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MCCAIG, Colin <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>>, STEVENS, Anna <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9450-890X>> and BOWERS-BROWN, Tamsin

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Does Aimhigher work? evidence from the national evaluation

Colin McCaig, Anna Stevens and Tamsin Bowers-Brown
Sheffield Hallam University

Introduction

Participation in higher education in England has increased dramatically over the past 30 years; the proportion of 17–30 year olds who are studying for a higher education (HE) qualification has reached 42% (DfES,2006). However, the increase in participation has done little to balance rates of participation by socio-economic group. Students from lower socio-economic groups are still less likely to participate in higher education than those from more advantaged groups. When students from lower socio-economic groups do participate in higher education there is a higher propensity for them to attend post-1992 institutions than those from the more affluent socio-economic groups. This is not only because students on vocational routes are more likely to be from lower socio-economic groups and post-1992 institutions offer more vocational higher education courses. Students from lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately less likely even to apply for places at elite universities when suitably qualified (Sutton Trust (2004). Thomas et al report that between 2000-2004 ‘applicants from the highest socio-economic groups (SEGs) have increased their share of applications to the more selective institutions’ (2005:15). There are also inequalities in participation at a subject level, by gender, ethnicity and disability. As Reay *et al* (2005:vii) note the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by a deepening of educational and social stratification and the emergence of new forms of higher education.

The government has recognised that the widening participation agenda is paramount in addressing these inequalities; in 2003 the white paper *The future of higher education* stated:

The expansion of higher education has not yet extended to the talented and best from all backgrounds. In Britain today too many of those born into less advantaged families still see a university place as being beyond their reach, whatever their ability.

Following the White Paper, the DfES established the Aimhigher programme, which is funded, in part, to help achieve the government target of 50% of 18–30 year olds having experienced higher education by 2010.

Aimhigher

Aimhigher is designed to widen participation in higher education and also to increase the number of young people going into higher education from under-represented groups who have the abilities and aspirations to benefit from it. The main target group is 13–19 year olds but other key groups include adults under 30. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) manages the unified Aimhigher programme on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

Aimhigher was integrated into a single programme on 1 August 2004, bringing together two predecessor programmes, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, in existence since 2001, and Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression, since 2003. The integration of Aimhigher is designed to facilitate the development of a single coherent plan by August 2006. As the focus of activities and targeting of groups is intended to remain local and regional, a major strategic aim of the integrated Aimhigher is the fostering of partnership working at these levels. Most activity in the integrated Aimhigher programme operates on a sub-regional basis, with some co-ordinated at a regional level, but in addition approximately £7 million has been spent on national Aimhigher projects between 2004 and 2006 (HEFCE: 2006a). This is a small proportion of the overall cost of Aimhigher of approximately £500 million between 2001 and 2008¹

Aimhigher's purpose is to widen and increase participation in higher education among those with the abilities and aspiration to progress to higher education among those currently under-represented. Aimhigher has defined these groups as: young people from neighbourhoods with lower than average HE participation; people from lower socio-economic groups; people living in deprived geographical areas, including deprived rural and coastal areas; people whose family have no previous experience of HE; young people in care (looked after young people), minority ethnic groups or sub-groups that are under-represented in HE generally or in certain types of institution or subject, other groups currently under-represented in certain subject areas or institutions (for example, women in engineering), people with disabilities (HEFCE: 2006b)². Many projects and activities are being delivered by schools, further education colleges (FECs), higher education institutions (HEIs) and work-based learning providers (WBLPs) all of which aim to tackle the inequalities that exist within the take-up of higher education.

Aimhigher operates at a national, regional and local level. The National Partnership Board (NPB) is responsible for policy and strategy decisions this includes allocation of funding, monitoring the impact and organising the evaluation of Aimhigher. At a regional level the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) exists to advise on the regional context for Area Steering Group (ASG) plans, it reviews and monitors regional activities. Area Steering Groups are based at a sub-regional level. Planning and decision making about the type of activities that are provided in the area are managed at this level, the group is expected to include representatives from all sectors³. Aimhigher activities are also supported by Action on Access, funded by HEFCE as the National Co-ordinating Team for Widening Participation.

During 2005 the Centre for Research and Evaluation in collaboration with the Widening Participation Policy Unit at Sheffield Hallam University conducted three surveys on behalf of HEFCE to evaluate the impact of Aimhigher⁴. Surveys were sent to all higher education institutions and a sample of further education colleges and

¹ Based on funding for 2003-04 of £59m, funding for 2004-06 of £240.7m and funding for 2006-08 of £167.2m, in addition to (estimated) Excellence Challenge funding 2001-03. *Aimhigher: guidance notes for integration 2004-08*, HEFCE, January 2004, *Aimhigher: guidance notes*, HEFCE, January 2006, *Partnerships for Progression: call for strategic plans to release funding*, HEFCE, November 2002.

² Target groups are listed on the Aimhigher practitioner website.

http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner/resource_material/about_aimhigher/target_audiences.cfm

³ http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/practitioner/resource_material/about_aimhigher/structure_of_aimhigher.cfm

⁴ These surveys were part of a wider HEFCE evaluation which comprises of tracking surveys of young people building on Excellence Challenge cohorts from 2001, an analysis of existing and linked administrative databases and a qualitative analysis of activity in a sample of Aimhigher areas.

work based-learning providers. All three surveys contained a set of core questions for the purpose of comparative analysis. The surveys focused on which activities are delivered through the Aimhigher partnerships, how the activities are perceived to impact on the provider and the apparent effect they have on the progression of target groups to higher education.

Methodology

The survey of HEIs was conducted in June 2005. A questionnaire was sent to senior members of staff with responsibility for WP strategy at all 130 HEFCE-funded higher education institutions in England. Subsequently, surveys were also sent to senior members of staff with responsibility for WP strategy at a sample of FE colleges and work-based learning providers.

Responses

Two thirds of respondents (68%) to the HEI survey provided their job title, of which 38% were heads of widening participation, 24% were at director level and another 22% were pro-vice-chancellors, vice-chancellors or principals. The HEI survey achieved a response rate of 87% (113 of the 130 institutions). Of the remainder, seven said they had no involvement, leaving only ten HEIs that opted not to participate.

Just over half (57%) the respondents to the further education survey provided their job title, of whom 37% were Aimhigher Co-ordinators, 13% directors, 13% heads of department (or with similar responsibilities), 10% vice-principals and 8% assistant principals. The FEC survey achieved a response rate of 65% from a sample of 205 colleges previously involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

A third (34%) of respondents to the work-based learning provider survey indicated their job title, of whom 25% were directors, 25% described themselves as managers and 18% were chief executives. The WBLP survey achieved a 52% response rate (80 from a sample of 155 learning providers known to have engaged with Aimhigher at some level) (Bowers-Brown et al: 2006).

Findings

The surveys comprised questions about the perceived impact of Aimhigher on their institution's mission and policy; the effect (if any) on its partnership and collaborative work; the nature of its engagement with WP cohorts; the Aimhigher projects and other WP activities institution's participated in, and their effectiveness; the impact on staffing and staff development; and the overall impact on the institution's operations and strategic management. Overall findings were generally positive. The Final Report noted that:

[T]he programme has had a significant impact on widening participation activities. Although its potential is sometimes dissipated by the diverse nature

of the activities to which it is linked, Aimhigher has clearly had a major role in widening participation.

Widening participation activities have grown over the past two years and that Aimhigher has been a primary facilitator, especially in the post-1992 universities and in further education colleges (FECs). Institutions in both sectors have worked more intensively and with a greater number of other organisations and educational institutions, particularly schools. However, institutions and work-place learning providers suggest there is still some way to go (Bowers-Brown et al: 2006, ii).

The intention of this paper is to concentrate on just three of the main issues from the report, the level and type of engagement with Aimhigher, the effectiveness of widening participation activities engaged in by HEIs and the impact of Aimhigher on organisations, partnership working and on applications to higher education. In doing so we identify behavioural differences between types of institutions, including within types of institution (such as pre-and post-1992 universities), that can be further explored in the discussion. Within the HEI category, institutions are divided (officially by HEFCE) between: older research universities (pre-1992); new universities, most of which are former polytechnics (post-92) and a category that combines Specialist Institutions (such as the Central School of Speech and Drama or the Open University) and Colleges of Higher Education (such as Edge Hill College of Higher Education). This category is referred to in tables as SI/CHE. The FEC category included general FE colleges and sixth form colleges, but not school sixth forms. In some of the following analyses FEC responses are divided between those colleges that provide their own higher education and those that do not. Note that while all three surveys were based on the same core questions, some of them were not relevant to work-based learning providers and so this category does not always feature in comparative analyses.

1. Engagement: Age Groups

The aspect of engagement on which this paper concentrates is engagement with cohort groups. We will look at engagement by age groups, engagement by targeted priority groups, and look at changes in the nature of such engagement between our survey in 2005 and a previous survey carried out on behalf of HEFCE prior to the integration of Aimhigher in 2004.

Respondents were asked to gauge their institutions' relative focus on five age-groups. A third of specialist institutions/colleges of higher education (36%) and post-1992 universities (36%) had at least some focus on primary school pupils (combining greatest, major and some focus) compared with 26% of pre-92 universities and just 9% of FECs. The three types of HEI all had a significant focus on secondary school pupils (around 90% major or greatest focus), which is much higher than the FECs (42%) (Table 1.1). This probably reflects that HEIs have to implant the idea of higher education and thus 'recruit' pupils at or before the GCSE stage, while FECs are the natural repository of record numbers of school leavers anyway (DFES:2006).

Table 1.1 Engagement by age group: primary (5-11) and secondary (11-16)

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Primary school pupils (5–11)</i>									
Focus	All FECs		All HEIs		Pre-92		Post-92		SI/CHE	
	n	%	n	%	n		n	%	n	%
Greatest	0	0	2	2	1	3	0	0	1	4
Major	0	0	3	3	1	3	2	5	0	0
Some	5	9	27	27	7	20	12	31	8	32
Occasional	11	20	35	35	14	40	15	39	6	24
No focus	40	71	32	32	12	34	10	26	10	40
Total	56	100	99	100	35	100	39	100	25	100
<i>Age group</i>	<i>Secondary school pupils (11–16)</i>									
Focus	All FECs		All HEIs		Pre-92		Post-92		SI/CHE	
	n	%	n	%	n		n	%	n	%
Greatest	8	8	59	52	20	56	20	48	19	54
Major	35	34	45	40	13	36	21	50	11	31
Some	45	44	8	7	3	8	1	2	4	11
Occasional	11	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No focus	4	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Total	103	100	113	100	36	100	42	100	35	100

FECs were far more likely to focus on young people aged 16-19 (their own students) than any of the HEIs. Specialist institutions/ colleges of higher education were least focused on this age group. The focus on adults (20–30) was similar in all types of institution. Post-1992 universities have by far the most focus on the 31+ age group.

Table 1.2. Engagement by age group: young people (16-19) adults (20-30) adults (31+)

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Young people (16–19)</i>									
Focus	All FECs		All HEIs		Pre-92		Post-92		SI/CHE	
	n	%	n	%	n		n	%	n	%
Greatest	95	72	32	29	14	39	10	24	8	25
Major	30	23	54	49	15	42	27	64	12	38
Some	6	5	18	16	6	17	3	7	9	28
Occasional	1	1	5	5	1	3	2	5	2	6
No focus	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	3
Total	132	100	110	100	36	100	42	100	32	100
<i>Age group</i>	<i>Adults (20–30)</i>									
Greatest	3	3	5	5	2	6	3	7	0	0
Major	20	21	24	22	7	19	8	20	9	30
Some	37	39	45	42	15	42	21	51	9	30
Occasional	19	20	21	20	8	22	7	17	6	20
No focus	15	16	12	11	4	11	2	5	6	20

Total	94	100	107	100	36	100	41	100	30	100
<i>Age group</i>	<i>Adults (31+)</i>									
Greatest	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Major	5	7	12	11	3	8	4	10	5	18
Some	21	29	32	31	10	28	17	42	5	18
Occasional	19	26	33	31	13	36	13	32	7	25
No focus	27	37	28	27	10	28	7	17	11	39
Total	73	100	105	100	36	100	41	100	28	100

Among FECs, respondents from colleges that provide higher education were more likely to have indicated either some or an occasional focus on primary school children (34%) than those from colleges that do not provide higher education (13%). Respondents from colleges that offer higher education were also more likely to have had a major focus (40%) on secondary school pupils aged 11-16 compared with non-higher education providing colleges (16%). The greatest focus for all colleges was on young people aged 16-19. This was somewhat higher for colleges that do not provide higher education (83%) compared with colleges that offer higher education (68%).

Colleges offering higher education were more likely to have had an occasional focus or more on adults aged 20–30 (72%) than those colleges that do not offer higher education (34%). A larger proportion of those colleges that offered higher education (36%) stated that they had some focus on adults aged 31+ compared to 11% of colleges that did not provide higher education.

These findings suggest that where FECs have their own HE they recruit from the same kind of groups that post-92 universities recruit from, ie adults 20-30 and 31 plus. For these institutions, recruitment from underrepresented groups is a strategic priority, while FECs without their own HE and pre-1992 universities can focus on selecting school leavers.

Engagement: priority target groups

There were also interesting variations in the targeted priority groups that institutions chose to engage with. Among HEIs post-1992 universities were involved to the largest degree with all groups of potential learners, with the exception of those in areas of rural deprivation and those in areas of urban deprivation. Pre-1992 universities reported most involvement with these groups. Overall the main priority groups were people from lower social classes, those in areas of urban deprivation and minority ethnic groups. Pre-1992 universities prioritised those in urban deprivation more than the other types of institution.

Post-1992 universities prioritised parents/carers, asylum seekers/refugees, minority ethnic groups, learners with disabilities, looked-after children, people not in education, employment or training, work-based learners and vocational work-related learners more than the other types of institution. Specialist institutions/colleges of higher education were most likely to prioritise people from lower social classes and those in areas of urban deprivation than other priority groups. Asylum seekers/refugees, those not in education, employment or training (NEETs), those in

areas of coastal deprivation and looked-after children received the least attention, particularly from HEIs (Table 1.3).

The most common priority groups for the Aimhigher activities in which the colleges were involved were people from lower social classes (79%), those in areas of urban deprivation (74%) and vocational or work-related learners (51%). The focus on urban deprivation reflected the sample of colleges, as all the colleges surveyed were involved in the pre-integrated Aimhigher programme, Excellence Challenge, which concentrated on urban areas (Table 1.3). One of the main variations by college type was vocational work-related learners, targeted by 58% of colleges providing higher education compared with 36% of non-higher education providers.

Table 1.3. Engagement by priority target group

<i>Priority groups</i>	<i>All FECs</i>		<i>All HEIs</i>		<i>Pre-92</i>		<i>Post-92</i>		<i>SI/CHE</i>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
People from lower social classes	105	79	104	93	35	97	42	100	27	79
Those in areas of urban deprivation	98	74	93	83	34	94	34	81	25	74
Vocational work-related learners	68	51	55	49	8	22	33	79	14	41
Minority ethnic groups	62	47	77	69	25	69	34	81	18	53
Parents/carers	41	31	64	57	22	61	28	67	14	41
Work-based learners	30	23	38	34	6	17	23	55	9	27
Other (please specify)*	27	20	15	13	6	17	5	12	4	12
Learners with disabilities	24	18	49	44	12	33	24	57	13	38
Those in areas of rural deprivation	24	18	45	40	18	50	14	33	13	38
Asylum seekers/refugees	23	17	14	13	4	11	7	17	3	9
Not in education, employment or training	23	17	16	14	5	14	9	21	2	6
Those in areas of coastal deprivation	15	11	34	30	11	31	13	31	10	29
Looked-after children	13	10	31	28	9	25	18	43	4	12

Engagement: changes over time

It is possible to explore how the targeted groups have changed over time, in this case since the integration of Aimhigher in 2004. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) survey carried out on behalf of HEFCE in 2004 (West, Xavier & Hind: 2003, Pennell, West & Hind) has some similarities with the CRE 2005 survey, however the surveys asked different questions in different ways. The CRE 2005 survey tackled age by asking respondents to rank age groups by the degree of Aimhigher focus and the CRE 2005 survey asked about those in areas of coastal and urban deprivation as well as those in areas of rural deprivation.

The main variations are for the groups: learners in vocational areas, learners with disabilities, residents in rural areas and work-based learners. Each of these groups was the target of more activity by the time of the CRE survey in 2005 than was the case at the time of the NFER survey in 2004 (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4. Comparison with NFER survey 2004

<i>Target group</i>	<i>NFER 2004</i> %	<i>CRE 2005</i> %
Minority ethnic groups	72	69
Mature learners	66	
Part-time learners	39	
Learners in vocational areas (post-16 AVCE)	39	49
Learners in vocational areas (post-16 other non-AVCE)	34	
Learners in vocational areas (pre-16)	27	
Disabled people (Learners with disabilities)	25	44
Residents in rural areas	24	40
Work-based learners	22	34
Sample size	67	113

* The 2004 survey included all widening participation activity whereas the 2005 survey concentrates solely on Aimhigher activity.

2. The effectiveness of Aimhigher activities

This section of the paper focuses in detail at which Aimhigher and other WP activities are seen as effective by institutions and some of the reasons cited for their relative effectiveness. As with the sections above on types of engagement with target groups and perceptions of overall impact there are variations between HEIs and FECs as well as within HEI types that the discussion will go on to address in more detail.

All three surveys asked about the type of activities in which institutions were engaged. Respondents were presented with a list of sector-specific generic WP activities and asked to indicate, firstly, whether they were involved in them, and secondly whether they were Aimhigher-funded or not, and if so to what extent they were Aimhigher-funded (all or some). A full analysis of the activities and the extent to which they are Aimhigher-funded is provided in the evaluation report (Bowers-Brown et al 2006). In summary, the activities most commonly provided by HEIs were:

- pre-entry information, advice and guidance;
- visits to schools, colleges or work-based learning providers by university staff;
- campus visits and open days (pre-application);
- subject-related taster events;
- links with employers, Sector Skills Councils or professional bodies;
- community outreach.

All of the above activities were cited by over 90% of institutions. Pre-1992 universities were more likely than other HEIs to have provided: residential schools; mentoring of school or college pupils and young people; tutoring of school/college pupils and young people; shadowing of university students; and community outreach.

Post-1992 universities were the most likely to have provided: subject-related taster events; campus visits/open days; non-residential schools; events for parents and carers; mapping Apprenticeship routes; collaborative curriculum activities; and links with employers, Sector Skills Councils or professional bodies. The least commonly provided projects and activities overall were: road shows, shadowing of university students, mapping Apprenticeship routes, and Aimhigher regional healthcare projects.

Overall, post-1992 universities reported the most involvement with Aimhigher activities. FECs' involvement with Aimhigher differs from that of HEIs. For instance, FECs are far less likely to be involved with residential schools, the shadowing of university students and community outreach programmes, Aimhigher regional healthcare schemes, and (most surprisingly) links with employers or Sector Skills Councils. On the other hand, FECs are much more likely to be involved in road shows, despite a view that these are not particularly successful.

As with the target groups engagement (Table 1.4 above), we were able to present our findings in relation to the findings from successive NFER surveys, which clearly demonstrate that there has been an increase in Aimhigher-funded WP activity. Although our survey and the NFER surveys contain many different questions, it is possible to compare nine activities from the three surveys. Bearing in mind certain caveats⁵, we can see evidence of a growth in the use of open days/Aiming for a College Education (ACE) days; outreach with community groups; parent-focused activities; mentoring of school pupils by undergraduates; road shows; master classes; and shadowing of university students (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Comparison of activities, 2002-2005

<i>Widening participation activity</i>	<i>Actual activities 2002/03 %</i>	<i>Actual/planned activities 2003/04 %</i>	<i>Provides this activity 2005 %</i>
Summer schools	96	99	97*
Presentations to schools by HE staff	93	97	98
Open days/ACE days	81	88	96
Outreach work with community groups	66	81	91
Parent-focused activities	58	70	87

⁵ The CRE question and the list of activities differed from that on the NFER questionnaire, which asked 'As part of your institution's widening participation programme, please indicate which of the following activities, if any, have taken place or are due to take place this academic year 2003/04 and which took place in 2002/03.' The NFER list contained some specific and named Excellence Challenge activities and Aimhigher pilot projects as well as some generic widening participation activities. In contrast the CRE survey of the integrated Aimhigher programme was intended to identify which from a list of widening participation activities institutions were engaged in, the extent to which they were funded by Aimhigher and the extent to which institutions could isolate their institutional widening participation activity from Aimhigher. Therefore, the two lists of activities differed. Although the NFER surveys formed the basis of the first draft of questions, discussions with stakeholders, other interested parties and piloting all led to modifications of the list. Some questions were not repeated, others were but in a different form, and therefore there are some combination problems. For example the NFER surveys asked about master and revision classes separately while the CRE survey asked about master/revision classes, and it is not possible to aggregate NFER data to come up with a meaningful exact comparison in the way we have been able to do for summer schools.

Mentoring of school pupils by undergraduates	58	69	91**
Master classes	61	63	81
Road shows	33	39	57
Shadowing of university students by pupils	24	34	55
Sample size	67	67	113

* This combines the separate categories of residential and non-residential schools in the 2005 survey

** The 2005 survey refers to mentoring but does not specify by undergraduates

The effectiveness of activities was addressed in all three surveys. Although work-based learning provider numbers are very small, it is clear that they think that mapping Apprenticeship routes, mapping vocational/non-traditional routes and collaborative curriculum development activities are effective to a greater degree than do respondents in colleges and universities. Residential schools were thought to be more effective by HEIs than by FECs. Evidence from another strand of the HEFCE evaluation, using qualitative methodologies to evaluate the impact in Aimhigher Areas, also reported that residential schools were seen as effective by HEIs (EKOS: 2005 : v). Pre-entry advice and guidance and campus visits were believed more effective by FECs than by HEIs (Table 2.2). The activities most often cited by HEIs as ineffective were road shows, master/revision classes, mapping Apprenticeship routes, and links with employers, Sector Skills Councils or professional bodies. FECs were more likely to cite master/revision classes, road shows and residential schools as ineffective than were HEIs (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Activities that are the most effective

(NB: HEI and FEC respondents were asked to name up to three effective activities, work-based learning providers were asked to indicate which from a different list of activities had been effective).

<i>Activities thought most effective</i>	<i>HEI</i>		<i>FEC</i>		<i>WBLP</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Residential schools	41	13	19	5		
Non-residential schools	12	4	6	2		
Subject-related taster events	42	14	42	11		
Campus visits/open days (pre-application)	35	11	83	23		
Road shows	5	2	6	2	3	3
Visits to schools, colleges or work-place learning providers by university staff	21	7	19	5		
Shadowing of university students	7	2	2	1		
Mentoring of school/college pupils and young people	40	13	44	12		
Master/revision classes	9	3	27	7		
Information, advice and guidance (pre-entry	27	9	48	13		

to HE)						
Events for parents and carers	8	3	15	4		
Transition support (e.g. life & study skills)	9	3	19	5		
Mapping Apprenticeship routes	0	0	2	1	5	5
Mapping vocational/non-traditional routes	4	1	3	1	6	6
Collaborative curriculum development activities	9	3	2	1	7	7
Community outreach	3	1	3	1		
Links with employers/Sector Skills Councils/professional bodies	1	0	3	1		
Aimhigher regional healthcare project(s)	0	0	0	0		
Other	31	10	23	6		
Total	311		366			

Respondents were asked why they rated activities as effective, and analysis of the open comments revealed that the most effective activities were those that provided ongoing support as part of a package of activities; provided financial and subject guidance; provided an opportunity for personal contact with staff or students at an HEI; allowed school pupils and young people to experience the higher education environment; and tackled misconceptions about higher education and helped change attitudes.

Several key elements were seen to be involved. Firstly, a sense of continuity, because respondents suggested that a series of Aimhigher activities (rather than one event) during the crucial Y8/9 to Y11/12 period, will have the effect of reinforcing the idea that higher education can be a realistic option for the group of young people in question. Secondly, basic financial and subject advice (as offered as part of Information, Advice and Guidance sessions) was seen as invaluable in tackling fear about the financial implications and ignorance of the benefits of higher education among underrepresented groups; again, the Area Studies evaluation drew similar conclusions (EKOS: 2005: v, vi). Thirdly, any activity or series of activities that allow young people to understand higher education through contact with university students and/or staff can have a beneficial effect. Fourthly, actual physical experience of the HEI in the form of visits by the cohort works in a similar way, helping familiarise potential students with the HE environment. Fifthly, activities that target the parents/carers and peers of the young cohort and work on the cultural misconceptions that act as a barrier to progression were also highly valued by our respondents. HEIs in particular have become adept at measuring the impact and thus effectiveness of activities, using feedback surveys, tracking measures and analysis of student application and admission data to support their own anecdotal impressions of effectiveness.

By contrast, activities that were seen as ineffective fell into two categories. Those that attempted to establish links with employers, Sector Skills Councils and professional bodies and activities designed to help map apprenticeship routes into vocational HE were not seen as effective, partly because of the long term nature of such projects and perhaps also the antipathy of pre-92 universities to these kind initiatives. However, traditional WP activities suited to the more academic stream of applicants were also seen as ineffective, such as master or revision classes and residential schools.

Comments suggested that they were ineffective as WP measures because they attracted the type of young people who would go to university anyway. Roadshows were also cited as ineffective; when asked why some activities would be judged ineffective, almost a third cited activities that were not clearly targeted.

3. The impact of Aimhigher

There are many different ways in which the impact of Aimhigher can be assessed. For example, our survey asked questions about respondents' view of the impact on their institutions' mission and policy, about the effect on its collaborative partnership working and the impact on its selection of priority groups. Our survey also asked specific questions about perceived impact on applications to higher education from both vocational and academic routes, and asked for comments about impact on operations and strategic development.

Among HEIs post-1992 universities were generally more engaged with Aimhigher and other widening participation activities than pre-1992 universities or specialist institutions/colleges of higher education. Overall, HEIs reported a good or reasonable fit between institution's widening participation activities and Aimhigher activities, and two-thirds believed the Aimhigher brand to have been helpful or very helpful in raising the profile of Aimhigher activities they delivered. Despite being generally positive about Aimhigher, HEIs were less sure about the impact in terms of increased applications to their institution: over half of HEIs reported that it was too early to say whether Aimhigher had increased applications from students on academic routes, and less than a quarter believed that there had been an increase in applications from students on vocational routes.

FECs shared a similar Aimhigher profile to post-1992 universities in their responses to the survey. They reported a good or reasonable fit between their institution's strategic priorities and Aimhigher activities and were positive about the Aimhigher brand's ability to raise the profile of the Aimhigher activities they delivered. Open comments from the FEC survey showed that respondents valued the opportunity to collaborate and share experience, and appreciated the fact that Aimhigher partnerships allowed them to extend their range of activities and avoid duplication and competition.

When directly asked: 'in your opinion have the Aimhigher activities had any impact in terms of increased applications to higher education from students on academic routes?' FECs were the most confident that there had been an increase in HE applications from students on academic routes; specialist institutions/colleges of higher education were the least confident. Over half (54%) the specialist institutions/colleges of higher education thought it was too early to say (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Impact on applications: academic

<i>From students on academic routes</i>	<i>All FECs</i>		<i>All HEIs</i>		<i>Pre-92</i>		<i>Post-92</i>		<i>SI/CHE</i>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	66	53	39	35	13	37	18	44	8	23
No	18	14	4	4	2	6	1	2	1	3
Too early to say	30	24	57	51	18	51	20	49	19	54
Not applicable	5	4	3	3	0	0	0	0	3	9
Don't know	6	5	8	7	2	6	2	5	4	11
Total	125	100	111	100	35	100	41	100	35	100

Respondents were also asked ‘In your opinion have the Aimhigher activities had any impact in terms of increased applications to higher education from students on vocational routes?’ FECs were again the most confident that there had been an increase in applications from students on vocational routes (Table 3.2), more so than from those on academic routes (Table 3.1). Post-1992 universities mainly thought it too early to say if there had been any impact on applications from students on vocational routes.

Table 3.2. Impact on applications: vocational

<i>From students on vocational routes</i>	<i>All FECs</i>		<i>All HEIs</i>		<i>Pre-92</i>		<i>Post-92</i>		<i>SI/CHE</i>	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	76	60	25	23	3	9	16	39	6	19
No	5	4	11	10	10	29	0	0	1	3
Too early to say	32	25	46	43	9	26	24	59	13	41
Not applicable	4	3	16	15	7	20	0	0	9	28
Don't know	9	7	10	9	6	17	1	2	3	9
Total	126	100	108	100	45	100	41	100	32	100

Respondents were asked to add comments about the impact of Aimhigher on institutions’ operations and strategic development, which were then coded for analysis. Overall, respondents were positive about the impact of Aimhigher, both in terms of operations and strategic development. A third of respondents (33%) reported deeper and broader collaboration with other institutions, schools and agencies. Other responses suggested that Aimhigher had become embedded in institutional strategies. In some cases, new target groups had been enabled and progression routes established as a result of Aimhigher funding. For some, the profile of Aimhigher and widening participation in general had been raised.

However, for 12% of respondents it was too early to say what the overall impact had been. There were some negative comments: 8% believed access agreements would harm Aimhigher’s impact, 5% feared for the future of Aimhigher funding, and similar proportions noted that the initiative was too short-term and had too little impact, either because of excessive bureaucracy or too many small activities dissipating the funding.

Among FEC respondents comments were mostly positive but there was some concern about Aimhigher funding coming to an end. Over a third (37%) of respondents that

chose to make comments said that Aimhigher was having a positive impact on staff and students, while 11% reported that Aimhigher had led to deeper and broader collaboration. There were positive comments also about the development of progression routes into HE, although fourth on the list of comments were those related to fears about the continuation of Aimhigher funding⁶.

Among work-based learning providers most respondents (78%) felt that Aimhigher had benefited the organisation's learners by raising their awareness of higher education, and 73% also felt that it had helped inform learners and employers about the opportunities for progression. In open comments the messages were more mixed for the WBLPs overall, they provided no clear signals other than suggesting that Aimhigher has had a small but growing positive impact. There were also negative comments which generally related to the need for further engagement and clearer information about the possibilities of Aimhigher.

Conclusion and discussion

The evidence cited above suggests that engagement with cohort groups, the effectiveness of Aimhigher and other WP and perceptions of overall impact of the Aimhigher programme are all contingent on the type of institution. Among HEIs there is a clear divide between pre-1992 universities and post-1992 universities on issues such as perceived impact on applications and the activities in which they engage and are likely to use Aimhigher funding for. In relation to their Aimhigher and other WP activities we can suggest a typology of universities based on whether they are selective or recruiting institutions.

Pre-1992 universities were more likely to engage with school age young people than with older age groups, and those in deprived areas rather than other distinct social types. They were also generally more sceptical about (as well as less reliant on) Aimhigher. Some pre-92 universities valued their autonomy and reported resentment at having to select partners and activities that reflected the institutional missions of partners rather than their own, and wanted to continue to develop their own outreach activities and historical links with schools and colleges beyond the geographical boundaries set by partnerships. The profile of activities pre-1992 universities were more likely to fund (mentoring, tutoring and outreach) reflects an apparent desire to increase the pool from which they can select those that meet their inviolable entry requirements.

Post-1992 universities were more likely to engage with those above secondary school age, and a broader range of priority target groups than pre-1992 universities. Post-1992 universities are more reliant on Aimhigher funding for their WP work and are thus more exposed to any reductions in funding. They reportedly benefit more from the kind of collaborative partnership working that Aimhigher funding obliges, and in that sense their institutional missions are more closely tied to Aimhigher. In terms of the target groups they engage with and the types of activities they favour, post-92 universities are often more closely aligned with FE colleges than with older research-led universities. The profile of activities that post-1992 universities are more likely to

⁶ this partly reflects the timing of the survey which was carried out prior to the funding settlement for 2006-08.

fund are those that target local home-based students and their parents/carers, and activities designed to help develop vocational routes into higher education. Post-1992 universities are more involved with the process of widening participation and access and are thus recruiters, rather than selectors.

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