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Data Insight

Should I stay or should I go? Exploring the university choices of Welsh students

Authors: John Poole, Rhys Davies and Katy Huxley

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Summary

This Data Insight examines the characteristics of university entrants who leave Wales for the purposes of education and compares them to those who stay. Those students who leave Wales to attend university have higher levels of educational attainment than those who remain. The Welsh language, deprivation and social class background also play a role, with Welsh speakers and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds being more likely to remain in Wales. However, these effects are small compared to the importance of academic attainment in the choice of where to study.

Background

The last four decades have witnessed the massification of the higher education (HE) system in the UK, with student numbers reaching new records in recent years. For example, in 2024 some 565,000 students had their applications for full-time undergraduate degrees submitted via UCAS accepted. This was compared to 271,000 in 1994 (Bolton, 2025). Over a third of UK 18 year-olds (36%) now enter HE. This period has also witnessed significant changes to the ways in which HE in the UK is funded and how students receive financial support while attending university. The effect of these changes has been to place an increasing financial strain on students and their families. Increasing rates of participation in HE combined with the increasing costs of attendance naturally generates discussions around whether going to university is still worth it.

Today's entrants to HE therefore need to carefully consider if they want to invest in going to university and, if so, which course will be best for them. There are many factors that will influence an individual's choice of university, including the amenities and disamenities associated with a particular location, family or other social ties and lifestyle factors. However, the main influences on the choice to enter university are either career related or related to the subject of study (Purcell et al, 2008; McCulloch, 2014; Walsh et al, 2015). Whilst the reasons for dropping out of university are varied and complex, having made the wrong choice of course or institution are important (Davies and Elias, 2003; Thomas, 2009).

Among prospective students from Wales - as elsewhere - the costs of attending university may encourage some to remain close to home. The increased financial burden of attending university has been demonstrated to constrain the choices of students, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (Callender and Jackson, 2005, 2008). A common strategy used by those concerned by costs is to study in areas where the cost of living is lower or to live near or at the parental home, often limiting the choice of such students to less prestigious institutions (Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

The Futuretrack study of 2005/06 entrants to higher education in the UK found that approximately fifth of those aged 18 years and under when they applied to university lived at home during their period of HE study. Those who were more likely to live at home included females, students with lower UCAS tariff scores, those attending lower entry tariff institutions, those from lower social class backgrounds and those whose parents had not been to university. For students who lived at home, the reputation or level of prestige of the

institution was a less important factor in choice of university than for those who lived away. Students who lived at home were also less likely to have made use of university guides/league tables, university websites or prospectuses, or to have been influenced by the teaching or reputation of the institution (Artess et al, 2014).

Other factors may encourage Welsh students to remain in Wales. Cultural identity, national pride and the Welsh language may discourage some from attending university elsewhere in the UK. The influence of these factors is complex, varying in their relative importance among different groups (Bonner et al, 2024). This Data Insight examines the characteristics of university entrants who leave Wales for the purposes of education and compares them to those who stay. Particular attention is given to understanding the relative importance of prior academic attainment, socio-economic background and Welsh language fluency. This Data Insight outlines some of the benefits of using linked data in understanding the migration patterns of Welsh-domiciled students (those resident in Wales) as they enter HE.

What we did

Through the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank (Lyons et al., 2009), we linked data from the 2011 Census with anonymised administrative records of five successive cohorts (2010/11 to 2014/15) of Key Stage 4 learners within the National Data Collection (NDC)[1]. Children in our first cohort of data would have been aged around 15-16 years old at the time of Census 2011, whilst those in our last cohort would have been around 11-12 years old. Data on A-level attainment is available from the Welsh Examinations Database (WED) for those attending Sixth Forms and from the Lifelong Learning Record for Wales (LLWR) for those who choose to continue their studies at a further education college. We linked these records to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for students who entered university between 2013/14 and 2017/18. For those students who attended university in Wales, higher education institutions (HEIs) provide data on whether they undertook tuition through the medium of Welsh.

The linked dataset contains the following variables that pertain to the Welsh language:

Census Welsh skills

Census 2011 provides information on the Welsh language skills of those living in Wales. It asks for details in four skill domains: speaking, reading, writing and listening. In the case of children, these assessments are likely to be made by a parent. Our data has access to a binary classification which distinguishes between:

- 'No Welsh skills', where the child is not recorded as having any of these skills,
- and 'One or more Welsh skills', where the child is recorded as having at least one of the four skills.

It is therefore important to note that combined Welsh language skills recorded by the Census are broader than being able to speak Welsh. Not all of those recorded as having Welsh skills will necessarily be able speak Welsh.

Parental Welsh speaking skills

Census data also identifies the type of family in the household and whether any adults in that family could speak Welsh. This allows us to distinguish between those children who are part of families where both parents speak Welsh, only one parent speaks Welsh or neither parent speaks Welsh.

Year 11 Welsh fluency

Data collected by schools provides information on pupils' Welsh ability, largely as assessed by their parents or guardians. Using records for pupils as held for Year 11 we can identify whether pupils were reported to be 'Fluent in Welsh', or that they could 'Speak Welsh but not fluently', or if they 'Cannot speak Welsh'.

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[1] The National Data Collection (NDC) is the term given to annual pupil level collection of statutory teacher assessment data in Wales.

Other variables pertinent to our analysis are as follows:

Educational attainment

Data from the NDC includes information on GCSE attainment at Key Stage 4. We allocate pupils to quintiles[2] of GCSE attainment based upon capped point scores. For A-level attainment, we again allocate learners to quintiles of attainment based upon points allocated to grades.

Deprivation

From the census, we were able to capture information on household deprivation across four key dimensions: employment, education, health and disability, and housing. Households are considered deprived if they meet specific criteria within each category. For example, a household is employment deprived if any non-student member is unemployed or long-term sick. For our analysis, we place households into the following categories which denote how many dimensions of deprivation they experience:

- Household not deprived
- Deprived in one dimension
- Deprived in two or more dimensions

Socio-economic background

We have also linked data from Census 2011 to provide additional information on the socio-economic background of learners. Socio-economic background is recorded using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) and is measured with respect to the head of the household (ONS, 2021). We have aggregated the eight NS-SEC Analytic Classes into the following four categories:

- Managerial/Professional
- Intermediate (e.g. administrative and technical roles)
- Small employers/Own account workers (e.g. self-employed)
- Routine/Non-employed

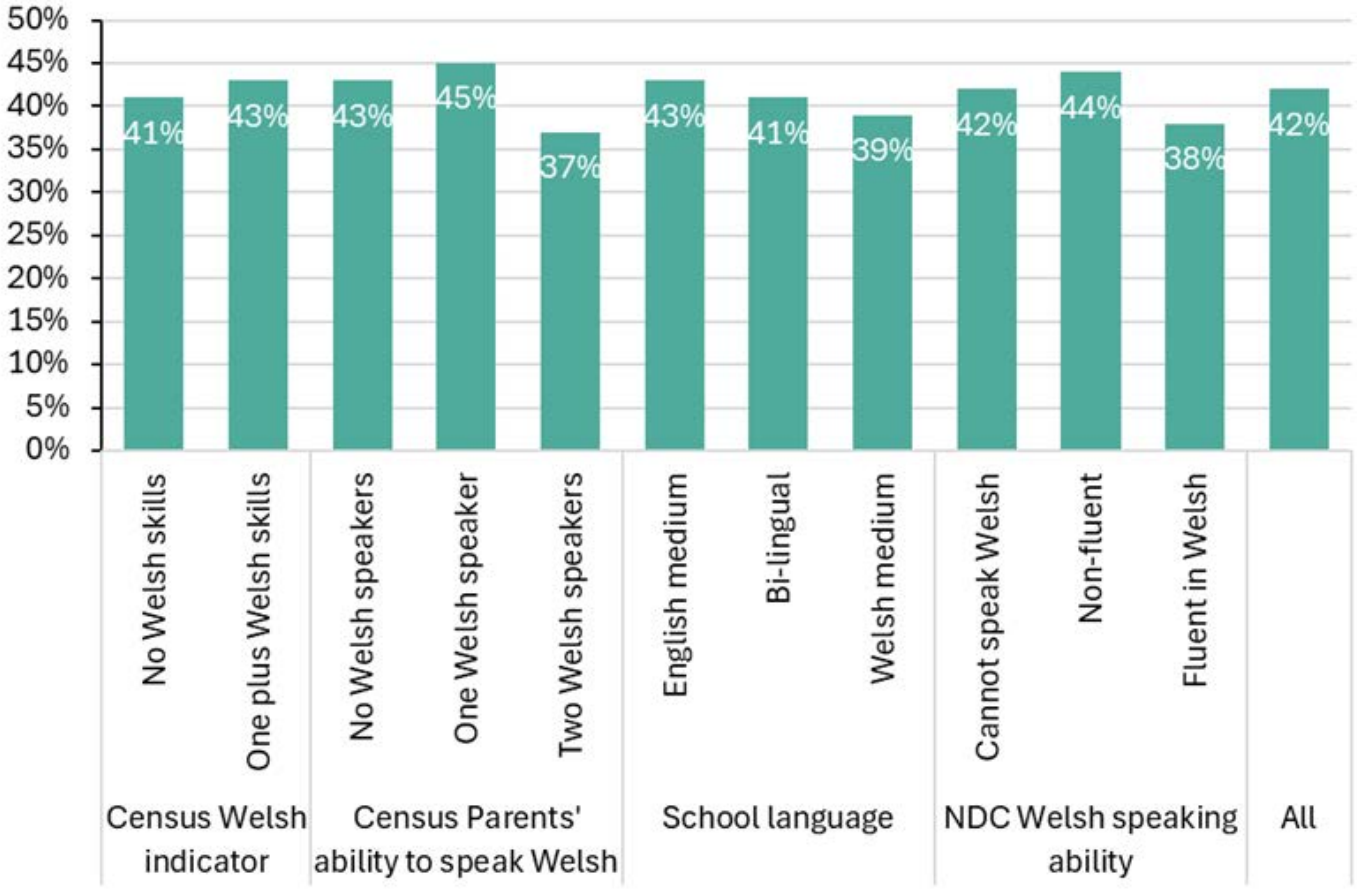
Using this linked dataset, we explore how the Welsh language abilities of children as recorded by schools, their educational attainment, and their socio-economic backgrounds relate to whether they choose to remain in Wales for the purpose of attending university or whether they go elsewhere.

What we found

Overall, 42% of Welsh-domiciled HE undergraduate students chose to study outside of Wales. Those students who were fluent in Welsh (38%) and those who were recorded in the Census as having two Welsh speaking parents (37%) were less likely to leave Wales to attend university (Figure 1). However, these differences are not large and therefore our attention now turns to the relative educational attainment and socio-economic background of those students who chose to remain or leave Wales to attend university.

[2] Quintiles divide pupils into five equal groups based on their attainment ordered from lowest (quintile 1) to highest (quintile 5).

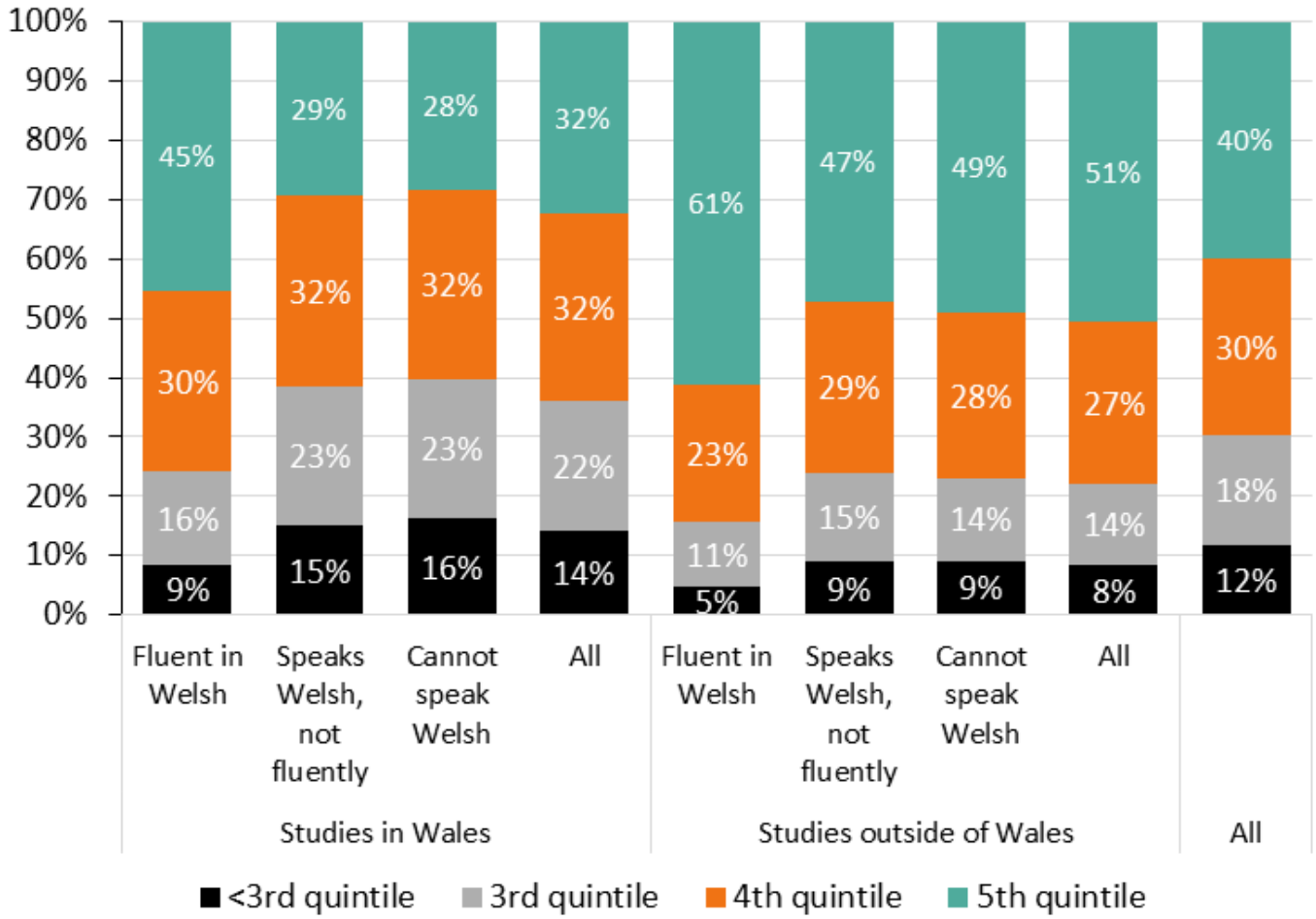
Figure 1: Higher education outside of Wales by Welsh language ability



GCSE Attainment

Analysis by Welsh fluency as recorded by the NDC reveals that among those pupils who go on to attend university, prior levels of academic attainment at GCSE are lower among those who remain in Wales than those who leave. Of the six out of ten Welsh-domiciled HE students who choose to remain in Wales, 32% achieve GCSE points that would place them in the top quintile of GCSE attainment. This is compared to 51% among the four out of ten who choose to leave (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Higher education destinations by NDC fluency in Welsh and GCSE attainment

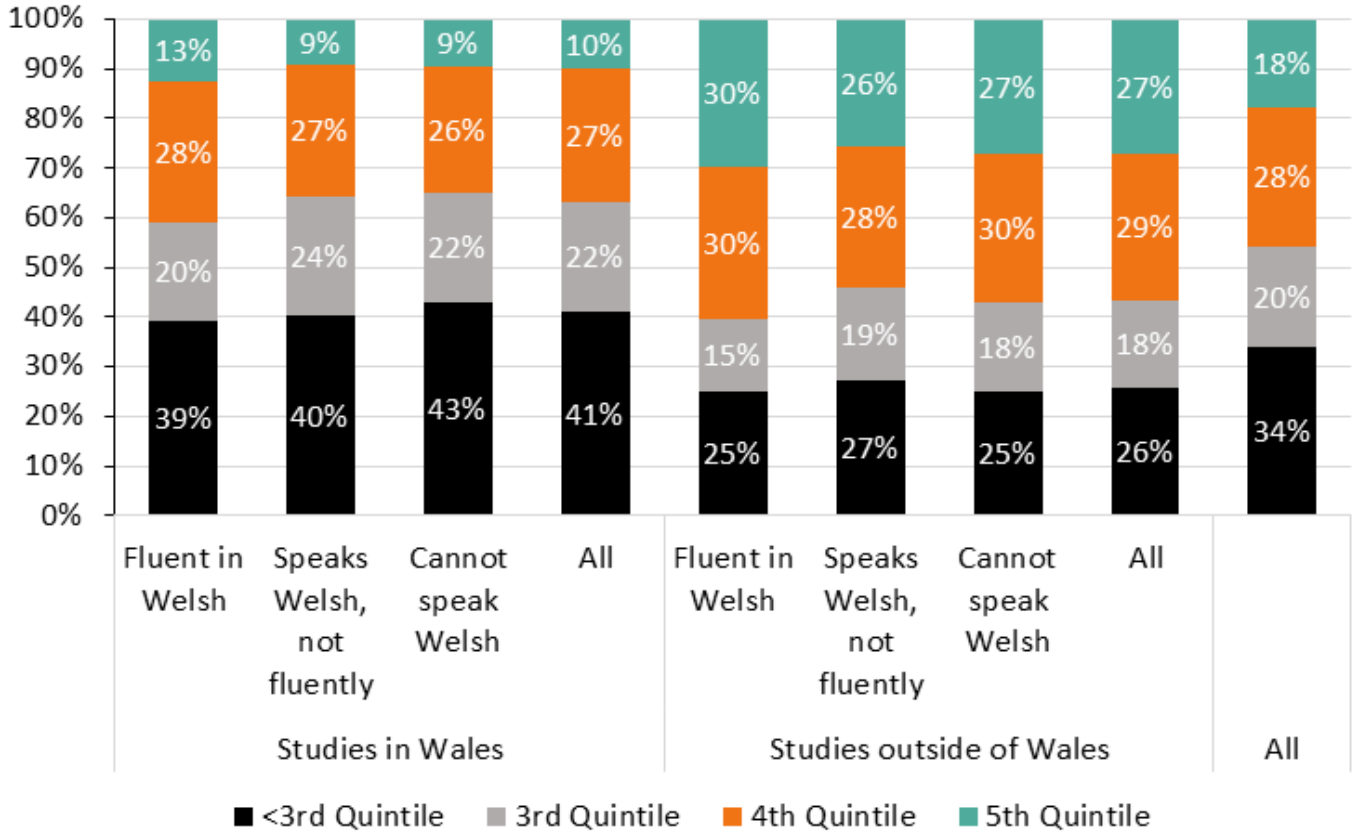


Levels of GCSE attainment are highest among those who are fluent in Welsh but who choose to study outside of Wales, among whom 61% achieve GCSE points that would place them in the top quintile of GCSE attainment.

Levels of GCSE attainment are lowest among those who cannot speak Welsh but choose to remain in Wales for the purpose of attending HE. Among this group, only 28% achieve GCSE points that would place them in the top quintile of GCSE attainment. This is compared to 45% among those who are fluent in Welsh.

Those who attend university are characterized by having gained relatively high GCSE grades. These students are therefore located at the upper end of the GCSE attainment distribution. Not all pupils go on to do A-levels. Among those who subsequently go on to attend university, Figure 3 reveals that the distribution of students with respect to A-level attainment is relatively more even. The most obvious difference is the higher levels of attainment among those students who go on to study outside of Wales. Almost three out of ten students (27%) who go on to study at university outside of Wales come from the top quintile of A-level points. This compares to just 10% of those who study at universities within Wales. This could reflect their attendance at more prestigious universities, entry to which will be dependent upon higher A-level grades

Figure 3: Higher education destinations by NDC fluency in Welsh and A-level attainment



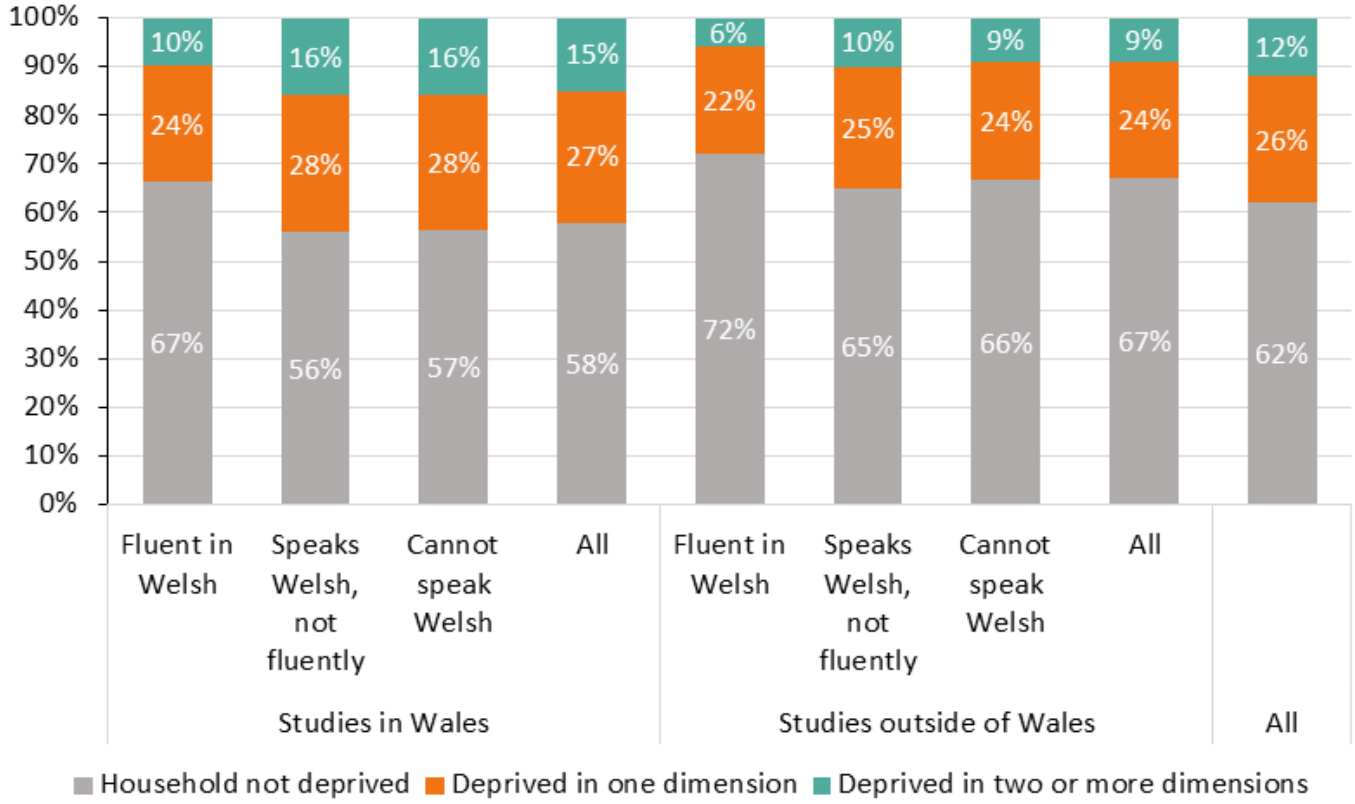
Those who are fluent in Welsh and go on to attend university continue to exhibit higher levels of attainment at A-level. Among fluent Welsh speakers who attend HE, 30% of those who study outside of Wales are located within the top quintile of attainment at A-level. Among those who remain in Wales, 13% are located within the top quintile of A-level attainment. Although marginally higher than other groups, the higher levels of attainment exhibited by Welsh speakers at GCSE do not appear to translate into significantly higher levels of attainment at A-level.

Deprivation

Combined levels of education, employment, health and housing deprivation are higher among students who remain in Wales (see Figure 4). A third of those who study outside of Wales lived in a household that was recorded as being deprived in Census 2011. This figure increases to 42% among those who remain. These observations are consistent with those from more deprived households choosing to remain in Wales to reduce the costs of HE attendance. These differences are however less stark than those associated with A-level attainment.

Combined levels of education, employment, health and housing deprivation are lower among students who are fluent in Welsh (see Figure 4). This is observed among both those students who choose to study in Wales and those who choose to study elsewhere. Levels of deprivation are lowest among fluent Welsh speakers who choose to study outside of Wales, only 28% of whom are deprived in one or more dimensions. However, levels of deprivation appear to be a weaker determinant of the decision to leave Wales than academic attainment.

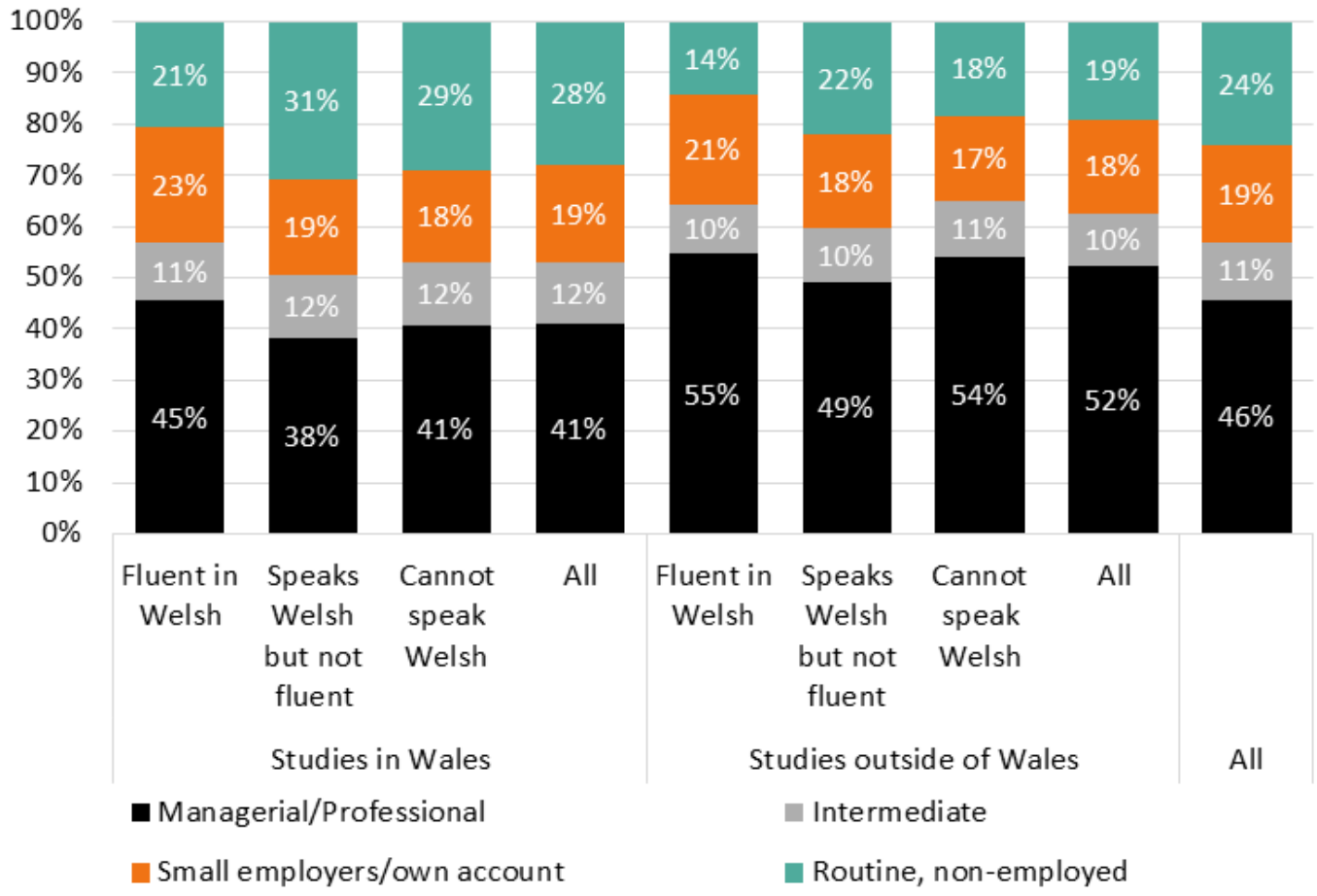
Figure 4: Higher education destinations by NDC fluency in Welsh and Census household deprivation



Socio-economic background

Among those who choose to study outside of Wales, Figure 5 reveals that 19% are from backgrounds where the head of household is either not in work or are employed in a routine occupation. This figure increases to 28% among those who remain in Wales, indicating a higher tendency for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to stay in Wales. Those who are fluent in Welsh are more likely to come from Managerial and Professional backgrounds. This is more apparent among those who choose to remain in Wales. Welsh-speaking students are also more likely to be the children of the self-employed or small employers. This could reflect the relative importance of such businesses in Welsh-speaking areas.

Figure 5: Higher education destinations by NDC fluency in Welsh and Census socio-economic classification



Why it matters

There is an increasing awareness that the ability of localities and regions to attract graduate labour is of crucial importance for local and regional economic performance in terms of creating conditions that support employment, innovation and ultimately economic growth. These issues are particularly pertinent to Wales where the existence of a 'brain drain' has become a focus of debate in the context of Wales's poor economic performance and the strong connections that exist between the Welsh and English labour markets (Bristow et al., 2011).

Set against this however is the clear importance that learners from Wales should attend the university which is best for them irrespective of their background. The tensions between these aims are frequently recognised in policy discourse. These ambitions are endorsed by the Welsh Government's SEREN programme which supports the aspirations and ambitions of pupils in Wales so that they can "fulfil their potential and excel in the future educational goals at the highest level" (Welsh Government, 2025).

Our analysis confirms that those students who leave Wales to attend university do indeed have higher levels of educational attainment than those who remain. The Welsh language, deprivation and social class background also play a role, with Welsh speakers and those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds being more likely to remain in Wales. However, these effects are small compared to the importance of academic attainment in the choice of where to study. Many of Wales's most able students choose to pursue their studies elsewhere in the UK.

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ADR Wales unites specialists from Swansea University Medical School and the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) at Cardiff University with specialist teams within the Welsh Government. The cutting-edge data analysis techniques and research excellence developed, along with the world-renowned SAIL Databank – which is an accredited processor under the 2017 Digital Economy Act (DEA) – allow the delivery of robust, secure and informative research that can inform future policy decisions in Wales. The ADR Wales programme of work is aligned to the priority themes as identified in the Welsh Government's Programme for Government. ADR Wales is part of the Economic and Social Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation) funded ADR UK (grant ES/W012227/1).

For further information please contact
Cathrine.E.Richards@Swansea.ac.uk

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