A-level it matches. About 65% or something come from state schools.

Dr Khan: I know that about 33% of the three-A-plus population of the UK is from the independent sector. They are almost overrepresented in that pool of high achievers. What we are recruiting from is that pool, so



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that reflects our make-up of independent and state. At the moment, with Oxford it is roughly 60% to 40% in favour of state.

Q28 **Chair:** Could you just say that again, please? I did not quite get it. You said that if you look at the number of pupils who have three A stars at A-level?

Dr Khan: I said three As.

Chair: Three As at A-level?

Dr Khan: Yes.

Chair: Then the statistics would show what percentage are from state and what from primary schools?

Dr Khan: Roughly, in terms of the independent proportion who make up that three-A-plus, it is about 33%. You have one for two A stars.

Dr Lucy: Yes. It is about 65% once you are into the higher A stars bracket.

Q29 **Chair:** So 65% of people with two A stars are at independent schools?

Dr Lucy: No, they are at state schools.

Q30 **Chair:** That is the proportion roughly that you have in the university. The argument you are making is that you are just drawing—

Dr Lucy: We are not quite there yet. We are still working our way up towards that, but obviously we do not offer all courses. We only offer a particular selection of courses. There may well be students out there who do not wish to apply to either of us because we do not offer the course that they want to do.

Q31 **Chair:** That does bring me neatly to my last question. If I can ask it now, and maybe I will come back to everyone else's. One of the issues I think Paul mentioned in the report, or it might have been in the brief, was about the difference between so-called hard and soft subjects. How important is it for both of you that people are taking history, maths and English, say, rather than—dare I say it—business studies, general studies and dance?

Dr Lucy: Internally in Cambridge we do not talk about hard and soft subjects. That seems to be an invention of somebody else. We talk about people taking appropriate subjects for the course they want to apply for. If I have a student who is applying for English, then drama is an entirely suitable choice, whereas it is not if they are applying for perhaps history or some other sort of course. It is about choosing wisely rather than having a set selection on an approved list. It is about what is appropriate and what is going to prepare you to come and study that subject in a very academic way with lots of essay writing and analysis.



Dr Khan: It is similar at Oxford. There are a few courses where we do stipulate particular A-level requirements. If you are doing medicine, you are required to do chemistry and it is probably advisable you do biology as well. If you are doing anything technology based, then it is best if you have A-level maths. For humanities subjects—take law for example—we do not really stipulate a strong preference for any A-level subject other than perhaps you should have done something that is essay based. In a way, it is picking something that is going to best prepare you to excel at the course that you want to do.

Q32 **Chair:** Okay, I accept that, but aren't there some subjects that are more likely to be applicable and good across the board? I do not want to pick out anything but, for example, we had this A-level in general studies when I was young. I do not know whether it is still going now, but it did not seem to amount to very much, in my view, and I am sorry but I did it so—

Dr Lucy: We have never included that.

Chair: I would say that probably maths would be a much better A-level to have than general studies.

Dr Lucy: I don't think either of us have ever included general studies.

Dr Khan: We do not accept general studies. We make that quite clear in all our literature. We do not accept general studies as an A-level for applying to any of the courses.

Q33 **Chair:** There are some other ones that are a bit ropey, aren't there? I know that if I start mentioning them now I am going to be swamped with e-mails from teachers. I know which ones I have in my mind and which ones I am telling my kids not to bother with.

Dr Lucy: I would say that probably all of them are suitable as a third option for some of our courses.

Dr Khan: Picking up on the drama, I think it is looked on really positively if you want to do English literature, as long as you have an English A-level with that and perhaps another essay-based subject such as history. That is quite a nice combination. I can give you the example of somebody who worked very closely with Paul Murphy on the preparation of the report. She did law and one of her A-levels was drama, and she was accepted to Oxford. What we say is do the A-levels you really enjoy because, after all, you are going to be spending two years doing them, but also select them with a view to what you might want to do at university so you are not ruling yourself out. There is plenty of information, advice and guidance from both universities on that. That is why we hold open days and things like that. We hold lots of teacher events so that we can support young people in what they want to do.

Q34 **Glyn Davies:** Is it appropriate to move on to the Welsh Bac?

Chair: Yes, please.



Glyn Davies: What is your view of the Welsh Bac? I remember when it was first introduced—I was probably a member of the National Assembly for Wales at the time—and there was a division of opinion about whether it was going to be academically rigorous enough to be useful or whether institutions like yours might say that it does not have the credibility it deserves and takes students' attention away from what they should be doing. To be doing the Welsh Bac was seen to have a political direction behind it. Where have we reached with the Welsh Baccalaureate now? What is your attitude towards it?

Dr Khan: All of Oxford's offers are based on three A-levels or equivalent. By that I mean IB and so on. We do not recognise the Welsh Bac as a substitute for one of those A-levels. They have to do the three A-levels, but we say the Welsh Bac Core is a really good vehicle for stretching and challenging yourself outside of your A-levels. There is much you can do through the Welsh Bac, whether it is an EPQ or discussing politics through one of the community subjects that you are doing. For those talented students who really want to go beyond what is happening in their schools, in their classes, in their A-levels, they can use the Welsh Bac Core to do that and to explore so they are stretching themselves. That in a way is really good preparation for the admissions test or the interview and so on.

Q35 **Glyn Davies:** So, in a discussion about the numbers of Welsh pupils and Welsh-based students who have gone through the Welsh system, the Welsh Bac is not really relevant in terms of acquiring access? It is useful to them in their preparation for life and their general education, but it is not—perhaps this is putting it a bit brutally—useful to them in securing access to Oxford and Cambridge?

Dr Lucy: No, but as long as they are doing the A-levels within it—

Glyn Davies: They have to be doing their three A-levels as well?

Dr Lucy: Yes.

Dr Khan: Yes.

Q36 **Glyn Davies:** You can age me if you like, but this is all a little bit beyond my years. Wouldn't Welsh Bac, if it is a realistic course, be taking quite a lot of the time that ought to be focused on a subject that they actually need to secure access?

Dr Lucy: No, because that is what the A-levels are for. I think it is now comparable to what an awful lot of the English students are doing, which is three A-levels plus an EPQ and usually Duke of Edinburgh or something like that. There is an awful lot going on. What we find does characterise a lot of our successful applicants is that they are easily able to cope with a three, sometimes even a four, A-level workload and they do other things as well, and the Welsh Bac is the other things as well. It is not having a deterrent effect. I do not think it is disadvantaging them at all.



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Dr Khan: I do not think it is disadvantaging them provided that they are wanting to use it as an additional vehicle through which they can explore a subject they really want to study at Oxford and Cambridge, which I think is a really good route. One of the things that we encourage some students to do is the EPQ, which is the extended project qualification. Neither university recognises it as an entrance requirement, but it is something they can use to fill out their personal statement in a very positive way. Equally, the Welsh Bac Core can be used for that purpose.

Q37 **Chair:** Following on from that, in your opinion which would be better, four A-levels or three A-levels and a Welsh Bac? Some people do get four A-levels, don't they?

Dr Lucy: Yes. For some of the Cambridge courses that have a very strong mathematical content, if that fourth A-level can be further maths and can be done within the context of the Welsh Bac, that is a positive advantage because it gives you that deeper mathematical preparation. For all of the rest of our courses, there is no advantage in doing four over three. That is another of these myths that circulate around.

Q38 **Chair:** What, so three or four, it doesn't matter?

Dr Lucy: Entirely, and normally we would only make an offer on three of them anyway.

Dr Khan: Likewise at Oxford. Our standard offers are based on three A-levels. If somebody wants to do a fourth A-level it is entirely up to them. We hope they enjoy it and excel at it.

Q39 **Chair:** But you are better off getting three top quality A-levels than, say, four not quite so good marks?

Dr Lucy: Yes, absolutely.

Q40 **Chair:** It does not work on a numbers thing. There is a new Welsh Bac coming out that is supposed to be a bit more rigorous, isn't there? Is that going to be any more use as an A-level?

Dr Khan: The one that I know of is the advanced Welsh Bac that I believe might already be in place. I would need to check on that. That is where the Welsh Core is now graded and receives tariff points. Again, Oxford does not recognise that. It might be useful for other universities who would recognise that.

Dr Lucy: We only make offers on the grades within the A-levels themselves rather than UCAS tariff points. We do not use those.

Q41 **Glyn Davies:** Clearly, we are looking at this because we have this issue. We want to encourage Welsh students to go to Oxford and Cambridge because of the reputation of the two institutions. What sort of recommendations do you think we could make? We are talking to people, talking to you principally. What sort of recommendations would you think would be particularly useful for our Committee to make? I do not want



you to write a report for the Committee, but you would have some ideas about what we could do in Wales to increase those numbers.

Dr Lucy: Support Seren because it is doing a really good job and it is definitely moving things in the right direction. For us, the further maths thing is a real advantage for those particular subjects, things like maths, engineering, physical and natural sciences. If students can be supported to allow further maths, particularly as a fourth alongside maths and two other sciences, that is a fantastic preparation for those courses. I see lots of Welsh students coming through with that, so it clearly is something that can be done within that qualification.

Dr Khan: I would say the hub-and-spoke model of the Seren network is really useful, bringing together large numbers of students so that they feel they are part of a larger community, particularly if they are aspirational and very academically minded—it can be quite lonely, but bringing them together in that community is really positive.

I would also say support the teachers. Bring the teachers on board to recognise the value the two universities have to offer and encourage teachers to tell their students to aspire to Oxford and Cambridge.

I would also say support the evaluation of the Seren network. It has been established and there are now 11 hubs. They have grown up quite organically and I think it is time now to evaluate where they are, what they will be doing next and also find some metric of how to evaluate their impact.

Q42 **Byron Davies:** On that encouragement for teachers, what do you do on outreach to encourage teachers yourselves?

Dr Lucy: We do all the work that goes on through the Seren hubs themselves. We have certain of our colleges who take responsibility for certain bits of Wales. They work very closely with the Seren hubs themselves. We do big Oxford and Cambridge student conferences. There is one in Swansea on Wednesday. I am not sure how many we have booked for that.

Dr Khan: It is usually a good turnout.

Dr Lucy: Yes, probably over 1,000 students are coming along to that at the Liberty Stadium. We put on a full day's programme of subject talks and advice talks.

Q43 **Byron Davies:** You are quite proactive?

Dr Lucy: Yes. There is lots and lots that does go on. There are open days and invitations to students to come to master classes and residentials.

Dr Khan: In addition to the work we do with Cambridge, Oxford does biennial teachers' conferences around the country. Every other year we are in Wales and these are bespoke for teachers. It involve a whole day of information about the admissions process. We quite often put master



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classes on, so we invite our academics to give the latest on X, Y and Z. Quite often we find the independent sector is looking out for them and very quickly sign up to them, but we send the invitations out to the state sector first to encourage them to do it, and then we send out the invitation. We do not tell anybody this, but that is how we do it because we find—

Byron Davies: You just have, I am afraid.

Dr Khan: I would encourage teachers to get involved in those. They are free, we do not charge, and they happen every two years.

The other thing that would be really useful is in the training of teachers, so initial teacher training. I would put something in around careers advice for those who want to go on to higher education and in particular to selective universities. One of the things that we are very keen to do, and have found it difficult to do, is to attend teacher INSET days. In particular our link colleges for Wales would be very keen to go along and support teachers in gathering information on our admissions process or the courses we offer and things like that.

Q44 **Byron Davies:** Thank you. Perhaps you may not be able to answer this, but I am interested in STEM subjects in terms of the breakdown of applicants for sciences/arts. Do you have percentages?

Dr Lucy: I think you do, don't you? My sense is that there are more applicants towards the STEM side than there are to the arts side, but that is just an impression. I would have to look at the breakdown of subjects.

Dr Khan: For Oxford the most popular subject for Welsh students is medicine, followed by physics, and then comes English, but in there is mathematics as well, PPE. I think what happens is if you know of a vocational course you go for it, otherwise you go for a course that relates very much to the A-level you are doing. I find that particularly students from schools where there is not much support for applying to higher education do not know about the wealth of other subjects that are on offer that they may find equally interesting.

Q45 **Chair:** Two quick questions. In the briefing we read through there was mention of the visits to Oxford and Cambridge that pupils from perhaps less well-off backgrounds can take advantage of. I was not quite sure; are they fully funded?

Dr Lucy: Yes.

Q46 **Chair:** What sort of age do they have to be to do those?

Dr Lucy: Most of the Seren work happens with sixth formers, so year 12 is the key thing there. We both have different sets of outreach events, but there are events that are put on for younger students as well.

Q47 **Chair:** May I ask about something that troubles me a bit? Given you have just said that it is very important that they pick the right A-levels in



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order to do these courses, shouldn't there be something going on for pupils before they make that selection? Isn't the 14 to 16 almost as important, if not even more, than the 16 to 18-year-olds?

Dr Khan: If somebody in key stage 4 wanted to come and visit one of the colleges that is linked to Wales, they could arrange that through the college. There is that opportunity to bring them earlier. What I find with younger age groups, so key stage 3, is that schools tend to bring them to the museums. We have fantastic museums that have their own educational programmes and the schools link that with a visit around a college or a lunch in college. There is the opportunity to come earlier and the link college to the different parts of Wales can arrange that. That is available.

The other thing that we have just agreed with the Seren network is the summer school path with Jesus College. Again, that is for sixth formers but it might be something, once we have evaluated it, that we could start at key stage 4 as well.

Dr Lucy: There is work that goes on with key stage 4 through the Seren hubs as well. Certainly, the Cambridge colleges—and I am sure the Oxford colleges—are working with those years 9, 10 and 11. The important thing there is to get the advice right, and it is not just advice for universities like Oxford and Cambridge. It is for any competitive university. It is making sure that you get the right A-level choices in at that stage.

In terms of residential visits, it does tend to make more sense in year 12 once they have decided that they are working at that sort of level and this is somewhere that they would like to aim for. It is when you can start working with them on the more specialist academic side of their subjects because they have narrowed it down by that stage. When you are working with key stage 4, it has to be a little bit more general because people do not quite know which way they want to go. Working in the hubs makes sense at that age group, and then potentially visits to Cambridge in year 12 makes sense for that structure.

Dr Khan: I am an advocate for normalising Oxford as early as possible. One of the ways is just to visit the botanic garden and things like that, and that is equally inspiring.

Chair: We very much appreciate your evidence. We have no further questions. Thank you both very much indeed for coming along this afternoon.