

REVIVAL IN THE VALLEY

The legacy of *Y Wladfa* (The Colony): The recent revival of Welsh culture in the Chubut valley, Argentina

150 years ago this July the ship *Mimosa* arrived on the shores of southern Argentina. It carried approximately 150 Welsh men, women and children, who became the first permanent settlers of the Chubut province. This year's sesquicentennial anniversary of *Y Wladfa* has sparked a year of celebrations in both Wales and Argentina, strengthening once more their transatlantic link. Prior to 1965 this link had found itself greatly weakened, but the centennial year stimulated a slow resurgence and revival of Welsh culture, which has been reassured by the continuing efforts of the Welsh Language Project since the late nineties.

The three main objectives were:

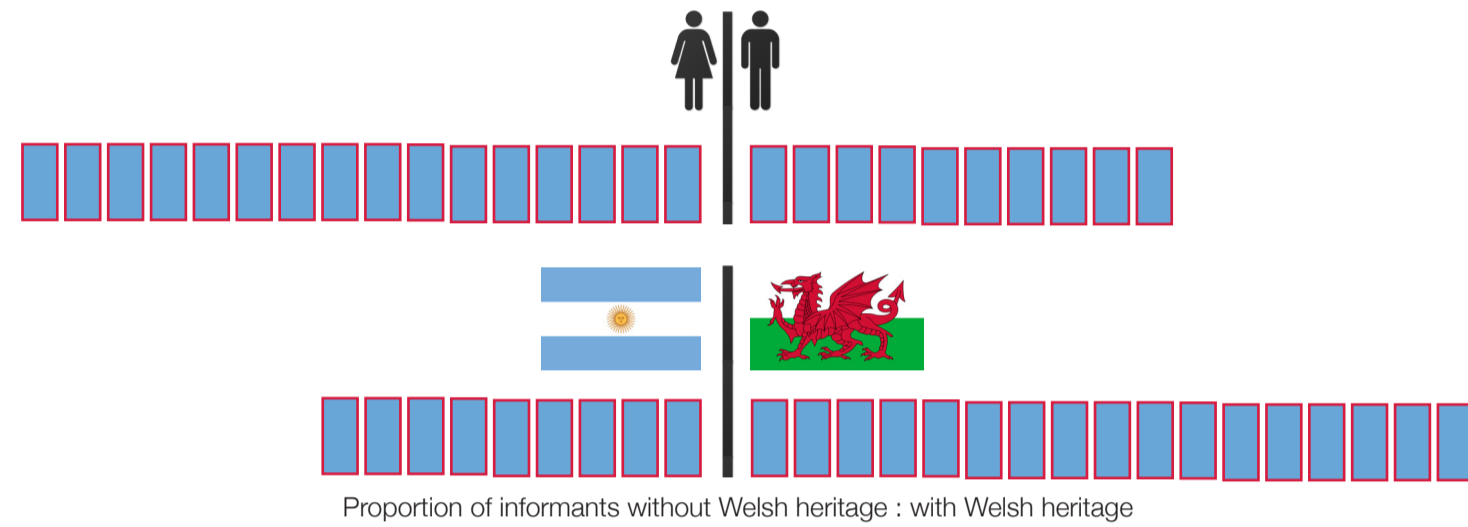
- To gain first hand understanding of the dynamics that exist between the Welsh and Argentine cultures in the Valley
- To assess the role of educational directives in the strengthening of Welsh culture
- To compare the role of formal and informal institutions in maintaining the Welsh culture



Eisteddfod: Traditional Welsh literary and musical festival.
Ysgol yr Hendre: Bilingual primary school in Trelew.
Coleg Camwy: Secondary school in Gaiman, which teaches Welsh as a foreign language.
Escuela Gymraeg y Gaiman (el jardín): Bilingual nursery school in Gaiman.
Welsh Language Project (WLP): A British Council project that sends 3 teachers from Wales to Chubut each year, funds local tutors and sponsors Welsh activities.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

These statistics are the result of 26 questionnaires that I circulated during my trip to the valley; specifically at a Welsh choir practice, a Welsh dance class and a Welsh language class. The informants therefore have some connection to the Welsh community.



Q: How important is 'Welshness' for the identity of the Chubut province? (1= Not at all important and 5= Very important)

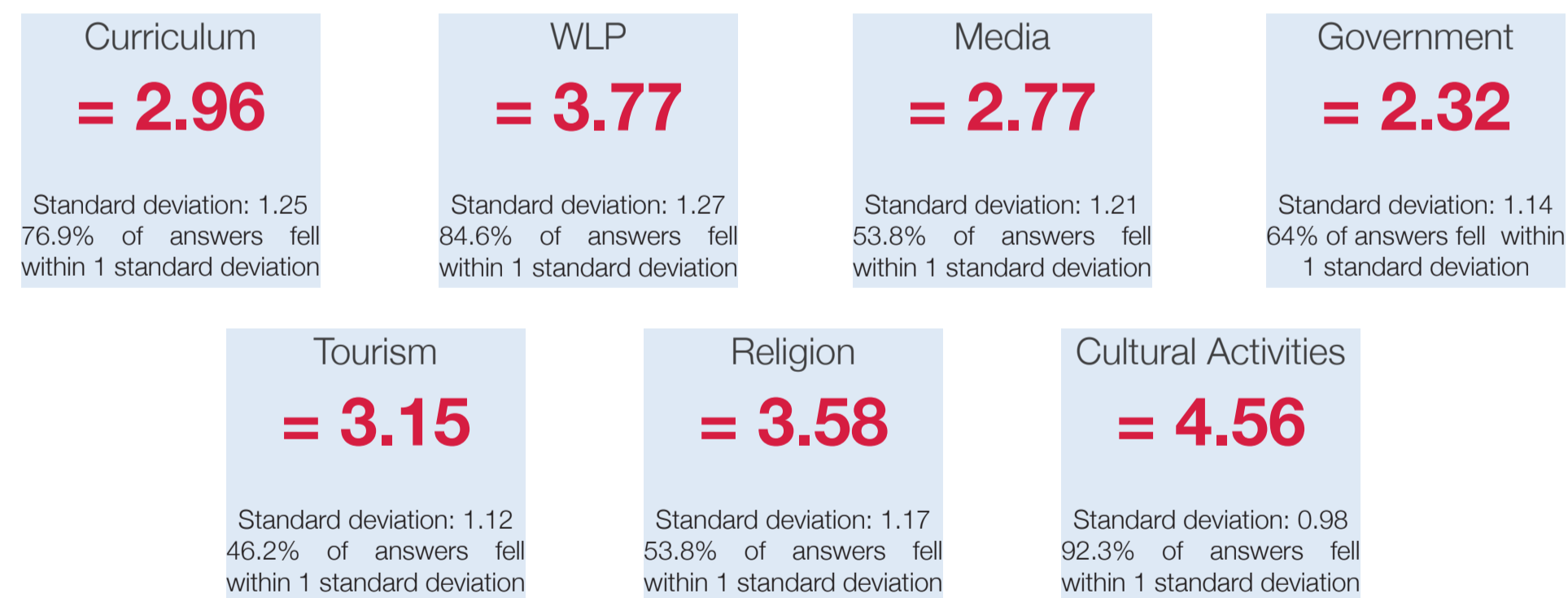
= 4.62

Standard deviation: 0.7
 88.5% of answers fell within 1 standard deviation

¿Cuán importante es la identidad galesa para el valle del Chubut? (1= Para nada importante and 5= Muy importante)

Q: To what extent do you think that Welsh language and culture is supported and promoted by the following? (1 = 'Not at all supports' and 5 = 'Very strongly supports')

¿En qué medida considera usted que el idioma galés y la cultura galesa reciben apoyo de la siguiente entidades? (1 = 'Para nada apoya' y 5= 'Apoya muy fuerte')



The above information represents only a small section of the questionnaire but in my opinion these are the most valuable results. Welsh culture and language in the Chubut valley is perceived to be most supported by the *Eisteddfod* and Welsh cultural activities, as it scored an average of 4.56 out of 5. Likewise, 92.3% of answers fell within 1 standard deviation.

The Welsh Language Project is the second highest ranked entity for providing support and promotion for Welsh culture and language as it was rated an average of 3.77 out of 5 with 84.6% of answers falling within 1 standard deviation.

INTERVIEWS

“Students come here [to Coleg Camwy] and have to study Welsh [as a foreign language] for 3 years. Then they choose to continue with either Welsh or French. And most actually choose Welsh.”

Esyllt Roberts de Lewis has lived and taught in Gaiman for 11 years, but is originally from Pwllheli in the Llŷn Peninsula, Wales.

“In 1965 the *Eisteddfod* restarted...Everybody considers that there was a revival in 1965 because people who... for different reasons didn't take part [in Welsh activities] suddenly had an interest.”

Gonzalez (80), a Welsh-Argentine who was raised in a Welsh speaking household, talking about the importance of the centennial year.

“The mornings are total Welsh immersion and then the rest is in Castellano [Spanish]... In order to be considered an official authorised school we must teach in both languages.”

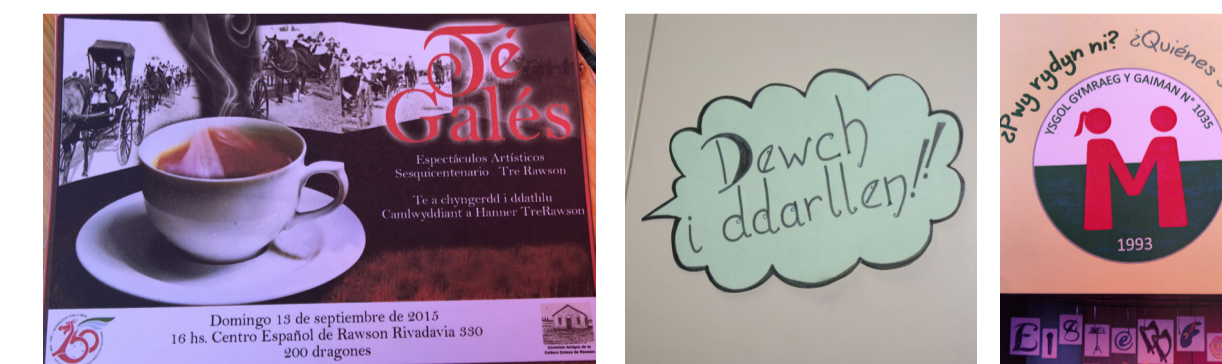
Rebecca White, a fluent Welsh speaker who learned as an adult, is the headmistress of Ysgol Gymraeg y Gaiman No. 1035.

“Since I was 8 years old we attended Welsh chapel, and when I was 11 or 12 Welsh classes were promoted there. My mother had a close friend who was Welsh and she insisted that my sister and I should attend.”

Virginia Steinkamp (21) is from Trelew and has no Welsh heritage but is a fluent Welsh speaker. She has visited Wales to do two summer courses with a grant from the British Council.



“When [the Welsh tourists] come and speak in Welsh, and I respond in Welsh, they often say: “Its true! Its not a myth”... They almost don't believe it until they see it.”



left: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Provincia_del_Chubut_\(Argentina\).svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c0/Provincia_del_Chubut_(Argentina).svg)

ARCHIVAL

Figure 1 shows a generally steady increase in numbers particularly in the last 6 years, with 2014 having the highest number of students attending Welsh classes ever (973).

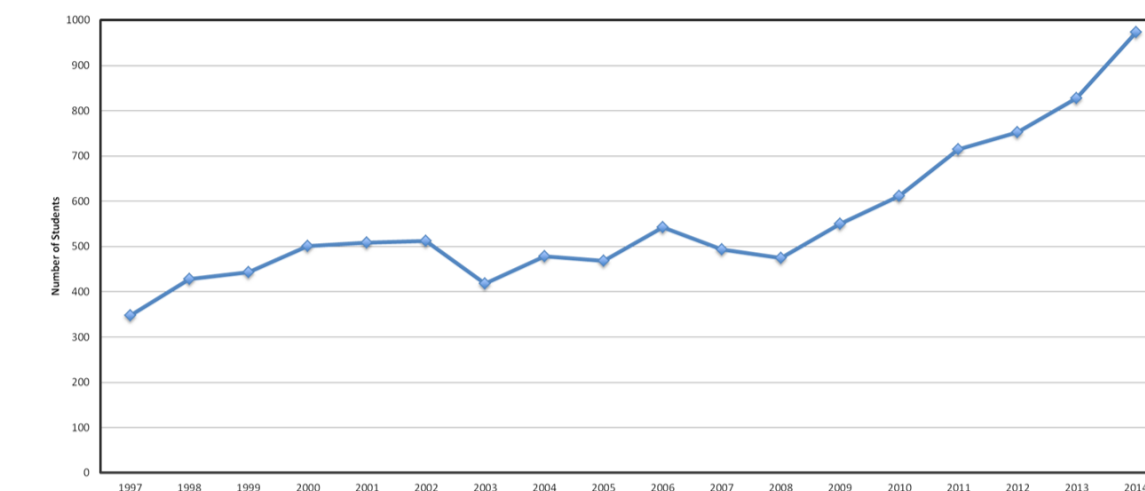


Fig 1. Number of students participating in Welsh Classes in the Chubut Valley

Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of students learning Welsh are under the age of 18.

The 2012 report did not provide a breakdown of students' age groups so has been left blank. Likewise, there were anomalies in some figures for the years 2007, 2008 and 2011.

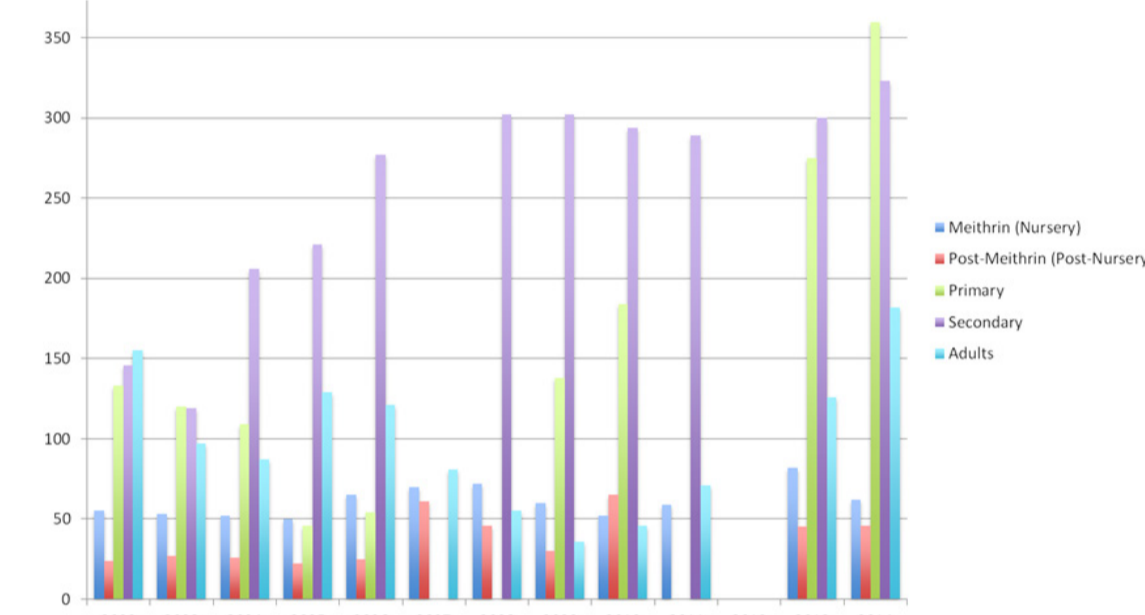


Fig 2. Number of students participating in the Chubut Valley according to age

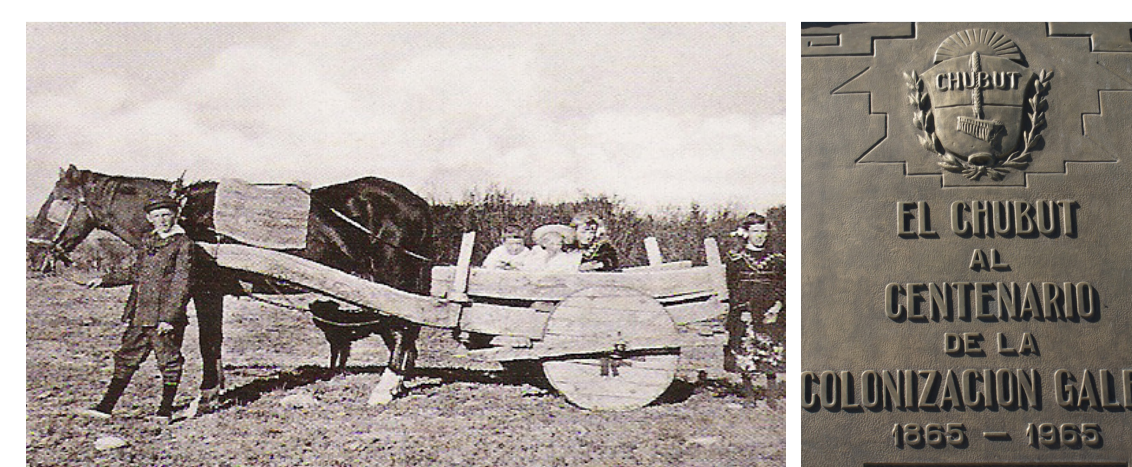
The data should only be viewed as an overview or basic assessment of much more complicated reality. The two figures do not communicate numerous points that are brought to light by the annual reports. For example, the graph does not communicate that the vast majority of students of all ages (with the exception of adult learners) are taking classes in Gaiman, rather than Trelew, which emphasizes Gaiman's role as the epicentre of Welsh culture.

Statistics taken from the annual Welsh Language Project Inspection Reports (2001 - 2014)

As a differentiation is not made between Gaiman and Trelew the graphs also fail to communicate the impressive growth of primary school learners in Trelew in the most recent years of the project, undoubtedly due to the expansion of *Ysgol yr Hendre*.



The images above represent a small portion of material evidence gathered on the expedition.



The above information is a small insight into the research gathered during this expedition. However, I hope it conveys the truly astonishing phenomenon that is Welsh Patagonia. To conclude, a few observations will be noted, reflecting on the aims of the project:

- It seems accurate to say that a revival of Welsh culture and language has definitely been experienced in the Chubut valley, with 1965 and 1997 (inception of the WLP) being years of key importance. Hopefully this crucial sesquicentennial year will also be looked back on as a 'turning point' in history.
- The theory of the 'Knowledge Economy', regarding heritage, (Graham 2002) comes to mind when considering the existing dynamic between the Welsh and Argentine cultures. Although the Welsh culture fell into low esteem in the early and mid-20th century it now constitutes a form of both economic and cultural capital. The role of education has been crucial in producing young bilingual students in Chubut.
- It was interesting to learn that Welsh education has transitioned from Sunday school in the chapel to being an institutionalised entity. Aside from education the importance of cultural events, such as the *Eisteddfod*, is central to the maintenance of the culture.