# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Seren Network Formative Process Evaluation** |
| **DATE** | **6th February 2018** |
| **BY** | **Kirsty Williams, Cabinet Secretary for Education** |

Today has seen the publication of the evaluation of the  Seren Network and I am taking this opportunity to provide you with further supporting information, and to set out my initial response to the recommendations put forward in the evaluation.

The formative evaluation of the Seren Network provides us with a set of 15 recommendations which the Welsh Government welcomes and which will be used to shape the future development of the programme.  Progress has already been made in responding to a number of these recommendations, with outstanding matters to be addressed in partnership with the Seren Network coordinators and partner organisations.

The Seren Network seeks to engage young people who have the aspiration and academic excellence required to pursue highly competitive academic courses of higher education. Entry requirements for Higher Education courses at leading universities demand the highest academic standards to be achieved. Moreover, when considering which young people should be granted places on more highly competitive courses, admissions departments within Universities are looking to see evidence that applicants have a genuine passion for their subject and the resilience needed to make a success of the university experience.

Since there are many high quality and competitive courses at different universities right across the UK and beyond,  the Seren Network does not limit participation only to those young people who aspire to study at a narrow list of defined institutions (such as Oxford and Cambridge or Sutton Trust 30 or Russell Group Universities).

The Seren Network starts with the learner, through stimulating and encouraging their aspiration to apply for high tariff and/or highly competitive course and focuses on supporting this aspiration -  irrespective of which university or course they ultimately end up applying for.  We do expect the work of the Seren Network to impact on the proportion of Welsh domiciled learners attending leading institutions and believe encouraging Wales’ academically brightest to reach their academic potential is in the long-term interests of Wales and our economy. With that in mind I will shortly be setting out my proposals for identifying and nurturing our most able learners, which include consideration of the important role Seren plays in a wider network of support and challenge.

In a fast moving and global marketplace for higher education it would be wrong to start with a closed list of courses or universities even if such listings will inevitably play a part in helping us understand the wider impact of the project.

There are three key strands to the work of the network which the evaluation activity will help us further refine and improve upon:

1. Seren aims to stimulate young people’s investment into supra-curricular activities. For a young person seeking to access a place at a leading university or on a highly competitive course, being able to evidence and demonstrate wider subject engagement and reading is vital and can translate into a powerful competitive advantage. The Seren Network provides masterclasses and other enrichment opportunities which are designed to stimulate participants own further study and engagement beyond the confines of the curriculum. Very intentionally Seren does not set out to provide a complete supra-curricular solution. Young people have to develop and grow their own passion for their chosen fields of study, and Seren is there to support this.
2. Seren seeks to provide information, advice and support both to young people and to professionals within the schools and colleges where they are based through a genuine collaborative efforts For young people, this means equipping them to navigate what can be complex and demanding application procedures, and understand what makes a strong application and how to go about presenting themselves to their prospective HE institutions. Certain courses and institutions require specific additional examinations, interviews and assessments. Through the work of the Seren Network we aim to ensure young people get timely support, encouragement and advice relevant to these processes.  For staff within schools and colleges, this means understanding how to guide young people and maximise the impact of their own professional input (such as references). Collaboration across hubs on a regional basis has been an effective way of recruiting students to attend subject specific masterclasses and preparatory sessions for interviews and entrance exams. This has resulted in increased number of students attending the sessions, which has been welcomed by the university partners who often deliver these sessions.
3. Seren seeks to raise aspirations and widen horizons. Already through the work of the Seren Network we have seen young people growing in confidence and changing how they feel, both about the prospect of applying to competitive courses at a range of universities and about their own ability and suitability to apply to such courses. In doing so, this has opened up life-changing opportunities across the World.

The evaluation of Seren can be found at

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-seren-network/?lang=en>

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-seren-network/?skip=1&lang=cy>

I welcome the evaluation report -  the progress and achievements it highlights as well as the challenges it poses.  While the partners who make up the Seren Network will be considering how best to respond to the issues raised in the coming weeks, I am able to provide some further information and direction at this time.

At the outset it is important to recognise that the Seren Network has only been operating on a fully national basis since November 2016 - and the 2017/18 is the first full academic year where a cohort of participants from across Wales is fully supported from the beginning of year 12. I wish to commend the partners who come together in the Seren Network for what has been achieved in such a short period of time.

It is a testament to the collaborative partnership including the schools, colleges, unitary authorities and universities in Wales, the UK and beyond, and to the young people who have come together within the Seren Network, that the evaluation reports that Seren makes a positive contribution to raising aspirations, boosting confidence and encouraging students to think more ambitiously about their university choices. Furthermore, while the evaluation points to areas for future development, we should not lose sight of the fact that this evaluation concludes that Seren has been of value in helping participants make better decisions about their preferred university course and making them realise the importance of reading widely around their subject area.

A growing number of universities are finding the Seren Network a great way to engage and target high achieving students directly. It also supports many of their widening participation targets. Creating the Seren Network is stimulating new and exciting opportunities for many more young people to interact with HEIs and this is to be welcomed and further strengthened. Welsh HEIs in particular make a vital contribution to the work of the Seren Network and, as recommended by the evaluation, I believe that this contribution needs to be more fully recognised. To this end, I will be writing to the Vice Chancellors of those Welsh HEIs who are actively contributing to the success of Seren to recognise their contribution as valued delivery partners going forward.

Each of the 11 Seren Hubs has, to date, defined their own criteria for participation in network activities. This flexibility has been a strength and has allowed a range of approaches to be developed and trialled. As the work of the Seren Network is now becoming more established I recognise the need for greater consistency in approach and, to that end, have asked that a common approach be adopted from September 2018 onward. Similarly, I am pleased to report that the Hubs themselves have brought forward proposals for a ‘minimum offer’ to young people that I believe will be of value in shaping effective and engaging programmes for all the young people who are invited to be part of the Seren Network., regardless of their location.

In developing the Seren Network we have become increasingly aware that some of the advice and information made available to participants has a relevance to wider groups of learners. I believe that digital services can, and should, play an important role in opening up access to the information and advice currently targeted through the Seren Network. To this end I have asked Careers Wales to engage with the Seren Network with a view to providing universal access to key resources, information and advice.

One of the foundations of the Seren Network was to form the collaborative partnership approach. This has been invaluable in developing the programme and in developing the opportunities for the students to attend stretch and challenge sessions, the national conference, university visits, summer schools and much more. The calibre and potential of the Welsh students is being recognised globally through the Seren Network, and I’m delighted to be supporting a new partnership between Yale and Seren in Wales. We hope that this will result in a number of Welsh students participating in the Yale Young Global Scholars Summer Programme this summer – a potentially life changing experience.

The progress achieved to date by the Seren Network gives me confidence that this programme should be maintained and encouraged to continue developing, innovating, and strengthening links with our wider policies and programmes.

The Seren Network is becoming an increasingly valued and important part of the support landscape in Wales and I believe that this evaluation gives a timely challenge, and valuable steer to guide future policy and the ongoing evolution of the Seren Network’s activities and partnerships.  I trust that this statement has helped you understand the work of the Seren Network and that you will join with me in celebrating what has been achieved by the young people, schools, colleges, unitary authorities, universities and other partners through the work of the Seren Network to date.