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# Learners leaving Sixth Form before Year 13: Characteristics and Further Education Enrolment

## Executive Summary

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### 1. Background

- 1.1 The purpose of this study was to provide quantified evidence to examine the extent of both non-completion among post-16 learners attending Sixth Form and of the movement of these learners from Sixth Form to the Further Education (FE) sector.
- 1.2 Using quantitative analysis of administrative data, the study explores the retention and destination of learners who attended Sixth Forms, and in particular, considers the characteristics of learners who did not complete their studies in Sixth Form but were identified within data records as having pursued courses in Further Education (FE) Institutions.
- 1.3 The analysis was based upon two cohorts of learners who were in Year 11, their final year of compulsory education, during 2011/12 and 2012/13 and who subsequently progressed to study in Sixth Forms. In terms of the key outcome measures of interest, the analysis specifically identified:
  - The number and percentage of learners who were recorded by Sixth Forms as having **withdrawn** from learning activities during the course of an academic year, distinguishing between withdrawal during Year 12 and Year 13;
  - The number and percentage of **non-progressing AS/A-level learners** who were observed studying towards AS/A-levels in Sixth Form during Year 12 but who did not continue with their A-level studies in Year 13;

- The proportion of learners identified above who were recorded as attending an FE Institution, either during or following Year 12, and the nature of the new learning activities being followed.

1.4 Withdrawal and non-progression are different phenomena. Withdrawal from Sixth Form can relate to all learners - both A/AS-Level learners and other learners undertaking other types of qualifications. Withdrawal can relate to some or all learning activities being undertaken by the learner and can occur at any point during the academic year. By contrast, the measure of AS/A-level non progression relates to AS/A-level learners only and relates specifically to a Year 12 learner not studying for AS/A-levels in Year 13. AS/A-Level non-progression is not necessarily associated with early withdrawal nor academic failure. An important aim of this report was to quantify the relative size of these groups and the relationship between the two.

## 2. Key findings

The key findings from the research are as follows:

- 2.1 Approximately 45 per cent (around 16,000) of the 34,000-35,000 Year 11 learners were identified as Year 12 Sixth Form learners in the following academic year. Whilst over 90 per cent of these Sixth Form learners undertook A-levels, just under a third of these A-level learners also undertook a vocational qualification. Females, learners recorded as having special educational needs (SEN), those eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those with lower levels of educational attainment were each less likely to have entered Sixth Form.
- 2.2 A number of measures were used to explore the incidence of withdrawal and non-progression (see Table 1.1). Among all Year 12 learners, 4 per cent (approximately 630 learners) were recorded as having withdrawn from *all* learning activities during Year 12 (this figure includes not only A-level learners but learners with any recorded learning activities). The rate of withdrawal among Year 13 learners was lower at 2 per cent (around 230 learners). Males, learners recorded as having SEN during Year 11, those eligible for FSM during Year 11 and those who attended a secondary school that had no post-compulsory provision each exhibited higher rates of withdrawal from Sixth Form. However, statistical analysis revealed that lower GCSE attainment was the most important factor increasing an individual's risk of withdrawing from Sixth Form. Absenteeism during Year 11, particularly persistent absenteeism, was also found to be a significant predictor of withdrawal from Sixth Form. Differences in rates of withdrawal by gender, SEN status and FSM eligibility were not found to be significant after controlling for the other characteristics of these groups. However, those learners recorded as not fluent in Welsh were more likely to have withdrawn compared to fluent Welsh speakers, as were learners who attended schools that did not have Sixth Form provision. There were some concerns about the quality of data on withdrawal, due to some uncertainties about recording practices in Sixth Forms and to the lack of historical data for use in validation.
- 2.3 Approximately 20 per cent (around 2,600) of Year 12 A/AS-level learners were classified as non-progressors who were not observed to be doing A-levels in Sixth Form during Year 13. These

learners were not always recorded as having withdrawn from their studies. Whilst 20 per cent of A-level learners were not seen to be recorded in Year 13, only 6 per cent (around 800) of Year 12 A-level learners were recorded as having withdrawn in Year 12. Non-progression among AS/A-level learners *following the completion* of Year 12 was therefore more common than the withdrawal of such learners *during* Year 12.

- 2.4 Males, learners recorded as having SEN during Year 11, those eligible for FSM during Year 11, learners with lower levels of attainment at GCSE or equivalent, those with high levels of absenteeism at Year 11 and those that attended a secondary school that had no post-compulsory provision each exhibited higher rates of A-level non-progression. Low levels of educational attainment at GCSE were demonstrated to be the most important factor in contributing to an increased likelihood of non-progression among A-level learners between Year 12 and Year 13. However, unlike withdrawal during the year, both males and those who were eligible for FSM during Year 11 were less likely to continue with A-levels in Year 13 when taking attainment levels into account. For example, a male learner, regardless of GCSE results, was more likely not to progress from AS-level in Year 12 to A-level in Year 13.
- 2.5 Among non-progressing A-level learners, approximately 50 per cent (around 1,300) were identified as having attended an FE Institution in the same or following year. Those withdrawing from Sixth Form during Year 12 entered FE more quickly than non-progressing A/AS level learners. Nearly 40 per cent of non-progressing learners identified as moving to an FE Institution were undertaking all learning activities below Level 3 at FE Institutions. These figures were approximately 10 per cent higher for learners who withdrew from Sixth Form during the year, but lower for learners leaving sixth form who did not commence FE studies until year 13.
- 2.6 Among non-progressing A/AS-level learners, a subsequent move to FE was less likely to occur amongst those recorded as having SEN, those eligible for FSM whilst in Year 11, those with lower point scores at GCSE or equivalent, and those with higher absentee rates. In terms of school type, non-progressing learners who at Year 11 attended a school with Sixth Form provision were less likely to transfer to FE compared to those learners who attended a school with no Sixth Form provision.
- 2.7 Non-progressors from Sixth Form who were recorded as fluent in Welsh were more likely to transfer to FE than those who could not speak Welsh and slightly more likely than those that could speak some Welsh.
- 2.8 The key findings indicate that discontinuing their A/AS-level programmes of study, and discontinuing study in Sixth Form altogether, are disrupted pathways that affected a significant number of learners across Wales. Whilst some learners' transitions from Sixth Form may have been smooth and/or planned, it is likely that others changed direction because the subjects or institution chosen, the level attempted, or some other decision taken at the end of Year 11 may have been sub-optimal. Whilst discontinuing Sixth Form may be to the ultimate benefit of these

learners, for many there may have been economic, emotional and/or social costs associated with such decisions.

- 2.9 This study has revealed characteristics that make discontinuation more likely. The significance of lower levels of academic attainment as a predictor of non-completion highlights the importance of learners embarking on programmes of learning that are commensurate with their academic abilities. However, increased likelihood of discontinuation among learners who attended a Sixth Form that was not attached to their secondary school also highlights the potential importance of the additional support that may be required by some learners to help them sustain their participation.

### 3. Recommendations

- 3.1 The robustness of the analysis for this study is clearly dependent upon the accuracy with which learner status is recorded within the administrative data. Where it has been possible, we have sought to examine the consistency of this data. However, **the consistency with which Sixth Forms record the completion status of Year 12 learners should be investigated, and where inconsistencies are found, they should be addressed.** This is particularly important if data are to be used to make comparisons between schools or Local Authorities.
- 3.2 Despite concerns regarding data quality, many of the findings in the report appear to be intuitive, with characteristics such as low levels of attainment at GCSE or high levels of absenteeism during Year 11 being associated with higher rates of withdrawal and non-progression within Sixth Forms. This study has been successful in establishing and measuring these phenomena, but not to explore their causes. To this end, **further research should be undertaken with learners to investigate the circumstances and influences surrounding their withdrawal, non-completion or non-progression in Sixth Form and their participation in Further Education courses or other routes.** Voluntary surveys of such groups of learners are unlikely to yield good rates of response. The responses to such surveys might also be subject to response bias, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions as to the underlying reasons for withdrawal. We would therefore recommend a programme of qualitative research conducted with a number of different groups including: learners, tutors, other Sixth Form staff, Year 11 staff responsible for guidance, careers advisors and parents to investigate the complex reasons underlying withdrawal from Sixth Form. It would be important to understand the range of local provision that is available and how this impacts on learner decisions.

- 3.3 There are also further possibilities in terms of statistical analysis that may help to shed further light on these issues through data linkage. **Data linkage to other sources of information held about Welsh learners could further enhance our understanding as to the determinants of withdrawal and non-completion at Sixth Form.** For example, links to Census data would provide a far more detailed understanding of the socio-economic background of these learners than that which can be inferred from FSM status.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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