

# Evaluation of Aimhigher: The Partnerships' View

Elizabeth Cleaver, Michelle Holland, Susan Merrilees  
and Marian Morris

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***Elizabeth Cleaver, Michelle Holland, Susan Merrilees  
and Marian Morris***

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Government's Aimhigher policy – previously known as Excellence Challenge – is one of a number of strategies that, it is hoped, will contribute to the achievement of the Government's target for participation in higher education. This target is that participation should move towards 50 per cent of young people aged 18 to 30 having the opportunity of benefiting from higher education (DfES, 2003). The policy, which was initially launched in 2001 in Excellence in Cities (EIC) Phase 1 and 2 areas and in non-EiC Education Action Zones (EAZs), is being extended to 2006 and is being expanded to include 10 Phase 3 EiC areas and 76 Excellence Clusters.<sup>1</sup> This extension has been accompanied by re-branding; all new areas will use the label 'Aimhigher' (the brand initially adopted by Strand 3 of the policy) from September 2003 and existing areas will replace the Excellence Challenge logo with the Aimhigher logo by September 2004. Since April 2003, the Aimhigher logo has also been used to brand Partnership for Progression (P4P) activities, under the auspices of HEFCE and the LSC.

This executive summary draws on interviews conducted in 2002 and 2003 with 42 Partnership coordinators, representing the geographical spread of Aimhigher and the range of partnerships in both EiC and EAZ areas. It summarises the key findings from the interviews, reflecting interviewees' views on the policy and with specific reference to their observations on the relative success of each of the four operational strands and the planned integration with Aimhigher:P4P.

## Managing Aimhigher

- ◆ Between 2002 and 2003, in the majority of partnerships, the role of the partnership coordinator had moved away from practical involvement with the project to become more focused on strategic management. This move was said to have been a response to a lack of available time and resources, with the concomitant need to adopt a more central coordination, rather than operational, role.
- ◆ As predicted by partnership coordinators in 2002, operational matters had been increasingly devolved to institutions over the second year of operation and, in many instances, had become the responsibility of institutionally-based coordinators.
- ◆ The relatively low level of reported involvement of local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) in Aimhigher in 2002 appeared to have changed little by 2003. Very few partnerships mentioned their LSC without

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<sup>1</sup> GREAT BRITAIN. PARLIAMENT. HOUSE OF COMMONS (2003). *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm. 5735). London: The Stationery Office.

prompting and most were unclear what their wider role could be, beyond acting as a funding provider for post-16 provision.<sup>2</sup>

- ◆ By contrast, reported collaboration between partnerships and local Connexions services appeared to have increased. The majority of the partnerships described a good or growing relationship with their local Connexions Services, although many such services were said to be still at an early stage of development.
- ◆ Inter-partnership networks appeared to have developed greatly between 2002 and 2003. These networks ranged from informal links between neighbouring partnerships to formal regional networks such as the Pan-London network and the Trans-Pennine group.
- ◆ The models of operation that partnerships have adopted and the linkages that partnerships have developed result from a complex interaction of people, place, funding and time. Aimhigher is not operating in a vacuum and local and national circumstances have combined to affect the particular ways in which the programme has been implemented across the country.

### **The Management of Funding in Aimhigher Partnerships**

- ◆ The management of funds differed across areas and ranged from the fully centralised organisation of funds to fully devolved funding to schools, or a combination of centralised and devolved distribution of funds.
- ◆ Although many of the EAZs still had centralised funds, EiC partnerships appeared increasingly likely to devolve funding to institutions and to hold only a small central sum of money to pay for designated time for the partnership coordinator and a limited number of centrally organised activities and resources.
- ◆ By 2003, all 42 partnership coordinators said that they were working in partnership and collaboration with HEIs, thus allowing them to utilise resources and activities funded both by Strand 1 and/or Strand 2 of Aimhigher.
- ◆ Partnership coordinators said that the level of Aimhigher funding had allowed them to expand the range of widening participation activities for students. In addition, partnerships with local organisations and other locally developed initiatives were said to have facilitated access to other funding streams for use in developing such opportunities.
- ◆ The main challenge for partnership coordinators was said to be the extent to which the success of the initiative could be sustained once the funding for the initiative ceases. They were looking at ways in which to embed the initiative within schools so that, at the end of the initiative, widening participation opportunities would still be available for students.

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<sup>2</sup> None of the interviewees mentioned the guidelines that had been issued to LSC local offices in December 2002. These guidelines outline the roles and responsibilities of local LSCs: *Excellence Challenge Guidelines for LSC Offices* (published 12<sup>th</sup> December 2002)

## Evaluating Aimhigher at Partnership Level

- ◆ By comparison with the emphasis that has been placed on implementing the initiative, most partnerships placed a lower priority on monitoring and evaluation. Interviewees identified a range of different issues, including ascertaining additionality and tracking students' post-16 destinations and activities, as particularly problematic.
- ◆ Few partnership coordinators felt confident in their ability to evaluate fully the ongoing impact of Aimhigher. Clear aims, guidance and support are likely to be necessary if such evaluation activities are to be developed and sustained at local, regional or national level.
- ◆ Very few partnerships appeared to be conducting independent evaluations, with most relying on impressions of success at the moment. Partnership coordinators claimed that it might take many years for the full benefits of Aimhigher to be felt.

## Strand 1: School and College-based Activities

- ◆ The process of identifying the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts was viewed as less problematic in 2003 than it had been in 2002. Partnerships appeared confident in using a range of hard and soft criteria for the selection of students in each cohort. Cohort membership was often seen as fluid across both time and activities.
- ◆ By 2003, all partnerships were running a large number of school- and college-based activities linked to Aimhigher, often involving contact with, and/or visits to, HEIs. The specific source of funding for these activities (whether strand 1 or strand 2) was not always clear, however.
- ◆ The limited extent of curriculum enrichment activities that had been identified in 2002 had changed little by 2003. However, it appeared to be an area of growth, especially in relation to activities with the gifted and talented cohort, and many of the interviewees noted that it was going to be a key target for the third year of operation.
- ◆ Out-of-hours study support, in the form of evening revision and support classes and study weeks, were often mentioned as successful in the interviews conducted in 2003. Saturday schools, however, were seen as less successful and students were said to be unwilling to give up their weekends to attend them.
- ◆ The focus of transition programmes and support changed from an emphasis on transition to FE in 2002, to transition into HE in 2003. Summer schools, mentoring and student ambassador schemes were all viewed as key to the success of these programmes, although some partnerships reported difficulty in either establishing sufficient provision or in facilitating implementation.
- ◆ Contact with HEIs was seen as important for raising aspirations and the modelling of success. Residential visits, in particular, were seen as central to this process. However, interviewees reported that some teachers in schools had expressed concern about the time such aspiration-raising events took away from curriculum work. As a corollary of that, there were

also concerns that, unless aspiration-raising activities were matched by increased attainment, young people could feel even more excluded than prior to taking part in the activities.

## **Strand 2: University Links and Outreach Activities**

- ◆ The Aimhigher initiative was said to have provided increased opportunities for students to experience FE and HE and to have raised students' aspirations through outreach activities. Partnership coordinators said they were keen to organise events within local institutions to allow students to experience extended education at first hand.
- ◆ By 2003, the range of such outreach activities included residential weekends, winter and summer schools, conferences and workshops and Saturday schools as well as visits to local employers. They were commonly organised in collaboration with partners (for example, Connexions and local HEI departments) a development that was said to have provided more opportunities for partnership coordinators to arrange suitable events for students.
- ◆ Despite the perceived success of many outreach events, partnership coordinators believed that activities held more merit when students were involved in practical (and preferably subject specific) activities during their visits. Partnership coordinators also believed that outreach events, such as HEI visits, should not be *ad hoc* undertakings and felt that it was important to reinforce them with additional school based activities.

## **Strand 3: Marketing Aimhigher**

- ◆ By 2003, the majority of the interviewed partnership coordinators were actively involved with schools and colleges in marketing extended education and the Aimhigher initiative. School-level staff were reported to be actively involved in marketing HE to students, not least through incorporating aspiration-raising activities into classroom activities.
- ◆ Partnership coordinators were aware of the barriers to educational progression and the attitudes within their local area and were looking to adapt their approach accordingly. They used various marketing tools to promote extended education in the hope of raising students' aspirations, increasing students' awareness of the opportunities available, emphasising the benefits of extended education and raising awareness of the initiative in schools and the local community.
- ◆ Awareness of the wider Aimhigher marketing campaign was limited in both 2002 and 2003. By 2003, most partnerships had experienced an Aimhigher Roadshow and felt able to comment on their utility. Reactions, however, were mixed. Some believed they were excellent as a stand alone event, while others thought that they needed support and follow-up activities embedded in the curriculum in order not to limit their impact.
- ◆ Marketing to parents was seen as a challenging task and partnership coordinators were looking at ways in which to increase parental participation and enthusiasm towards extended education.

#### **Strand 4: Opportunity Bursaries**

- ◆ Partnership coordinators considered the difficulty of addressing the financial implications of post-16 education as possibly the main barrier to students' progression to higher education. By 2003, most interviewees had an awareness and understanding of Opportunity Bursaries, though a number were doubtful of their success and felt that their limited availability and low financial value reduced their potential impact.

#### **Sustainability and the Future**

- ◆ Just under half of the interviewees stated that they believed that ring-fenced funding would be necessary in the future in order to sustain the values and outcomes promoted by Aimhigher. Without funding, it was believed that some level of central or school-based coordination would be impossible to sustain. This coordination was believed to be central to maintaining working partnership between HEIs, schools and colleges.
- ◆ Coordinators were keen to point out that there was a need to change two different cultures in order to sustain the values and outcomes of the initiative: the local culture of 'education is not for the likes of us' and the educational culture which, in some schools, was still not always geared towards supporting students to raise their aspirations and achievement.
- ◆ There was still a great deal of confusion at the partnership level about the day-to-day operation and goals of Aimhigher:P4P. Coordinators who had little knowledge of the initiative tended to be split in their views: on the one hand some felt that the new initiative would be complementary to Aimhigher, while on the other, some believed that Aimhigher would lose out as P4P gained momentum and overshadowed it. Those coordinators who were more knowledgeable about P4P were also split in their views. While some reported active involvement, some were concerned that the new initiative was not taking their experiences of Aimhigher into account. Partnership coordinators reported that, by spring 2003, few had been actively engaged in any P4P planning meetings.
- ◆ In addition, concern was also raised about the regional focus of P4P. It was believed that this would lead to lesser involvement of the local area (which had been the focus of Aimhigher work) in any regional developments. Others believed that the two initiatives would dovetail well and that the regional focus was the next logical step in the area of widening participation.

#### **About the evaluation**

The evaluation is being conducted by a consortium comprised of researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) the Centre for Educational Research (CER) and the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS). It has adopted a multi-method and multi-strand approach to assess the extent to which the policy initiative is proving effective in raising young people's aspirations towards higher education, motivating them to achieve the

necessary qualifications and facilitating access. This report drew solely on the information obtained from detailed interviews with one in two Aimhigher coordinators, but the evaluation strategy also includes:

- ♦ the systematic and longitudinal collection of data from pupils, schools, students (post-16 and post-18), colleges and higher education institutions
- ♦ the linked analysis of a number of matched national databases, including PLASC (Pupil Level Annual School Census) and the NPD (National Pupil Database)
- ♦ in-depth Area Studies, which draw together data from Aimhigher coordinators, other project staff, widening participation coordinators, lecturers and student mentors (or Student Ambassadors) in higher education institutions, staff in local Learning and Skills Councils, Connexions Services and other link organisations, teaching and tutorial staff in colleges and schools, pupils and sixth form students in schools and students in FE colleges, and parents.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The UK Government's Aimhigher policy is one of a number of strategies that, it is hoped, will contribute to the achievement of the Government's target to increase participation in higher education towards 50 per cent of young people aged 18 to 30 (DfES, 2003). Aimhigher, which seeks to increase and widen participation in higher education among young people from deprived areas, was initially launched under the name of Excellence Challenge in Excellence in Cities (EiC) Phase 1 and 2 areas and in non-EiC EAZs.

The publication of the Government's White Paper, in January 2003, heralded the extension of the policy in existing Challenge areas until 2006 and the expansion of the policy (again until 2006) to include all Phase 3 EiC areas and all Excellence Clusters.<sup>3</sup> This expansion was to be accompanied by re-branding, with all new areas to use the label Aimhigher (the brand initially adopted by Strand 3 of the policy) from September 2003 and existing areas to replace the Excellence Challenge logo with the Aimhigher logo by September 2004. Furthermore, the Aimhigher logo is also to be used to brand all Partnership for Progression (P4P) activities, under the auspices of HEFCE and the LSC.<sup>4</sup>

The extension of the policy has reiterated the Government's emphasis on the issue of access to higher education, particularly for the most disadvantaged students. At a policy level, this focus has brought into prominence the need to be able to identify those practices and activities that have the biggest impact on widening participation. This is two-fold, encompassing the need to identify those activities that raise the aspirations (and achievements) of young people and the need to identify the practices that are most likely to enable higher education institutions to attract young people to embark on higher level programmes of study.

The strategy currently adopted for the evaluation, that of systematic and longitudinal collection of data from pupils, schools, students (post-16 and post-18), colleges and higher education institutions combined with detailed interviews with Aimhigher partnership coordinators and in-depth Area Studies, facilitates the collation of such information. It should be stressed that no one element of the evaluation on its own will provide all of the information. However, when brought together through a programme of analysis, both the 'hard' data (for example, in terms of student attainment, progression and retention) and the 'soft' data (in terms of student aspirations and attitudes, for instance) will be illuminated by information on how and why any positive outcomes have been achieved and the activities and

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<sup>3</sup> GREAT BRITAIN. PARLIAMENT. HOUSE OF COMMONS (2003). *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm. 5735). London: The Stationery Office.

<sup>4</sup> From April 2003 to April 2004 it will be known as Aimhigher – Partnerships for Progression.

infrastructures that need to be in place in order to facilitate their achievement. The analysis should also provide some indication of where and when such outcomes are most likely to be transferred and embedded.

This report draws on partnership level interviews conducted in 2002 and 2003 and provides details of how partnership coordinators were implementing Aimhigher in their areas as the initiative ‘bedded down’ in practice. It aims to reflect coordinators’ views of the policy and its appropriateness to their particular situation. It includes specific references to their observations on the relative success of each of the four operational strands of the policy and, in addition, it addresses their views on the bringing together of Excellence Challenge/Aimhigher and Aimhigher: P4P from 2004.

## 1.1 Method

Recruitment for the detailed interviews was carried out by telephone, email and letter, using a contact list based on the known 2002 partnership coordinators and updated by cross-checking with the Aimhigher website. In the first report about partnerships (Clever and Levesley, 2002; hereafter *the 2002 Partnership Report*)<sup>5</sup> it was noted that many of the people with responsibility for the (then) Excellence Challenge in EAZ and EiC areas were not doing the job full-time, generally having other responsibilities within the LEA or EAZ. In a few partnerships, one large and one small EiC partnership and two EAZs, the partnership coordinators were also senior managers in schools. Most partnership coordinators had a teaching and/or advisory background. During the interviews in 2003, and as detailed in Chapter 2, it became apparent that the number of full-time EC partnership coordinators had increased, though not dramatically. Moreover, whether full-time or part-time, the role of partnership coordinator had generally moved away from an operational emphasis to become more strategic.

Approximately one-third of the interviews in 2003 were conducted face-to-face, with the remainder carried out by telephone, using a semi-structured interview schedule. The majority took place during February and March 2003. It was necessary to have some flexibility in the interview since it was expected that different partnerships would have different emphases in the way they approached Aimhigher and would also be at different stages of development. However, it was also important that similar ground was covered in each of the interviews, particularly as they were being carried out by different researchers. There was very little difference between the interview schedules for EiC and EAZ areas.

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<sup>5</sup> All interviews in 2001/02 were carried out face-to-face. CLEAVER, E. and LEVESLEY, T. (2002), *Evaluation of Excellence Challenge: Report on Interviews with Partnership Coordinators*. Unpublished report to DfES.

## 1.2 Aims of the Research

The interviews were designed to be more closely focused than those in 2002, with an emphasis on the effects of the initiative to date, including a focus on what was perceived to have worked most effectively. The interviews sought to ascertain how well the initiative had been established in the partnerships and explored what was taking place at partnership and school/college level, including interactions with higher education institutions (HEIs) and other partners. Interviewees were asked to describe how the aims of Aimhigher related to the particular circumstances of their area, what was being done to implement Aimhigher in terms of strategy, structures and students' involvement, and how far the partnership coordinators felt the initiative was succeeding locally.

## 1.3 Coverage of the Research

The interviews involved re-interviewing coordinators in the 43 Aimhigher partnerships that were first visited in Spring 2002.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that, while 33 of the 42 partnership coordinators who were interviewed in 2003<sup>7</sup> were the same as those interviewed in 2002, nine of the partnerships had appointed a new coordinator by the time of the second interview.

The partnerships under focus were originally chosen to reflect the geographic spread of the initiative and equated to just over half of all the Aimhigher partnerships. The breakdown of partnerships by region is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Partnerships interviewed by region: 2003**

	Number of interviews (total number of partnerships)			
	EAZ	EiC Phase 1	EiC Phase 2	Total
South West	3 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (5)
London & South East	3 (6)	7 (15)	1 (3)	11 (24)
North Central and East	4 (6)	1 (2)	5 (10)	10 (18)
North West	4 (6)	2 (4)	3 (5)	9 (15)
Midlands & East Anglia	6 (10)	1 (3)	2 (4)	9 (17)
<b>Total</b>	<b>20*</b> (33)	<b>11</b> (24)	<b>11</b> (22)	<b>42</b> (79)

*\*One of the EAZ interviews was held with a coordinator who managed two small EAZs working together on Aimhigher. This interview has been counted only once in this table.*

<sup>6</sup> One of the interviews was conducted with a coordinator who managed two small EAZs working together on Aimhigher. This interview has been counted only once throughout this report.

<sup>7</sup> It proved impossible to arrange one EAZ interview during the time frame for undertaking the interviews. In the 2003 round of interviews the research team therefore visited or phoned 42 partnership coordinators.

The partnerships varied in size, based on the number of schools and colleges involved. In general terms, those in EiC Phase 1 areas were the largest, ranging from partnerships with nine schools to one with 33. EAZs were much smaller and the largest of these had six schools. None of the EiC or EAZ partnerships had more than four further education colleges involved in Aimhigher activities.

As an indicative measure, the EAZs involved three schools on average, EiC Phase 1 partnerships involved 17, and EiC Phase 2 partnerships involved nine. The average number of further education colleges was around two for all the partnerships, although EiC Phase 1 partnerships were more likely than other areas to have more than two colleges involved.

The first round of interviews conducted with partnership coordinators in 2002 reported on Excellence Challenge at a very early stage of its organisation. Much of the 2002 Partnership Report focused on setting the scene within the partnerships and on exploring their plans for implementation. This report focuses on progress to date in the development of the Partnerships and their activities.

## 1.4 Structure of the Report

The report is divided into eight sections. Following this introductory chapter, **Chapter 2** begins with a discussion of the strategic and operational organisation and management of Aimhigher at the partnership level. **Chapter 3** discusses the funding of Aimhigher in its second year of operation, considering the organisation and sources of funding available for staffing and activities. In **Chapter 4** the focus shifts to a discussion of partnership-based evaluation strategies, including a discussion of both short-term and longer-term evaluation plans and activities.

**Chapter 5** discusses *Strand One* of the initiative, focusing on the range of activities that partnerships have developed in schools and colleges to enable people from non-traditional backgrounds to access higher education. **Chapter 6** moves on to focus on *Strand Two* (the provision of extra funding to universities and higher education colleges to reach out to young people), in particular highlighting the various ways in which students are gaining access to and information about higher education through university outreach. **Chapter 7** provides details of partnership coordinators' understanding, experience and perceptions of *Strand 3* of Aimhigher: the national marketing campaign to provide clearer information on the route to higher education for young people. In addition, it focuses on more localised marketing strategies at the partnership level. A discussion of *Strand 4* (the provision of individual financial support to some students via Opportunity Bursaries) is also included in this chapter.

**Chapter 8** presents a consideration of Aimhigher's sustainability in the longer term and its move to combine with the work of *Aimhigher: P4P*, while **Chapter 9** includes concluding comments and looks at some of the wider implications of the findings in the report.

## 2. THE ORGANISATION OF AIMHIGHER

During the early stages of Aimhigher, the way the partnerships operated varied greatly. However, some patterns were discernable and, based on the descriptions given by partnership coordinators, it was possible to classify their organisation in two different ways: devolved or centralised; and clustered and non-clustered. In order to consider the ways in which the partnerships had developed their operational structures over their second year of operation, this chapter provides very brief summary of findings in 2002, followed by a discussion of subsequent changes or developments in 2003.

### 2.1 Year 1 – Devolved, Clustered or Centralised Models of Operation

During the first year of operation (2001-2002), partnership coordinators, particularly in EiC areas, reported that they allowed schools<sup>8</sup> varying degrees of autonomy in terms of the activities they provided for students. This depended, in part, on the size of the partnership, the priority accorded to Aimhigher within the partnership, and whether funding was devolved to the institutions to buy activities from the partnership or from a centralised menu of activities. In addition, the four largest partnerships reported that they operated a particular form of devolved model: they arranged schools into smaller clusters of four to five schools (and possibly an FE college) on geographical or achievement-based criteria. The most sophisticated cluster arrangement divided its funding into three, with different proportions allocated to each school, each cluster and the partnership. In contrast, smaller partnerships (largely EAZs) were more likely to have a centralised funding and operational model, whereby partnerships organised and controlled the budget and activities on offer to schools and colleges.

Perhaps most significant was the finding that a number of partnership coordinators believed that, as schools and colleges became more involved in Aimhigher, and as staff became more aware of its aims and goals, they would develop a better sense of what worked well for their particular students and their particular situation. The 2002 Partnership Report stated that some of the more centrally controlled partnerships were, therefore, working towards giving schools more autonomy as time went on. The discussion that follows explores whether this has been the case, and provides details of other changes that have taken place during the second year of partnership operation.

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<sup>8</sup> Due to the separate funding allocations for colleges from the LSC, partnership coordinators in the first year of operation reported that they had less control over, and knowledge of, the way that post-16 budgets in colleges were spent.

## 2.2 Year 2 – Leadership and Management

The partnership coordinator interviews in 2003 specifically asked about the role of the partnership coordinator, the models of strategic and operational management adopted and the funding of Aimhigher activities and staff. It became clear from the interviews that all three aspects of organisation and operation (leadership, management and funding) were interlinked. For example, a strategic leadership approach was often connected with devolved management, staffing and funding, while a more operational leadership approach was more likely to be connected with centralised management, staffing and funding. The following discussion explores leadership and management issues and organisation in the second year of operation, while Chapter 3 considers the organisation and sources of partnership-level funding for Aimhigher.

In 25 of the partnerships, both large and small, the role of the partnership coordinator had changed and developed and was, by 2003, stated to have largely moved away from practical involvement with the project and towards strategic management. Programme coordination took place at the centre and school staff largely dealt with operational issues. One northern EAZ coordinator described his role as *'oiling the wheels'* and sustaining links between schools and other partner institutions. Others described their role as involving brokerage between partner institutions (largely HEIs and schools), monitoring, innovation and coordination. In one London EiC area, the partnership coordinator also acted as an intermediary, who filtered information for the rest of the partnership to avoid information overload: *'my role is to rationalise and pull together all the material and control what I feel [it] is necessary for schools to know'*. These partnership coordinators indicated that the withdrawal from practical involvement resulted from a variety of factors, of which the main one was the lack of centrally available time and resources. However, the growing skills of school-level coordinators and other partner staff were also said to be significant in this process.

In a further seven partnerships, operational responsibilities were stated to be shared between the central partnership Aimhigher team, other partner organisations and/or institutionally based staff. Six of the remaining partnerships (all EAZs with limited budgets) acknowledged that the partnership coordinator or other peripatetic partnership workers still played a much more central, practical role, involved in all operational aspects of the initiative, from booking buses to liaising with students. This was said to result from the limited funding for school-level coordinators, or the perception that school staff suffered from initiative overload and could not effectively undertake the operational aspects of Aimhigher. Four partnership coordinators did not provide details of their level of operational engagement.

The 2002 Partnership Report revealed that, while those partnerships with full-time coordinators tended to be the larger ones, some smaller partnerships had begun to work towards this goal. A small number of partnerships (particularly EAZs) who had started with part-time Aimhigher partnership coordinators had

sought other funding to allow for the post to become full-time. In most cases where this had occurred, the EAZ had provided the necessary extra funding; in one south-western EAZ, the full costs of the full-time partnership coordinator were borne by the EAZ so that all Aimhigher monies could go to fund Aimhigher activities rather than management. However, as in 2002, the majority of coordinators (26) stated that their Aimhigher work in 2003 was conducted on a part-time basis alongside other roles. Only eight partnership coordinators stated that they worked full time on the initiative, while information on this subject was not available for the remaining eight partnerships.

In the partnerships where Aimhigher coordination was undertaken on a part-time basis, coordinators were also variously EAZ and EiC directors and deputy-directors, LEA advisers and inspectors, EiC Gifted and Talented coordinators and heads and deputy heads of schools and/or college liaison officers. Where mentioned, the percentage of time dedicated to the coordination of the initiative ranged from 20 per cent to 95 per cent. However, in some areas where coordinators were also undertaking other demanding roles (i.e. EAZ director) it was indicated that the time available centrally was not enough to cover the demands of the coordinator role. One example of these competing demands and roles was provided in an EiC partnership, where the Aimhigher coordinator was also a senior secondary inspector and the EiC coordinator. In order to maintain a flexible approach in a partnership that devolved money and operational issues to schools but which dealt with planning and training centrally, two further partnership coordinators had been appointed, each dealing with a range of parallel initiatives. The Gifted and Talented coordinator dealt with EiC and Aimhigher, coordinated all 11-18 gifted and talented work in schools and colleges and was also a secondary link inspector. The Widening Participation coordinator dealt with all widening participation aspects of Aimhigher, while also coordinating the 14-19 Pathfinders initiative. This combined and coordinated approach led the partnership to view Aimhigher as integral to their wider school-improvement work:

*...when I have been to [external] Excellence Challenge [sic] events it always surprises me just how separate Excellence Challenge is... whereas here it is quite difficult to identify bits of Excellence Challenge because it is so interwoven... I think something that stands out to me is how Excellence Challenge has so many links into other things... it is the cement which holds these things together.*

In all but a handful of partnerships, the coordinators worked with school-level coordinators who had been seconded from some of their duties to take on Aimhigher responsibilities. The amount of seconded time for school-level coordinators ranged from two days to a few hours per week. The effectiveness of school-based staff was believed to depend on two factors. The first was time; without a realistic reduction in work-load it was impossible for school-level coordinators to undertake operational responsibility for the policy, to attend relevant planning meetings and events and to promote Aimhigher

within their school. This last point hints at the second factor that was deemed significant in facilitating effective school-level coordination: the seniority and/or dynamism of staff. Partnership coordinators stated that, in schools where Aimhigher was being promoted and organised effectively, members of staff either had the seniority to get the message across to other staff, or had the 'right' personality. The following illustrative quotation reveals the importance of such coordinators' positions within their schools:

*... [in this partnership] schools have given [Aimhigher] quite high creditability in terms of management... [this is] something that some of my colleagues [in other partnerships] have struggled with, because they have people in school that they don't necessarily feel ... have the time or the status. [North-eastern EiC partnership coordinator]*

It is important to note that interviewees believed that head of sixth form (or similar) was the level of management deemed most suitable for school-level coordinators. Partnership coordinators stated that a school-level coordinator who was too senior could be too busy to promote and organise Aimhigher effectively. Getting the balance right between time, personality and seniority was said to be key to the effective deployment of Aimhigher within partnership institutions. Coordinators at partnership level were less forthcoming about the characteristics of the 'right' personality for the job, and none discussed this in detail.

From the data collected during the interviews in 2003 it is difficult to make a direct link between the time available to, and the seniority of, the staff employed as school-level coordinators and the extent to which partnership operational issues have been devolved to school-level. This is an issue that will be explored in greater depth in the final round of Aimhigher partnership coordinator interviews due to take place in Spring 2004.

Despite a general strategic and operational split in one EiC partnership, the coordinator spoke of the need to involve schools and colleges in innovation and strategic level planning in order to reduce their reliance on the central partnership coordinator, an issue which would arise when Aimhigher funding was no longer available. This, and other issues of sustainability, are addressed in Chapter 8.

## **2.3 Partners and Networks**

### **2.3.1 LSC involvement**

The 2002 interviews found that, beyond funding post-16 institutions and serving on steering committees, local LSC involvement in Aimhigher partnerships was seen as fairly passive and its influence did not come across strongly in partnership interviews. Among the possible reasons cited was the fact that local LSCs were in their early days of existence and were still in the process of establishing their role both in Aimhigher and in wider regional initiatives. How then has this changed during the second year of operation?

As in 2002, very few partnerships spontaneously mentioned their local LSC and those who did, tended to refer to their funding role and their membership of the Aimhigher steering group (or equivalent body). When pressed to describe their relationship with their local LSC, most partnerships stated that they were unclear of the LSC's role in Aimhigher beyond funding post-16 work. As one London EiC partnership coordinator stated: '*it is hard to see where the LSC fits in at all*'. None of the interviewed partnership coordinators mentioned the guidelines that had been issued to LSC local offices in December 2002 and which outline the roles and responsibilities of local LSCs.<sup>9</sup> The role and impact of these guidelines will be addressed in the 2004 interviews with partnership coordinators and in future Area Studies.

A number of partnerships also expressed the view that LSC-collated post-16 data were not compatible with the pre-16 data collected by the partnership. Partnerships stated that they needed better communication with the LSC in terms of data transfer and the role the LSC could play and would be willing to play. Indeed, three partnerships particularly stated that their local LSCs had not been as proactive as they had expected, and simply wanted to know how the post-16 money was being spent. One south-western EAZ stated that the lack of interest shown by their local LSC stemmed in part from the relatively small amount of Aimhigher money it administered.

However, in a limited number of partnerships (five of the 42 where interviews took place), relations with the LSC were said to have developed substantially. One north-western EiC partnership reported that the LSC had overcome the lack of awareness of its role by means of a presentation to the partnership. Another EiC partnership stated that the local LSC had funded a post-16 coordinator who was responsible for leading and coordinating the post-16 strategy in the north of the partnership. A London EiC partnership reported that links with the local LSC had strengthened greatly to result in a '*meaningful partnership*'. Extra LSC funding had been provided for Aimhigher work and discussions were underway about the setting of common targets and goals. Two EAZs perceived their LSC as supportive, in a mutually beneficial relationship which, for the EAZs, included an extra source of funding for Aimhigher. In addition, one of these partnerships reported that their LSC had taken on an advisory role and attended and supported Aimhigher events.

Connections between partnerships and local LSCs were not limited to single-partnership activity. In the north-east, where a regional network of Aimhigher partnership coordinators had become an embedded and valued part of the initiative (see section 2.3.4 for a further discussion of regional networks) a local LSC representative attended regional partnership coordinators' meetings to share information, thereby furthering the LSC's relationship with eight partnerships.

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<sup>9</sup> *Excellence Challenge Guidelines for LSC Offices (published 12<sup>th</sup> December 2002)*

### 2.3.2 Connexions

The 2002 Partnership Report revealed that, in early 2002, Connexions was not yet operational in the vast majority of the sample partnerships. As a result, discussions were limited to projections about hopes and plans for links between Connexions and Aimhigher. By the second year of operation, the extent of partnerships' contact and work with Connexions services was still variable depending, in part, on the stage of development of local Connexions services and the personnel in place.

Of the 42 partnership coordinators interviewed, 27 stated that Connexions provided a representative who sat on their partnership strategy or steering groups. Others had invited a representative along to meetings, but no-one had materialised, or were unable to do so due to the late start-up of the Connexions service in their areas. In these cases, representatives from the local careers service were often invited instead.

Three partnerships did not mention Connexions in the interviews beyond the discussion of steering/strategy group membership, while four indicated that their relationship with Connexions was limited by the fact that '*Connexions are not really off the ground yet*'. Partnership coordinators in two of these partnerships highlighted their continuing uncertainty about the role that Connexions would play in Aimhigher, an uncertainty which was perhaps exacerbated by their lack of contact with Connexions personnel.<sup>10</sup> Those 35 partnerships who discussed their local Connexions services in greater detail could roughly be divided into three: those who stated that Connexions had started but, as it was early days, their relationship with the service was just beginning (13 partnerships); those who stated that they had a growing relationship with their local Connexions service (12 partnerships) and those who described a close working relationship with Connexions (10 partnerships).

In those partnerships where relationships were described as developing and growing, a number of partnership coordinators had overcome some of the uncertainty surrounding the role of Connexions by involving Connexions staff in their partnerships and defining their role within Aimhigher. For example, one partnership had participated in the training of Connexions' Personal Advisers, to inform them of the various initiatives in which Connexions could play a part.

In those partnerships where a close working relationship was described, coordinators discussed the ways in which Connexions was promoting

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<sup>10</sup> The guidelines related to the involvement of Connexions Services in Aimhigher (*Connexions and Aimhigher Joint Guidance*) were published in April 2003 at the end of the period during which interviews with partnership coordinators took place. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that none of the partnership coordinators mentioned this guidance during interviews. It will be interesting to review how and whether this guidance has had an impact on partnership coordinators' understandings of, and relationships with, Connexions services in the next round of annual interviews (Spring 2004). Future Area Studies will also provide the opportunity to address this issue in more detail.

Aimhigher through their Personal Advisers and events. For example, one London EiC partnership coordinator stated that Connexions was working with them to help to prevent student drop-out at the post-16 transition phase. In another example of collaborative working, a north-western EiC partnership reported that Connexions provided opportunities for students to shadow graduates and to take advantage of psychometric testing facilities, careers advice and post-16 work experience. A further example of partnership links with Connexions was provided by an EAZ which reported using Connexions personnel to staff Aimhigher visits to HEIs and parents' evenings in schools. While the expertise and support that Connexions' personal advisers could bring to these events was said to speak for itself, the partnership coordinator was keen to point out the additional benefit of reducing the burden on school staff, who were already overloaded with initiatives and tasks. Other partnerships spoke of Connexions involvement in, or management of, careers fairs and conferences, while one London partnership specifically highlighted the role that Connexions played in training school-level staff. Finally, one London EiC partnership said that, with the Connexions Partnership, it had jointly funded a full-time post to raise awareness of Aimhigher, while a Midlands EAZ stated that the position of Aimhigher partnership coordinator was part-funded by Connexions, reflecting historical links in the area between the careers service and the EAZ.

However, despite the growing links between Connexions and Aimhigher partnerships, three partnership coordinators stated that they did not feel that Connexions' potential had been fulfilled, partly because Connexions staff were not seen to be sufficiently proactive in their links with the partnerships. A north-western EiC partnership coordinator stated: *'they need to put their feet in the water and get involved'*. A south-western EAZ coordinator mentioned the difficulties caused by the fact that the Connexions staff involved in Aimhigher were not senior enough to be able to support and promote Aimhigher within the Connexions service. This, in turn, had implications for their role in partnership activities.

### **2.3.3 Business and Community links**

The 2002 interviews revealed that, in its first year of operation, Excellence Challenge/Aimhigher appeared to be largely restricted to activities within and between schools, colleges and HEIs.

In 2003, partnership coordinators reported that business links had not evolved greatly over the second year of Aimhigher. One EAZ mentioned links with a local business enterprise group, and a few others said that they had clear links with their local Education Business Partnerships. The clearest links were highlighted by a south-western EAZ, which reported that it had worked with, or received support from a utilities company, a local building society and the local BBC, and by a north-eastern EiC partnership, which had commissioned their local Education Business Partnership to coordinate a web-development project between students, a local university and a local web-design company. Two other partnerships spoke of working with their local paper, although the extent of this contact was not clarified.

In terms of wider community links, a group of north-eastern partnerships said they had funded gifted and talented art students to participate in a community art project working with sculptor Antony Gormley,<sup>11</sup> funded by the Samling Foundation, while another partnership specifically mentioned student workshops run by a local theatre group. However, in the main, partnership coordinators reported that community links were limited and remained an area for development.

As mentioned in the 2002 report, the apparent lack of business and community links created through Aimhigher may, in part, result from the difficulties encountered by partnership coordinators in isolating Aimhigher links from those activities or links associated with the EAZ, EiC, LEA or LSC programmes. In short, pre-existing and new links with businesses and the community may be used for Aimhigher purposes, but may not be funded by, or have originated as part of this initiative and would therefore not have been mentioned in connection with it. For example, one south-western EAZ mentioned that three local companies sat on the EAZ executive forum. Thus, while they were indirectly involved in Aimhigher, their involvement had not stemmed from this initiative *per se*.

### **2.3.4 Inter-partnership networks**

In contrast, partnerships were keen to point out that links between networks of partnerships had developed greatly over the last year. Having stated in 2002 that they would welcome increased links and the sharing of good practice with other partnerships, Aimhigher partnership coordinators were enthusiastic in relating that their growing links with other partnerships had '*gone from strength to strength*'. The links and networks can be categorised loosely as informal and formal and range from links between neighbouring partnerships to those which involve all partnerships in a region and beyond.

#### **Informal links**

Informal links between neighbouring partnerships were found in a small number of non-EiC EAZs, where a previous lack of any history of EiC, the small nature of the partnerships and their relative isolation were all believed to have had a negative impact on the implementation of Aimhigher in the past. In particular, partnership coordinators in these partnerships had actively sought to share ideas, information and good practice with other partnerships. Informal links had also been established through Aimhigher partnership coordinators' attendance at extra-regional groups which had been developed for other purposes, for example, the *Midlands Planning Group* and the *Four Counties Group*.

#### **Formal Links**

More formal links included networks, largely at the regional level. Although the primary motivation for their continuing development had been the sharing of good practice, during 2003 a number of networks had begun to plan and

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<sup>11</sup> Antony Gormley is perhaps best known for his sculpture *Angel of the North* in Gateshead.

fund activities together to benefit from economies of scale and to avoid duplication. Reported examples of formal networks include:

- ◆ A Teeside group, made up of partnerships in the Teeside region.
- ◆ A north-eastern regional group comprising all EAZs and EiC partnerships, which met once a month. This group also met termly with the Teeside group.
- ◆ A Trans-Pennine group, including partnerships from Greater Manchester, Yorkshire and Merseyside, which met twice a year and was divided up into smaller regional groups for termly meetings.
- ◆ A pan-London consortium, which met twice termly and was divided into sub-regional groups for more regular meetings/collaborative working.

Examples of recent co-operative ventures include a pan-London conference for school-based Aimhigher coordinators, which one interviewee reported as *'a roaring success [which] boosted everyone's morale'*, the coordination of regional masterclasses and the production of a *Prospectus of Opportunities* (a list of activities that schools can carry out at various times of the year) in the north-east, and the coordination of masterclasses in West London. In the words of one West London Aimhigher Partnership coordinator, working with other partnerships is crucial as *'there is enough fragmentation as it is'*.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.4 Summary

- ◆ In the majority of partnerships the role of the partnership coordinator has developed and has largely moved away from practical involvement within the project to become more focused on strategic management. The main factor felt to have resulted in this shift was a lack of centrally available time and resources, with the concomitant need to adopt a more central coordination role.
- ◆ As predicted by partnership coordinators in the 2002 report, operational matters had been increasingly devolved to institutions over the second year of operation and had become the responsibility of institutionally based coordinators in many partnerships.
- ◆ Local LSC involvement in Aimhigher did not appear to have moved on greatly since 2002. Very few partnerships mentioned their LSC without prompting and most were unclear what their wider role could be beyond acting as a funding provider for post-16 provision.
- ◆ A greater amount of interface and collaboration had occurred between partnerships and local Connexions services. The majority of the partnerships described a growing or a good relationship with their local Connexions services who were said to be working with partners at both the central partnership and institutional level.

<sup>12</sup> The proposed national, regional and sub-regional structure for the new unified Aimhigher programme may help to promote further collaboration and cooperation.

- ♦ Inter-partnership networks have developed greatly over the last year. These ranged from informal links between neighbouring partnerships to formal regional networks such as the Pan-London network and the Trans-Pennine group.
- ♦ The models of operation that partnerships have adopted and the linkages that partnerships have developed result from a complex interaction of people, place, funding and time. Aimhigher is not operating in a vacuum and local and national circumstances have combined to affect the particular ways in which the programme has been implemented across the country.

### 3. FUNDING WITHIN AIMHIGHER

Partnership coordinators interviewed in 2002 were pleased that Aimhigher funding had allowed them to expand their existing widening participation activities and allowed more students to be involved in the activities. However, at that time, there was a degree of confusion in the distribution and control of funds, due to the fact that pre-16 funding was distributed through the partnership and post-16 monies via the LSC. Moreover, in 2002, partnership coordinators were largely unclear as to how sixth forms and colleges were using their money for Aimhigher activities. Interviews with partnership coordinators in 2003 suggested that there was more clarity in the management of funds within areas, although they still faced some issues and challenges. A limited number of interviewees stated that they did not feel that they had full knowledge of, or control over, the ways in which separate post-16 institutions used their funds. To overcome this, two EAZs had persuaded their local LSC to allow the partnership to collate and distribute post-16 funding centrally for all institutions. Another EAZ had arranged for all post-16 funds to be sent to one ‘administrating’ post-16 institution, thereby achieving a coherent post-16 strategy.

This chapter looks at the ways in which partnership coordinators manage, distribute and monitor Aimhigher money and how some are increasing their resources through additional funding streams.<sup>13</sup> It also describes some of the issues and challenges some partnership coordinators face with their management of funds.

#### 3.1 Organisation of Funds at the Partnership Level

Different funding formulae were found across the areas investigated. These included:

- ◆ fully centralised organisation of funds by Aimhigher partnership coordinators
- ◆ fully devolved funds to schools
- ◆ a combination of centralised and devolved distribution of funds.

Five partnerships did not provide information on the particularly funding formula they had adopted for Aimhigher. Twelve partnerships (all EAZs) stated that full funding was held and managed centrally or by proxy as a central fund by a partner institution. For example, three such partnerships revealed that their main partner FE college received all LSC post-16 funding for the partnership. This was either managed remotely by the partnership

<sup>13</sup> A more detailed account of Aimhigher funding is provided in Xavier and West (2002).

coordinator or was transferred to the EAZ. In these areas, schools and colleges were able to 'buy-in' activities organised centrally by EAZ coordinators.

In partnerships that had adopted a more strategic approach to the management of Aimhigher (see Chapter 2), any funding which came to the partnership for activities and staffing was generally devolved to school or cluster level. A number of variations in this funding formula were, however, apparent.

In 25 partnerships (primarily in EiC areas) the coordinators described Aimhigher funds as being completely, largely or partially devolved to schools and colleges. Five partnerships specifically reported that no money was held centrally. In two of these partnerships, the coordinators claimed that this made them somewhat impotent and that a central fund would be useful for booking coaches, arranging special days and masterclasses. Instead, they had had to use funding from other sources for this purpose. In partnerships where the majority of money was devolved, the amount ranged from 80 to 92 per cent, leaving eight to 20 per cent in central funds.

In those partnerships where partial devolvement of funds occurred, the split was varied. Some partnerships stated that they devolved funds for gifted and talented students to schools and colleges but held widening participation funds centrally, while others revealed that post-16 funds were devolved but pre-16 funds were held centrally. One north-western partnership coordinator described how this partially devolved funding formula allowed for a degree of flexibility concerning the (central or devolved) payment for activities.

*When I talk to my opposite numbers in other partnerships it strikes me that when all the money is managed centrally or all is devolved it is foolish: having both gives fabulous flexibility.*

However, such flexibility was not always experienced by partnership coordinators. It appeared that the devolution of post-16 funding was not always a chosen course of action. Thus, while some interviewees felt comfortable with the way in which the LSC controlled post-16 Aimhigher funds for colleges, a few were concerned about their lack of involvement in the management of college funds and the organisation of their widening participation activities within post-16 institutions. For example, one EAZ coordinator had tried to integrate a coherent pre- and post-16 approach. However, the local college had developed an isolated programme of activities which was not linked to any overall strategy. The lack of coherence and of local LSC support caused confusion and the partnership coordinator felt the situation was a 'disaster'.

A few partnerships (both EiC and EAZs) suggested that full financial devolution, allowing schools and clusters to plan and fund events, would prepare them to continue the work after the central coordination of Aimhigher had ended (see Chapter 8) or, in the case of one EAZ, after its transference to Excellence Cluster status later in 2003. In particular, one EiC partnership

stated the importance of involving school-level staff at the planning stages to facilitate sustainability:

*As you get further into the project it is much more important that the real stakeholders in the schools actually have a complete picture of how each element intermeshes and how they are working together.*

In most partnerships where schools received devolved funding, they were required to agree their yearly spending and staffing strategy with the partnership coordinator. To facilitate equality of access to HEI-led activities, some partnerships had developed a menu of costed activities from which schools could choose. This was particularly the case in the north east, where large EiC partnerships had worked together regionally to create a Prospectus of Opportunities.

Some partnership coordinators also favoured devolving a proportion of funds to schools across an academic year. For example, one area allocated 70 per cent of funds during April and the remaining 30 per cent in September, once cohorts had been identified for the new academic year. For another area, schools received their funds in three termly instalments – 40 per cent, 30 per cent and 30 per cent – throughout the year. The partnership coordinator for this area believed that this system allowed flexibility to make adjustments to expenditure. Another partnership coordinator, who was considering such a model, explained that the funds for the area were allocated within a three-year plan and schools were aware of their budgets for this three-year period. However, he felt that, for some schools, it was better to retain some money centrally and distribute it across the year in the hope of motivating them to carry out activities.

In some larger EiC partnerships, Aimhigher school-level coordinators met as a cluster to decide on activities that they would undertake together, thereby creating economies of scale. One partnership suggested that establishing networks that were fully informed and had the potential to be self-sustaining was one way to ensure sustainability of the initiative and its aims and outcomes:

*If [Aimhigher] is subsumed in lots of other things [then] when the funding does stop, you find other ways of doing it.*

### **3.2 Additional Funding Sources**

A total of 14 partnership coordinators said that they were satisfied that they could work within their funding remits. Twenty two partnership coordinators stated that they had access to additional funding streams to support their activities. Indeed, for many areas, Aimhigher appeared to be just one funding stream supporting ‘*educational regeneration*’. Additional funding for activities was obtained through:

- ◆ the Partnerships for Progression (P4P) initiative
- ◆ Widening Participation funds from local HEIs
- ◆ the local LSC
- ◆ Connexions
- ◆ other locally developed groups and initiatives such as Education Business Partnerships (EBPs)
- ◆ EAZ central funding.

The pattern of funding sources, however, was often unique to particular areas. For example, in one area, a locally organised higher education roadshow was funded jointly by the Open University, P4P and through Aimhigher. Another partnership was creating a local website for students to promote extended education, provide information about careers, local FE and HE providers and links to relevant websites. The development of the website was partly funded through DOMEX.<sup>14</sup> In another area the partnership coordinator explained how some schools and colleges had developed widening participation activities some time before Aimhigher was in place. Such widening participation activities had been funded, and continued to be funded, by an anonymous private benefactor. A final example came from an EAZ where extra-funding for a post-16 officer was provided by the local LSC.

### 3.3 Issues and Challenges

Despite widespread satisfaction with the funding available for Aimhigher activities, a number of partnership coordinators identified difficulties in tracking funds within some schools, or identifying how those funds were used. Most partnership coordinators agreed that efficient tracking procedures were important to assess the impact of activities and, ultimately, of the initiative as a whole. The increase in collaboration and cross-funding of resources had added to this concern, as it was more difficult to track the specific input and impact of Aimhigher funds. As one partnership coordinator said, *'the funding must be allocated for specific purposes, if not, then how can we possibly evaluate effectively?'*

All interviewees were happy with the progress and the impact that Aimhigher appeared to be having in their areas and were considering ways of sustaining the success of the activities (see Chapter 8). However, 22 partnership coordinators stated that they were concerned that, if funding stopped, there would be little opportunity to continue the promotion of FE and HE through outreach activities. For this reason, some interviewees stressed the importance of devolving funds to schools, thus allowing them to take control of their activities and establish their own links, which they could continue when the

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<sup>14</sup> 'Domex is a project that brings together City Learning Centres in six boroughs in the east of London to develop the use of the internet and other ICT resources (such as video conferencing) to raise standards in education' (<http://www.domex.org.uk/> accessed June 2003).

funding ceases, possibly by using alternative funding sources. Similarly, 12 partnership coordinators described how they were costing some activities to schools, in particular the more expensive residential outreach activities, to increase schools' awareness of the actual costs of running such activities.

A few partnership coordinators were concerned that a lack of commitment to attend activities, on the part of some students, even where they had a reserved place, resulted in a waste of money. One partnership coordinator had tried to overcome this by charging them a nominal deposit – say £25 for a £150 weekend course. The deposit was refunded when students attended the event or, in agreement with parents, was passed on to the student as pocket money.

### 3.4 Summary

- ♦ Aimhigher funding was said to have allowed all the responding partnership coordinators to expand the widening participation activities for students, and they were generally satisfied with the money available for them to promote extended education to students.
- ♦ The ways in which partnership coordinators managed their funds differed across areas and ranged from fully centralised organisation of funds (typically in EAZ areas) to fully devolved funding to schools, or a combination of centralised and devolved distribution of funds.
- ♦ EiC partnerships were increasingly likely to devolve funding to institutions and only to hold a small pot of money centrally to pay for the partnership coordinators time and a limited number of centrally organised activities and resources.
- ♦ All responding partnership coordinators were working in partnership and collaboration with HEIs thus allowing them to utilise resources and activities funded both by Strand 1 and/or Strand 2 of Aimhigher
- ♦ In addition, partnerships with local organisations and locally developed initiatives allowed access to money from other funding streams for widening participation opportunities.
- ♦ The main challenge for partnership coordinators, in terms of funding, was the extent to which the success of the initiative could be sustained once the funding for the initiative ceases. They were looking at ways in which to embed the initiative within schools so that at the end of the initiative widening participation opportunities would still be available for students.



## 4. PARTNERSHIP EVALUATIONS OF AIMHIGHER ACTIVITIES

### 4.1 The 2002 Report

In 2002, partnerships were unsure whether they or the DfES were primarily responsible for undertaking evaluation activities. Partnerships stated that the activities could only be evaluated after they had taken place and that it was too early in the implementation of Aimhigher for more than a limited evaluation to have been initiated. The DfES's requirement that all partnerships submit an Annual Report (by January 2003) seems to have contributed to a sharper focus on monitoring and evaluation in this second round of interviews. Partnership coordinators mentioned three main types of evaluation: immediate feedback exercises, the creation of databases to enable the tracking of students, and commissioned research. However, many still indicated that it was 'early days' to expect to find solid evidence of real change.

### 4.2 Year 2-Evaluation of Activities

Four themes connected to evaluation emerged from the Year 2 partnership interviews.

#### 4.2.1 Additionality

The first theme was that of overlap. Ten partnership coordinators specifically highlighted the difficulty of 'unpicking' the effects of Aimhigher from the effects of other initiatives. It has proved as difficult to disentangle the impacts of Aimhigher as was anticipated by the partnership coordinators in 2002. Few partnership coordinators saw this as a real problem except when it came to reporting return on investment (ROI) to the DfES. They believed that there was a positive change as a result of Aimhigher, but were not particularly keen to claim that these benefits were solely the result of the initiative.

A partnership coordinator in the Northeast gave an example of the most common response on evaluation:

*If the DfES was wanting the answer "you've had X thousand pounds, what difference has that made in terms of grades?" it is very difficult to say...Trying to say which bit is due to EC and which bit isn't, is impossible. But the message needs to be, just because you can't do that [evaluate value-added due solely to Aimhigher] doesn't mean you should take the thousand pounds away.*

#### **4.2.2 Demands placed on coordinators and schools**

The second theme was that evaluation was difficult because of a shortage of staff time and expertise, rather than due to a shortage of funds. Running Aimhigher was said to take all the time available to partnership coordinators, so that monitoring and evaluation was given a lower priority. Most made it clear that they saw the activities as the core of Aimhigher and, for some at least, evaluation was conducted out of compliance rather than conviction. Staff time was in short supply:

*This area is overloaded with initiatives... for the first time ever I think I can say that we have got too much money in education and not enough staff.*

#### **4.2.3 Difficulties in tracking students and attainment**

The third emerging theme concerned the challenges posed by tracking individual students pre- and post-16. According to partnerships, tracking of students (pre- and post-16) was causing considerable concern. Some areas had attempted to create centrally-held databases from pre-16 to post-16 education, as mentioned in the 2002 report. The success of such initiatives varied a great deal, and depended on cooperation from a number of organizations, not all of whom collected information in the same way. In addition, not all partnerships reported a good relationship with Connexions and the LSC and communication barriers may have contributed to difficulties in getting data. Positive feedback on the annual reporting procedure to DfES centred on its role in helping partnership coordinators identify the data which needed to be kept and the extent of monitoring/evaluation required. It has taken time to get a shared sense of data needs. One partnership coordinator remarked:

*it is becoming ... easier to track students as schools and colleges are now aware of what information they should be holding and what data needs to be tracked.*

However, data protection was still seen as a barrier to effective tracking of students.

*We won't know what is working at school level until there is reliable data on outcomes and enhanced ability to track students through the system. Real effects will take years to become obvious. Time scales [for reporting impacts] are too short and too ambitious.*

#### **4.2.4 The timescale of evaluations**

A number of partnership coordinators stressed the point that the real outcomes of Aimhigher might not be fully appreciated for years. They reported feeling pressured to produce quick results and felt that success would grow more slowly. One inner-city partnership coordinator felt that it was unrealistic to expect results by 2006:

*You need to give things time. Results are not immediate. It's a long process to encourage students and parents, especially as we are starting to target year 6 now. The impact of that won't be apparent for many years to come.*

### 4.3 'Soft' and Shorter-term Evaluations

Most partnership coordinators reported a range of soft monitoring and evaluation strategies. Virtually all reported intangible benefits, based on impressions and student comments.

*You know it's having an effect, you can actually see that from the visits and roadshows and you know it's doing good, but how you measure that, well I really don't know.*

Immediate feedback exercises assessing the 'wow factor' of activities such as the Aimhigher Roadshow and attempting to trace attitudinal changes appeared to be almost universally used. Most of this information was gathered through the use of brief feedback sheets at the conclusion of activities. However, it was not clear how the information gained was being used, although one partnership coordinator reported that feedback was analysed immediately after each activity and that changes were made to activities that had received low scores. Case-studies of and entrance/exit interviews with individual students were also cited as common strategies. Seven partnerships reported asking for post-activity feedback from teachers and schools, as well as from students. However, this paperwork was said to put more pressure on teachers' time.

### 4.4 'Hard' and Longer-term Evaluations

#### 4.4.1 DfES Reports

Partnership coordinators' gave mixed reactions to their major monitoring task, the DfES Annual Report. Some had found it helpful, because it compelled them to attempt to match their results to the targets that had been set. Others were frustrated by the demands and said that they were being asked to hit a moving target:

*The monitoring and evaluation of the programme as a whole is an absolute nightmare.... Quite frankly DfES hadn't a clue what they were asking for... they asked us for information which was quite different from what had originally been set out, they asked us to report on targets that were quite different from what the original targets were (targets that they had agreed), they asked us about underachieving students which had not been an issue when we set targets (we were looking at under-aspiring and under-represented groups). They were asking us for baseline information that no-one can provide.... Measuring impact is going to be very very difficult until you can track students through using a national database.*

Several partnership coordinators expressed disappointment that, at the time these interviews were conducted in spring 2003, they had not yet received any DfES feedback on the Annual Reports.

#### **4.4.2 Internally and Externally Conducted Research**

Three partnerships described their efforts to learn more about the effects of Aimhigher through commissioned research. One (as mentioned in the 2002 report) was using the expertise of the local HEI to research student attitudes in Years 9, 10, and 12. Another partnership had commissioned a much more limited study of student response to a Year 10 Maths Challenge, again carried out by a local university and which had now produced results for 2002 and 2003. Finally, one EiC partnership had commissioned its own comprehensive internal evaluation exercise in order to review the implementation of Aimhigher both with regard to its stated aims and objectives and to highlight any issues for future development.

The 2002 Partnership Report stated that a number of partnership coordinators were keen to avoid reinventing the wheel and had enquired about the level of qualitative feedback that the national evaluation would provide at the partnership and school level. This point was re-iterated in 2003, particularly in light of the fact that no feedback had yet been provided from the interviews in which they had taken part in 2002, and that they were not generally aware that any other reports from the national evaluation were available in the public domain for partnership coordinators to refer to.<sup>15</sup> Partnership coordinators stressed the point that they would welcome and value access to such reports.

### **4.5 Summary**

- ◆ Ascertaining additionality was considered problematic because of the difficulty of isolating the effects of Aimhigher from the effects of other initiatives.
- ◆ Most partnerships still place a lower priority on monitoring and evaluation of the initiative relative to '*rolling it out*'.
- ◆ Issues of tracking students post-16 meant that many partnerships were doubtful of their ability to follow students through to HE age. Partnership coordinators claimed that it might take many years for the full benefits of Aimhigher to be felt.
- ◆ Very few partnerships are conducting evaluations independently; most are relying on impressions of success at the moment.

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that individualised aggregated feedback on pupil questionnaires is sent each summer to all schools returning completed questionnaires. This feedback is also provided at a higher level of aggregation to local partnerships. Two reports from the national evaluation, the executive summary of the first interim report, and a report on the first HEI survey, are now available on the DfES Aimhigher website:  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme/upload/evaluation.doc> (sourced August 03)  
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme/upload/EC%20evaluation%20report.doc> (sourced August 03)

- ◆ Partnership coordinators were keen to point out that feedback from, or access to reports from, the national evaluation would be both welcome and valued.



## 5. STRAND 1: SCHOOL/COLLEGE BASED ORGANISATION AND ACTIVITIES

Some of the interviews on which the 2002 Partnership Report was based were conducted only three months after the partnership plans had been approved. Thus the focus of the first report was largely on planning for activities and some early implementation. A year later, a wide range of activities were reported across the partnerships and coordinators were beginning to be able to identify ‘what works’, at least at an anecdotal and somewhat local level. This report has also drawn on the considerable amount of information on the range of activities which many partnerships had included in their Annual Reports to the DfES. However, it is not the purpose of this report to duplicate information available elsewhere and this chapter focuses on what partnership coordinators perceive ‘to work’ and ‘not to work’ at school/college level.

The interviews with partnership coordinators painted a scene of intense activity in terms of school- and college-based Aimhigher activities. EAZs demonstrated a tendency to focus on aspiration-raising activities, with many of these taking place away from school premises. EiC partnerships that had gifted and talented cohorts in addition to widening participation cohorts, were beginning to develop curriculum enrichment activities and to emphasise modifying the syllabus to meet local needs which, it was felt, might be sustainable after the end of Aimhigher initiative.

### 5.1 Cohort Identification

In the original planning guidance for Excellence Challenge,<sup>16</sup> EiC partnerships were asked to identify two cohorts of students: a widening participation cohort comprising students aged 13 to 19 and a gifted and talented cohort (which extends the EiC pre-16 gifted and talented cohort) to include 16 to 19 year olds. EAZs were only asked to identify a widening participation cohort. The DfES asked partnerships to develop criteria, to be used in institutions, to identify the cohorts of young people who will participate in gifted and talented and widening participation activities. The criteria used for cohort identification were to build on existing practice within the partnerships with the gifted and talented cohort between two per cent and 20 per cent in each institution with an average of 10-15 per cent across the partnership. No limits on the size of the widening participation 13-19 cohort were set.

The 2002 Partnership Report revealed that partnership coordinators ‘*related some practical difficulties associated with the cohort identification criteria they had used*’ (Cleaver and Levesley 2002, p.iii). In contrast, identification

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme//upload/originalceplanningguidance.doc>

of the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts was reported to be less of an issue by the time that the second round of partnership interviews were held in 2003. A variety of indicators were in use and very few schools were still reluctant to identify a cohort at all. This seems to have been based on two factors: a pragmatic acceptance that the funding would only go so far – *'we don't want to spread the jam too thin'* – and a sense that the DfES was now providing clearer guidance on appropriate cohort selection.

However, some partnership coordinators had been approached by parents who wanted to know why their children were not involved in Aimhigher activities. Although some areas involved all students in their widening participation cohort, three partnership coordinators specifically stated that the available funds only allowed a limited number of students to participate in activities. Where the widening participation cohort was restricted, partnership coordinators generally felt that they would have liked to include more students.

### **5.1.1 The Gifted and Talented Cohort**

Gifted and talented students tended to be identified by key stage scores, GCSE results, and measures such as CAT<sup>17</sup> and YELLIS.<sup>18</sup> When percentages are mentioned, these ranged from five per cent to 10 per cent of the students in the year group, both pre and post-16. Some partnership coordinators indicated that certain Aimhigher activities were opened to a wider group than those who had been officially identified as gifted and talented for the purposes of the initiative. This was supported by evidence provided in the DfES's internal summary of the Partnership's annual reports, which indicates that partnerships are increasingly incorporating younger year groups (Years 9, 10 and 11) into gifted and talented activities. The composition of the gifted and talented cohort was generally seen as less flexible than the widening participation cohort, particularly where students were aware of their gifted and talented status. While this cohort could be expanded (as far as funding would allow), in the words of one EAZ coordinator, once a student had been identified as a member of the gifted and talented cohort, it would be difficult to take them out; this would be tantamount to telling them they were no longer gifted and talented.

### **5.1.2 The Widening Participation Cohort**

The widening participation cohort was identified in a variety of ways. A very small number of partnerships reported trying to include as many as possible of those aged 13 and above in the widening participation cohort. Most, however, used some form of selection. Some partnerships asked teachers in schools to identify students with the potential to benefit from higher education. One partnership interviewed all the students put forward by their schools. A few partnerships asked students to apply for inclusion, using a combination of application forms and an interview process. Others used parental background (those with no history of higher education), although one partnership

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<sup>17</sup> Cognitive Abilities Test – produced by NFER Nelson

<sup>18</sup> Year 11 Information System – produced by CEM-Durham

coordinator described asking students about their families as *'difficult and intrusive'*. It was stated explicitly that postcodes were not widely used as these were felt to be unreliable, often covering pockets of affluence within deprived areas, and a number of partnerships attempted to 'weight' a number of factors, including teacher opinions, parental background, and potential to benefit.

A number of partnership coordinators stressed that decisions were made flexibly in order to take account of special local circumstances: *'the boundaries [of the cohort] are permeable'*. Some partnerships targeted underachievers; others focused on socio-economic need. One London partnership, for example, had chosen to target *'kids with no support at home at all'*, including a number of post-16 students who lived on their own. Several partnership coordinators stated that they had attempted to ensure that the cohort mirrored the ethnic makeup of the school. In total, 13 of the 42 interviewed Partnership coordinators made specific reference to concerns about ways of engaging different ethnic groups as part of the widening participation cohort. Of these thirteen partnerships, six in particular were engaged in exploring ethnic-related barriers to progression which they hoped to address through their work with this cohort in the future. This potential work involved developing strategies to counter:

- ♦ The underperformance of black boys (one partnership) and of Afro-Caribbean students (one partnership)
- ♦ The negative attitudes to further and higher education expressed by Black Caribbean students (one partnership)
- ♦ Fears of racism and violence amongst black pupils that appeared to be a barrier to progression to further education (one partnership)
- ♦ Fears of transfer to an 'unsafe' or different cultural environment amongst Bangladeshi students (one partnership)
- ♦ Parental concerns about Asian<sup>19</sup> girls (one partnership) and Muslim girls (one partnership living away from home).

## 5.2 School/College Activities

The 'wealth of activities' that had been mentioned as being in the planning stage in the 2002 report were, by 2003, reported to be underway across partnerships. Many of these built on activities developed through Excellence in Cities or fostered by the general aims of the EAZ. Consequently, partnership coordinators reported that it was still very difficult to separate out those activities that were 'purely' Aimhigher. Two of the interviewed partnership coordinators had devolved activities so completely that they were able to discuss initiatives in only the most general terms, but the great majority

<sup>19</sup> The term Asian is used where partnership coordinators themselves used this term and did not differentiate between different nationalities and ethnic groups. Where such differentiation was provided by interviewees, (i.e. Muslim or Bangladeshi students) this detail is included in the text.

of interviewees (40 of the 42 interviewed) stated that they were very aware of the range of options in their partnership's programme. Indeed, most were actively involved in the planning, if not the delivery, of activities.

### **5.3 Teaching and Learning Provision and Development**

Given the early stage of the initiative, it was not surprising that, at the time of the 2002 interviews, there were few examples of specific curriculum provision as part of the (then) Excellence Challenge initiative. Information on this element of Aimhigher is still relatively limited but, where mentioned by partnership coordinators, considerable growth was reported to have taken place. However, the overall and continuing emphasis on out-of-school activities, especially for the widening participation cohort, suggests that the majority of partnerships were still not directing most of their energies to this area.

Where it occurred, curriculum provision and differentiation were reported to be directed at two groups: students (largely through providing extra help) and teachers (normally through activities aimed at improving their range of teaching and learning strategies and skills). Details of this provision are outlined below.

#### **5.3.1 Help for students**

Curriculum-linked changes, so far, have focused on helping students to achieve better results within the current syllabus, rather than on modifying the curriculum itself. A number of partnership coordinators indicated that special classes on learning styles, leadership, relaxation techniques, and similar subjects were being offered. The most common example of curriculum enhancement appeared to be sessions to assist students in achieving their potential in examinations. Examination technique sessions for Year 11 students were held in several areas. A few partnerships also offered 'companion' sessions on interview techniques, simulating the kind of situations students might face when applying for an Oxbridge place or for employment.

Enrichment normally took the form of masterclasses. These were viewed very differently in different partnerships; some felt students resented classes which were not closely linked to A level subjects; others remarked that collaborative region-wide masterclasses offered students an excellent experience, an opinion also highlighted within the DfES's internal summary of the Partnership's annual reports whereby partnership coordinators reported masterclasses as raising aspirations. The coordination of a successful programme of masterclasses was described as '*a huge job*'. At this point in the initiative, no consensus had developed as to their value, although the DfES's internal summary of the Partnership's annual report highlighted the need for closer collaboration between higher education academics and school teachers, if they were to be successful.

Partnership coordinators were not specific as to the funding sources for such masterclasses and, indeed, the proportion of monies that came from Strand 1 or through Strand 2 was unclear.

### 5.3.2 Improving teaching and learning provision

Some partnerships saw curriculum enrichment as best facilitated through the improvement of teaching. In Yorkshire, the Curriculum Network Group was working on ways to train teachers to provide effective study support. Teachers in several partnerships were offered courses on the Brain Gym<sup>20</sup> system. A number of partnerships had devoted training days to helping teachers develop teaching methodologies that addressed differing learning styles.

Partnerships were increasingly working towards creating teaching materials with clear links to the goals of Aimhigher. Several partnership coordinators mentioned that they encouraged schools to develop curriculum materials based around the *Aimhigher Roadshow* teachers' pack. In one London-area the partnership itself had done this for schools, providing a menu of one hour, pre-packaged lessons on subjects relevant to Aimhigher, for use in PHSE time. This was then distributed to all Aimhigher schools, not just those that hosted the *Aimhigher Roadshow*. In addition, a partnership in the southwest had worked with its local HEI to produce a tailor-made programme of enrichment classes for each school, while a midlands EiC partnership had spent Aimhigher money on funding extra subject teachers in schools. A further example was provided by a northern EiC partnership where money had been devolved to schools in order to help them develop teaching and learning strategies in vocational subjects.

One common thread was the importance of high-quality teaching for both the gifted and talented cohort, who were considered to need extra stimulation, and the widening participation cohort, who, it was feared, would be 'turned off' education by mediocre teaching. Partnership coordinators across the country stressed the need to improve A Level teachers' subject and teaching skills; the practical outcome of this concern tended to be a shared initiative between partnerships because of the need for specialist speakers. Resources were sometimes drawn from Aimhigher monies as well as from funding for continuing professional development.

## 5.4 Out-of-hours Study Support

In 2002, partnership coordinators were unable to provide many examples of out of hours study support. Where mentioned, they largely referred to summer schools, study weeks or mentoring; all commonly funded by EAZs and EiC partnerships, but not solely under the banner of Excellence Challenge. The interviews in 2003 revealed a growth in this area.

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<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.braingym.org/> for further information.

Aimhigher funded out-of-hours study support, school or library-based evening revision programmes were often mentioned as successful and simple to implement. Revision classes were generally popular with students if they were seen as of direct relevance to their exams. Enrichment classes, often run by HEIs, were mentioned, but partnership coordinators pointed out that their impact was entirely dependent on the quality of teaching, a matter that was beyond their direct control. Moreover, Saturday schools were generally seen as rather unsuccessful due to the fact that students were not keen to give up their weekends for extra school-related activities.

## 5.5 Transition Programmes/Support

In 2002, some partnerships were reported to be more organised in supporting transition than others: some were waiting for Connexions to come ‘on stream’ in order to tap into the ‘holistic’ support mechanisms that this would provide for their students, while others were beginning to develop ‘in-partnership’ support mechanisms. The focus during this first year of Excellence Challenge was on supporting progression into FE. In particular partnerships between schools and FE colleges were developing to support students in their transition to post-16 education. Partnerships also spoke of bringing FE to Year 11 students in schools in order to begin the transition mentally, before any physical or social transition took place. Developing support was not, however, focused solely on academic needs. Cultural barriers to progression were also highlighted in 2002, and partnership coordinators spoke of the need to remove students from their everyday culture and show them that there was the possibility of a different life outside. Mentoring was also seen as key to smoothing transition and improving retention.

In the 2003 round of interviews with partnership coordinators the focus appeared to have expanded from supporting progression into FE to include progression into HE. While examples of support for students in the early stages of FE were still provided,<sup>21</sup> coordinators generally felt that the key to successful transition programmes appeared to be making a link – in the form of a personal contact or a personal experience – between the students in the cohort and the world of higher education.

Mentoring and *Student Ambassador* projects were generally perceived to be highly effective, although some partnerships reported difficulty in getting these running smoothly. Summer schools were seen as successful and popular with students – ‘*Summer schools are important, they empower students, they feel special and feel that they really can achieve*’ – although it was noted that

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<sup>21</sup> For example, one partnership reported running a programme to support students through their first term at the local FE college, using an on-site Learning Mentor to guide a small group of students through the transition. Other partnerships used peripatetic project workers to support students on activities and in their transitional phase, while others had employed school-based *progression coaches* to support students, often on a one-to-one basis at key transition points, and where necessary, more generally.

there had been some problems in 2002. Partnership coordinators said that would like to see a wider range of HEIs offering summer schools.

## 5.6 Aspiration-raising Activities

In 2002, partnership coordinators revealed that contact with HEIs was key to raising aspirations. This continued as a key theme in 2003, when virtually all of the interviewed coordinators perceived the visits to HEIs as fundamental to the success of Aimhigher and were able to provide a wealth of examples of such events which had occurred, or which were planned to take place during the academic year 2002-2003. Visits to HEIs were described as ‘transformative’, ‘life-changing’ and very popular with students, and were seen as key to raising their confidence about their ability to cope in an unfamiliar environment. One partnership coordinator from the northwest said:

*It is a big achievement for some students to get through the door of a university that they wouldn't normally visit. It's a big achievement to get them off their estate for a lot of students.*

A few partnership coordinators also remarked that the visits changed the attitudes of both the school teachers and university lecturers involved, making them much more positive about the abilities of students from groups currently under-represented in HE. One partnership coordinator stressed that it was important to organize visits properly and to ensure that students were not taken out of classes too often: ‘some kids have gone five or six times’.

Partnership coordinators also described team building residentials (for example, one group of students in an Aimhigher area had crewed a boat), visits to local employers, attendance at conferences (including UCAS conventions) and youth camps for the younger year groups. One area organised a study skills workshop at a local sports arena, where students took part in the workshop activities and then used the sports facilities. This partnership coordinator was keen on such outreach activities:

*we're in the process of arranging a trip to Man[chester] United football ground where [students] can see all the other types of jobs, for example, catering, accounts, and then they can go around the museum. It all acts to motivate them.*

Plays focusing particularly on aspiration raising and progression issues had been presented at schools and these were commonly rated as very successful. Mentoring was seen as successful in terms of raising aspirations as well as a means of study support.

‘Aspiration’ was understood differently in different partnerships; one described its enrichment classes as aspiration-raising rather than as curricular:

*We are not looking for curriculum gain in our enrichment classes...raising attainment in X is too difficult due to the low attainment of schools, so we are only looking to raise aspiration through them.*

In addition, in 2003, two concerns about aspiration-raising were commonly reported. Respondents feared that if aspirations were successfully raised, but attainment was not, students would feel even more excluded than at present; a point also made in relation to out-of-hours study support (see Section 5.4). The other concern related to the amount of time devoted to these activities. A number of partnership coordinators reported that teachers in schools were concerned at the amount of time being taken away from curricular work by aspiration-raising activities. The partnership coordinators pointed out that raising aspirations was *'all well and good, but if they don't get the grades it will not help them at all.'* As a result, in future, they indicated that more aspiration-raising activities might be scheduled outside school hours when possible.

## 5.7 Summary

- ♦ The process of cohort identification was viewed as less problematic in 2003 than in 2002, and was now being carried out with considerable confidence in most partnerships. Partnerships used a range of hard and soft criteria for the selection of students in each cohort and cohort membership was often seen as fluid across time and activities.
- ♦ All partnerships were now running a large number of activities linked to Aimhigher. Many of these activities involved contact with and/or visits to HEIs. The specific source of funding for these activities (either strand 1 or strand 2) was not always clear, however.
- ♦ Curriculum enrichment is still limited, but this is an area of growth, especially in the gifted and talented sector. Many of the partnership coordinators interviewed were keen to point out that this would become a key target for the next year of operation.
- ♦ Out-of-hours study support, in the form of evening revision and support classes and study weeks, was often mentioned as successful and simple to implement. Saturday schools were, however, seen as less successful due to the fact that students were not keen to give up their weekends.
- ♦ Transition programmes and support had moved in focus from the transition to FE (2002) to transition into HE (2003). Summer schools, mentoring and student ambassador programmes were all viewed as key to this success.
- ♦ Contact with HEIs was seen as key to successful aspiration raising and modelling of success. In particular residential visits were seen as central to this process. However, it was reported that teachers in schools were concerned about the time taken away from curriculum work by aspiration raising events.

## 6. STRAND 2: UNIVERSITY LINKS AND OUTREACH

The 2002 Partnership Report and the DfES internal summary of the Partnership's annual reports both indicated that partnership coordinators were increasingly making links with HEIs both in the local area and further afield. Similarly, this year partnership coordinators were enthusiastic about outreach activities and expanding them, thus allowing students increased access to the FE and HE environment.

Certain schools and colleges reported links with HEIs prior to the Aimhigher initiative. However, 31 of the 42 partnership coordinators interviewed, especially those in EAZ areas, said they had little to no previous history of widening participation activities. One partnership coordinator referred to past difficulties with establishing contact with HEIs, mainly, they felt, because institutions were rather insular and competitive. Aimhigher, therefore, had given an impetus to such collaboration and the opportunity to continue this work beyond the demise of current widening participation activity.

This chapter discusses some of the outreach activities and describes how partnership coordinators organised and facilitated them and sought to maximise their benefits of outreach events.

### 6.1 First-hand Experience of FE and HE

Partnership coordinators described the outreach activities organised for schools and colleges in their area. These commonly consisted of residential visits and shorter one day events at institutions both local and further afield. Partnership coordinators stated that, in addition to the HEFCE summer schools provision, there were often opportunities for students to attend local area summer schools and, in certain areas, Easter and winter schools as well. Outreach events encompassed workshops and lectures as well as guided tours around the campus, so that students could see the facilities, talk to current university students, gain experience of university life and use specialist equipment unavailable in schools and colleges. This was intended to reassure students and build their self-esteem. As one partnership coordinator stated *'It is one of the best things that happens because pupils experience HE in a residential capacity'*.

In addition to summer schools, residential and day visits, partnership coordinators described a range of other activities organised at FE and HE institutions. A number of areas had held HE fairs at universities, workshops and conferences, booster courses for advanced skills and to raise self-esteem, Saturday schools to help students' raise attainment and student visits to law

courts or to local university hospitals where aspirational events had been organised. A few partnership coordinators described school visits for those students interested in teaching to observe lessons as well as observational opportunities for students with an interest in nursing and medicine. One described a unique opportunity for a small group of gifted and talented students to attend the 'Space Olympics' in Russia. Schools and colleges had selected 'bright' young people to research a space project and to give a talk at the space centre in Russia and to their local schools.

Another area organised a forensic masterclass with the local HEI. This event included activities such as DNA profiling and a visit to a 'scene of the crime' house. At the end of the two-day trip, the students had to solve the crime. The event was well received by staff and students, as it allowed students the opportunity to use specialist equipment as well as experience different subjects from those in their syllabus. According to the partnership coordinator, this helped motivate them to think about their aspirations.

Outreach activities were deemed successful by interviewees, with students felt to be responsive to such activities. Some students were unused to travelling to areas outside their home town and partnership coordinators were keen to open up such outreach opportunities to these students. One coordinator felt that regular activities with HEIs allowed students to familiarise themselves with lecturers, which helped to enlighten students' vision and aspirations. This reflects the findings from the DfES internal summary of the Partnerships' annual reports, which highlights the success of HEI visits.

Due to the success of the outreach activities with older students, several partnership coordinators were keen to include students in Year 7 and 8 in institutional visits, and a few partnership coordinators were looking to develop outreach opportunities for primary schools. These coordinators felt that opening the eyes of students from a young age could only be beneficial.

## **6.2 Organising Outreach Activities through Collaboration**

The majority of HEIs were said to offer a menu of events for schools and many interviewees were keen to work alongside HEI departments to try and tailor these activities more appropriately to students' needs.

Although a number of partnership coordinators were disappointed with the lack of collaboration with Connexions, some interviewees were working closely with their local representatives to organise events for students within local HEIs, local businesses, and at local conference centres. For example, in one area, an 'Extending Horizons Conference' was organised alongside Connexions, to look at the different routes through education and the explanation of job opportunities. The conference was targeted at the widening participation cohort and also involved collaboration with local HEIs, to organise workshops and visits, including campus tours. The conference

involved input from local businesses, and activities were organised to allow students to look at job opportunities.

### 6.3 Evaluation of Outreach Activities

Clearly, all the partnership coordinators interviewed were enthusiastic about visiting local FE and HE institutions. However, they commented that the success of outreach activities could be maximised in a number of ways. In particular, partnership coordinators commented that it was important for students to have practical, challenging work whilst visiting institutions, so that they were actively engaged: merely listening to lectures and going on campus tours were said to be not enough. Partnership coordinators also felt that students were more willing to participate in these practical activities when they were relevant to the subject and the syllabus taught by the visiting school, which would allow students to relate the content of the activities to their school or college work. As one partnership coordinator stated,

*it's not so much any one particular activity. It's more to do with the quality when the students are there that's important. We need to keep the students interested.*

For this reason, a number of partnership coordinators stressed the need for HEIs to work closely with schools and colleges prior to HEI visits to ensure that activities and opportunities are relevant for students. In some areas, such as a communication network between school coordinators and HEI organisers was said to be lacking and this was considered a weakness in their delivery. Partnership coordinators were looking into ways in which this could be improved so that a suitable pedagogic style could be established.

In addition, a number of partnership coordinators felt that it was important to reinforce student experiences of outreach activities with additional school-based activities. The success of a trip to a university (in isolation) was viewed by some partnership coordinators as being short-lived. Most suggested incorporating such visits into a programme of events, so that there was a clear continuum for students. Twenty-three partnership coordinators out of the 42 interviewed, commented that students must have '*the right diet of activities*', which should include what occurs in the classroom. This view was strongly reflected by one interviewee who felt that some schools took part in an excessive number of HEI trips, and stated that there should be a limit to the amount of time students are taken out of school: '*you can't raise standards in school and take kids out*'

Summer schools were considered an effective activity for students, empowering, motivating and raising their confidence in their ability to go on to HE. One partnership coordinator commented that, '*the summer schools I view as very complementary [to Aimhigher]. They are a natural and logical part of our programmes*'. However, despite the overall success of HEFCE Summer Schools, a number of partnership coordinators expressed concerns.

Some felt that they were not well organised and others commented that they should target Year 10 students, to motivate them for their future exams. Targeting a younger year group would also allow partnership coordinators and teaching staff to track students' success and see the impact of such activities.

Despite a repeated increase in allocated places in some EAZ areas, the overall allocation of places for HEFCE Summer Schools in a number of EiC areas was said to have been reduced, and there was some concern from partnership coordinators that only a handful of eligible students had been able to attend. Partnership coordinators were not pleased about the apparent reduction, which represented half of the previous year's allocated places. One partnership coordinator, however, suggested that schools were finding it difficult to fill their allocated places, due to some students' lack of confidence and self-esteem. In another area, the partnership coordinator felt that, due to the limited number of places, students did not want to apply for HEFCE summer schools and risk rejection.

Saturday classes at HEIs were organised in many areas to raise students' attainment. There were mixed responses and take-up was generally poor. Some institutions had tried to overcome this by offering students an attendance incentive and a recompense for a loss of earnings from Saturday jobs.

## 6.4 Summary

- ◆ The Aimhigher initiative has provided increased opportunity for students to experience FE and HE and to raise students' aspirations through outreach activities. Partnership coordinators were keen to organise events within local institutions to allow students to experience extended education at first hand.
- ◆ Outreach activities included residential weekends, winter and summer schools, conferences and workshops, Saturday schools as well as visits to local employers and were commonly organised in collaboration with partners (for example, Connexions and local HEI departments). Such collaboration provided more opportunities for partnership coordinators to arrange events for students.
- ◆ Despite the success of outreach events, partnership coordinators recognised that the activities hold more merit when students are given practical things to do during their visits and that the activities are subject specific. Partnership coordinators also believed that outreach events, such as HEI visits, should not be single events and felt that it was important to reinforce student experiences of outreach activities with additional school based activities.
- ◆ The outreach events described in this chapter, as well as the school-based activities described in Chapter 5, show that partnership coordinators are using a variety of ways in which to promote higher education.

## 7. STRANDS 3 AND 4: MARKETING IN AIMHIGHER AREAS AND OPPORTUNITY BURSARIES

This chapter describes some of the Aimhigher marketing activities partnership coordinators have adopted in relation to the local area needs. These include promotional events for parents and strategies to raise awareness of the initiative among school staff and provide training for them. The chapter also discusses some of the challenges partnership coordinators faced in their marketing approaches.

The 2002 Partnership Report recorded a positive start in the promotion of the Aimhigher initiative. Partnership coordinators described some of the promotional events organised for students and parents and indicated how their efforts to break down some of the barriers to student progression were having a positive impact. The 2003 interviews with partnership coordinators revealed a continued level of enthusiasm for such activities, and all interviewees reported that they had developed ways in which to reinforce the Aimhigher message for progression post-16.

### 7.1 Localised Marketing Strategies

Partnership coordinators were enthusiastic about the marketing tools they were using and were actively involved with schools and colleges in promoting the initiative and extended education. (Only two interviewees felt that promoting FE and HE was not within their remit and had devolved responsibility for marketing strategies to schools.) Those partnership coordinators who were involved in marketing stated that they had adapted their marketing approach to address local cultural attitudes to further and higher education. In discussing these approaches, they were keen to point out some of the barriers to progression as well as the attitudes within their local area that affected the approach they adopted.

First, geographical location was considered a challenge to progression in many areas, where there was a perceived reluctance to travel outside the local area or to move far away from home towns. One partnership coordinator commented that '[students] *can compete academically, but become lost socially and drop out*'. All interviewees were therefore keen to organise outreach/marketing events to allow students the opportunity to visit institutions that they would not ordinarily visit. As described in Chapter 6, partnership coordinators said that they valued and welcomed opportunities to organise FEI/HEI-based outreach activities so that young people could experience college and university life at first hand. Partnership coordinators tried to organise such

trips because, they believed, students would be unlikely to undertake them of their own accord.

Secondly, Aimhigher areas experience relatively high levels of social deprivation and partnership coordinators stated they were working hard to try to offset some of these problems and to promote extended education. They explained that students found it difficult to progress from such areas and from communities that held *'parochial'* attitudes. In some areas, students were not necessarily *'anti-university'*, but were said never to have considered higher education or the full range of HE/FE options available to them.

Thirdly, some students were thought to be resistant to the idea of HE. For example in some areas, partnership coordinators felt boys were more interested in earning a wage, while girls expressed the belief that their boyfriends or husbands would provide support for them in the future. A number of partnership coordinators therefore stressed the need for Aimhigher activities to set out the options available to students in the hope of increasing their self-esteem and raising their aspirations. Some students appeared to be under pressure from their families to bring in an income at 16 and to *'get a job while you can'*. Partnership coordinators felt that activities should aim to promote the value of higher education and reduce some of the mystery about what it actually entails. As one partnership coordinator said, *'The image of FE has been dented locally. [The community] have a very Oxbridge type of idea of university and "what use is that to you?"'*

Finally, cultural attitudes within certain ethnic groups were also highlighted as potential barriers to progression into FE/HE (see section 5.1 for a fuller discussion of these barriers). For example, one partnership coordinator stated that Bangladeshi students in the area were uneasy about the progression into a new environment, considering FE an *'unsafe'* environment, with a different cultural mix. Likewise, in another area, the partnership coordinator felt that some Asian students were uneasy about a transition at 16 and were therefore choosing the wrong subjects, merely to stay within their *'safe'* environment. In two further partnerships, coordinators stated that there was an apparent unwillingness for Asian, and more specifically, Muslim parents to permit female students to continue their education outside the borough.

## **7.2 Marketing Strategies for Students**

Partnership coordinators reported promoting certain aspects of FE and HE to:

- ♦ raise students' aspirations
- ♦ explain the options and different pathways available to students to help broaden their horizons
- ♦ emphasise the benefits of further education
- ♦ raise awareness of the Aimhigher initiative in schools and the local community (so that students within the widening participation cohort, in

particular, were not embarrassed about being specially selected to participate in activities).

Such messages were conveyed through a variety of marketing tools: posters, leaflets, newsletters, websites, roadshows, workshops and conferences and press advertising. Success stories of recent graduates from the local area, applications advice and careers advice were made available as posters and leaflets. Some partnership coordinators had organised websites for the initiative, covering careers advice, information about local FE and HE institutions and links to local education providers. Within one area, the partnership coordinator, working with a web designer, had adapted the *Aimhigher* website to create a local version that was more appealing to the students in the area. Another partnership coordinator had found that including photographs of events on notice boards, leaflets and posters were a '*powerful marketing tool*'. In another partnership the coordinator had helped write a booklet about local graduates who were now working in the borough.

For those partnerships dealing with the barriers to higher education for certain ethnic groups specific marketing activities had been developed to promote staying on in education. These included:

- ♦ family visits to institutions and the use of role models with Asian backgrounds to promote HE/FE to parents and students
- ♦ encouraging black pupils to take part in university residential by emphasising the 'safety' of the higher education environment outside perceived 'racist' areas.

Respondents stated that local FE and HE institutions and Connexions had contributed to marketing activities and worked with partnership coordinators to promote the initiative through presentations at school events and providing leaflets and information packs to schools and colleges. In one area, for example, the local HEI had provided display boards for school libraries.

### **7.3 Aimhigher Roadshows**

Awareness of the Aimhigher campaign amongst coordinators in 2002 was generally low. When mentioned, coordinators were only able to refer to the Aimhigher Roadshow which had visited, or was due to visit, their partnerships and did not refer to any other aspects of the campaign. There was a generally positive reaction to the *Aimhigher Roadshows* from partnership coordinators interviewed in 2002, although only a few partnerships had hosted the roadshow at the time of interview. A number of those who had experienced them believed that they concentrated too much on the A Level route into HE at the expense of less academic routes.

Awareness of the wider Aimhigher marketing campaign was almost as limited in 2003 as in 2002. However, as most partnerships had now experienced the

Roadshow first hand they were now in a better position to comment on their utility. Reaction was, however, mixed. Some partnership coordinators felt that the roadshows were *'excellent...very good at communicating with the students and [they] relate to them very well'*. In particular they believed that the marketing strategy of the Roadshow had been adapted to the needs of their local area, and that schools were better prepared than in 2002.

However, the overall view of the Roadshows in 2003 was not always positive. For example, one partnership coordinator felt that the *Aimhigher* video was poorly designed and that there was a limit to the number of students who could watch the video on the bus. In addition, she felt that the *Aimhigher* supporting literature employed too many 'role models' who were not themselves university educated. Another partnership coordinator was not too keen on using roadshows, as he felt that the effects were short lived *'if you spoke to them [the students] the week after, the impact would be quite high, but if you went back now, I'm not so sure'*.

Some partnership had overcome this problem by recognising that the Roadshow required follow-up activities to embed the messages it was sending. For example, one area had organised a parents' evening after the *Aimhigher* roadshow, to reinforce messages of progression. Another partnership coordinator had started using the *Aimhigher* materials and *Aimhigher* online information within his own activities, while one other reported making copies of the *Aimhigher* video for all schools and copying selected elements of the teacher packs into a one-hour lesson for classroom use. Partnership coordinators were clearly keen to interlink activities in this manner.

## 7.4 Marketing to Parents

All of the interviewed partnership coordinators recognised the important role of parents in influencing students' future pathways and progression: *'it is key and crucial to get the parents involved because so much influence comes from parents'*. They were therefore in the process of establishing suitable ways to target parents and increase their awareness of the opportunities available to young people.

In 30 out of the 42 *Aimhigher* areas covered in this report, partnership coordinators reported that parents had little enthusiasm for higher education, and all interviewees commented on the difficulty in engaging parents, recognising that parents needed to be *'won over'*. Partnership coordinators said that they were 'battling' with the barriers to progression, and looking to change the attitudes of parents who believed that HE was *'not seen as a priority'* or *'not for the likes of us'*. Some partnership coordinators referred to parents in their area as having little experience of HE and few educational opportunities in general, and therefore little knowledge of what HE entails. One partnership coordinator felt that some parents did not value education, favouring alternative ways in which to earn money. Another partnership coordinator felt that some girls saw getting pregnant as a measure of success

in the local culture and did not consider higher education important, as their aspirations were centred on raising children. In addition, a number of ethnic cultural barriers were identified by partnership coordinators, including parental concerns about Asian girls living away from home and negative attitudes to further and higher education expressed by Black Caribbean students. All interviewed partnership coordinators considered such attitudes as a great challenge and were experimenting with ways to increase parents' enthusiasm.

Parental participation in Aimhigher activities was reportedly low. For example, one area organised a borough-wide event on HE with Connexions. Nearly 3000 invitations were posted to homes but only 350 parents attended the event. However, despite low turnouts, most partnership coordinators said they were pleased with the positive and enthusiastic feedback from parents who did attend events. Partnership coordinators were seeking new approaches to encourage parent participation. A number of areas were seeking to involve parents and the wider community at an early stage (from Year 7). One partnership coordinator followed up posted invitations by telephone.

Partnership coordinators frequently commented on involving parents in presentation evenings and mock graduation days as a strategy to engage parents and promote the benefits of higher education: *'It's all about celebrating the success of their children and involving them in that process'*. They also felt it was extremely useful to send out letters at the beginning of the academic year, informing parents of their child's involvement in the initiative. More commonly, partnership coordinators tried to keep parents informed about the initiative and activities through newsletters, which included feedback on evaluations, photographs of recent events and news of forthcoming activities.

While such general marking and promotion strategies were utilised across the majority of partnerships, in those areas where ethnic minority students were viewed as part of the target group partnership coordinators had adopted a number of specific strategies. Examples of such strategies include:

- ♦ Employing an ex-student to work with Asian families from the school and to talk to mothers about the options available to their children in order to encourage participation by Asian parents and in particular mothers, who were commonly in charge of education but would not attend promotional activities.
- ♦ Arranging activities targeted at raising awareness of higher education amongst black parents.
- ♦ The use of bi-lingual or multi-lingual leaflets to explain the Aimhigher policy/programme
- ♦ The use of telephone, rather than written, contact to engage parents' interest in the Asian community and the employment of someone from the Asian community to reach parents (although it should be noted that the

success of this latter strategy was limited, in that parents had not attended the meeting so arranged at a local community centre).

Despite the difficulties in overcoming parents' lack of enthusiasm for extended education, partnership coordinators reported that attitudes were changing. Once encouraged to attend events, parents were often very enthusiastic:

*to be perfectly honest, some of the sessions we have run with parents, we have had to push them through the doors at the end because they don't want to go. They have been very, very keen.*

Another partnership coordinator said that schools had reported that permission slips for Aimhigher activities were always returned quickly and often with 100 per cent return rate. Parents appeared to be getting more involved and partnership coordinators appeared to be confident of a steady increase in parental involvement. In one school, for example, 33 (out of a possible 35) parents attended an evening event.

However, despite this optimism, there was a general consensus that marketing the educational opportunities to parents was generally a weak link in Aimhigher and that the issue needed further attention. It was, however, difficult to ascertain, from hour-long interviews, whether any particular groups of parents were more problematic to reach than others. This is an issue that requires further investigation and will be followed up in the area study element of the Aimhigher evaluation.<sup>22</sup>

## **7.5 Addressing the Financial Implications of Extended Education**

All respondents reported that their efforts to promote the positive aspects and benefits of continuing education post-16 were hampered by financial barriers: *'with the extremely poor families, finance is the big issue. We have gone backwards with higher education due to financial issues'*. Another partnership coordinator commented, *'however hard we're peddling [HE], that is the key blocker'*, and a third, that *'we feel kicked in the foot on this one, because whilst our primary aim is to increase the numbers going into HE, the financial side is not being dealt with'*.

Not surprisingly, all of the interviewed partnership coordinators stated that students and parents frequently asked about the financial implications of further and higher education. Partnership coordinators believed that the concept of paying for education was *'alien'* to many families. Although FE was said to present a financial barrier for some families, who prefer their

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<sup>22</sup> Ten in-depth area studies are underway in a sample of partnerships across the country. These area studies explore policy and practice at a local level and the perceived effectiveness of the various strands of the Aimhigher programme;

children to leave education at sixteen and contribute to the family income, the majority of financial worries were over university education. Fears about the level of debt which their children could accrue undermined parents' view of the value of the HE experience.

Partnership coordinators also commented on the importance of providing students with accurate information in order to break down the myths surrounding the financing of undergraduate study. Some felt that they were hindered by information on government policy provided by the press, which did not provide a positive and full picture of higher education, thereby leaving parents without a clear idea of the true cost of university. However, other partnership coordinators were clear that the furore created by press reports was not simply a media generated '*moral panic*' and stemmed from contradictions at the policy level. As one partnership coordinator stated, '*it's a classic example of one government policy working against another one*'.

All the interviewed partnership coordinators said that they addressed the financial issues on every possible occasion. However, they worried about encouraging students and families into debt: '*we are being very honest [and] we are concerned with the national message that you can earn this money if you graduate – we will not promote this*'. All of them commented that it was important to be honest about the financial implications of higher education in particular: '*We are not talking about huge salaries. We emphasise the fact that the learning experience can enhance life generally and that it has an affect on job opportunities, but not salaries*'.

Partnership coordinators said they were exploring advice for parents on overcoming the financial barriers, to relieve their anxieties. They also promoted the more positive aspects of progression, in the hope of justifying such expense. Partnership coordinators commonly cited the use of information packs for students and parents which contained information on degrees and other courses, as well as information on costs and the funding available to low-income families. Most doubted the effectiveness of such packs and had organised reinforcement activities (for example, open evenings) to discuss the financial implications of higher education and the funding options in more detail with parents. Some interviewees had invited financial experts to talk to parents during open days and evening events.

## **7.6 Strand 4: Opportunity Bursaries**

Opportunity Bursaries were designed to provide direct financial assistance to families with a low income to enable their child(ren) to progress to higher education. Partnership coordinators interviewed in 2002 appeared generally unaware, or lacked understanding of, Opportunity Bursaries. All the partnership coordinators interviewed in 2003 were now aware of the bursaries and promoted them to students, although there was a mixed perception of their value. Fifteen partnership coordinators were doubtful of their success and felt that they had little impact, because there were too few bursaries available for

the number of students who were eligible or applied for them. Likewise, a few partnership coordinators commented that while some families had an income that exceeded £20,000 a year and were relatively advantaged in relation to some residents in the local area, they were nevertheless often unable to support a student financially through university. The fact that Opportunity Bursaries were unavailable to this group was therefore seen as an issue of concern.

In addition, a number of partnership coordinators argued that the £2000 bursary was not a great incentive for students. As one partnership coordinator commented, *'Opportunity Bursaries have not changed the world; £2000 over 3 years is not going to make the difference between going or not going'*. Therefore partnership coordinators were not confident that the promotion of Opportunity Bursaries would overcome the financial barriers to higher education.

A number of partnership coordinators were wary about giving *'misinformation'* to students because they did not know about the success rates of Opportunity Bursaries applications. Ten of those interviewed expressed the concern that there was little to no feedback from HEIs regarding the number of students who were successful. Moreover, according to one partnership coordinator, as students only found out whether their application had been successful when they started university, they had little time to plan financially, something which went against the 'forward thinking' ethos promoted to students through Aimhigher.

As one of the key barriers to increasing student participation in HE was seen to be the transition from compulsory education to FE, some partnership coordinators were keen to point out the need to address student funding and debt at the FE as well as the HE level. While Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) were available in some partnerships, the success of these in helping students to remain in FE was viewed as limited. The main concern regarding EMAs was the application process. A few partnership coordinators felt that the application forms were too complicated and had put some students off applying. One said that the application process needed to be clearer and simpler to target the Aimhigher cohort and their families.

## **7.7 Training of and Marketing to Teachers and School Staff**

A number of partnership coordinators emphasised the fact that school-level coordinators and teachers explained the issues around cohort identification (and subsequent participation in activities) to students and were also important for incorporating aspiration-raising activities into classroom activities. Indeed, ten partnership coordinators were hoping to embed a degree of Aimhigher into the curriculum by 2006 (when the current extension of the initiative is due to end), and considered enthusiastic and well informed staff essential. Whilst they valued the contribution of well-informed school staff, they expressed a

more general concern about the lack of guidance and formal training for school-level staff.

Some partnership coordinators had experienced resistance to aspiration-raising activities from teachers, due to the duration and frequency of student absence from their lessons. A few partnership coordinators were uncertain about teachers' (and, in some cases, head teachers') knowledge and awareness of Aimhigher. To combat this, a number of partnership coordinators had organised tailored workshops, specific training in the opportunities available through FE and HE, or Aimhigher briefing meetings for staff teams, to inform teachers, boost their enthusiasm and encourage the establishment of links and communication networks. One partnership coordinator, for example, described how he had sent letters to all teachers and governors, to help clarify how they should explain the initiative to parents. Such training activities had '*... kick-started a lot of staff enthusiasm and has fired up some staff*' and staff had seen the results of activities and recognised the added value of the initiative. A few partnership coordinators stated that such teacher involvement would have longer-term beneficial effects on the sustainability of HEI links and communication networks, as they would be able to perpetuate links and organise activities themselves (see Chapter 8 for a further discussion of sustainability).

## 7.8 Challenges to Marketing Aimhigher and FE and HE

As well as overcoming some of the barriers to progression in terms of adapting to local area issues, partnership coordinators experienced a number of additional challenges. One partnership coordinator felt it was harder to market FE to students in 11 to 16 schools than 11 to 18 schools. He commented that, whereas schools that cater for post-16 education have an inbuilt incentive or agenda to market further education, schools that only cater for 11-16 year olds do not have the same urgency to promote further education. He therefore spent a large proportion of his time assisting school coordinators in 11-16 schools.

'Initiative overload' for students, parents and staff, was a concern for some partnership coordinators, especially in light of the re-branding of 'Excellence Challenge' to 'Aimhigher'. It was generally felt that there were '*too many names and too many initiatives to understand*'. Indeed, one partnership coordinator intended to use the 'Excellence Challenge' terminology for some time to come, because he was concerned about the confusion that re-branding might cause.

Despite a general appreciation of collaboration within and across Aimhigher areas, there were a few reservations that partnership coordinators were not working in partnership as much as they could. One partnership coordinator for example, felt that HEIs sometimes worked independently of Aimhigher partnership coordinators and feared that they were sometimes '*reinventing the wheel*'. Another partnership coordinator stated the belief that the clientèle

targeted by HEI marketing departments was often not focused on Aimhigher students and felt that they should be working together, as much as possible, to achieve the same goal.

## 7.9 Summary

- ◆ The majority of partnership coordinators interviewed were actively involved with schools and colleges in marketing the Aimhigher initiative and extended education. Partnership coordinators were aware of the barriers to educational progression and attitudes within their local area and were looking to adapt their approach accordingly.
- ◆ Various marketing tools were used by partnership coordinators to promote extended education in the hope of raising students' aspirations, increasing students' awareness of the opportunities available, emphasising the benefits of extended education and raising awareness of the initiative in schools and the local community.
- ◆ Awareness of the wider Aimhigher marketing campaign was almost as limited in 2003 as in 2002. However, as most partnerships had now experienced an Aimhigher Roadshow first hand they were now in a better position to comment on their utility. Reaction was, however, mixed. Some felt they were excellent as a stand alone event, while others felt that they needed support and follow-up activities embedded in the curriculum in order that their impact was not limited.
- ◆ Marketing to parents was seen to be a challenging task and partnership coordinators were looking at ways in which to increase parental participation and enthusiasm towards extended education.
- ◆ Partnership coordinators were also faced with the difficulty of addressing the financial implications of post-16 education and this was considered to be the main barrier in students' progression to higher education.
- ◆ Coordinators now had good awareness and understanding of Opportunity Bursaries. However, a number were doubtful of their success and felt they had little impact due to the limited number of bursaries available and the small amount of financial support they entailed.
- ◆ School-level staff were reported to be actively involved in marketing HE to students, not least through incorporating aspiration-raising activities into classroom activities.

## 8. SUSTAINABILITY AND THE FUTURE

### 8.1 The Sustainability of Aimhigher

Whilst acknowledging the extension of Aimhigher to 2006, most partnership coordinators were keen to point out that the long-term success of the initiative would depend on its subsequent sustainability. They felt that a number of issues would need to be resolved and changes would be required to ensure sustainability.

#### 8.1.1 Funding and finance

Seventeen partnership coordinators stated that they believed that ring-fenced funding would be necessary in the future to sustain the values and outcomes promoted by Aimhigher. Without funding for some level of central coordination or brokerage, partnerships believed that schools, colleges and HEIs would revert to an individualistic and competitive culture and could end up confused and overloaded by the workload that the initiative had brought. As one London partnership coordinator stated:

[the partnership has created] *the structures that make things happen. Unless schools are rewarded in some way, things won't happen.*

Another London partnership coordinator argued that because '*human capacity is not enough to deliver Excellence Challenge to its potential*' some funding was necessary to avoid overburdening schools. This view was echoed by a south-western partnership coordinator, who stated that Aimhigher only gets things done through central coordination: constantly reminding schools, colleges and HEIs that they need to do certain things.

Respondents said that, if central coordination were not available, then support *within* schools would be crucial. Placing the burden of Aimhigher on already overworked staff would sound the death knell for the initiative. Thus, despite the existence of partnerships and collaboration across all of the Aimhigher areas investigated, some partnership coordinators still expressed concern about the level of collaboration in the drive to promote extended education. They clearly felt that further coordination between initiatives was central to reducing '*initiative overload*'. Partnership coordinators frequently commented on the number of initiatives in place that aimed to achieve the same goals. Indeed, a number of them felt that many initiatives were '*reinventing the wheel*' and that this wasted valuable resources. As another partnership coordinator stated, '*everything is interconnected, although some people are unclear as to how everything clicks together*'. The role of the partnership

coordinator was seen as central in making sure that initiatives that were complementary worked together rather than in parallel.<sup>23</sup>

Partnership coordinators were also keen to point out that student finance would have to be addressed for the longer term-success of Aimhigher (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of the ways that Aimhigher funding is currently used).

### 8.1.2 Changing the culture

Partnership coordinators emphasised that two cultures needed to be changed. Firstly, and as stated in Chapter 7, they deemed it essential to embed the idea of higher education into parent/student/local culture. While this was seen to be a long and slow process, changing the '*uni is not for the likes of us*' mindset was both a central goal of Aimhigher and crucial for the sustainability of the initiative. Secondly, they believed that educational culture needed to change. Partnership coordinators highlighted the following ways in which they were working towards securing the sustainability of the goals and outcomes of Aimhigher:

- ◆ **embedding the concept of progression** into further and then higher education into the culture of schools
- ◆ encouraging schools to **establish** their own **links/dialogue/networks** with other institutions and ensuring that all schools feel included and valued
- ◆ **developing teaching and learning** in schools and colleges in order to develop ways to encourage students to fulfil their educational and personal potential
- ◆ making sure that school and college staff are fully **informed and trained**, aware of the benefits of the initiative and can work towards a common goal
- ◆ working on **staff retention** – a high turnover of staff was felt to have the potential to undermine the creation of a common culture in institutions and in the region
- ◆ **making activities cost-effective** and costing them transparently. It was believed that, if schools are aware of the true cost of activities, they are more likely to continue to fund them from other budget headings, should Aimhigher funding disappear
- ◆ **combining Aimhigher and other relevant EiC and LEA initiatives** so that activities are not funded solely by Aimhigher

Finally, a number of partnership coordinators referred to Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression (P4P) as a feasible way for the goals and outcomes of Aimhigher to remain prominent in the near future. The following sub-section discusses partnership coordinators' views and experiences of P4P

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<sup>23</sup> The proposed unification of Aimhigher and Partnerships for Progression with other widening participation in HE strategies may help to reduce the number of separate initiatives with the same aims that can create confusion and overload for some staff.

to-date and explores ways in which P4P could potentially support sustainability of Aimhigher.

## 8.2 Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression (P4P)

Despite some involvement in the consultation process leading up to P4P, and some attendance at initial planning meetings, Aimhigher partnership coordinators were generally unsure about the day-to-day operation and goals of P4P. In a number of partnerships, little was known about P4P and uncertainty was expressed about its likely impact on Aimhigher. P4P was, on the whole, mentioned less by EAZ coordinators than by EiC coordinators. Partnership coordinators with little knowledge of the initiative tended either to assume that P4P would complement Aimhigher or, conversely, to believe that Aimhigher (and its schools) would lose out as P4P gained momentum and overshadowed it.

Partnership coordinators expressed concern that, without a consistent dialogue between the respective partnership coordinators, P4P would be likely to reinvent the wheel and duplicate the work of Aimhigher. The uncertainty resulting from a lack of effective dialogue, was clearly put by a north-eastern EiC partnership coordinator:

*I don't know ...whether the lead will come from the Universities for the North East and Excellence Challenge will work within that, or whether it's a coming together to write plans... or whether we work, as we do now, kind of independently as a partnership in determining what we do.*

Such uncertainty had led one EAZ partnership coordinator to attend all regional P4P planning meetings for fear of missing out. However, while in certain areas all of the partnership coordinators we interviewed had been involved in P4P from the early stages, in others they had not: *'I had to make a noise to get involved in P4P.'*

Partnerships were also concerned that the regional focus of P4P would lead to the local area (which had been the focus of Aimhigher activities and planning) missing out. More particularly, concern was raised that universities' leadership of P4P, would undermine the hard work that Aimhigher schools and partnership coordinators had put into making HEI-school links work. Indeed, partnership coordinators were worried that universities would not understand the challenges facing schools, their students and their staff and the need to work with school-level students and staff in order to make widening participation work. As one respondent stated:

*...my comment to the DfES ... was if you lost Excellence Challenge just into the P4P pot, you would lose the work in schools with teachers and young people.*

Thus, in a number of cases, the reality of the interface and liaison between Aimhigher and P4P did not appear to match that described on the DfES website:

*P4P and Excellence Challenge are liaising to ensure that activities planned under each initiative are complementing and not duplicating existing activity in any given area.*<sup>24</sup>

However, some partnerships were more positive about the future expressing the hope that, as the same people were involved in P4P and in Aimhigher, continuity between the two initiatives was bound to happen. Fourteen partnerships clearly stated that they believed the two initiatives were complementary and that they could work together, ensuring the sustainability of work undertaken and changes wrought by Aimhigher. In most cases, Aimhigher partnership coordinators believed that P4P represented the obvious and logical next step in the area of widening participation, as P4P had a regional remit beyond the limited and artificial boundaries created by Aimhigher funding. The following quotations illustrate the ways in which they saw the two initiatives dovetailing:

*P4P is a much bigger agenda. Excellence Challenge is one piece in the jigsaw.*

*it's almost as if we are already there. It's a funding body really. All of the things that we said other places [outside of EiCs and EAZs] could perhaps do, it is more of a mechanism for helping it to happen elsewhere.*

Insofar as they viewed Aimhigher as a platform from which P4P could and should build, the role of the Aimhigher partnership coordinators was seen as central to the work of P4P. P4P was said, therefore, to need clear guidance and information, based on partnership coordinators' experiences of the last two years, to spearhead the new initiative, to build on best practice and to avoid overlap and duplication.

### 8.3 Summary

- ♦ Just under half of the partnership coordinators interviewed stated that they believed that ring-fenced funding would be necessary in the future to sustain the values and outcomes promoted by Aimhigher. Without funding some level of central or school-based coordination would be impossible to sustain. This was believed to be key to maintaining working partnership between HEIs, schools and colleges.
- ♦ Coordinators were keen to point out that two cultures needed to be changed in order to sustain the values and outcomes of the initiative: the local culture of 'education is not for the likes of us' and the educational

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme/> (sourced June 03).

culture which, in some schools, was still not always geared up towards supporting students to raise their aspirations and achievement.

- ◆ A number of partnership coordinators had not been involved in P4P planning meetings to date. Some of those who had felt that they had had to '*make a noise*' to become involved.
- ◆ There was still a great deal of confusion at the partnership level about the day-to-day operation and goals of P4P. Coordinators who had little knowledge of the initiative tended to be split in their views on the initiative: on the one hand some felt that the new initiative would be complementary to Aimhigher; while on the other, some believed that Aimhigher would lose out as P4P gained momentum and overshadowed it.
- ◆ Those coordinators who were more knowledgeable about P4P were also split in their views of the initiative. Some were concerned that the new initiative was not taking their experiences into account and was likely to reinvent the wheel. In addition, concern was also raised about the regional focus of P4P. It was believed that this would lead to the local area (which had been the focus of Aimhigher work) missing out in the region. Others believed that the two initiatives would dovetail well and that the regional focus was the next logical step in the area widening participation.



## 9. CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

### 9.1 Concluding Comments

This report has focused on the experiences of Aimhigher partnership coordinators during the second year of the implementation of the initiative (2002-2003). On the whole, partnership coordinators reported that the initiative had become an effective mechanism for supporting widening participation and gifted and talented groups of students during their time in, and progression through, secondary and further education. While the picture of implementation varied greatly between partnership a number of overarching conclusions emerged from the data which are presented below:

- ♦ Partnership coordinators felt they had greater understanding of and control over the initiative than in its first year of operation (2001-2002). In the early stages of implementation, the flexibility of the initiative was, for some, seen to create uncertainty and ambiguity as to its aims, structure and operation. However, one year on, partnership coordinators now felt that their growing understanding and experience of the initiative had led to them viewing the same flexibility as positive and complementary to its successful implementation. In short, it allowed for local flexibility which took into account the needs of the partnership, its institutions and its partner organisations.
- ♦ More often than not Aimhigher has been integrated into the wider working of the partnerships and was seen as an integral part of wider post-16, 14-19 and/or school improvement strategies. This integration also extended into the area of funding. Partnership coordinators were clear that it was difficult to disentangle which funds had paid for which activities and which outcomes could be attributed to them.
- ♦ The sharing of good practice both within and between partnerships was seen as key to the success of Aimhigher. Meetings between partnership coordinators and school-level coordinators were often arranged to this end.
- ♦ The official time allocated to the coordination of Aimhigher and the reality of the time needed to undertake this job often did not match. A number of partnership coordinators stated that they worked considerably more than their allocated days on the project. Other partnerships had sought extra funding from other sources (often centralised partnership budgets) to provide more staff time for Aimhigher.
- ♦ Continuity of staff members was seen as key to the stability and success of the initiative. A number of partnership coordinators highlighted the difficulties created by a high-staff turnover in partner organisations and within the partnership.

- ♦ Links with partnerships' local LSCs remained limited. Coordinators were often unclear about the particular role that the LSC should play beyond funding the post-16 aspects of the initiative. None of the interviewed partnership coordinators mentioned the guidelines that had been issued to LSC local offices in December 2002 and which clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of local LSCs.<sup>25</sup> The role and impact of these guidelines will need to be addressed in future research.
- ♦ Aimhigher continues to address the culture of competition which had developed within and between institutions over the last two decades. Partnership coordinators stated that one of the greatest benefits that had arisen from their Aimhigher work was the loss of competitiveness and the growing discourse between schools and colleges in their area.
- ♦ Partnerships stressed the difficulties that they had in monitoring and evaluating the initiative. In particular the following were highlighted as difficulties: trying to 'unpick' the effects of Aimhigher from the effects of other initiatives; trying to identify the impact of an initiative whose real outcomes will be long term and subjective; trying to track students across the pre-16, post-16 and post-18 sectors when no data tracking facilities are in place; trying to report back to DfES when the evaluation criteria change from targeting under-represented groups to targeting under-achieving students.
- ♦ Student funding was seen to be one of the key barriers to the success of Aimhigher. Partnership coordinators were united in their belief that unless a satisfactory way of funding students through university was established it would be unlikely that aspiration raising would result in a greater number of the targeted group entering and remaining within higher education.
- ♦ Higher education visits and summer schools were seen as key to raising student aspirations. In particular, trips to universities (for students and their parents) were viewed as central to breaking down some of the cultural barriers that prevented students from thinking about applying to university.
- ♦ The source of funding for HEI visits, activities and masterclasses was often difficult to distinguish. Partnership coordinators did not clarify the amount of money that came from HEIs (strand 2) or from the partnership (strand 1) to fund each activity.
- ♦ Uncertainty about the future of Aimhigher and its relationship to P4P was expressed by the majority of partnership coordinators. In order to dispel such uncertainty, greater communication about the potential interface of these two initiatives and greater involvement of all Aimhigher partnership coordinators is needed.

Finally, any difficulties encountered on a day-to-day basis by partnership coordinators did not quell their overall optimism, and the optimism of their partner organisations. In the words of one partnership coordinator: *'this is one of the most exciting things I've done. I am thoroughly enjoying my job'*.

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<sup>25</sup> Excellence Challenge Guidelines for LSC Offices (published 12<sup>th</sup> December 2002).

## 9.2 Implications

Given the planned integration of the DfES and HEFCE policy initiatives related to Aimhigher, the findings from this study highlight a number of potential implications for the success of further developments in this area:

- ♦ To begin with, it would seem important to capitalise on the wealth of existing local knowledge and the demonstrable strengths of inter-institution collaboration that currently exist within both EiC and EAZ Aimhigher partnerships. It is intended that, in the future, there should be a single planning unit for the integrated Aimhigher strategy at local level. However, some Aimhigher coordinators have expressed concern about their current lack of involvement in P4P planning meetings and feel that their expertise has not been (and may not be) fully utilised at local or regional levels.
- ♦ Funding for existing Partnerships has been guaranteed at existing levels until 2006. Nonetheless, many Partnerships have been seeking to identify ways to sustain awareness and aspiration raising activities once this funding has ceased. While many have focused on developing longer-term integration of strategies and activities within institutions, it would appear that a certain element of central coordination (whether at partnership, cross-institution or institution level) may be essential to facilitate the purposeful involvement of young people and of schools, sixth-form and FE colleges, HEIs and HE students.
- ♦ Thirdly, while all Aimhigher Partnerships have engaged in collecting and collating monitoring data and some have undertaken evaluation exercises, these two activities have not emerged as strengths of the majority of existing partnerships. However, such activities would appear to be central to ensuring that, at a local level, partnerships are able to identify not only those strategies that appear to be most popular with young people (and their parents and teachers), but those activities that have the biggest impact on both their attitudes and their subsequent actions. Clear aims, guidance and support are likely to be necessary if such evaluation activities are to be developed and sustained at local, regional or national level.
- ♦ Finally, the involvement of other relevant agencies (particularly Connexions and the local LSCs) would seem vital in supporting any local monitoring and evaluation activities and in addressing such challenging issues as strategic planning and student tracking.

As interviewees have indicated, there is a need for a culture change to be wrought amongst young people, their families and even their teachers, in terms of promoting young people's aspirations towards higher education. However, it is also evident that a further culture change, that of increased inter-institution and inter-agency collaboration, may be necessary in order to promote such a significant development and to reduce the likelihood that young people might fail to take advantage (or be unable to take advantage) of any appropriate opportunities that are made available to them. Such collaboration requires both goodwill and coordination and, it could be argued, the resources necessary to underpin both.



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