# Partnership working in widening participation policy: collaboration in a competitive climate

MCCAIG, Colin <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4364-5119>, STEVENSON, Jacqueline <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3097-6763> and MADRIAGA, Manuel <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2725-1718>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

http://shura.shu.ac.uk/16678/

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## Published version

MCCAIG, Colin, STEVENSON, Jacqueline and MADRIAGA, Manuel (2017). Partnership working in widening participation policy: collaboration in a competitive climate. In: BERA Annual Conference 2017, Brighton, 4-6tSeptember 2017. (Unpublished)

## Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

**Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive**
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

# Partnership working in widening participation policy: collaboration in a competitive climate

## Colin McCaig, Jacqueline Stevenson and Manuel Madriaga

# The arc of collaborative WP policy: 1997-2015

- 1997 Dearing and the Labour government
- 1998 Excellence Challenge to Aimhigher
- 2006 Lifelong Learning Networks
- 2010 Browne Review recommends freeing up of institutions - age of autonomy and targeted outreach
- 2010 - 2015 no collaborative work funded
- 2015 - 16 National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
- 2017 - 2021  National Collaborative Outreach Programme

# The return of partnership working

NNCO

*The National Networks for Collaborative Outreach scheme aims to encourage more young people into higher education. It brings together universities and further education colleges (FECs) into local networks to provide coordinated outreach to schools and colleges* (HEFCE, 2016, np).

The scheme had three goals:

1. To create networks of universities, colleges and other partners to deliver outreach in their sphere of operation.

2. To provide national coverage of outreach so that all state-funded secondary schools and colleges knew how to access information about outreach activities.

3. To establish Single Points of Contact (SPoCs) for each network.

# NNCO

- The scheme involved 200 HEIs and FECs and was designed to reach 4,300 secondary schools and colleges.
- Thirty-eight networks were funded: 34 regional and four national
- emphasis was on geographic coverage:

*'cold-spots' which may have previously received little or no outreach activity. It was also intended that this approach would avoid duplication of coverage by supporting multiple HE institutions (HEIs) to work together in more targeted ways*.

# Evaluation - data and methods

Data from National Evaluation of NNCO carried out by Sheffield Hallam University and London Metropolitan University (funded by the HEFCE 2015-16)

Evaluation aims:

1. To conduct an evaluation of NNCO networks to assess their value, beyond existing activity, in terms of enabling co-ordinated, efficient and effective outreach with schools and colleges.

2. To work with the networks to help to embed and share good practice in effective evaluation methodologies relating to outreach activities.

# Evaluation Activities

- scoping survey (May-June 2015)
- case study data collection (June – September 2015) replicated 2016.
- capacity building - case support
- workshops
- JISCmail
- website materials hosted by HEFCE

# Data sources

| | Number of responses | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SPoC | Lead | Partners | Schools |
| **Survey 1** | 37 | | | |
| **Case study data 1** | 9 | 10 | 21 | 24 |
| **Survey 2** | 38 | | | |
| **Case study data 2** | 10 | 9 | 23 | 29 |
| **SPoC final reflections** | 19 | | | |

# Issues: collaboration in a cold climate

- Pre and Post 92 institutions have different interests and needs

- Post 1992s and FECs often in direct competition for the same students

- Differential funding allocations

- Power imbalances between the lead institution and other HEIs and FECs

- Residual problems of competitive behaviour leading to a lack of coherent focus.

# Differential interests

- Pre and Post 92 institutions in a given area often have different needs when it comes to WP, outreach, recruitment
- they are not in direct competition for students but exhibit differential interest, motivation and levels of commitment to partnership working

# Differential interests

*I think the first challenges were around getting the partners together and working in a new collaborative approach (as some have seen each other as competition) i.e. for college students. (Lead)*

*In my role, as SPoC, I had no decision power with projects or finances (again, something I did not foresee) and therefore, this has made it difficult to progress many ideas forward. This lack of decision making power has also influenced the Steering Group....  Also competition between Partners meant that it was very difficult to share ideas and also be truly impartial (SPOC).*

*The concept of the SPoC was positive but due to it being a new partnership and funding being devolved to each institution the SPoC was not able to guide developments as strongly as should have been able to. It was successful at an administrative level and facilitated some new links but was never really a Single Point of Contact due to the variety of the activities delivered by the partners….(Partner HEI).*

# Collaboration in a competitive climate

- Post 1992s and FECs often in direct competition for the same students;
- this has replaced a culture of collaboration with a culture of competitive mistrust (Taylor and McCaig 2014)
- reflected in different outreach and recruitment priorities
- some FECs wanted freedom to use own money on own agendas

# Collaboration in a competitive climate

*It has been difficult to be open and transparent when working in a group with competing colleges (Partner FEC).*

*College HE is a fairly niche format and as far as NNCO is concerned we were very much the smaller party when it came to delivery. [our college] did have considerably smaller portions of allocated funds with proportionally limited resource/staffing for delivery. In practice this meant we were unable to contribute as fully as we would have liked. It proved difficult for us to use our allocated funds on shared projects as this often in turn had an impact on increased workload which we were unable to commit to alongside our core business (given NNCO activity was targeted as 'new activity'). (Partner FEC)*

# Differential funding allocations

- Funding allocated by number of HE students they currently have
- leading to low leverage on priorities for smaller institutions.
- unequal funding allocations can lead to differential outcomes
- shaped the nature of what was offered and the level of institutional buy-in where the resource was limited.

# Funding imbalance

*The network would have been more effective if each partner had the same level of investment. In my view, the small amount of funding FE colleges received resulted in a low level of commitment. This seemed to be the situation in our network.* (Partner HEI)

*It proved difficult for us to use our funds without creating unworkable extra workload, whereas I think a larger HEI can filter down this workload among a wider team* (Partner FEC).

*In my view, the small amount of funding FE colleges received resulted in a low level of commitment. Work was done collaboratively and some additional funding was made available but if an institution is already stretched thinly (as many FE colleges are) and only receive a small amount of funds to deliver a project then commitment / engagement is likely to be less.* (Partner HEI)

# Power imbalances

- Power imbalances between the lead institution and other HEIs and FECs
- Some networks dysfunctional where:
  - lead HEI insisted on unshared priorities (i.e. not shard by FECs)
  - perception that Network Lead and NCoP were not independent enough from lead HEI
  - where partner HEIs did not contribute to collaborative work

# Power imbalances

The network initially agreed activity plans – both centrally and per partner. This allowed conversations about overlap in plans and joint delivery. We have had regular (bi-monthly) meetings of management and steering groups: however sometimes information was not cascaded up or down groups and full attendance could be a problem… (Partner HEI)

*There has been some tendency for the SPoC to lean towards the lead institution rather than remain wholly impartial and represent the network as a whole. I do also feel that the SPoC could have been more proactive in engaging partners, particularly during meetings and making them engaging and productive.* (Partner FEC)

*Challenges also arose from being associated too closely with the lead institution, where some wariness was evident from partners and other organisations about the impartiality of the SPoC and the true objectives of the network.* (SPoC)

# Impact on effectiveness

Residual problems of competitive behaviour leading to a lack of coherent focus.

*[The NNCO programme could have had] a clearer vision from the beginning and timeframes and better collaborative work/vision nationally. There was a lot of repetition across the networks (i.e. with designing very similar web pages) and time would have been better developing national resources that we could have all contributed to, or had regional working parties etc.* (SPoC)

# Time factors

- the need to demonstrate impact in 15 months

- time it takes to build collaboration

- time to appoint SPoCs and construct websites

- time to build new relationships with schools/colleges

# Time factors

*Where Aimhigher established a brand and identity over a number of years, it feels as though the NNCO's are still in their infancy with schools not really knowing who they are and what their ambition is.  Supporting WP in HE needs to continue to be priority and this cannot be achieved with short-term funding (Partner FEC)*

# Where it did work...

- good collaborative activity in research to identify cold-spots and areas of saturation or overlapping outreach
- building of evaluation frameworks, logic models etc for future use
- development of tools/resources on Network websites
- sharing of ideas/resources on JISCmail
- developed ways of working collaboratively
- good grounding for NCOP partnerships

# Collaboration can work..

- *Bringing together such a broad range of partners would not have been possible without the network infrastructure as a catalyst. Activities have been delivered collaboratively with a number of partners involved. This has not happened in the interim years since the end of Aimhigher funding.* (Lead partner)

- *The NNCO scheme has encouraged greater levels of communication across all partner institutions, in addition to the ability to work collaboratively, both within the network, and across networks.* (SPoC)

# .. leading on to NCOP

*Another benefit will undoubtedly be the renewed focus for teachers on widening participation (WP) as a national priority and re-energising of WP activity.* (SPoC)

*The NNCO will leave a legacy of stronger (and new) collaborative relationships and activity and knowledge that will inform future WP practice and the NCOP consortiums that will follow.* (Lead partner)

*Just being able to go to one place and get all that you need about outreach and information for our young people has been incredible. We have never had this, rather we have had to scramble around looking for information; but beyond that there is also a single person we can go to for this support.* (FE partner)

# Final Report and references

Browne, L. (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance.* The Browne Report.

BIS 2011a White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System*

BIS (2016) *Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, White Paper, Cmnd 9258, May 2016

HEFCE (2006) *National Evaluation of Aimhigher: Survey of Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Colleges and Work-based Learning Providers* , Bristol: HEFCE

HEFCE. 2012. *Formative Evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme*. Bristol: CFE and the Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University

HEFCE (2017) Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs) Final Report by the Sheffield Institute of Education, June 2017

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2017/Evaluation,of,the,NNCOs/2017_nncoeval.pdf

HMSO (2004) Higher Education Act, HMSO 2004

HMSO (2017) Higher Education and Research Act, HMSO 2017.

McCaig, C (2016) The retreat from Widening Participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new Access Agreements in English higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 41, Issue 2, 2016, pp.215-230

Taylor, C. and McCaig, C. (2014) *Evaluating the impact of number controls, choice and competition: an analysis of the student profile and the student learning environment in the new higher education landscape*, Higher Education Academy, York, August 2014.