ColegauCymru
CollegesWales

Briefing

The Seren Network – Supporting Wales' Brightest

Background

Established in 2014, the Seren network was the vision of former Secretary of State for Wales, Paul Murphy MP. Prompted by a decline in the number of successful applications made by students in Wales to attend Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the purpose was to provide pupils and teachers with the support they need to ensure more students reach their academic potential and progress to the UK's top universities.

However, the initial aim was later expanded to include support and guidance to the academically brightest A level students to achieve better levels of A level attainment and progress to the UK's leading universities, namely those in the Russell Group/Sutton Trust 30. The objectives of the Seren network are currently considered to encompass supporting the brightest Welsh students' progression into 'good departments' within universities for Higher Education.

The Seren Network Hubs

Initially comprising of three regional pilot hubs, the network has expanded rapidly, and by the start of the 2016-17 academic year, there were 11 hubs. Each hub comprises a partnership of schools and FEIs who draw upon the inputs of leading universities. Each hub received an equal amount of funding (£50k) for their initial two-year delivery period.

In 2015/16 there were 1,529 involved in the program, by 2016-17 this had increased to 2,059. Participants engaged at the hub level varies from around 100 to nearly 300 students.

At the beginning of each academic year the brightest and most applied students are invited to attend their region's hub, based on their fantastic GCSE results.

The 11 Seren Network hubs[1]

1. Flintshire & Wrexham (Coleg Cambria)
2. Swansea (Gower College Swansea)
3. Rhondda Cynon Taff & Merthyr Tydfil (
4. Pembrokeshire & Carmarthenshire
5. EAS Consortia (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport, Torfaen & Monmouthshire)
6. Cardiff
7. Neath Port Talbot, Powys & Bridgend
8. Conwy & Denbighshire
9. Anglesey & Gwynedd

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[1] https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-04/seren-brochure-the-story-so-far.pdf

10. Ceredigion
11. Vale of Glamorgan

Policy context

The Seren Network has been designed and is being delivered within the context of a Welsh Government policy which focuses on raising the global profile of Higher Education in Wales, improving the proportion of graduates who stay in Wales and widening access to and participation in higher education more generally.

One of the fundamental objectives set out in the Welsh Government's 'Learning Country: Vision into Action' is to 'tackle poverty of educational opportunity and raise standards in schools'. Of relevance to the Seren Network are the Welsh Government's plans for raising the level of attainment at GCSE and to narrow the gap in performance across schools. The action plan also sets out the Welsh Government's commitment to supporting the 'needs of Welsh students and enable them to participate in higher education'.

Evaluation Report of the Seren Network – 5 February 2018

A formative and process evaluation of the Seren Network[2] was commissioned to inform decisions about the criteria for young people's participation and the design and delivery of the programme at national and local levels.

OB3 who undertook the review took the view that Seren Network has the potential to make a contribution towards Welsh Government policies of widening access to and participation in Higher Education.

However the initiative, which has been designed to select and support the most academically able students in order to provide them with additional enrichment activities to improve their chances of going to prestigious universities, could be considered to be taking Welsh Government policy in a slightly different direction to existing policies which are primarily focused on widening access to Higher Education amongst disadvantaged students and supporting Higher Education institutions in Wales to become the first choice for students from Wales and beyond. It is also noteworthy that no direct reference is made to the Seren Network within any mainstream Welsh Government educational or Higher Education policies reviewed as part of the evaluation.

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[2] https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-seren-network/?lang=en

Research aims

OB3 Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a formative and process evaluation of the Seren Network to inform decisions about the criteria for young people's participation and the design and delivery of the programme at national and local levels. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

• Assess how each Seren hub is operating to include consideration of engagement criteria, programme costs, participation levels and programme of provision

• Identify the barriers and enablers to delivery for Seren hubs and participants

• Assess the extent to which hub activities contribute to the Seren Network objectives

• Design a methodology and make recommendations for undertaking a final impact evaluation of the programme

Evaluation Conclusions

The evaluation concludes that since its piloting during 2015/16, the Seren Network initiative has been successfully expanded over a relatively short timeframe so as to offer a full programme of pan-Wales provision by the start of the 2017/18 academic year.

A key finding of the evaluation was that there was a common understanding that the purpose of the Seren Network was about providing super-curricular experiences, raising student aspirations, expanding their horizons and encouraging them to consider a wider range and more competitive institutions than would otherwise have been the case. There was less consensus in terms of the 'end game' for participants and the target universities which Seren was focused upon.

A further key finding of the evaluation was that Seren had been established in response to a political drive as opposed to being an initiative which stemmed from Welsh Government policy.

The evaluation found that the Seren Network currently lacks common processes to collect and share participant data and that developing data collection processes and a data sharing agreement was an immediate priority for the initiative.

Very little data was available to evidence the difference made by the Seren Network upon the number of students applying to higher tariff universities due to the fact that 2017/18 represents the first full year of delivery and the absence of any robust counterfactual data.

Participants were of the view that the Seren initiative had been able to make the greatest difference to them in terms of getting them to think more ambitiously about their university choices and raising their aspirations. The majority of surveyed participants also thought that their involvement with the Seren Network would help them prepare a stronger application to universities.

Allocated funding

The evaluation found that Seren hubs are making appropriate use of allocated funding and that a fairly modest amount of annual funding per hub has resulted in significant in-kind investment from partner organisations to the initiative. Whilst the funding was always intended as initial pump-priming funding the feedback suggests that hubs are not well established enough for this funding to be withdrawn at this stage. In addition, hubs do not yet have HEI entry and enrolment data to be able to make any informed decision about the impact of the initiative upon university applications and enrolments at their local authority level.

Contributors involved in the co-ordination of local hubs regarded the initial Welsh Government financial investment as having been instrumental in 'getting the hub off the ground' not least as it enabled them to overcome any financial restrictions which schools and colleges may have faced in getting involved. It was generally recognised that the level of funding provided over the two-year period was modest but nonetheless adequate for most hubs. Indeed, in some cases stakeholders referred to instances of under-spending by a small number of hubs who were not reliant upon the funds to cover coordinator or venue costs.

The two other main funding themes raised during the evaluation related to the amount of funding allocated per hub area and long-term funding requirements. It was observed that whilst the simplistic approach currently adopted to award hubs with equal funds had been appropriate at the outset it was suggested by a few Welsh Government officials and those involved in the running of local hubs that there was a need to refine this for the future to take into account factors such as the number of participants supported across each hub and the additional costs of delivering provision across a large, rural area.

In terms of future funding requirements, contributors involved with local hubs offered a strong argument that a further round of financial support would be required to ensure the long term continuity of Seren provision, particularly in those areas where the hub had only been operational for a year or so. Some concern was expressed that hub activity could disappear in the event of funding being withdrawn at too early a stage in their formation.

Key Recommendations from the report

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Welsh Government continues to provide pump-priming funding to local hubs for at least a four-year period until an impact evaluation can offer robust evidence on the difference being achieved by the initiative.

We would further recommend that the funding awarded by Welsh Government to each hub gives due consideration to:

a. the number of participants supported by each one and b. a rural weighting for those hubs which incur greater travel costs.

For the purposes of calculating funding amounts we would suggest that the number of participants per hub be considered by band size.

We also recommend that Seren hubs implement a common process for capturing the annual value of in-kind contributions made by schools and FEIs to the Seren Network.

Recommendation 12

We recommend as a priority that the Seren Network implements a data sharing agreement and adopts a common participant data capturing approach and reporting process, to include the adoption of standard paperwork to record participant registration details and outcomes

Recommendation 13

We therefore recommend that participation in Seren is recorded as a learning programme within the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR). The advantage of this approach is that the data collected on Seren participants will be covered by the privacy protocols embodied within LLWR.

Colleges and the Seren Network

All Welsh colleges are valuable members of the 11 Seren Hubs around Wales. As large A Level providers, providing from 20 – 45 different A Level options, the Seren network has provided colleges with the network and support to showcase Oxbridge and other Russell Group University opportunities for their high achieving academic learners.

Voluntarily, investing time and resources into the Seren network colleges are looking for a guarantee that the network will continue, and that Welsh Government are committed to ongoing support and funding of the Seren network. Colleges are eager for the Welsh

Government to implement the recommendations made from the OB3 report released earlier this year in February 2018.

More Able and Talented

Colleges are also a part of the More Able and Talented program. The review of More Able and Talented (MAT)[3] provision in Wales published in January 2016 provided an overview of the current situation in the further education (FE) sector and confirmed the sector's commitment to ensuring that MAT learners are supported to meet their potential.

For the purposes of this guidance we define MAT as: 'Learners who demonstrate, or have the potential to demonstrate, exceptional ability and/or talent, in one or more aspects of their learning.'

 "The Welsh pupils and students I have met over the course of my study are as bright as any anywhere. Whatever path they choose in life, our job is to equip them to aim for the stars."
- Oxbridge Ambassador's final report, June 2014

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[3] http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/160110-mat-guidance-for-fe-sector-en.pdf
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