

Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004

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National Foundation for Educational Research

Research Report
No 650

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

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ISBN 1 84478 503 3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their thanks to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for sponsoring this research. We would especially like to thank Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes and David Thompson for their support and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report and their guidance throughout the evaluation.

We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the LSE and IFS as the wider research consortium, as well as colleagues at the NFER for their contribution to this report. Particular thanks are extended to Tom Levesley, Elizabeth Cleaver, Sarah Aiston, Susan Merrilees, Sue McMeeking and Graham Taylor for carrying out some of the interviews over the last three years and for their assistance with the analysis of some of the earlier interview data. Special thanks also extend to Julia Rose for her consistently high level of administrative support.

Finally, the authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the partnership coordinators who generously gave their time across three years to contribute to the evidence and insights on which this report is based.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge¹ was established in September 2001 with the aim of increasing participation in higher education amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Partnerships between Local Education Authorities (LEAs), schools, colleges of further education and higher education institutions (HEIs) were established in areas of socio-economic deprivation to implement Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Between September 2001 and September 2003, these partnerships were instituted in areas that were already engaged in the government's Excellence in Cities (EiC) and Education Action Zone (EAZ) initiatives.

From September 2003 the programme was extended to further areas and, in August 2004, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was integrated with the Partnerships for Progression (P4P) programme which had been established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Aims

The DfES commissioned an evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in 2001 to explore the outcomes of the programme and the extent to which it had met its aims and objectives. The overall evaluation comprises² large scale surveys, a programme of case-study visits and qualitative interviews with partnership coordinators. This research brief focuses on the findings from the latter and examines:

- ♦ The nature and structure of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and the extent of any change in these.
- ♦ The type and range of activities partnerships were offering, the extent of any change in these and coordinators' views on the effectiveness of activities.
- ♦ The evidence of the impact and outcomes of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge based on qualitative data, annual monitoring returns to DfES and supporting evidence from partnerships.
- ♦ The partnership coordinators' views of the future developments and sustainability of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge under the integrated Aimhigher programme.

¹ Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was originally named Excellence Challenge and was subsequently renamed Aimhigher. As the evaluation was conducted while both names were in use, the composite 'Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge' is used throughout this research brief.

² Further details of the research methods are provided at the end of this brief.

Key findings

- ◆ The partnerships which were established to implement the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme had matured and slightly expanded over the three years and were said to have led to establishing relationships between institutions and more collaborative working.
- ◆ Partnerships had developed and refined their activities and identified the need for activities such as visits to HEIs and for events for parents, to be appropriate in their timing and content in order to be effective.
- ◆ Activities which enabled young people to experience higher education first hand, such as visits to HEIs, residentials and summer schools, and meeting current undergraduates, were said to be most successful in raising aspirations.
- ◆ Partnership coordinators perceived the future integrated programme as offering more effective use of resources and facilitating sharing of good practice but noted the need for the '*local voice*' of schools and young people to be retained in order to meet their needs.

Structural developments in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

The partnerships which were established to implement Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge initially built on established links between educational institutions. Moreover, partnership coordinators sought to respond to the needs of local students and pupils by involving local HEIs in the partnership, and to the interest and abilities of young people through establishing relationships with HEIs across the country which had subject specialisms and those whose entry requirements were appropriate for high-achieving students. The membership of the partnerships had remained largely stable as they had matured with the addition of new partners including HEIs, schools and colleges and work-based learning providers in order to meet the needs of young people locally.

Although the institutional involvement in the partnerships had remained largely stable, coordinators often reported that the individual staff who represented their organisation in the partnership had changed. This had caused some disruption relating to the handover to the new staff member and their ability to implement the programme when they were not a senior member of staff.

Reflecting on their experience of working in partnership over the three years of the evaluation, coordinators observed that effective partnership working was facilitated by the development of positive working relationships which were informed by clear strategic direction and planning, with which all parties agreed, and effective communication. A further contributory factor was through partners gaining a mutual understanding of each other's institution and educational sector. Underpinning these factors was ensuring that there was sufficient funding and time to establish such effective partnerships.

Conversely, partnership working was said to be inhibited where partners had insufficient time and where there was poor communication and a lack of trust and understanding between partners. In some areas, partnership working to implement Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was inhibited where there was a lack of capacity or appropriate personnel in the partner institutions.

Working in partnership through Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was said to have benefited the relationships between educational institutions within and across the educational sectors. Coordinators reported that it had led to the establishment of links which had not previously existed, and had encouraged collaboration between partners including where the institutions were in competition.

The involvement of the Local Learning and Skills Council (LLSC) and Connexions Services in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had increased as the agencies became more established and partnerships matured. However, the extent of the involvement if these agencies varied across partnerships, with some Connexions Services and LLSCs engaged in supporting the management of the partnership and delivery of activities, and others less actively involved and there appears to be scope for further development of their role in the future.

Engaging with the parents of students in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge cohort continued to be a challenge for partnerships. Those that had experienced success recommended making contact through schools and Learning Mentors, who were already liaising with parents, and ensuring that events for parents were offered at an appropriate time and location and that the content was relevant to parents' concerns and priorities.

The partnerships had continued to develop and formalise inter-partnership links to support the implementation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge which were seen as beneficial. In many cases, these links were related, at the time of the interviews, to planning for the future integration of Aimhigher and P4P and early establishment of these relationships was regarded as of benefit to future planning.

Developments in the activities of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

The strategies and focus for the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships remained broadly unchanged across the three years of the evaluation. Partnership coordinators had taken into account the local context and history of activities in their area in their strategic approach. Depending on the local context, particular target groups of students among these partnerships included white working class males, and students from minority ethnic backgrounds particularly Asian females and African-Caribbean males. Engaging with such students, and raising their aspirations and attainment, remained an ongoing

challenge that coordinators were seeking to address through, for example, offering vocational learning opportunities and working with parents.

Overall, partnerships had continued to refine and develop their activities, rather than to discontinue any individual activities. The activity which was most frequently noted as presenting a challenge were visits to HEIs. Partnership coordinators' observations indicated that careful consideration of the timing, content and approach of these visits was necessary in order to meet the needs of the young people and the aims of the programme. In developing their activities, it emerged that work-related activities, those which provided one-to-one support and the use of theatre groups and ICT-related activities appeared to have been a particular feature in the third year of the evaluation together with learning-related activities such as study skills support.

The use of case study examples of young people from the local area who had progressed into further or higher education were said to be effective in promoting further learning to young people. The Aimhigher Roadshow was widely used to market further and higher education to young people and was generally well-received in the view of partnership coordinators. Some considered that the Roadshow had improved and was now more responsive to local concerns and issues.

The financial cost of participating in higher education was reported to be a primary concern among parents who were said to be influenced by media reports which could be misleading. Partnership coordinators had used specialists from partner HEIs, written information and meetings with parents to ensure that parents were accurately informed.

Impact and outcomes of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

Although the majority of partnerships undertook various forms of feedback exercises to evaluate the short-term success of individual Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities, few partnerships had instituted systematic monitoring and evaluation strategies as yet. It appeared that some progress towards the targets for partnerships, which related to attainment and progression to further learning, had been made. However, variations in the nature and quality of the data available to the partnerships inhibited any overall assessment of their progress. Nevertheless, in the professional judgment of the partnership coordinators, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had been successful in key respects.

Activities which sought to raise the aspirations of young people towards higher education, had been a particular emphasis in the partnerships. Visits to HEIs, through day visits, residential activities and summer schools, were said to play an important role in achieving this through '*demystifying*' universities and providing young people with an opportunity to spend time in a different

environment away from home. The use of higher education students as mentors also emerged as an effective approach to raising aspirations through the work they did with individual pupils and students and because they were role models for younger students. Partnership coordinators also emphasised the need for a school culture that promoted higher education, and high expectations, and a programme of activities that included a focus on study skills and learning activities in school alongside high-profile motivational events.

Partnership Coordinators' Views of the Future of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge under the integrated Aimhigher programme

At the time of the interviews (March to April 2004), some confusion was evident among the partnership coordinators regarding the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P, together with a lack of understanding of the detail of the management and operational aspects of the new integrated initiative. Nevertheless, the majority of partnership coordinators were engaged to some extent in planning for the integration in their areas and, while some were peripherally involved, others were more centrally involved in writing the plan for their region.

It emerged that partnership coordinators were more positive about the plan for integration than they had been previously and cited potential benefits such as the avoidance of duplication through a more streamlined approach and more effective use of resources and sharing of good practice. In addition they noted that more young people would benefit and a wider range of activities could be offered. Nevertheless, some degree of apprehension remained regarding the integration. Particular concerns expressed by partnership coordinators related to a loss of '*local voice*' due to the HEI-led approach of the new programme, uncertainty over the role of the local area coordinators under the integrated regional programme and a lack of understanding between partners from different educational sectors of the differences between them. In addition, interviewees expressed concern about transitional issues during the initial stages of integration and changes in the funding arrangements.

There was evidence that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had become established in partnership areas. Many partnership coordinators believed that the '*spirit*' of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, and its aims of raising aspirations and attainment and widening participation, would continue in future through embedding Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities in schools and colleges through networks and partnership working. However, it was noted that the extent to which this could be achieved was influenced by the existence of funds to support it.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The partnerships had developed over the three years of the evaluation and differences which had initially been observed between those in EIC areas and those in EAZ areas, such as the extent to which they were able to access networks, appeared to have reduced. Nevertheless, regional coordination of the integrated Aimhigher programme could usefully take into account the potential risk of partnerships that are geographically isolated or working with a small number of schools.

The partnerships had remained largely stable over the three years of the evaluation in terms of their institutional membership, with some expansion. While partnerships had experienced turnover in the individual staff and some associated disruption, there was no evidence that they had been significantly adversely affected by this and the relative stability suggests that there has been a commitment to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge among participating institutions. Where partnerships had established good operational links with partners such as the Connexions Service and LLSC, this was thought to have made a positive contribution to the work of the partnership and could usefully contribute to the development of the wider regional partnerships under the integrated programme.

Partnership coordinators' role in establishing relationships between institutions and facilitating networks and communication appeared to have made a valuable contribution to ensuring effective partnership working. Under the integrated programme, it was felt that a similar mechanism would be required to mediate between institutions and to provide advice and guidance on local issues in order for HEIs to be aware of, and respond to, the priorities of individual institutions and young people.

Summary of Research Methods

This Research brief is based on the evidence gathered through interviews with partnership coordinators in 42 Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and supporting documentation such as their initial bids, annual reports to DFES and publicly available data on attainment. Coordinators were interviewed three times in the course of the evaluation, in the spring of 2002, 2003 and 2004. The findings in this report focus particularly on the interviews undertaken during March and April 2004.

The wider evaluation comprises:

- ♦ Large scale longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys of young people in Year 9 upwards and their teachers, and coordinators of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in colleges and sixth forms. This is supplemented by analysis of data on young people's attainment provided through the National Pupil Database.
- ♦ A programme of detailed case study visits to ten Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Since its inception in September 2001, under the title of Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher's principal aim has been to increase participation in higher education amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This challenge, to extend access to higher education to sectors of society that have previously been under-represented, is not unique to England and, indeed, is one of the strategies that has been identified by member states of the European Union (EEU, 2000) as a means of promoting lifelong learning across Europe.³ Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge has sought to widen participation in areas of socio-economic deprivation through establishing partnerships between schools, colleges of further education and higher education institutions (HEIs). Between September 2001 and September 2003, these partnerships were instituted in areas already engaged in Excellence in Cities (EiC) and in Education Action Zones (EAZs).

From September 2003, and following a government announcement of the extension of the programme until 2006, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was extended beyond Phase 1 and Phase 2 EiC areas and EAZs to include Phase 3 EiC areas and all established Excellence Clusters.⁴ The extended programme was subsequently merged, in August 2004, with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and LSC *Partnerships for Progression* (P4P) initiative.⁵ This became the unified Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Programme, in accordance with the commitment in the 2003 HE White Paper to create a coherent national outreach programme operating most intensely in areas of disadvantage.⁶

The extension of the original programme and subsequent merger with P4P have some significant implications for existing partnerships in EiC and EAZ areas. Prior to the merger, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, was based on the

³ EURYDICE EUROPEAN UNIT (2000). *Lifelong Learning: the Contribution of Education Systems in the Member States of the European Union*. Brussels: Eurydice European Unit.

⁴ GREAT BRITAIN. PARLIAMENT. HOUSE OF COMMONS (2003). *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm. 5735). London: The Stationery Office.

⁵ Partnerships for Progression was launched in November 2002 under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Submissions for bids for funding for regional partnerships were invited following publication of the results of a consultation initiated in 2001. HIGHER EDUCATION AND FUNDING COUNCIL (2002). Publications: 2002: 2002/49 – Partnerships for Progression: Call for Strategic Plans. Available: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2002/02_49.htm#exec. [August 2004.]

⁶ DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (2003). *Aimhigher web-site*. Available: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme/index.cfm?i_pageId=1&s_pageType=level2 [October 2003].

concept of local partnerships, each with an element of central coordination, the extent of this was locally determined. The unified Aimhigher programme, in contrast, has a three-tiered structure - a National Partnership Board, Regional Forums and Area Steering Groups. This has resulted in the development of existing relationships, and the formation of new relationships, amongst former Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P planners and practitioners. To date, the various strands of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge (see Figure 1) remain extant with the exception of Strand 4, the Opportunity Bursary scheme, which will remain in place only until the current recipients complete three years of their current higher education course.

Figure 1 Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Strands

- ◆ **Strand 1** funds a range of activities in schools and colleges to provide the encouragement and support that young people need to increase attainment, raise aspirations and successfully apply to university.
- ◆ **Strand 2** provides extra money to universities and other higher education providers for summer schools, outreach work and to help institutions with the extra costs involved with supporting students who come from areas with low participation rates in higher education.
- ◆ **Strand 3**, the Young People's Publicity Campaign provides advice, information and promotes higher education to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in a variety of ways.
- ◆ **Strand 4** provides extra financial support for students through 26,000 Opportunity Bursaries each worth £2,000 over three years.
- ◆ **Strand 5** is the evaluation of the programme. This strand was initiated after the launch of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and is being carried out by a consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies.
- ◆ **Strand 6** provides payments, through the student associates pilot programme to undergraduates to do work in schools and further education colleges; the aim is that they will provide role models for young people and help them to learn more about higher education. This strand was introduced in 2003 and is not the subject of this evaluation.

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 HEIs 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 HEIs combined with detailed interviews with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge 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 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.

1.2 Aims and objectives

This report aims to supplement two previous reports of the findings from interviews with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators by presenting the views of coordinators in the third year of the evaluation. It will explore:

- ♦ the extent and nature of any change and developments in the structure of partnerships
- ♦ the types and range of activities partnerships were offering, the extent of any change in activities and coordinators' views of the effectiveness of activities
- ♦ the evidence of the impact and outcomes of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge based on qualitative data, annual monitoring returns to DfES and any supporting evidence from partnerships
- ♦ the partnership coordinators' views of the future developments and sustainability of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge.

1.3 Research methods

This report presents the findings from the qualitative interviews with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators, which form one aspect of the wider national evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Coordinators in a sample of 42 Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships were interviewed by telephone between March and April 2004. The partnerships included 22 which were located in EiC Phase 1 and 2 areas and 20 which were in areas that were EAZs at the inception of Aimhigher (then named Excellence Challenge).

These interviews followed up interviews that had been conducted with coordinators in the same partnerships in 2002 and 2003 and included questions which related to:

- ♦ working in partnership
- ♦ the impact of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge
- ♦ approaches to delivering Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, including targeting groups of students, marketing and raising awareness of financial issues
- ♦ the future of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and the planned integration with P4P.

In addition to the interviews conducted in 2004, this report draws on the annual reports submitted to DfES by these partnerships, the initial bids for funding and nationally available data on achievements. The analysis of the 2004 interviews included an exploration of the extent of any change from previous interviews with partnership coordinators that were reported in 2003.⁷ It is worth noting that, in the course of the three years of interviews, only 22 of the coordinators across the 42 partnerships remained in post and were interviewed in each year. In 2004, 28 of the coordinators were the same individuals that had been interviewed in 2003. In the remaining 14 partnerships the individual coordinating the programme had changed in the course of the year. Consequently, while broad comparisons between perceptions and views in each year are made in the report, it should be noted that some differences may be due to changes in personnel who held different views, or had different priorities to their predecessors.

As noted above, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships were located in EiC Phase 1 and 2 areas or in EAZs. Representatives of both types of partnerships participated in the interviews. Where any differences emerged which appeared to be related to the type of partnership, these are noted in that text. However, in general there were few notable differences between partnerships which could be attributed to their EiC or EAZ association.

Further development in policies that impacted on Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, including the plans for integrating Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P, were ongoing at the time of the interviews. Consequently, the perceptions of some coordinators, particularly in relation to the future planning and sustainability of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge (discussed in Chapter 5), may have been superceded by the confirmation of details of the policy.

⁷ CLEAVER, E., LEVESLEY, T. (2002). Evaluation of Excellence Challenge: Report on Interviews with Partnership Coordinators. Unpublished report.
CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

Throughout this report, figures which indicate the number of interviewees who mentioned the issue being discussed are given. It should be noted that these figures are provided for guidance and to give an indication of the extent to which an issue was mentioned in the course of the interviews. However, it should be noted that these are the result of unprompted responses to broader questions rather than structured responses to a series of closed or restricted questions. As such the comments reflect interviewees' perceived issues, priorities and concerns.

1.4 Structure of the report

- ♦ Chapter 2 explores structural developments in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships over the three years of the initiative. It looks initially at the institutions and organisations involved in the partnerships, the reasons for which they were selected and how the institutions changed during the course of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Links with Connexions, LLSCs, parents, the wider community and other partnerships are also examined. In addition, the chapter investigates factors which appear to facilitate or inhibit partnership working.
- ♦ The third chapter examines the developments in the activities of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships. It considers the extent to which partnerships had changed the activities they undertook, introduced new activities and made changes to their target groups. It explores the issues around raising awareness of the costs of higher education and concludes by investigating the marketing strategies used by partnerships.
- ♦ Chapter 4 explores the monitoring and evaluation undertaken by partnerships. It addresses the impact and outcomes of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, looking at the extent to which they had reached their targets, and the perceived impact of their activities on young people.
- ♦ Partnership coordinators' views of the future of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge are outlined in Chapter 5. This chapter examines the extent of coordinators' involvement in P4P at the time of the interviews and their views on the possible impact of the merger of P4P and Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge as well as their hopes and concerns for this integration.
- ♦ The final chapter draws out the main conclusions from the report and outlines the resulting policy implications. It considers the evidence for the models of partnerships that have emerged over the three years of the evaluation and the implications these models have for the integrated Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme.

2. STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AIMHIGHER:EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PARTNERSHIPS

Summary of findings

- ◆ Partnerships initially chose partners to participate in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in order to build on local links or to meet local needs. Some partnerships chose to improve their provision by employing new people or working with different institutions. However, many of them experienced turnover in members of the partnership and in key personnel, which sometimes caused disruption.
- ◆ Factors that seemed to facilitate partnership working were: creating positive working relationships, strategic direction and planning, good communication, understanding of each partner institution, funding and time. Partnership coordinators felt that partnership working was very positive and believed that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had created and sustained relationships between school, colleges and HEIs.
- ◆ Links between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and Connexions and LLSCs have developed over the three years of the project. However, there remains scope for the development of their role.
- ◆ Working with and engaging parents was a challenging task for many partnerships. Those that were successful, recommended using contacts such as schools or Learning Mentors to link with parents and felt that the timing, location and relevance of events for parents was vital in ensuring participation.
- ◆ Partnerships had continued to develop and formalise inter-partnership links, in many cases to plan for the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. Links with other partnerships were seen as beneficial and the development of these links at an early stage was seen to facilitate future planning.

This chapter examines the structure of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and the ways in which they have evolved over the three years of the initiative. First, it looks at the reasons for involving particular members, the turnover of members and personnel and the facilitating factors and benefits of partnership working. The second part of the chapter examines links with the wider community and other agencies, including Connexions, the LSC, parents and other organisations. The final part of the chapter looks at links between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships.

2.1 Membership of the partnership

This section will explore the reasons why the partnerships decided to work with individual partners and the extent to which they had recruited and maintained relationships with those partners over the three years. Factors which appeared to inhibit or facilitate the relationships with partners and the benefits of partnership working are also discussed.

2.1.1 Reasons for involving partners

In considering the institutions and organisations involved in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, it is worth noting that they could be in a supporting role such as Connexions, a delivery role, such as an HEI, or a service user, for example a school. Information gathered from partnership bids and interviews with coordinators reveals that there were two main reasons why Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships chose to involve certain partners. The first of these was to reflect links between schools, colleges and HEIs that existed prior to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. The second basis for selecting particular partners was that they were able to fulfil local needs. These two reasons are both discussed in more detail below.

In 14 of the 42 partnerships, interviewees said that partners were chosen to participate in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge because there were **already links between these institutions**. In 12 of these partnerships links existed with HEIs and in five of these the local HEIs had links with another project or initiative such as an EAZ or P4P. In two of the 12 partnerships with pre-existing links to HEIs, these initial links were due to the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinator's contacts within the institutions, from previous jobs and experience, which the coordinator then developed into partnership links. In three of the 14 partnerships it was mentioned that links already existed between schools and colleges, and in one of these partnerships these links were attributed to the work of Connexions.

The second main reason that partnerships selected particular partners was to **reflect and meet local needs**, as outlined below. For nine of the partnerships this involved working with local rather than distant HEIs. For two of these, involving local HEIs meant that young people involved in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge would not have to travel too far to participate in activities, which was not only cheaper and more convenient than involving institutions further afield, but also ensured that the target young people would take part, as many of the young people were reported by coordinators to be unwilling to travel (see Chapter 3). Two further coordinators reported that local partners were chosen as there was a sufficiently wide range of higher education provision in the local area to meet the needs of the partnership. Partnerships also chose to involve local HEIs as they catered for the needs of the local population and enabled minority ethnic

students to go to institutions with, as one coordinator put it, '*more compatible student bodies and appropriate support*'. Furthermore, one coordinator mentioned that involvement of local HEIs allowed target students to consider living at home whilst at university which for some students, was the only financially viable option and was also said to be culturally more acceptable for young people from some ethnic minority groups. (These issues are discussed further in section 2.2.3, in relation to parental attitudes to higher education.) Another advantage of involving local HEIs, mentioned in one partnership, was that the target students would eventually graduate from these local HEIs and, as such, would be more likely to live and work in the area, thus helping to meet skills shortages in the local economy.

Other ways in which partnerships selected higher education partners to meet local needs included choosing HEIs to meet the abilities and talents of the target young people. Oxford and Cambridge were particularly mentioned by two partnerships as being selected in order to cater for the needs of, and raise the aspirations of, potentially high achieving students, even though they were some distance from the partnerships. Three partnerships chose HEIs in order to meet the needs of students at Specialist Schools in the area. They did this, for example, by involving an HEI that excelled in engineering to reflect the needs of students at a Specialist Technology College or by involving an Art College to meet the needs of students at a Specialist Arts College. Partnership coordinators in five areas said that they had linked with the Open University in order to support Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Two mentioned the use of the Open University Uni4me website and a third used Open University to deliver masterclasses.

2.1.2 Change in partners

Change within the structure of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships was apparent in three areas: changes of HEIs involved in partnerships, changes in the schools and colleges involved and, in more recent years, the growing involvement of work-based learning providers. These three areas are discussed below.

In ten of the partnerships, the **HEIs** involved in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships appeared to change over the three years of the initiative. Four of the partnerships recruited additional HEI partners, whilst in three partnerships there were many different HEI partners over the course of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Three coordinators also mentioned that they thought that, since the initial implementation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, new HEI partners had become involved. They were unsure, however, as the schools and colleges were in contact with HEIs independently of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator. Two partnership coordinators noted that they had changed higher education partners in order to provide young people with different or more appropriate higher education linked activities. One coordinator said that they had found

that the masterclasses provided by one HEI were not sufficiently difficult to challenge their brightest students and so had chosen to involve another HEI which provided masterclasses at a higher level. This appeared to have been more effective, as indicated by the comment of the coordinator that: *'[the] student himself said it was the only time he felt really stretched'*. One coordinator, in an EAZ area which received less Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge funding than EIC areas, also mentioned that they were only able to maintain links with their higher education partners that were able to fund activities themselves, and had lost contact with those without funding as the partnership was unable to afford the cost of buying in activities.

In six of the partnerships there had been a change in the number of **schools and colleges** involved, with four partnerships experiencing an increase in such institutional involvement. This was said to be due to a rise in student population in one area, while in another the partnership had chosen to involve a school that had previously not been involved. This school had a large ethnic minority population, the needs of whom had only recently been recognised in terms of widening participation. In two partnerships a further education partner had ceased involvement. This was attributed, in both cases, to staff changes and a lack of organisation in the colleges concerned.

In the interviews conducted with partnership coordinators most recently (in 2004), three coordinators mentioned that they were trying to recruit a **work-based learning provider** to try to strengthen the focus of the partnerships on vocational routes into higher education. This recent emphasis on vocational routes into higher education is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.1.3 Staff turnover within the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership

As discussed in Chapter 1, 20 partnership coordinators in these 42 partnerships changed over the three years of the initiative. Many of the partnerships also experienced staff turnover amongst their partner schools, colleges and HEIs. In some cases this was a positive experience as it led to an increase in the number of people involved in the initiative. In other cases it caused disruption and confusion.

A total of 21 coordinators in the interviews conducted in 2004, said that their **contacts in schools and colleges had changed** over the past year. In some cases this was simply due to people leaving the area or changing jobs and interviewees did not attribute it to a wider issue of high levels of staff turnover in schools in the area. Seven coordinators said that they found the staff turnover in relation to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was nonetheless problematic. One coordinator even said that she felt that the high turnover of staff responsible for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in some schools in her area had seriously limited the impact of the initiative. This turnover in staff caused two main issues for the partnership: problems with the handover

between one school or college coordinator and another; and problems to do with the status of the role.

Five partnerships had problems with the **handover**. In three partnerships, coordinators said they had problems establishing a new contact for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in schools and colleges after someone had left and there was sometimes no-one available to fill the post. Two other coordinators had experienced disruption with a change in schools contacts when there was not a smooth hand-over of information and responsibilities from one person to the next. As one coordinator put it *'It's difficult to know how much information has been passed on'*.

Four coordinators had encountered problems with the **status** of the coordination of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in schools. Three coordinators found that in their areas, once Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had been established the responsibility in schools and colleges was passed from senior to more junior staff who, although enthusiastic, did not have the power to implement changes. A partnership coordinator in another area, where there was a high turnover of school coordinators, believed that staff had given up Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge responsibilities because they had not been given any extra time. As several school coordinators had said to him: *'Look ..., for one point this [amount of work] isn't worth it'*.

Although the issue of staff turnover did not appear to have led to a extensive change in approach, coordinators had instigated some changes in response to the issue. A partnership coordinator in one area, when faced with a problem of too much work for school coordinators, was able to tackle it by providing more administrative support within the partnership to minimise the burden on school and college contacts. Another partnership coordinator took a different approach to this issue and had transferred more responsibility onto school contacts over the past year in order to allow him to take a more strategic focus. Although the partnership had not experienced staff turnover, the people involved had taken on differing roles. In two partnerships, coordinators mentioned that they had employed additional staff in order to address problems that had arisen or to support staff in school. One coordinator described how she had seconded a Connexions employee to support students in schools and colleges and to support and inform teachers about vocational routes into higher education which they were not aware of. A second coordinator had employed an additional person in order to try to embed mentoring in the schools and colleges involved in the partnership and funded this role partly through Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and partly through EiC.

Only three partnership coordinators specifically mentioned that there had been **staff changes in their higher education partners**. Two coordinators said that the staff change had been positive, as their point of contact in the

institution had changed from one person to a Widening Participation team, as a result of widening participation becoming more of a priority for the HEI. Another coordinator, who noted a constant turnover in higher education contacts, did not have such a positive experience and however felt that for one of her higher education partners in particular, widening participation was seen as a low priority.

2.1.4 Factors facilitating or inhibiting relationships with partners

Drawing on their experience of working in partnership with schools, colleges and HEIs to deliver Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge at a local level, partnership coordinators identified a range of factors which they considered had contributed to the development of effective partnerships. In addition, they mentioned elements which either could, or had, inhibited the development of such partnerships. The factors which had facilitated these partnerships can be summarised as:

- ◆ positive working relationships
- ◆ strategic direction and planning
- ◆ good communication
- ◆ understanding of each partner institution
- ◆ funding
- ◆ time.

These aspects of partnership working do not operate in isolation but are inter-related and the extent to which partnership coordinators mentioned them reflects their concerns and experiences. Nevertheless, their perspectives on each of these, as discussed below, provide an insight into the ways in which Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had sought to operate effectively at a local level.

Eighteen of the interviewees made reference to the importance of **positive working relationships** in developing a partnership. Three of these felt that the pre-existence of relationships in their area had facilitated such partnership working. For example, one coordinator mentioned that embarking on a dialogue with the relevant individuals was easier where a link already existed. Developing positive working relationships was said by interviewees in two partnerships to be underpinned by trust between the partners. The comments of five interviewees suggest that such trust could be engendered through successful delivery of the initiative and through the time spent building relationships which included sharing both positive and negative experiences. The latter was said by one coordinator to require individuals who were open and willing to share such experiences. A central factor that emerged as contributing to positive working relationships, and to the partnership as a whole, was the personalities of the individuals concerned. As one interviewee

expressed it *'like with most things, it's personalities...it boils down to the motivation and commitment of the people doing the job'*.

One coordinator noted that such relationships need to be supported by appropriate management structures. This view was reflected in the comments of nine further interviewees who mentioned the value of **strategic direction and planning** in ensuring effective partnership working. Five interviewees highlighted the importance of having senior staff *'with clout in their institutions'*, and the authority to make decisions, represented on strategic planning groups. Establishing and communicating a clear plan, with agreed protocols and procedures as necessary, was noted by two interviewees as valuable in developing the partnership. However, three partnerships noted the importance of ensuring that partners felt that they had ownership. This was emphasised in the case of one partnership coordinator who felt that the success of the partnership was partly due to it responding to the requests and interests of teachers. It appears, therefore, that a balance is required between clear strategic direction and ensuring ownership of the initiative by the partners at all levels.

As might be expected, **good communication** was mentioned by nine partnership coordinators as a contributory factor to developing effective partnerships. Reflecting the comments above, one partnership coordinator mentioned the importance of consultation. A second highlighted the necessity of clarity in the aims and roles of all partners, observing that *'everyone has to be clear about what they are doing and why they are doing it'*. Communication was said by two partnership coordinators to be facilitated by *'a nominated person who is the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge person in that institution'* with whom to liaise. Or, as the second interviewee expressed it: *'having a link person in each of the colleges and HEIs who is a one-stop-shop and who you can communicate with and make things happen'*. Good communication is related to developing good working relationships noted above and interviewees commented on the value of maintaining contact and taking a friendly approach and communicating the rationale for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge effectively in order to develop such relationships.

A further contributory factor, mentioned by six interviewees, was that all partners needed to gain an **understanding of the partner institutions**. While this entailed knowing what each partner could contribute to the partnership as a whole, it was also said to involve recognising the capacity of each partner and any related constraints. One partnership coordinator cautioned that it was important to be *'realistic'* about what a partner could provide and a second noted the need to take into consideration the priorities and agendas of each partner.

The final two factors which were said by partnership coordinators to have facilitated the partnership were **funding** (four interviewees) and **time** (three interviewees). Two interviewees highlighted the importance of clarity or transparency in the funding arrangements and a third mentioned the value of partners working together to develop a bid for additional funding for a specific local element of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, even if the bid was unsuccessful, in establishing the partnership. The need for partners to have sufficient time to contribute to the partnership was mentioned. In one instance, the partnership coordinator considered that the extent to which a coordinator in a partner organisation had sufficient time was related to the perceived status of the initiative in their institution. Indeed, lack of time and funding both emerged as factors which had constrained the partnership, as indicated below.

Overall, fewer partnership coordinators commented on the factors which had inhibited the development of their partnerships, and their comments often reflected the converse to the facilitating factors noted above. Lack of dedicated **time** for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was a concern in nine partnerships. This had proved frustrating for institutional coordinators and had led to difficulties for partnership coordinators in arranging meetings and bringing coordinators together to share and develop their working relationships in the way that was said to contribute to effective partnership working above. **Poor communication and lack of trust** was said to inhibit positive partnership working by five interviewees. **Lack of understanding** of partner organisations was mentioned by six partnership coordinators and included partners '*fighting for territory*' and having a lack of flexibility in approach. The **lack of capacity** to respond in some organisations was raised by four interviewees, one of whom acknowledged the other pressures in organisations, and was surprised that this had not had a greater negative effect. **Personnel** issues were mentioned by two partnership coordinators, one of whom noted the need for the individual to have status. The second had experienced changes of personnel which, as discussed in section 2.1.3, had led to limited success of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in the partner institution. Finally, two partnership coordinators mentioned that partnership working had been inhibited where the approach had been too '*top down*' and one cited recent developments in integrating Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P in this respect. The recent developments in integrating the programmes, and the effect on partnerships is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

2.1.5 Benefits of partnership working

Many of the partnership coordinators were very positive about the way in which the partners had cooperated and worked together over the three years of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Ten coordinators felt that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had **forged links with HEIs** that did not exist before and, in the words of one coordinator: '*put universities and schools into regular contact*'. Another coordinator said that '*we are now much more aware of*

local HEIs'. A further ten coordinators felt the initiative had been very successful in **encouraging collaboration** between all members of the partnerships. One coordinator described how he saw one of the most positive aspects of the initiative as:

allowing institutions and partnerships and collaborations to work together, allowing people to be innovative and creative which wouldn't have happened if the initiative hadn't gone ahead.

A second coordinator felt that partnership working had been '*absolutely brilliant*' and a third believed that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had helped break down barriers between institutions which were previously in competition. Four coordinators believed that the collaboration between partners had improved over the three years of the project. One coordinator explained:

If you look back at the first year, when we were establishing the routines within schools and colleges, and now, the work [has been done] changing relationships and developing trust elements that were perhaps not there. Now better relationships are being cemented.

Indeed, another coordinator felt that: '*The collaboration has improved considerably...collaboration and partnership working on a scale not previously seen in the city*'.

Two coordinators felt that through partnership working the initiative had become more embedded and that the higher education partners were taking more of an active role and working with the schools, independently of the partnership coordinators.

2.1.6 Summary

In summary, although partnerships were careful in choosing their partners at the outset of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in order to meet local needs or to build on local links, many of them experienced turnover in members and also in key personnel. In some cases this turnover was beneficial, as it was a result of learning from experience and improving provision by employing new people or focusing on better quality activities. In other cases, staff and membership turnover caused disruption and limited the potential impact of the initiative. Other identified factors that inhibited partnership working were lack of time, understanding, trust and capacity and poor communication. Facilitating factors identified related to: creating positive working relationships, strategic direction and planning, good communication, understanding of each partner institution, funding and time. The partnership coordinators were generally very positive about the benefits of partnership working, many of whom stated that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had created and sustained relationships between schools, colleges and HEIs that

did not previously exist and had given the institutions the opportunity to work together for a common aim.

2.2 Relationships with other agencies and the wider community

This section will discuss the developing links between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, LSCs and Connexions and the factors that coordinators considered inhibited or contributed to developing these links. It will investigate the extent and nature of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities which involved the local community, focusing particularly on links with employers, parents, other local initiatives and the wider community.

2.2.1 Relationships with Connexions

The Connexions service was not yet operational in most of the partnerships at the time of the first interviews with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators in 2002. The situation had changed by 2003, although interviews with partnership coordinators revealed that, in 13 of the sample partnerships, Connexions was still in its early stages. In more than half of the partnerships, representatives of Connexions attended Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge steering groups and, in 12, the relationship between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and Connexions was said to be developing. In addition, ten of the partnerships were described as having a close relationship with their Connexions service.

Interviews with partnership coordinators in 2004 suggested that the development of such positive working relationships with Connexions was continuing. More than half of the partnership coordinators (26) said that they were content with the involvement of the Connexions service in supporting Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. The partnership coordinators who were interviewed did not specifically mention whether or not they had drawn on the experience of other partnerships in developing their relationships with the Connexions Service and, given the variations in experience, there may be scope for such sharing of practice in future. Nevertheless, the involvement of the Connexions Service went beyond representation on the steering group in a number of instances and coordinators noted a variety of contributions made by staff from the Service.

In terms of **managing** Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, Connexions personnel had, in some cases, participated in strategic planning and agreeing protocols and procedures and in providing additional funding for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities. A further contribution made by the Connexions Service, which appeared to be increasing, was in sharing data with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and exploring mechanisms

for tracking students in order to inform monitoring and evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge at a local level.

Connexions personnel in some of the partnerships visited were also said to have contributed to the **delivery** of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. For example, there were instances of joint events which Connexions staff were involved in planning and organising such as higher education fairs, parents events and conferences. In one partnership, Connexions staff also provided briefings for students before the event and a debriefing following it. Other contributions that were mentioned by partnership coordinators included Connexions staff attending school coordinator meetings to provide an update on new developments in the higher education sector and the use of Connexions facilities for conferences and events. In one partnership, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge funding contributed towards Connexions Personal Advisers who '*wear an Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge hat*' in schools.

In these partnerships, the relationship with Connexions was positive and developing, albeit, in one case, that it was the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership that was '*the instigator at pulling Connexions along*', as the coordinator explained. However, ten of the partnership coordinators who were interviewed identified areas for further development in their relationship with Connexions. Their specific concerns related to the pressures on the Service and the nature of their target groups, personnel changes and data sharing. One partnership coordinator commented that Connexions in the area '*seem terribly stretched*' and had a focus on students who were '*less able*'. A similar perception was expressed by another coordinator who felt that Connexions had '*limited capacity to provide support for Gifted and Talented and Widening Participation students*' which affected the extent to which they could support Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. A third coordinator said that too great an emphasis was on young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and was '*a bit peeved that what was supposed to be a universal service, is not*'. The second factor that three coordinators had found challenging in building effective relationships with the Connexions service was the frequent changes in personnel. Finally, one coordinator related problems in sharing data between the agencies. Although acknowledging that this was improving and observing that '*some data has been coming through from this year*', he stated '*...it still feels difficult*'.

2.2.2 Relationships with Local Learning and Skills Councils

Interviews with partnership coordinators in 2002 indicated that LLSCs had a largely passive involvement with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships. As with the Connexions Service, LLSCs were at a relatively early stage of their development at that time. Their involvement appeared to have increased to a certain extent by 2003, when some partnerships reported that LLSCs were represented on the steering group and provided funding.

In 2004, however, 13 of the 42 partnerships who outlined their relationship with the LLSCs described the LLSC as having limited involvement. For example, one partnership said that the LLSC *'is a figure in the background, they come to meetings but they have a passive role'*. Four of the interviewed Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators who were interviewed commented that the relationship between them and the LLSC was challenging. In two cases, this was due to changes in personnel which were said to have made it difficult to build productive relationships. In a third partnership, the coordinator had experienced difficulties in accessing relevant data and in communicating with the LLSC who *'never respond'*. The fourth partnership highlighted the tension between the LLSC's roles when he said that he had *'a lot of time for the LSC coordinator but not the LSC as such, they struggle with whether they want to be on our side or whether they're going to be involved in area-wide inspections'*.

Around 18 of the partnerships observed that their LLSC had been helpful, including six who said that they had received additional funds from the LLSC. In addition, LLSC representatives were said to attend meetings and to be proactive in making suggestions about strategies. Interviewees in three partnerships noted that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was seen by LLSCs as contributing to wider strategic aims for their organisations such as their 14 to 19 and widening participation strategies. A further contribution made by the LLSC in one area was facilitating communication between agencies through using their existing networks. The value of specific individuals with commitment and enthusiasm was noted by two coordinators who commented that a change in personnel had led to an improvement in the relationship with the LLSC.

Overall, it appears that the relationships between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and Connexions and LLSCs have continued to develop over the three years of the evaluation in many areas. However, there remains scope for development of more active contributions from Connexions and LLSCs and the evidence from some partnerships (where such relationships exist) indicates that there can be a greater role for these agencies in supporting Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. While productive working relationships may have developed because the relatively new Connexions and LSC organisations have become more established in their areas, the interviews suggest that, in many cases, the coordinators have been proactive in engaging with these partner agencies.

2.2.3 Engaging parents

While the interviewees in 2004 noted the value of involving parents in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities, many also noted the challenge they faced in engaging parents. This reflected the comments of many coordinators in 2003. Where interviewees in 2004 commented further, some remarked that some parents did not perceive higher education as a possible

opportunity for their child, as one partnership coordinator commented ‘*it’s not in the parental attitude, particularly in white working class families*’ while a second observed that:

we’ve started chipping away at something very large and it is an area in which we want to move forward...this whole thing about widening participation is not just about young people, it is about re-engaging communities.

It appears, therefore, that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators were seeking to engage parents in a context where, as was reported in 2003⁸, parents had little enthusiasm for higher education and did not perceive it as being ‘*for the likes of us*’. In addition, in 2003, parents were said to lack experience, and therefore understanding, of higher education and in some cases to not value education. The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of parents were also said to present a barrier, in some cases, with, for example, parental concerns about young Asian women living away from home (this is discussed further in Section 3.2). Although three years into the initiative, partnership coordinators continued to find engaging parents to be a challenge, they identified the main ways in which they had sought to accommodate this context and target parents through Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, as outlined below.

Twelve of the interviewees mentioned that contact with parents was mainly **through schools**. This included a presence at existing parents’ evenings and options’ evenings, and through school newsletters. While one interviewee noted that schools’ direct relationship with parents was instrumental in engaging them in considering the possibilities for their child’s future, another two considered that schools could be more proactive and had experienced a ‘*varied level of impact*’ between different schools. One coordinator who had organised parental events centrally believed that this was more effective than leaving the responsibility with schools.

Eleven of the partnership coordinators indicated that contact with parents occurred **through the activities** that were offered to young people. This included parents attending events and visits to HEIs with their child and through attending pre-summer school events. One coordinator said that the activities acted as a mechanism for making contact with parents and, in an area where e-mail mentoring was used between higher education students and young people, an unexpected outcome had been the involvement of parents who became interested first in finding out more about who their child was e-mailing, thence in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge.

⁸ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships’ View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

Six of the partnership coordinators said that they had held **events which were for parents only**. In one instance this was in response to the students' requests for parents not to attend events with them. Such events had included advice on the support parents could provide for their child when studying, and with examinations. Advice relating to finance was a further area addressed by some partnerships although this was said to be a challenge by one who observed that '*the most common issue parents want to know about is finance, and it is very hard to know exactly what the financial situation [will be] say in 2008*'. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Coordinators' reflections on their experience of engaging parents provide some insights into strategies that they considered had been successful. Two coordinators felt that having **face-to-face contact** with parents was beneficial in gaining their involvement and a third said that if the students were interested and enthused, this facilitated gaining the interest of their parents. Another partnership had used Learning Mentors, whose role was partially funded through Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, to engage with mentees' parents who had no history of higher education. Consideration of the **timing and location** of any activities or events emerged as important. For example, one partnership had located their activity in the local football stadium and a second held a city centre event late on a Saturday afternoon to coincide with parents shopping. **Targeting the content of activities** and events to meet the identified needs of parents, such as their lack of understanding of higher education noted above, had also proved successful for some partnerships. For example, one had produced a '*progression pack*' which aimed to '*demystify*' the routes for parents and a second held a session to assist them in understanding '*incomprehensible*' HEI prospectuses. In addition, one partnership had engaged a motivational speaker and two others had provided presentations on supporting your child with studying and examinations, as noted above, which had been well-received. Finally, a partnership reported success with '*student profiles*' of students in their areas who had successfully progressed to higher education.

Some of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators who were interviewed mentioned that they were seeking to develop their contact with parents through, for example, working in partnership with Connexions, representation at the town fair, use of websites, and having stands at parents' evenings staffed by student mentors and student ambassadors. One partnership coordinator saw a role for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge as a brand name in the future for parents, commenting that:

I think with parents it is making sure over the next few years that they are aware that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge is the place to go for information about higher education and whether it be part of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in Connexions or in the schools, but it is the branding they need to look for.

Overall, it appears that responding to the need to engage with parents had proved challenging for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators. Where they had success, this seemed to be where they had considered the route through which to make contact including using other contacts such as schools or Learning Mentors as appropriate. In addition, the timing and location of any event of activity and the relevance of the content of the activity emerged as a key consideration.

2.2.4 Working with the wider community

In 2003, the interviews with partnership coordinators revealed limited involvement with employers and the wider community. Although there were instances of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships working together with employers and the community to support their activities, this was not extensive across the partnerships. Involvement of employers and the local community did not appear to have developed noticeably by 2004 and indeed, two partnership coordinators commented that this was an area of weakness and an '*omission*'.

Of the partnerships who commented on the extent of employer involvement in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in 2004, five mentioned that they had relatively established relationships, albeit in two of the cases related to other strategies locally rather than having been instigated by Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. The three partnerships who had engaged employers in relation to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had done so for curriculum-based work and bursaries in one case and in working with employers to develop a CD-ROM for ICT in a second. The third had experienced success with '*professional practice lectures*' where individuals from the working world gave talks to Year 10 students about their occupations.

In addition to the existing involvement of employers outlined above, eight of the interviewees mentioned that they were beginning to establish such links to support Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. This included working with the local Education Business Partnership (EBP) in two cases, through P4P and the LEA's strategic plan for 14 to 19 in a second and through a Specialist School in business and enterprise in a third.

A total of six partnership coordinators mentioned activities which involved the local community. In two cases, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was said to have benefited from relationships which existed through the EAZ. Two of the six partnerships had worked with local community groups to raise the profile of the opportunities that young people from their communities could access in order to raise aspirations in the community as a whole.

An additional partner was mentioned by three partnership coordinators, who stated that they had links with local 14-19 pathfinders. In one area, the partnership coordinator mentioned that the partnership had received extra

funding from the 14-19 pathfinders and so were able to include a larger number of young people in their target cohort. In another area the coordinator explained how the 14-19 pathfinders had facilitated the evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge by encouraging schools to understand the importance of monitoring students' progress.

2.3 Links with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships

This section outlines the ways in which Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships worked with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, in light of the new integrated situation, and the benefits or challenges of doing so.

2.3.1 Development of inter-partnership links

The 2003⁹ report described the way in which inter-partnership links had developed considerably between 2002 and 2003. These links appear to have continued to develop over the past year, partly in response, it seems, to the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. Interviews with partnership coordinators were carried out in Spring 2004, prior to the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P integration when many partnership coordinators would have been involved in planning for the integration. As such, in discussions about linking with other partnerships, coordinators focused particularly on the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. While three coordinators mentioned country-wide links with other partnerships, many of the partnerships had regional, sub-regional and informal links. Nineteen of the partnership coordinators mentioned links with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships as part of a regional group, whilst 17 coordinators said that they had links with a sub-regional group. Seven coordinators also said that they had links with other individual partnerships, which were not part of a wider coordinated group. Only four coordinators expressly said that they had no links with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships. Nevertheless, no notable differences in the types of partnerships without links emerged, such as those in more rural or coastal areas experiencing greater challenges in this regard.

The 2003 report¹⁰ categorised inter-partnership links into informal and formal links. Whilst these categories still apply, it seems that many of the partnerships which were described as having informal links in 2003, had developed these links to form more concrete networks in order to work towards the integrated Aimhigher programme (this will be discussed further in

⁹ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

¹⁰ Ibid

Chapter 5). As such, it makes sense to view links between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships as newly established and established, as described below.

Seven coordinators in EAZ areas (previously reporting only informal or no links with other partnerships), said in 2004 that they had recently developed and formalised these links in order to plan for the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. Some of these **newly established links** were created in order to plan for the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P, as one coordinator noted: '*the meetings are only for P4P and not for sharing good practice*'. Nevertheless, some experienced wider benefits, such as the coordinator who mentioned that, although links were only for planning purposes, she had informally been able to '*pick up tips*' and share good practice in relation to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities. Other partnerships that had only recently established links with each other for planning purposes had developed these links and started to run joint Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities.

A total of 24 coordinators mentioned that they were involved in **established inter-partnership networks**. As outlined in the 2003 report,¹¹ formal networks of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships were organised on regional and sub-regional levels with the purpose of sharing good practice and, in some cases, running joint activities. Five such regional networks were described in interviews with partnership coordinators in 2004, an increase from the three formal networks identified in 2003.¹² Partnership coordinators said that, within four of these networks, there were also sub-regional groupings, including, for example, the Trans-Pennine group, which includes, amongst others, a Merseyside group and a Greater Manchester group. Partnerships in EiC areas appeared to have taken the lead in establishing and maintaining these networks and indeed, at least three of these consortia seem to have been developed from pre-existing EiC networks. In addition, all networks seem to have links to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in EAZ areas, either as part of or through links to a sub-regional group. The involvement of EAZ Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships networks with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships appears to have grown this year, perhaps as a result of the need for regional level planning for the integration.

The work of these regional and sub-regional networks had mostly continued and they had taken on the additional task of planning for the integration. In some areas this involved establishing separate planning groups, whilst in other areas meetings between coordinators focused on integration in addition to sharing good practice and organising joint activities. Some coordinators felt

¹¹ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

¹² Ibid

that planning for the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P had taken priority over other tasks: one coordinator commented that she spent most of her time on planning, whilst another commented that with the additional need to plan for integration meant there were now *'too many meetings to attend'*. Partnership coordinators' views on the integration are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

2.3.2 Benefits and challenges of links with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships

Seven partnership coordinators mentioned the benefits of linking with other partnerships and they described the advantages as relating to sharing good practice and acting as a support network. One coordinator explained that links with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators who were partners with the same HEIs as they were, allowed them to ensure they were taking full advantage of the activities provided by the HEIs. She said:

I think it is a real bonus, because it means that when we are talking to HEIs...they know that we talk to each other. So we have all got a good idea how each other used HEIs and what type of activity we are doing in each authority. So it's a good means of sharing good practice.

Another experienced Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinator described how he was able to offer support and guidance to new coordinators in other areas which helped them to established their programme and learn from his experience.

As noted above, the focus of much inter-partnership activity was in relation to the impending integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. Two coordinators identified this as a benefit when they mentioned that their existing links with other partnerships had helped them in planning. One noted that she already had a good working relationship with the other coordinators in the region through their Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge work and that this facilitated planning for the integration. Another coordinator commented that links with other partnerships with similar demographic backgrounds for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had emphasised to him the importance of working in small localised groups for planning for the integration, in order to ensure that local needs are met.

The only challenges relating to linking with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, as mentioned by three coordinators, were in relation to time restrictions. Two coordinators said that they only had a limited amount of time to attend regional and sub-regional partnership meetings. Another stated that her involvement with other partnerships was only possible as she had very good administrative support to help her in the day to day running of the partnership.

Overall, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had continued to develop and formalise links with other partnerships, particularly in order to plan for the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge with P4P. Many of the regional and sub-regional networks identified in 2003¹³ had continued to shared good practice, act as support networks and provide joint activities. However, in some areas planning for the unified Aimhigher programme had taken priority over these other tasks. Linking with other partnerships was generally seen as beneficial and had facilitated the preparation for the integration in some areas.

2.4 Conclusion

The structure of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships evolved and developed over the three years of the initiative with changes in partners and personnel, often through circumstance, but also through the refocusing of priorities and through learning from good practice. Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was viewed by many as innovative and successful in the development of links between schools, colleges and HEIs. Whilst the involvement of Connexions and LLSCs in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had developed, there may however, be scope for these partners to play a more proactive role. Links with other partnerships had also developed and became more established as a result of the need to prepare for the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P integration. In the last year of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge before the integration with P4P, the structure of the partnerships seems, in many cases, to have moved away from central coordination: with increasing operational responsibilities being passed down to school coordinators; with HEIs and schools forming links independently of a central broker; and with partnerships coordinators developing links to other partnerships at the sub-regional and regional national level. However, the difficulties sometimes caused by changes in school or college personnel, and the mediation role played by partnership coordinators, suggests that there is still a need for a local coordinating role to maintain the involvement of schools and colleges and to ensure that local needs are recognised and met.

¹³ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ACTIVITIES OF AIMHIGHER:EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PARTNERSHIPS

Summary of findings

- ◆ The strategies and focus for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in the third year were largely unchanged. Partnership coordinators continued to take into account the local context and the history of activities in their areas in their strategic approach. It emerged that they tended to focus either equally on further education and higher education progression, or slightly more on higher education.
- ◆ White working class males and students from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly Asian females and Afro-Caribbean boys, emerged as particular local target groups in the partnerships, depending on the local context. Such students remained an ongoing challenge that coordinators were seeking to address through, for example, vocational learning opportunities and working with parents.
- ◆ In the third year, partnerships had generally continued with the types of activities which they had implemented to meet the aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge although they had continued to refine them.
- ◆ The most frequently mentioned activity which had presented challenges to the coordinators were visits to HEIs. Their observations indicated that careful consideration needs to be given to the timing, content and approach to these visits to meet the needs of the young people.
- ◆ Partnerships had continued to develop the activities which they provided in a wide range of areas. Work-related activities and those that provided one-to-one support were often mentioned and appeared to have been a particular feature of the third year along with learning-related activities, the use of theatre groups and ICT-related activities.
- ◆ The financial costs of participating in higher education remained a concern among parents who were said to be influenced by somewhat misleading information in the media. Partnerships had used HEI specialists, written information and meetings with parents to seek to ensure that parents were accurately informed and to provide advice and guidance.
- ◆ The Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Roadshow, which was widely used to market further education and higher education to young people, was well received. Indeed, it was felt by some partnership coordinators to have improved and was more responsive to local issues and concerns. Case-study examples of young people from the local area who had progressed into further education or higher education were said to be effective in promoting further learning to young people.

This chapter focuses on developments in the operation of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in the third year of their operation and the extent to which the delivery of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had changed. It will explore any change in the strategies or focus of the partnership and the extent to which partnerships had identified specific target groups of young people and their success in meeting their needs. Any activities which had been discontinued and the introduction of new and innovative activities will be discussed and the approaches to raising awareness of financial issues will be outlined. The chapter concludes with an outline of the approaches to marketing in the third year of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge.

3.1 Strategies and focus

The report¹⁴ from the first round of interviewees with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators, which were undertaken in 2002, examined the variations in priorities and strategies for the partnerships in interpreting and delivering the aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge at a local level. It found that there were different emphases between partnerships, for example in relation to focusing on further education or higher education, or on raising the aspirations and broadening the horizons of students or focusing on overcoming concerns with transition and retention. In devising their strategies and approaches, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators responded to the formal guidance and, where there was some lack of clarity, partnerships' interpretation led to some differences of approach. Other factors which appeared to have influenced the strategies and approaches adopted in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships included the need to take into consideration the structure of the local education system and any concerns about students moving to '*rival*' institutions. Relationships with the local college of further education, and the level of understanding which coordinators had of this sector, was a further influential factor. Partnership coordinators in 2002 also appeared to have developed strategies which they felt were appropriate for the cohort in their area. For example, in some areas it was felt to be more appropriate to focus on encouraging students to aspire to realistic aims which, in some cases, involved looking at the short-term progression to further education rather than longer-term higher education progression. Where an area had a history of activities which focused on raising attainment and aspiration, this could be influential as these pre-existing activities, which could be developed or extended, provided a starting point for the development of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge locally.

To some extent, therefore, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators had taken into consideration local issues and concerns, in addition to the more

¹⁴ CLEAVER, E., and LEVESLEY, T. (2002). Evaluation of Excellence Challenge: Report on Interviews with Partnership Coordinators. Unpublished report.

universal challenges which Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was seeking to address, and developed strategies in response to these local challenges. In 2004, similar issues appeared to be relevant to partnership coordinators as they continued to develop their partnerships. As discussed below, it was apparent that coordinators continued to take into consideration the local context and had varying perspectives on whether there was a need to focus particularly on either further education or higher education in their area.

In some partnerships, the strategic aims of the programme were referenced to **other local strategic plans** such as Education Development Plans and the plans of EIC, Connexions and LSCs. In addition, there were cases where Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge aims were related to the local Single Regeneration Budget initiatives and to the outcomes of an area wide Ofsted inspection.

Partnership coordinators sometimes mentioned that, in planning the implementation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, they had built on **existing initiatives** which were also aiming to widen participation and raise the attainment and aspirations of local young people. These included pilot programmes in EIC partnerships and EAZs. They were conscious of the aim to ensure that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities did not duplicate programmes which were already in place although, in some instances, the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge funding enabled programmes to be continued or extended, for example from a further education focus to include higher education.

The third main consideration, which partnership coordinators appeared to have taken into account in some cases, was the need for the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme in their area to respond to **specific local issues and challenges**. For example, partnership coordinators mentioned the need for the programme to address parental attitudes locally where pursuing education post-16 was perceived as *'not for us'*, as discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, coordinators noted that local insularity, whereby young people and their parents were unwilling to travel away from their area, was an issue. Alternatively, *'seepage'* of students away from the local post-16 provision to neighbouring boroughs was a concern in another area. In some cases, partnerships had identified particular target groups in their area to focus on, this will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2.

Reflecting on their experience of implementing Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, some interviewees commented on the extent to which their partnership **focused particularly on further education or on higher education** or whether there was no distinction. Of those who commented twelve of the partnership coordinators explained that they had an **equal focus on further education and higher education**. Their comments indicated that they perceived that *'the whole thing is a continuum'*, as one expressed it, and

that it was necessary to encourage participation in further education in order to promote participation in higher education. An alternative viewpoint expressed was that engaging students in higher education-related activities could inspire them to see the relevance and value of participating in further education. One partnership coordinator explained that there was an equal focus on both further education and higher education and that the partnership had a strategy of promoting the message of lifelong learning and the progress from school to further education and then to higher education. This strategy had emerged from the view in the partnership that it was important that students remained in the education system without interruption because *'the danger is that once people get out of learning, with all the support systems that can be provided, it is much more difficult to come back in'*.

Interviewees in eight partnerships reflected that they had a tendency to **focus more on higher education**. Their reasons for doing so, in some instances, were practical. One noted that they had focused on further education at first and that this cohort was now at the stage of progressing to higher education. A second identified existing activities relating to further education which had been influential in deciding their initial strategy. Difficulties with engaging the local college of further education, however, had inhibited a further education focus in two partnerships. In other cases, the focus on higher education was related to the need to raise the profile of higher education and to find the most effective means of achieving the aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. For example, in one partnership, the coordinator explained that *'I'm constantly trying to broaden school staff's idea of what higher education is. They see it as a Y junction: those suitable for higher education to the right and the rest to the left...they haven't stayed on top of the evolution of higher education – things like Foundation Degrees, for example'*. In a second partnership, the coordinator stated that it was *'easier to get parents keen if you are talking about university rather than further education'*.

It appears that, while many partnerships focused equally on further education and higher education, some partnerships had adopted strategies which emphasised the progression to higher education. Some partnerships commented that the extent to which there was a focus on either sector was related to the structure of education locally. This was primarily related to whether schools had sixth forms or not, which might be the case for some or all schools in a partnership area. Interviewees in three partnerships indicated that their **focus tended towards further education**. This was said to be because of a perceived need to raise attainment initially and then focus on aspirations, in one case, while in a second, higher education activities were developing but were said not to be at such an advanced stage.

Overall, there was little evidence in the interviews in 2004 that partnership coordinators had changed their broad strategies and focus. However, there

were indications that some had refined the detail of their work in relation to target groups and activities. These will be discussed in the following sections.

3.2 Target groups

One strategy adopted in the majority of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships was to target particular groups of students. Four of the interviewed partnership coordinators stated that there were no target groups and that there were equal opportunities to participate, and two mentioned that there was no partnership-wide approach although individual schools might target specific groups. However, the majority of interviewees identified at least one group of students that had been a focus in their partnership. The nature of the target groups was influenced by the context of the area. For example, 18 partnership coordinators said that minority ethnic groups were not significantly represented in their area. In addition, some identified, through experience, the types of students who presented particular challenges. Therefore, in discussing the groups targeted, partnership coordinators did not report that they had successfully addressed the issues with these types of students. Rather, they were regarded as an ongoing challenge on which they continued to focus. The two main broad groups of students who were targeted in these Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships were minority ethnic groups and white working class young people.

Some partnerships were located in areas with significant representation of **minority ethnic groups**, while others had few or no such young people. However, 13 coordinators commented that they had targeted young people with minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly those who were Asian or Afro-Caribbean, and discussed these target groups at varying levels of detail in terms of any sub-groups. Four coordinators said that they had worked with ethnic minority students without specifying further details. For example, in one area, the coordinator held an event for students with English as an additional language to celebrate their abilities. More specific sub-groups were noted by some coordinators. For example, seven coordinators had identified a need to work with Asian females to address their particular barriers. Three of these coordinators mentioned that they had focused on Muslim females. The challenge presented to coordinators is illustrated in the comment of one who reported that Asian females would sometimes say *'it might be great, but we know we're not going to go so please don't ask us to go on any more trips because, actually, you are making me feel bad'*. Gaining the understanding and involvement of parents were seen by some coordinators as key to success with these groups of students. Two coordinators had focused on working with parents to address any concerns which they may have about their child's progress post-16 and two had offered residential opportunities to female Asian students. Three of the coordinators had targeted Asian males and two had focused on Afro-Caribbean males. More specifically, one noted the challenge

of addressing peer pressure and ‘*street cred*’ among Pakistani males and a second noted the ‘*culture of underachievement*’ among Afro-Caribbean males. The use of role models and e-mentoring were mentioned as strategies adopted to engage with these students.

The second major group which coordinators mentioned as presenting particular concerns was **white working class students** and, in the majority of cases, specifically male students. Such students were said by one coordinator to be ‘*the most difficult to engage*’. This was said to be because of lack of motivation and the culture of underachievement and ‘*macho culture*’ where education was not well-regarded and it was seen as ‘*effeminate*’ to work hard at school. Among males and females, working class students were said by one coordinator to be inhibited in their ability to consider the long-term because ‘*at best, they don’t think beyond today*’. The prevailing view among these coordinators was that engaging with this group was an ongoing challenge which they had yet to successfully address, although three felt that exploring opportunities through a vocational route in future might yield results. As one coordinator said:

Maybe there’s a way [to engage white working class boys] through the vocational route. The weakness at the moment is that we are not tapping into the group who want to go and do construction and the trades. We hope that this will be the thrust of the next couple of years and that will bring the boys back in.

In addition to these two main groups of students, coordinators had identified specific groups of young people locally at whom to target Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. In four areas, students who were **disabled or had Special Educational Needs** were targeted. One coordinator noted the sensitivity of working with such students and a second adopted a case-by-case approach to this group. Again, gaining the involvement of the parents was said to be beneficial. In three areas, coordinators had worked with **looked after children** and noted the challenge in liaising with social services or accessing foster parents for example to gain permission to attend activities. Finally, two coordinators said that they had targeted **students embarking on level 3 courses at 16 who needed extra support** which they provided through mentoring.

Most of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships visited had targeted at least one particular group of students but the nature of this group depended on the local context and the extent of need identified by partnership coordinators. The overall outcomes and successes of these Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships will be discussed in Chapter 4. However, it appears that with these target groups (ethnic minority students, white working class males and students with SEN), who perhaps presented particularly

complex barriers to progression, continued to be an ongoing challenge within Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships.

3.3 Activities which had been amended or developed

Details of the nature of the activities which Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had undertaken to support an increase in the aspirations and participation in higher education of young people from deprived areas, were outlined in the report of the visits in 2003.¹⁵ At that stage, partnerships had, to some extent, focused on out-of-hours learning such as study support and revision classes and enrichment classes delivered in some instances by HEIs. In addition, they had provided transition programmes and aspiration-raising activities which had increasingly focused on the transition to higher education in addition to more immediate further education transition. A key focus of these transition programmes was on enabling students to have direct experience of higher education through visits, summer schools, residentials and contact with higher education students, through schemes such as the student ambassadors programme, for example. Partnership coordinators who were interviewed in 2003 also mentioned some teaching and learning activities which they had provided, although these appeared to be slightly less widespread than the out-of-hours learning, transition and aspiration raising activities. These teaching and learning activities included sessions on examination preparation, masterclasses for students and training for teachers, in relation to areas such as study support.

In raising students' aspirations, some partnership coordinators noted the need to take care not to inhibit the possibility of young people achieving their potential as a result of missing curriculum time to participate in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. Experience of delivering activities away from school led some partnership coordinators to comment that they were most effective when they were delivered in an appropriate way, were challenging, practical and related to school-based work with which students were currently engaged.

In 2004, it appeared that, on the whole, the activities in these partnerships had remained as had originally been intended. There was no widespread evidence of any activities having proved so unsuccessful that they had been discontinued and overall, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, coordinators had experienced success with many of the activities they had implemented. Nevertheless, as one coordinator explained '*the programme is evolving, if something is not working, we stop doing it*' and there were instances of coordinators mentioning that there were concerns in relation to some activities and that they were considering how best to address these. While two

¹⁵ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: The Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

coordinators mentioned that insufficient numbers of students could access the Aimhigher Roadshow or residentials, and one was concerned about e-mentoring, the most commonly expressed concern related to visits to HEIs.

Ten of the partnership coordinators made reference to the challenges associated with **visits to HEIs** which related to the **content** and the **time** spent by students participating. A few coordinators commented that visits to HEIs could be *'little more than campus tours'* and another reported that HEI input was *'uneven'*. One partnership coordinator felt that in future, visits needed to be more tailored to individuals or groups of students and commented that *'the kids are saturated with generic visits to HEIs'*. Coordinators in 2003 observed that adopting an appropriate style of delivery was central to engaging the young people. The varied extent of progress and success with developing this is illustrated in the comment of a coordinator in 2004 who said that sessions in HEIs were *'too youth culture, they talk down to them and it's all balloons and fun – we need honesty and a reality check'*. Three partnership coordinators suggested that they would have liked to have seen a greater recognition of vocational route to higher education during these events, while others felt that a lack of a stronger vocational emphasis was a weakness of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge: *'sometimes university is not the right route for everyone – even if they are the brightest kids'*.

Participating in visits to HEIs often entailed time away from school during the school day. As was the case in 2003, some partnership coordinators raised concerns at the impact that such time could have on students' learning. For example, one commented that *'taking students off timetable more than once a year is problematic at best and counterproductive at worst'* and a second partnership coordinator echoed this saying *'I don't want my kids out...I want them in school, learning'*. While partnerships were engaging with the tension between enabling students to access appropriate activities in HEIs and the need to focus on their learning, there was no evidence of partnerships discontinuing such activities. Instead they appeared to be exploring how best to refine the content and timing of visits and ensure that HEIs had an understanding of the constraints on schools with regard to timing.

In addition to HEI visits, two coordinators were examining the value of **masterclasses** which one coordinator felt *'can be a one-off hit that isn't subject specific enough. They need to be re-engineered so that schools can see their worth'* while the second had found that courses delivered by the local HEI did not stretch the students and had changed to delivery by the Open University. **Summer schools** were mentioned by two coordinators, one of whom felt that the criteria for selection on HEFCE courses was too rigid. The second coordinator had learned that summer schools after the end of Year 11 were not successful because the students were *'tired of school and ready for their holidays'* and had therefore changed to offering these to Year 10 students.

In summary, it appears that few partnerships identified specific activities which they had discontinued. Nevertheless, they had continued to reflect on activities and refine and develop them. Further insights into the development of new, and in some cases innovative, activities are presented in the next section.

3.4 New activities introduced

In considering interviewees' observations on new activities which they had provided or were planning to provide, it is worth noting that, where an activity was new for one partnership, it may be well-established in another. Indeed, partnership coordinators may have been inspired by practice in another partnership which they had learned of through network meetings or other contact with partnerships such as the interviewee who explained that *'if you have a problem, you can e-mail one of the groups with it and [they] say 'yes I had this and this is what I did''* (see Chapter 2). Interviewees in eight partnerships indicated that the activities in their partnerships had remained largely the same, although they had sometimes adopted a slightly new approach or worked with a new institution. In five partnerships, coordinators said that they had strengthened and expanded their existing activities, rather than introducing any new ones. One coordinator reported, however, that as a team member had left, the number of activities was now reduced which suggests that, in this partnership, practice was yet to become fully embedded.

As indicated in previous reports, partnerships were engaged in a plethora of activities of varying nature and, when discussing any new activities, interviewees may not have mentioned all of the developments in their area. Nevertheless, it is possible to summarise some of the most frequently mentioned new activities in the partnerships as follows.

- ♦ **Work-related activities** – 16 partnership coordinators said that they had introduced or extended a vocational element to their activities, or were planning to do so. For example, one partnership was developing a link with a training provider to support such activities. The activities planned in these partnerships included examples of supporting the use of vocational GCSEs such as ICT and leisure and tourism, industry visits, and workshops accompanied by workshadowing of undergraduates and employers. In two partnerships, activities which focused on encouraging females to consider business, industry and engineering had been adopted or were planned.
- ♦ **One-to-one support and mentoring** – interviewees in nine of the partnerships had used mentoring, student ambassadors, staying-on tutors and undergraduate shadowing to support young people. In three of these partnerships, e-mentoring had been used to support students and, in one case, this was supplemented with social events. In one partnership, post-

16 Learning Mentors had been introduced to '*hand-hold*' students when they made the transition at 16.

- ♦ **Learning-related activities** – eight of the partnership coordinators mentioned that they had introduced or expanded activities which directly supported the learning of students such as examination preparation classes and study skills support and masterclasses.
- ♦ **Arts and theatre-based activities** – interviewees in seven partnerships had extended their theatre workshops, although one coordinator mentioned that some students found these somewhat '*passé*' having experienced many. Some partnerships reported that they had worked with the theatre company to develop a more bespoke production which more closely met their specific needs. One further partnership had introduced a regional art project.
- ♦ **ICT-related activities** – six of the partnerships had used ICT to support Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. This included examples of developing a CD-ROM and a DVD to support delivery of a qualification and ICT-based study support programmes both on the internet and software distributed to schools. One partnership had supported completion of UCAS forms electronically.
- ♦ **Conferences and fairs** – interviewees in four partnerships highlighted the conferences which they had introduced. In one case this was a regional conference and in another, a Year 11 conference, which had been piloted in one school, had been expanded city-wide.
- ♦ **Trips abroad** – interviewees in four partnerships mentioned that they had introduced trips abroad for students including adventure activities and planning and undertaking community work in another country.
- ♦ **Joint activities with partner agencies** – four partnership coordinators highlighted activities which they had undertaken in partnership with their local LEA or Connexions service. One partnership had linked into a programme to promote teaching as a profession to sixth form students. In a second partnership, students participated in psychometric testing and work shadowing with a Connexions Personal Adviser. In a third partnership, a Connexions Personal Adviser supported students with advice on the application process and interview techniques as part of a system whereby all students completed UCAS forms.
- ♦ **Personal-development activities** – three partnership coordinators had experienced success with motivational seminars, which, in one case, was subsequently to be embedded into the PSHE curriculum. A fourth partnership had held a residential for younger students to improve their self-confidence.
- ♦ **Subject-specific activities** – three partnership coordinators mentioned that they had introduced subject-specific activities such as focusing on maths and art and design and subject study days which were staffed by undergraduate mentors.
- ♦ **Working with younger students** – staff in four partnerships said that they had introduced activities with younger students such as Year 9 in one

instance and, although Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge is targeted at students in Years 9 to 13, two partnerships had undertaken work with primary students. Conversely, one partnership said that they were targeting older students in Year 11.

- ♦ **Staff development** – two partnerships had offered staff development activities to teachers which related to foundation degrees and thinking skills.
- ♦ **Resources** – one partnership had provided a *‘toolkit for learners’* which contained the basic resources to embark on a post-16 course such as a calculator.

Although interviewees did not themselves specify whether their activities were innovative, the developments outlined above indicate that partnership coordinators and colleagues in schools and partner agencies continued to adopt creative and novel approaches to meeting the aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge both in terms of the aim and content and the approach to delivering activities.

3.5 Raising awareness of financial costs

Partnership coordinators commented specifically on the extent to which parents and pupils were aware of the financial costs of going to higher education and the approaches that they had adopted to raising awareness and providing information and guidance. It emerged that parents were concerned about the costs, as exemplified in the comment of one coordinators who said that *‘every time we have an event, it is still the first question asked’*. The prevailing view among many coordinators was that parents and students were aware of the costs but were often unrealistic about the level of finance required and sometimes *‘wildly over-estimate’* the potential costs. Furthermore, they were often said to be unaware of exemptions for young people from low-income backgrounds. Media *‘hype’* and *‘scare mongering’* was frequently noted as contributing to parents’ and young peoples’ misperceptions of the costs involved in higher education. As one coordinator commented *‘people only remember the headlines. No-one bothers to read the small print so they rarely get the full story about tuition fees and top-up fees’*, while a second felt the cost of higher education was misrepresented by the media who *‘focus on top possible amounts like the cost of seven years of medicine’*. It was evident, therefore, that there was a need to inform and advise parents and students about the financial aspects of continuing into higher education, and *‘helping parents to see a way through it’*, to which the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had sought to respond.

Providing finance-related information and guidance was said by some partnership coordinators to be a part of any event. Nevertheless, some identified specific ways in which they undertook this role. Eight partnership

coordinators mentioned that parents and students were informed through **specialists from HEIs** giving talks or holding seminars about finance. In some instances these were delivered through parents evenings, in others during visits to HEIs and also through summer schools. In addition to HEI specialists, there were instances in four partnerships of other organisations providing information and advice to students and parents. These included the further education college, LEA, Connexions representatives, a local accountancy firm and one of the high street banks.

Written information in the form of leaflets or booklets were mentioned by eight partnership coordinators as a mechanism for informing individuals about the financial implications of higher education. These included leaflets produced nationally and locally and were said to include information relating to salaries of graduates and advice on obtaining additional funding and on financial management. One coordinator explained that leaflets were sent directly to home addresses following on from parents evenings to ensure that the information was targeted effectively and for a *'personal touch'*. Providing information and answering questions at **parents' evenings** was specifically mentioned by four coordinators but is likely to have been more widespread, given the comments about the concern of parents noted above. The final main method of informing parents and students was through using existing students who were able to provide details of how they had managed financially and were particularly valuable in the view of one coordinator because *'they tell the truth'* to students.

Partnership coordinators in some instances noted challenges relating to informing parents and students. Firstly, cultural attitudes to debt among working class families in particular were said to inhibit discussions about financing participation in higher education in two partnerships. One coordinator observed that it was helpful to consider the phrasing of the discussion and advised *'don't talk about 'debt', talk about 'investment'... 'debt' is so negative'*. Secondly, responding to parents' and students' questions and requests at a time of considerable uncertainty regarding the costs and funding of higher education participation was identified as a challenge in two partnerships. As one expressed it *'up until recently, there hasn't been anything solid to say'* while a second felt that *'all you can say is the chances are you will get a better job and earn more money'*. Thirdly, in two partnerships there was said to be a concern about the financial implications of participating in higher education among school staff. One observed that some teachers felt uncomfortable advising students that they would earn more in the longer-term if they continued to higher education when this might not happen in practice. A second felt that teachers needed to be better informed and stated that *'a lot of teachers are out of date with what's happening and are discouraging students...as they'll get into so much debt'*. Finally, one partnership coordinator felt that the issue of the financial burdens for higher education students could not be addressed only by

Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships but required the attention of the government when he/she said '*Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge does not have the remit for it and it is not part of the initiative to tackle this. This is something for central government to address*'.

3.6 Marketing

Many aspects of the work of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships could be described as promoting or marketing further education and higher education to young people. As one interviewee stated '*all the activities have a marketing element*'. The focus of this section is on the marketing materials produced by Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships, any publicity and on their perceptions of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Roadshow.

All but one of the partnerships coordinators who had used the **Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Roadshow** had found it a successful means of marketing to young people. Two coordinators noted that the Roadshow was now better adapted to the local area and had a better understanding of the issues than had been the case previously. A third commended the approach of members of the Roadshow team who participated which was enthusiastic and appropriate. In some cases, the Roadshow was said to be followed up within schools with activities and discussions with students, although this was said to vary from school to school. One partnership had successfully adopted a different approach through holding the Roadshow on the site of an HEI and bringing together students from a mix of local schools.

Partnership coordinators often mentioned that they had made use of centrally-produced **Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge marketing materials**, such as leaflets, and were content with these, although in a minority of cases, concerns were expressed regarding the logistics of receiving some resources such as the pop-up board. The Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge website had also proved effective as a marketing tool in the view of a few coordinators. One commented that '*it has changed completely and is now about people rather than about procedures – I think that is what switches people on*'. The value of using examples of people who had progressed into further education and higher education was recognised by a numbers of partnership coordinators in developing local marketing materials. Coordinators mentioned that they had introduced leaflets or booklets containing '*case-studies*' of young people from the local area who had made the transition to further education and higher education. These were felt to be an effective means of communicating the opportunities which young people locally could access to their peers, parents and the wider community. The **local media** were a further means of marketing which some partnerships had adopted. In one case, this included a local radio campaign and in a second specialist local magazines, such as the football club magazine, were used.

Some partnership coordinators mentioned that schools produced their own marketing materials and noticeboards, supported in some cases by the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinator. One partnership commented that they had produced marketing materials for teachers which provided details of the vocational routes available to young people to support them when providing information and guidance to their students. There was evidence of partnerships working together with other organisations either to develop marketing materials or to make use of existing materials. These included producing a leaflet with an HEI, developing posters with another borough and working with Connexions to use existing, and to develop new, leaflets.

Parents were often mentioned in relation to marketing of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. One coordinator saw parents and families at the centre of supporting students' transition and believed that families needed support themselves in order to ensure that their child remained '*on track*' to fulfil his or her potential. As noted in Chapter 2, partnership coordinators had sought to engage with parents through events. In addition, there were instances of producing leaflets which were felt to be most effectively targeted if they were posted directly to home addresses, rather than a more widespread approach such as leaving leaflets in community centres or libraries. In one area, the coordinator said that leaflets were translated into community languages.

3.7 Conclusion

In summary, it appears that the approaches to meeting the aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge locally in the partnerships visited had not changed markedly in the third year of operation. Partnership coordinators continued to take into consideration the local context and history, and to identify target groups of students in their areas, and seek ways of addressing their particular needs. In doing so, they had generally retained the types of activities but had sought to refine and develop these in response to any challenges encountered. In doing so they found creative solutions to best meet the needs of the young people in their local area, as indicated by the wide range of practice identified in these partnerships. Financial concerns associated with participating in higher education remained a concern for parents who were said to be influenced by media reports. Partnership coordinators had used strategies including use of HEI specialists, written information and discussions at parents' evenings to provide parents with accurate information and guidance.

4. IMPACT AND OUTCOMES OF AIMHIGHER:EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PARTNERSHIPS

Summary of findings

- ♦ Few partnerships had instituted systematic monitoring and evaluation strategies as yet, although the majority of partnerships undertook various forms of feedback exercises to evaluate the short-term success of individual Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities.
- ♦ Most partnerships collated detailed monitoring data with respect to national and local targets, although there was little consistency in the way that these were recorded or presented. This made it difficult to assess progress towards national targets.
- ♦ Some partnership coordinators questioned the value of focusing on national targets that related to applications to higher education and A level achievement that did not reflect the majority of the work that they were doing in raising awareness and aspirations amongst younger pupils in schools.
- ♦ Partnerships identified a range of activities that they felt had contributed to increasing pupils' motivation towards higher education, particularly highlighting the value of residential experiences, mentoring support and sustained activities that focused on personal development. They also emphasised the need for a school culture that promoted higher education programme and high expectations and programme of activities that included a focus on study skills and learning activities in school alongside high-profile motivational events.

In compiling their bids for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge funding, partnerships identified a range of anticipated monitoring and evaluation activities, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques. By 2003 however, two years into the implementation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, there was little evidence that many of these plans had been put in place. Most partnerships still placed a much lower priority on monitoring and evaluation the initiative than on implementing activities.¹⁶ Few were evaluating their progress by systematic means, relying primarily on impressions of success, and partnership coordinators highlighted specific problems in relation to issues such as ascertaining additionality and tracking students through to higher education. In making monitoring returns on Strand 1 activities to the DfES, partnerships interpreted the targets in different ways and presented the data in a variety of different formats

¹⁶ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

By 2004 there was evidence that, although a number of partnerships had begun to standardise their monitoring strategies, this variability continued. While partnerships appeared to have had more success in compiling the monitoring data that was required by the DfES for its annual reports, variations in interpretation and presentation remained. Moreover, while some partnerships had established clear evaluation strategies, others were still in the very early stages of planning or implementing these.

To what extent, therefore, could it be claimed that there is a good local evidence base from which to assess the relative impact of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge on young people? The discussion in the following sub-sections explores the strategies used by partnerships to evaluate their progress, examines the evidence that suggests the degree of progress that has been made towards national and local targets and summarises the types of activities that partnership coordinators believed had contributed most to partnerships levels of success in meeting those targets.

4.1 Approaches to local monitoring and evaluation

In a minority of the sample partnerships, monitoring and evaluation appeared to have remained a low priority throughout the three year period from 2001/02 to 2003/04, with some coordinators indicating that they saw little value in focusing on such activities until the pre-16 cohorts on whom they had concentrated their Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge work progressed to further and/or higher education. By 2004, there was still no clear evidence of evaluation activities in eight of the 42 partnerships that were tracked during this period, although at least four of these had clearly collated detailed monitoring data with respect to the national targets.

Elsewhere, however, partnerships continued to use (or had more recently instituted) feedback mechanisms for the evaluation of each Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activity: at least 16 partnerships regularly administered post-activity evaluation sheets, although only two of these appeared to have consistently identified specific success criteria for these events, while only one had adopted a strategy that enabled pre- and post-activity surveys. More informal feedback mechanisms, based around post-event discussions with young people and generally conducted on an *ad hoc* basis by the partnership coordinator, were in place in two areas, while three further partnerships had adopted a case-study approach. These case studies ranged from a focus on the impact of specific interventions (such as the role played by EiC Learning Mentors with widening participation students) to a more student-focused approach, with an exploration of the combined impact of the catalogue of all the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities experienced by targeted individuals.

The use of a longitudinal strategy, following a specific cohort of pupils, seemed rare. Two partnerships had adopted a survey approach to this work, either commissioning an external study or working with one of their HEI partners to conduct this work. A third had focused on a less methodology-led approach, preferring to keep a '*watching brief*' on the targeted cohort, logging the activities in which they took part and monitoring performance and behavioural outcomes as well as attitudes and aspirations (albeit on a more informal basis than might be achieved by a survey). No less than two partnerships had instituted one-off attitudinal surveys with particular groups of young people or, in the case of at least one partnership, had commissioned evaluations of specific events.

However, while one partnership had made a specific effort to make links between inputs (such as Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities) and outcomes (such as pupil attitudes and aspirations) through the use of Progress File in all schools, systematic triangulated evaluations were rare and only one of the 42 partnerships appeared to have carried out such a study during the years from 2001/02 to 2003/04. Many relied more on the measurement of throughput (the numbers attending events, for example) than on measurement of perceived or actual impact. Only one partnership, for example, indicated that it had been developing ways of linking attendance at events with subsequent performance or progression outcomes, working in close cooperation with the Connexions service.

The lack of systematic evaluation was acknowledged by many interviewees, with recognition that evaluation was '*a weakness*' and that '*in terms of measuring effect we have some way to go*'. While few were in the position of the interviewee who, in 2004, bemoaned the fact that '*this far into the project all of our evidence is still anecdotal*' there was widespread agreement that more needed to be done at a local level to enhance understanding of the specific impact both of activities and the wider programme: '*the funding is having a major positive benefit on students, but I don't know how to prove it*'.

It needs to be emphasised that the deficiencies noted in evaluation activity seemed to be less to do with any lack of will or of belief in the value of such work than linked to concerns about levels of expertise: '[we are] *excellent at launching things, but when it comes to quantifying their success [we] need to look into it*'. In response, partnerships had commissioned external research, had appointed a researcher to the team (one partnership) or, in the case of one coordinator, had undertaken research within the partnership as part of personal study towards a higher degree. On the whole, there was an apparent commitment amongst coordinators to monitoring and evaluating the impact of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, but an acknowledgement that there were a number of barriers to that work.

The barriers that were identified in 2004 varied little from those identified in earlier years, although there were fewer openly expressed concerns about additionality, with partnerships appearing to have decided to focus more on the apparent relative impact of individual activities on awareness raising and pupil aspirations rather than on identifying the impact of the wider initiative on pupil and student attainment. However, concerns about a shortage of time and expertise (as indicated above), about tracking of pupils and about timescales were as evident as in 2003, while concerns about the quality, reliability and validity of statistics appeared to be becoming more overt.

Nine coordinators said they were frustrated by the fact that they were still having difficulty in persuading schools and (more frequently, they noted) further education colleges of the value of reliable statistics in assessing the relative merit of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge-related activities. One celebrated the fact that they were finally getting the data they needed from schools, further education colleges and Connexions, stating '*we've established a protocol with the college, so we're finally getting a reliable figure [for progression]*'. However, there was some concern as to whether the data that was being collected for the annual Strand 1 reports to DfES were those on which partnerships should continue to concentrate: '*the information you get for your annual report is not necessarily what you need in order to know how you can be more effective*' and one partnership coordinator expressed the forthright view that the statistics they were collecting were '*of no use to anyone*'.

The issue of the suitability of the data collated for the annual reports as a means of contributing to local monitoring and evaluation was specifically raised by nine of the interviewees, with a further 22 raising wider concerns about the reliability and accuracy of the data they (and others) collected, the lack of suitable tracking data and difficulties in accessing existing data held in schools and colleges. For some interviewees, problems were primarily related to the definition and specification of the targets (see section 4.2), with reference to '*incomprehensible national targets*' in the first year and, for some, the consequent difficulties in establishing appropriate baselines from which to measure success: '*we've almost given up on pupil-level data because the cohorts are so confused*'. Particular issues in relation to disaggregating figures for the widening participation cohort, or for those deemed to be underachievers but capable of entering higher education, were noted by seven interviewees in unprompted responses to questions about local monitoring strategies.

For others, the patchy and perceived unreliability of the data obtained from schools and colleges, particularly in relation to post-16 progression, but also in relation to participation in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge events, was of

concern. The issues surrounding tracking noted in previous reports¹⁷ were still evident, with 13 partnerships identifying difficulties in tracking young people post-16 and nine expressing further worries about tracking young people into higher education.¹⁸ Such difficulties were particularly evident in areas where the majority of the pre-16 cohort had been in schools without sixth forms, where there had been cross-boundary transfer, or where joint post-16 provision meant that responsibilities for sharing data were sometimes unclear.

Given these concerns about the quality and coverage of local monitoring and evaluation data, what can be said about progress towards national and local targets for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge?

4.2 Progression towards targets

The picture of attainment and progression in the 42 partnerships (who, it should be noted, were all in relatively disadvantaged areas) prior to the implementation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge showed variation, both between partnerships and by comparison with the national picture. This variation is still evident,¹⁹ as summarised below:

Attainment

- ◆ In 2001, the England average for attainment of five or more A* to C grades was 50 per cent of the Year 11 cohort.²⁰ This mean value was matched or exceeded in only three of the 42 Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in this study. Across those partnerships for whom accurate key stage 4 attainment rates could be calculated, means varied from as low as 26.5 per cent of the cohort achieving higher grades (with values in some schools as low as nine per cent) to a mean of 55 per cent.
- ◆ By 2003, when the England average for five or more A* to C grades had increased to 52.9 per cent, performance levels in four partnerships matched or exceeded this. For the remainder, mean attainment across the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge schools in this study ranged from seven per cent to 59.9 per cent.

¹⁷ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

¹⁸ The lower numbers expressing concern about tracking into higher education may be more of a reflection of the number of partnerships that were actively engaged in tracking post-18 cohorts by 2003/04 than a reflection of the relative level of accessible data for the older cohorts.

¹⁹ National performance and transition data for 2004 is not yet available.

²⁰ All national performance statistics are sourced from the DfES website. Schools Performance Tables. <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables>. [online] Accessed 26 August 2004.

- ♦ The mean A level point score per student in England in 2001 was 17.4, with an average point score per examination entry of 5.5.²¹ The mean point score was matched in only one of the 42 partnerships, although the average examination entry was matched or exceeded in schools in four partnership areas. Mean A level point scores per student in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge schools ranged from 10 to 17.9, while average point score per examination entry ranged from 3.8 to 6.1.
- ♦ By 2003, the mean A level point score per student in England 2001 was 258.9, with an average point score per examination entry of 77.4. The mean point score was matched or exceeded in three partnerships, although the average examination entry was exceeded in schools in only one partnership area. Mean A level point scores per student in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge schools ranged from 147.6 to 271.7, while average point score per examination entry ranged from 56.4 to 78.9.

Post-16/post-18 participation

- ♦ The national post-16 participation rates for young people aged 16 or over in full-time education in 2001 was 70.8 per cent, that for 2003 was 72.4 per cent, an increase of 1.6 percentage points.²² There was a more limited change in the proportion of young people under the age of 19 undertaking Level 3 courses, however, with a 0.6 per cent increase between 2001/02 and 2002/03 and a decline (of more than 16 per cent) in the proportion taking GNVQ and AVCE courses.²³ However, obtaining a comparative picture of post-16 participation rates across the 42 partnerships was difficult, with partnerships using a range of different measures of participation in their initial bids for funding and in their subsequent returns to DfES (see Section 4.2.4). Where information was available, participation rates ranged from around 35 per cent to 77 per cent of the post-16 population in 2001 (based on 19 areas) and from 48 per cent to a maximum of 80 per cent of the cohort in 2003 (based on 17 areas). The change in rates for entrants on to Level 3 courses over that period in the 42 partnerships was not possible to calculate with any reasonable degree of accuracy.
- ♦ Assessing any changes in the extent of post-18 participation over the period 200/01 to 2002/03 is complex. At a local level, and across the 42 partnerships in this study, reliable data on post-18 participation was not widely available (see Section 4.2.1). Nationally, calculating changes in

²¹ Note that the way in which A level point scores was calculated changed between 2001 and 2003. In 2001, totals were based upon a grade equivalence, with a grade A at A level earning 10 points in the UCAS system. A new Tariff was introduced in 2002, to reflect the new National Qualifications Frameworks in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, the introduction of Curriculum 2000 from September 2000 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the phasing in of Higher Still from September 1999 in Scotland. This tariff gave value to a wide range of qualifications within the national frameworks, and allowed comparison between them. The introduction of the new Tariff coincided with the first intake to higher education of Curriculum 2000 students. Under the new Tariff, a grade A at A level would score 120 points.

²² <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000469/tab001.xls>

²³ <http://www.lsc.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/emqlluykgf5wfpxmcbhkmv6qcczn2u6lvuzedbzmqxosmcur27g7pytxhqwgp34hwyqk7772g7uao/ILRSFR05.pdf>

participation have been complicated by the move from using the Initial Entry Rate (IER) to using the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR). Data for HEIPR suggests that rates of participation amongst those in the 17 to 30 age group increased from 42 per cent in 2000/01 to 44 per cent in 2002/03.²⁴ However, figures for the 17 to 19 age group suggest that the proportion of that cohort in higher education was lower, at 33 per cent, 2000/01. Of these 19 per cent were from social classes III, IV and V (skilled to unskilled) and 16 per cent from minority ethnic groups.²⁵ The comparable figures for 2002/03 are not yet available.

Widening participation activities

Prior to the advent of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, all partnerships identified some widening participation activities, although most indicated that these were through individual school or college-based links with higher education institutions, primarily on an ad hoc basis. There was little local coordination and little central awareness of the range and extent of activities underway, and little evidence of inter-institution collaboration. By 2004, this picture had changed, with a wide range of awareness-raising and aspiration-raising activities in place (see Chapter 3).

Given the changes that have been identified above, with increased widening participation activity and apparent increases in attainment, what is the extent of progress that has been made towards the national and local targets for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge? The national targets, against which locally determined figures were set by individual partnerships, were linked to the following areas.

- ♦ The number of students with potential, but at risk of underachieving, who progress to Higher Education at age 18 to 19.
- ♦ Improvement in the A Level or equivalent average point score of those participating in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme.
- ♦ Within the above, a target for the proportion of students achieving top UCAS points.

DfES also sought to monitor, in each partnership, the number of students starting post-16 education (a level 3 course).

However, as will become evident, there was often little agreement between partnerships about the ways in which targets were defined. Moreover, a number of partnerships redefined their baselines and their targets and the ways in which they calculated progress towards those targets over the three year period. Assessing progress towards national targets, therefore, is not straightforward. Even when the data supplied by partnerships appears to give

²⁴ <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000456/SFR07-2004.pdf>

²⁵ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/trends/upload/xls/4_6t.xls

a clear indication of success or failure, the ways in which the data is presented makes comparing the relative impact of individual partnerships upon their widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts a problematic exercise. As one partnership coordinator opined: '[It] would be nice if there were nationally agreed ways of reporting the data and targets – different bodies have different figures and [these] could be for different reasons'.

In interviews, more than half of the partnership coordinators also raised issues about the quality of the data that they presented in their annual reports. As highlighted in Section 4.1, they expressed particular concerns about the comprehensiveness and accuracy of destinations data – whether at post-16 or post-18 – with one coordinator suggesting that some of the figures received from schools and colleges were '*meaningless*' and a second calling them '*guesswork*'. The difficulties they faced in tracking students once they had left compulsory education and their reliance on a range of different and often unrelated databases, held by a range of bodies including individual institutions, Connexions services and the local LSCs, meant that few were able to provide clear, robust and unambiguous data in relation to either national or local targets.

4.2.1 Progression to Higher Education at age 18 to 19

By January 2004, 16 of the 42 partnerships in the study reported that they had achieved the 2002/03 target that they had set for progression to higher education amongst young people who were at risk of underachieving at 18. A further 13 indicated that they had failed to meet their target. Of the remaining 13, seven had either not set a target, or the target was unclear, while a further six had not yet obtained, or were unable to obtain, any supporting data. Some, indeed, identified some longer-term concerns with measuring progress towards this target. In addition to the short-term issues related to the comprehensiveness of the progression data they received from colleges and sixth forms (see Section 4.1), longer-term issues about their ability to track young people from compulsory education into post-16, thence post-18 destinations emerged as a specific concern: '*asking [schools] how many people went up to university at the age of 19 is not something they necessarily want to know for their funding*'.

The fact that, by this date, 13 partnerships still felt unable to provide even locally interpreted outcomes may also reflect a persistent and general level of confusion and uncertainty over this target. Cleaver *et al.* quoted the view of one coordinator (echoed by other interviewees) that their bids had related specifically to '*under-aspiring*' and '*under-represented groups*' rather than to under-achievers.²⁶ By 2004, even amongst the 28 partnerships who had noted success or failure, there was still only a limited level of agreement as to who

²⁶ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

constituted the cohort of young people to whom this target was attached. One partnership (by no means unique) specifically identified its entire Year 13 cohort as potential underachievers (*'all students have the potential to underachieve'*) and so calculated progression data for the whole year group. Others referred to disadvantaged students rather than underachieving students; calculated the target in relation to success amongst those applying to university rather than those who might be seen as underachievers; estimated progress variously in relation to the whole cohort, the widening participation cohort or the gifted and talented cohort; or set out different figures for each institution (each, potentially, with its own definition of underachievers) and so were unable to indicate whether the partnership as a whole had met the 'national' target. Referring to these different practices, one coordinator questioned the value of the concept: *'what does "underachieving" mean if a national target is interpreted differently at local levels?'*

4.2.2 Improvement in the A Level or equivalent average point score

A change in the way in which average point scores were calculated for A level achievement meant that many partnerships said they were still in the process of re-assessing progress towards this target.²⁷ Indeed, nine of the 42 partnerships suggested that they were re-visiting the target (and therefore could not indicate progress) and three others had no data to present by January 2004. Levels of relative success amongst the other 30 partnerships were mixed. Fourteen had been unable to reach their target (even though a number noted an overall increase in A level attainment year on year) and, of the other 16, some suggested that levels of achievement were not uniform across all schools and colleges in the area.

It was not always clear that the data being presented by the partnerships referred solely to young people who had taken part in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities²⁸. While some partnerships, indeed, had explicitly stated that they had difficulty in disaggregating the widening participation cohort from their peers, others presented figures that appeared to include the whole of the Year 13 (or equivalent) cohort. This lack of disaggregation means that it becomes more difficult to assess the relative impact of Aimhigher:Excellence

²⁷ See footnote 21 on page 46 for an explanation of this change.

²⁸ In the formal guidance issued to partnerships, coordinators were asked to report on the whole year cohort not just the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, widening participation or gifted and talented cohorts. This was because, at the outset of the programme, there were no participants upon whom they could report and so targets were set on the whole year cohort. Subsequently, and with respect to individual targets such as the improvement in the "A" level or equivalent average points score and in the proportion of students achieving top UCAS points, partnerships were asked to refer to those participating in the programme. However, as new partnerships came on stream they were faced with the same issues and, as a result, different partnerships in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme have different baselines based on different cohorts, which means any comparative analysis is very difficult.

Challenge except in the broadest terms. As one coordinator commented: '[It is] a bit tricky to measure additionality at any time.'

4.2.3 Proportion of students achieving top UCAS points

Eleven of the 42 partnerships reported attaining the target that had been set locally for UCAS point achievements. Fourteen noted that they had been unsuccessful and a further 13 that they had not set any specific target (four were unable to provide any data). However, given the wide variation in understanding of what were defined as the top UCAS points (from as low as 240 to as high as 320), the extent to which any meaningful assessment of this target can be made must be questioned.

4.2.4 Post-16 progression at Level 3

Nearly two-thirds of the partnerships (30) provided information on young people's progression to Level 3 courses, with 12 reporting that they had achieved the target at which the partnership was aiming. Of these 12, however, at least five noted that the targets were set at a different level in each institution, reflecting the different starting points of the schools in each Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership. The coordinators, therefore, had not provided any aggregated figure for progression across the partnership, making any comparative assessment of progress difficult. Others had revisited the targets set out in their bids (and in the monitoring returns made to DfES at the end of Year 1), with some setting targets for subsequent cohorts that were lower than had been achieved by previous cohorts. It was not clear whether this was to reflect possible lower levels of prior attainment in the target cohorts, or whether it was for any other reason.

Eighteen partnerships noted that they had not achieved the locally-set target for Level 3 progression. This lack of progress fits in with the wider national picture in which the take-up of Level 3 courses appears to have remained relatively static, or has even declined with respect to AVCEs (see Section 4.2).

4.2.5 Local targets

Only five partnerships said that they had not set any local targets, although a further eight partnerships had not provided any evidence of progress. Across the remaining 29 partnerships, local targets had been set, variously, with regards to:

- ♦ **Post-16 participation** (including progression to Level 2 courses). The majority (18 partnerships) had met with success, although seven said that progression rates were still lower than anticipated and three had not clarified their data on post-16 participation by the time they made their monitoring returns.
- ♦ **GCSE attainment** in Year 11. Sixteen partnerships (six in EAZ areas) had established local targets for higher level GCSE attainment (generally

five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, but with three setting a target for A* and A grades). Ten of these (three of the EAZ areas) indicated success, although with a recognition that this was not always true for all schools.

- ♦ A range of **other targets** including the proportion of successful applications to further education, A level point scores, the proportion of successful applications to higher education, numbers of applications to higher education from disadvantaged students and the extent of recruitment of target groups to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities.

4.2.6 Summary

It appears, therefore, that some progress has been made towards both national and local targets, but the exact extent of that progress, and the degree to which one can thereby claim that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge has succeeded in meeting its stated aims, is questionable on the basis of existing data alone. Yet many partnerships highlighted a number of areas in which they felt that they could claim success, even where there was little hard data, as yet, with which they could support their claims. These perceived successes are explored in the following sub-section.

4.3 Impact of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities on young people

During the first two years of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge initiative, partnership coordinators appeared to place particular emphasis on activities that raised young people's aspirations towards higher education. This emphasis was still evident in 2004: visits were said to give '*young people the opportunity to look outside of their own environment. You can forget how difficult it is for [young people] to break away from the norm*'. However, there also seemed to be a growing awareness of the need for what one interviewee described as the '*drip, drip effect*' of complementary teaching and learning activities within a school culture that was openly supportive of progression to higher education. '*The success of anything is when the school itself embraces and includes it in its own improvement plan and has structures within its normal teaching that encourages students to go on to higher education*'. This focus on the strategies needed for embedding the aims of the initiative was more overt than in previous years, although the partnerships had met with variable levels of success.

4.3.1 University links

In 2004, the majority of partnerships continued to highlight the important role that they believed contact with universities had played in raising young people's aspirations, reflecting one of the main findings from the previous

round of interviews in 2003.²⁹ Few partnerships were able to identify significant or measurable increases in applications to higher education as a result of such contact, stating that it was either too soon to see the impact on younger cohorts or identifying difficulties with monitoring data (see Section 4.2.1). Others expressed an unwillingness to attribute any changes in applications directly to one set of activities. However, two coordinators felt confident they could specifically make such a claim, highlighting both higher numbers of applications and more aspirational applications as a result of direct contact with staff and students in universities. Four other coordinators suggested that contact with university personnel, and particularly undergraduate mentors, had led to an increase in post-16 staying-on-rates and had also contributed to better post-16 retention.

Most partnership coordinators, however, focused on the perceived motivational and attitudinal impact of such visits. Twenty four of the 42 partnerships in this study singled out activities such as day visits (12 coordinators particularly identified these) or residential courses and summer schools (13 coordinators) as the activity (or activities) prompting the greatest change in young people's attitudes. Such activities were said to '*demystify universities*' so that young people were not '*frightened by them ... lack of awareness due to no family background [in higher education] is made up by visits.*' Coordinators emphasised the importance of first-hand encounters with university life and facilities – '*the alien territory of higher education*'. As one commented: '*I can't think of anything potentially more powerful – it becomes real... [otherwise] it's like talking to people about concepts that they have no experience of*'. More specifically, the residential experience was reported as significant in '*winning the battle ... they are really persuasive and turn kids on to higher education*'.

The responses in 2004, however, also indicated that partnerships were taking a more considered look at the university-based activities that were available to young people, as discussed in Chapter 3. While some interviewees in 2003 had expressed concern about the amount of time that such activities required and others were critical of the pedagogic style adopted by some of the higher education staff, or the perceived irrelevance of unfocused campus tours, they were generally supportive of the principle of residential university visits. However, by 2004, some coordinators suggested that there was an additional need to provide young people with '*stepping stones*' – experiences such as an event involving one overnight stay that would prepare them more fully for longer residential experiences such as summer schools. Many of the young people were said to lack the confidence even to take up available opportunities for summer schools or residentials, even when they were with their peer group. This lack of confidence, if not addressed, was believed to reduce the likelihood of take-up and reduce the extent to which young people benefited

²⁹ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

from any visits in which they took part. Coordinators indicated that, in some areas, few of those in the widening participation cohorts were thought to have spent much time either away from home or without immediate access to their family network, for example. They also said that they were sometimes exercised in trying to overcome these cultural barriers or to break down parental antipathy to residential experiences. They were similarly challenged when the level of demand for such experiences, following their promotion to young people, exceeded the numbers of residential places (*'it creates a feeling of exclusion'*) or when the high costs of such places meant that numbers had to be restricted. However, the fact that there was a continued demand (and in some areas, a growing demand) for places on summer schools and residential courses was heralded by a number of partnership coordinators as a signal that the strategy was playing an important part in helping young people to understand university life and to aspire to following a course in higher education.

4.3.2 Mentoring support

The role of higher education mentors – be they undergraduates, graduates or members of the Student Ambassadors Scheme or 'e-mentors' as noted in Chapter 3 – was commended by at least 13 coordinators. This was not so much because of the work that they did with individuals (although five partnership coordinators specifically highlighted the impact that such people had played in raising young people's self-esteem and aspirations), as the wider function they played as role models. Commenting on the role that such interaction with higher education students played in breaking down cultural barriers, one coordinator emphasised the point that: *'higher education is becoming cool in the schools – not because of some ageing careers advisor, but [because] kids come back at 19 or 20 and say university is magic'*. As indicated in Chapter 3, they were also identified as of particular value in addressing young people's concerns about financial matters (*'talking to students about how they managed their finances has had an important impact'*), an issue that was deemed particularly pertinent in one partnership where seven young people were said to have withdrawn their applications to university in 2004 following publicity about student grants and top-up fees. Coordinators also noted, however, that although the coaching of student mentors being undertaken by universities had improved, some schools were not always able to make the best use of the mentors, whether for reasons of time or lack of understanding of their potential value.

The concept of professional academic mentoring had been further developed in three EiC areas where partnership coordinators made specific mention of the ways in which they had either incorporated existing EiC Learning Mentors into the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme or had recruited paid mentors (partly or wholly funded by Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge) in order to work with young people in widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts. Whilst other EiC areas may well have been making such use

of mentors, these partnerships singled them out as having had a specific impact on, variously, increased applications to higher education, increased applications to Russell Group universities and increased post-16 staying-on rates.

4.3.3 Outreach activities

Higher education related presentations by theatre groups (five partnerships specifically mentioned these) were credited with a '*phenomenal impact on [pupil] attitude*' while external motivational training seminars run for Year 9 and Year 11 pupils and leadership events run for Year 12 students (one partnership) were said to have '*turned kids [and staff] around*'. The Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Roadshow was given similar credit by two EAZs partnerships for whom the advent of external visitors promoting higher education had provided a talking point for young people who had not previously considered going to university. However, there was a widespread recognition that, while these events may have acted as catalysts for change, it was the more sustained activities (and especially those that were personal to the individual) that had a longer-lasting impact on young people's attitudes and aspirations. One partnership coordinator, indeed, felt strongly that aspiration-raising activities had been overdone, with young people in danger of '*saturation*', and that more attention needed to be paid to raising attainment so that young people's ambitions might be supported by appropriate levels of achievement.

4.3.4 Teaching and learning provision and development

Reflecting this apparently growing appreciation of more prolonged interventions, partnership coordinators cited a range of curriculum-based and study support initiatives that they believed had played a significant role in raising attainment or changing expectations. Eleven of the 42 coordinators reported that such initiatives, whether school-based (such as revision classes and study skills courses) or university-based (in the case of Masterclasses and Saturday classes) were central to improving young people's attainment at GCSE and at A level and suggested that they improvements that they had seen (at least at GCSE) might, in part, be a result of such activities.

A focus on '*front-line achievement raising activities*' was seen as an important element of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme, particularly in the EiC areas, where links had sometimes been made with Learning Mentors and with existing programmes for gifted and talented pupils. Subject-based activities with younger pupils in one such partnership were thought to have stopped '*anti-achievement pressure almost in its tracks*', whilst a second reported that their older pupils had been more motivated by on-site activities that linked to their studies and to their potential achievements than they had been by previous external visits.

The extent to which teaching and learning activities had been affected in the normal classroom, however, was unclear and a number of coordinators referred to constraints imposed by the existing curriculum. Exceptions to this view were noted in one area where strong links were said to have been built between the Increased Flexibility Programme at key stage 4 and Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities. The perceived increase in interaction between schools and colleges that had come about as a result of the former initiative, and its apparent high profile in the area, was thought to have resulted in an embedded awareness of progression from further to higher education (even if there was no hard evidence as yet, of increased attainment or higher education entries). Elsewhere, curriculum developments seemed more inhibited. The Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge taster classes for Year 9 pupils being run at one HEI, for example, were seen as a means of helping young people *'find their passion and inspire them to work harder'*, but there was little indication as to how these classes, in subjects outside the key stage 3 curriculum, were followed up in the everyday classroom.

Partnership coordinators referred to developments in school policies that encouraged staff to raise the issue of higher education whenever they felt it appropriate, whether in subject lessons or tutorial work. They highlighted the need for constant reiterations of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge message that *'higher education is for everyone, no matter what their background'* and they acknowledged that *'it's what happens every day in the school that matters'*. As yet, however, and as far as the evidence provided by partnership coordinators in this study, is concerned, this did not appear to have translated into any widespread development of targeted teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Whilst there was evidence of stronger links being built up between university departments and subject departments and faculties in schools (see Chapter 3), there was less hard evidence that this had led to changes in teaching and learning approaches culminating in higher attainment, increased staying-on rates or increased numbers of applications to higher education.

4.3.5 Summary

Partnership coordinators readily acknowledged that many of the judgements that they had made about the relative impact of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities on young people's aspirations, motivations and attainment were based on *'gut reactions'* and what they referred to as *'anecdotal evidence'*. As yet, few would claim to have addressed all of the issues that they faced, particularly, as discussed in Chapter 3, in relation to boys' attitudes (many were said to live in a non-academic culture that *'glorifies disinterest'*) and to Asian girls.

However, based on their professional judgements, they were very clear that some of the most important outcomes of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, to date, had been increases in awareness of higher education amongst young

people (and their teachers), changes in cultural expectations in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge schools and amongst parents of young people in those schools and greater confidence amongst young people themselves that higher education might be within their grasp. They suggested that a focus on either aspiration raising or attainment alone was not enough, but that a dual approach was necessary. In the words of one partnership coordinator: *'study skills have an impact on the way students work, revise and take notes and prepare their work – but students won't say they want to go to university [as a result] – that's where the trip [to a higher education institution] has most impact'*.

4.4 Conclusion

Progress in developing comprehensive and reliable local monitoring and evaluation strategies appears to have been slow, with many partnerships suggesting that there were issues in both the quantity and quality of the data to which they had access. Patchy coverage, a range of different (and often unrelated) data formats and concerns over the type of data that would best serve their needs were variously mentioned as challenges during interviews and were borne out by the differences observed between partnerships in their annual monitoring returns to DfES. Some partnerships had clearly made progress, most particularly in areas where schools and colleges had been persuaded of the value of monitoring and evaluation data in helping them to identify and target young people who would most benefit from Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities. As one coordinator noted, improved tracking strategies had led to *'a focus on individuals instead of numbers'*.

The general paucity of tracking data available to the partnership coordinators, the variations that existed in the ways in which partnerships (and their partners) either set targets or recorded levels of achievement and, indeed, the lack of specificity in national guidelines, made it difficult to assess progress towards national and local targets. To date, 16 of the 42 partnerships had met at least one of the national targets. Only three, however, appeared to have achieved *all* of the locally defined objectives that they had set for each of these.³⁰ Elsewhere, some partnerships had matched or exceeded the national average for progression or attainment but indicated that they had failed to reach the higher target they had set for themselves. This apparent lack of progress, however, may be misleading and certainly underplays the progress that partnerships had made in promoting higher education to young people, their teachers and their parents.

³⁰ In none of these three areas, however, were the attainment or progression figures as high as the national average

Partnership coordinators were not always convinced, for example, that the national targets that had been set (three of which referred to achievement and progression at 18) were appropriate for an initiative that was targeted at young people from age 13. Many partnerships, indeed, reported that they had not yet focused many of their activities on young people in the older cohorts. Some indicated that, as a result, they had not yet set targets in these areas (17 partnerships indicated at least one area in which they had not yet set a local objective for the national target). Others reported on local levels of attainment or progression in their monitoring returns to DfES, as requested, but suggested (in interview) that these were not yet relevant to the work that they were currently undertaking.

This work they saw as divided between raising awareness, raising aspirations and (ultimately) raising attainment. Most partnerships felt they had achieved some significant success in raising awareness (although two struck a note of caution with concerns that the constant reiteration of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge message might be counter-productive with some students). While few partnerships felt able to claim that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had yet led to increased applications to higher education, at least 16 of the 42 said that it had contributed to higher rates of staying-on or retention at 16, while 18 reported that they had met their local target for post-16 progression. According to partnership coordinators Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge's greatest impact had been in promoting positive attitudes to higher education and raising aspirations amongst young people: *'they get motivated to **want** to progress and that is what Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge does really well'*.

5. PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS' VIEW OF THE FUTURE OF AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE

Summary of findings

- ◆ There was still a degree of confusion at partnership level about the merger of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge with P4P and a lack of understanding regarding the management and operational aspects of the new integrated initiative.
- ◆ Despite partnership coordinators being largely unaware of the finalised plans for the merger of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P, the majority were engaged to some extent in the planning for integration in their areas. Some had a peripheral role, while others were more centrally involved in writing the plan for their region.
- ◆ While interviewees felt more positively about an integrated approach to widening participation than they had in 2003, there also appeared to be a degree of apprehension about it. Partnership coordinators were concerned about: a loss of local voice due to the HEI-led approach the new initiative would take; ambiguity over the role of local area coordinators under the HEI-led programme; cultural differences and a lack of understanding between different types of schools, colleges and HEIs; transitional issues during the initial stages of the integration; and changes in the funding arrangements.
- ◆ The main perceived advantages to the integration were: a more streamlined approach to avoid duplication across initiatives and therefore a more effective use of resources, the sharing of good practice across areas; a wider range of activities for the area, and the extension of widening participation activities to more students.
- ◆ There was evidence that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had become established in partnership areas. There was also a belief that the spirit of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and the principles of higher education and widening participation would continue in the future by embedding Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities within schools and colleges and through networks and partnership working. However, it was also recognised that there was a limit to the extent to which widening participation can be embedded without funding.

This section will outline the partnership coordinators' views on the future development of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Coordinators' perspectives on their involvement in the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P will be discussed as well the perceived advantages and disadvantages

of the integration.³¹ As discussed in Chapter 1, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and the HEFCE funded P4P initiative will be integrated in order to build on both of their strengths and ensure coherence in delivery and approach, while minimising bureaucracy.

The integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P in April 2004 means that there will be changes to the way in which Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge will be run. While P4P was always run at a regional level, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was based on local partnerships. Since April 2004, the integrated initiative has been coordinated at a regional level rather than at an individual partnership level. It was evident from the previous interviews with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators in 2003,³² that there was a degree of confusion over the day-to-day operation and objectives of P4P. The majority of interviewees in 2003 had little involvement with the P4P planning meetings and, despite some coordinators expressing the view that the new P4P programme would be complementary to Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, there was some noticeable uncertainty at this stage regarding the appropriateness of the two initiatives merging. Interviews with coordinators in 2004 indicated that similar concerns remained.

5.1 Partnership coordinators' current involvement in P4P

At the time the partnership coordinators were interviewed (between March and April 2004), interviewees appeared to be largely unaware of the finalised plans for the merger. Despite this, there was evidence that some coordinators were involved in the planning for integration in their areas and there was also an indication that HEI-led P4P activities and Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge activities were already running in parallel.

The extent to which partnership coordinators were involved in the planning for integration varied from some interviewees who said that they were actively engaged, to others who had had some peripheral involvement in the planning for integration, to a small minority of interviewees who said that they had no involvement with the merger of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. Only two partnership coordinators (both from EAZ areas) said that, so far, they had had no involvement with P4P. The remaining 40 interviewees stated that they had attended at least one meeting regarding the integration, through either regional or sub-regional working groups. Twelve interviewees mentioned a more integral role in the integration such as their involvement in a writing group to put together the regional plan for the integrated initiative.

³¹ Partnership coordinators were interviewed prior to April 2004 and therefore the final plans for the Aimhigher/P4P merger were not finalised at the time of interview and therefore this report discusses the perceived benefits and issues concerning the integration.

³² CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

The involvement of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators was felt to be important in the view of one coordinator who commented that it would help to ensure that it was a *'merger and not a take-over'*. However, involvement needed to be proportionate as another interviewee stated that the meeting schedule meant that, *'we meet too often to make any progress'*.

Although, for some interviewees, involvement in the integration was in its embryonic stages, there was evidence that other areas had been more proactive in bringing the two initiatives together. In addition to various working groups, some areas outlined the ways that they had **already been working in collaboration with HEIs under the P4P umbrella**. One partnership coordinator, who had been involved in the P4P working group in 2003, said that this had been extremely productive in terms of encouraging the collaborative links between Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P. The coordinator explained that it made sense to work together: *'We wanted to avoid duplication, schools wouldn't know who was coming in, [or] why and it would've confused them'*. As a result of her work on the group she was seconded two days a week to the working group and illustrated the effect of this on their progress towards the integrated programme when she said: *'we actually deliver and do things jointly now which is what we're going to be expected to do in a more formal way'*.

Other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators similarly reported that they were working with P4P partnerships. One coordinator described how Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P had *'always worked as an integrated programme [with P4P]: always as equal partners'*. Another area coordinator described how they had been working collaboratively with P4P and had jointly funded activities such as a visit to the local HEI; where Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had paid for the venue, whilst P4P staff had organised the rest of the day for the students. In another area, P4P funding had been used to extend the range of masterclasses across two regions. Two Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators from neighbouring regions were working more closely as a result of the integration to write the merger bid between them, while another had initiated links with other EiC coordinators through the integration steering group. Overall, there was general consensus amongst interviewees who had been working in collaboration with HEIs in relation to P4P that, to date, their relationship had been beneficial.

5.2 Perceived impact of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge/P4P merger

In 2002,³³ two main concerns emerged in relation to the proposed integration with P4P. The first related to the regionalisation of the initiative and the loss of local focus, and the second to the lead which the universities would take with the integrated initiative. It was also evident from the 2003 Partnership Report,³⁴ that interviewees needed clarification and more information about the P4P programme and how it was going to take forward the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge agenda. A year on, while feelings were similarly mixed, partnership coordinators, on the whole felt more positive about the merger. It should be remembered that the majority of the 2004 interviews were conducted at a time when the plans for the P4P and Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge integration were still not concrete and therefore, coordinators based their responses on perceptions rather than actual experiences. The perceived advantages of the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P will be discussed below.

5.2.1 Advantages of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P integration

Only two of the 42 partnership coordinators could not think of any advantages to the integration. Other interviewees could think of at least one benefit to the merger and the majority of interviewees thought that it would be a positive way forward for widening participation. The main perceived advantages of the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge with P4P, were:

- ◆ a more streamlined initiative that would hopefully avoid duplication across initiatives and provide a more effective use of resources through combined activities
- ◆ the sharing of good practice across areas
- ◆ a wider range of activities for the area
- ◆ extension of widening participation activities to more students (from other schools not currently taking part in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, as well as students over the age of 19).

In total, 26 interviewees felt that the integrated initiative would create a **more streamlined approach**. These interviewees felt that the integration '*makes sense*' and will '*work more effectively*'. Overall, it appeared to be the natural progression in moving the initiative forward. One interviewee explained the importance of HEI and Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge staff working

³³ CLEAVER, E., and LEVESLEY, T. (2002). Evaluation of Excellence Challenge: Report on Interviews with Partnership Coordinators. Unpublished report.

³⁴ CLEAVER, E., HOLLAND, M., MERRILEES, S. and MORRIS, M. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: the Partnerships' View* (DfES Research Report 477). London: DfES.

together: *'it pulls key people together and gets them around a table where synergy can develop'*.

Two coordinators suggested that the merger would mean that Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge would **remain on the agenda for longer**, turning it into a longer-term initiative. Four interviewees also commented on the perceived improvement in communication it would facilitate between staff in schools, colleges and in universities, with the possibility of improved networking as partners.

Three coordinators felt that it would **avoid duplication of activities** and provide *'cohesion across the country'* and **reduce confusion amongst schools and colleges**. One coordinator was hoping that the integration would help to raise the profile of the widening participation agenda in general. She felt that widening participation was not a high priority within certain schools and that by *'branding'* it through Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge it would help to raise awareness of widening participation issues in the area. For another interviewee, the current Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme appeared to be too disjointed and she was keen on a more streamlined approach that would be easier to understand: *'Some schools who are not part of it [Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge] don't know why they are not and hopefully this will make it clearer'*.

Partnership coordinators also described how an integrated initiative could potentially be a **more effective use of resources**. Although none of the interviewees mentioned the individual funding bodies for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P, such as LSC, a number of partnership coordinators mentioned the potential benefits of having a centralised administrative body. Three interviewees felt that the integrated initiative had the potential to concentrate management and coordination centrally, with one coordinator hoping for general administrative support: *'this way everyone wouldn't have to do everything'*. Two other interviewees reiterated the potential benefits of having a centralised administrative body to take control of the funding allocation: *'it makes more sense to have it under a single administrative body, otherwise money can get swallowed up in bureaucracy instead of ending up with the kids where it does most good'*. They also stated that it could clarify sources of funding for schools and colleges: *'We won't need to explain where the funds have come from. It'll all come from the same pot and it might help everyone'*. Three coordinators were keen to use the merger to help improve their tracking, data collection and evaluative procedures. These interviewees explained how they had felt that their current monitoring and evaluation systems under Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge were weak in that they were finding it difficult to collate reliable information on the progression of their Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge cohort. They were keen to improve their monitoring and evaluative procedures either

through the sharing of good practice with HEIs and other partnerships or through a central tracking system.

Sharing good practice across HEIs and schools and colleges was thought to be a main benefit to the integration by 17 of the 42 interviewees. As one commented, *'it's a great vehicle for us all to work together and share good practice'*. The sub-regional organisation of the new integrated initiative was perceived to be a way in which to instigate the sharing of ideas, as well as allowing partnership staff to network more effectively and identify gaps in provision at a regional level. For example, one partnership coordinator explained how the possibility of working with another region would help them develop their Gifted and Talented element of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge through sharing ideas with another EiC area with more experience of such work. Similarly, two other partnership coordinators commented that, as Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge coordinators, they were more aware of what worked and what did not work when organising widening participation activities for schools and colleges. Sharing such knowledge with HEIs was considered imperative to move forward together: *'We want to share. We don't like being in a vacuum'*.

Although some Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge areas had included Year 7 and 8 in some activities, the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme is generally restricted to students from Year 9 to Year 13. The P4P programme, however, has a greater breadth and includes students outside the 14 to 19 age group. Not only was the merger expected to lead to an **expansion in the number of widening participation activities**, it was also thought by a number of interviewees to enable them to **extend participation to more students**. Eight interviewees were keen to broaden the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge brief and attend to the needs of other 'groups', in particular individuals outside of the 14-19 age group. For example, at the time of the interviews, one partnership coordinator particularly noted an intention to include work-based and community learners. It is worth noting that a number of other partnerships aimed to develop their work-related activities, as noted in Chapter 3. Two further partnerships hoped to work with looked after children, *'to try and give them more awareness of life when they leave care'*. At the time of the interviews the partnership coordinators did not raise any concerns in relation to meeting the wider remit of the integrated Aimhigher programme in terms of the range of target groups.

The new integrated programme was thought by four partnership coordinators to have the potential to **help schools and colleges not currently participating in the programme** as, within the current Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme, not all schools within a particular area participate. These interviewees suggested that schools not currently involved, could also receive some funding for pupils who fall into the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge remit.

Overall, partnership coordinators' perceptions of the potential benefits of the integrated initiative correspond with the DfES' aims of merging the two, such as rationalising bureaucracy and seeking coherence in delivery and approach.

5.2.2 Disadvantages of the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge with P4P

Despite the increased enthusiasm for the merger in 2004 compared to that in 2003, partnership coordinators identified some potential disadvantages to the integration, many of which reflected the concerns originally raised in 2003.

Six partnership coordinators found it difficult to think of any disadvantages at the time of the interview. They either felt that *'it was too early to comment,'* or that they did not know enough about it as yet and would not know what impact it would have until the merger actually took place. One interviewee commented that, had he been asked the question a few months previously, he would have been suspicious of the impending merger. However, barriers had since broken down and issues had been resolved during this time through the various working groups he had attended as well as a DfES briefing session that had clarified to some extent, what the integrated initiative would encompass.

Despite the involvement in various working groups by many partnership coordinators, (as detailed in Section 5.1 above), there still appeared to be some **lack of understanding** regarding P4P and the merger. The majority of these concerns were related to a lack of clarity about the integration. Fifteen interviewees stated that they were still unclear about the policy change: *'the guidance and information isn't clear enough. They [the DfES] are treating us like a focus group: they need to give us criteria. We want to know the operational nitty-gritty'*. As stated previously, all of the interviews with partnership coordinators were carried out at a time when the plans for the integration were still to be finalised and so there was still confusion amongst interviewees over what the integrated scheme would involve.

In addition to the lack of clarity of the guidance for the integration, partnership coordinators identified a range of issues concerning how the new initiative would be organised and coordinated. Their comments, which will be discussed in more detail below, indicated that there was apprehension regarding:

- ♦ the loss of local voice due to the lead HEIs would take with the new integrated initiative
- ♦ uncertainty over the role, if any, of local area coordinators under the integrated, HEI-led programme
- ♦ changes in the funding arrangements

- ♦ the current cultural differences and a lack of understanding between different types of schools, colleges and HEIs
- ♦ transitional concerns during the initial stages of the integration.

Although interviewees appeared to be unclear about specific details of the policy change, they were all generally aware that HEIs would lead the new integrated initiative and that it would adopt a regional approach. In total, 21 interviewees raised concern over the lead that HEIs will play. There was apprehension that HEIs would dominate and control the new programme, a concern also identified in 2003, and as a result, many were worried that their **local needs might be ignored** and that they would **lose their local voice**. This *'top-down'* approach was not considered to be the most effective way forward for widening participation.

The new integrated programme will encompass a larger area than is currently the case under the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge initiative and may include six or seven LEAs in any one area. Partnership coordinators felt that this **regionalised approach**, coupled with the leading role HEIs would play, would mean that their local needs might be overlooked due to the larger geographical area the new initiative would cover. One of the reasons why Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had worked well was, *'because people who are running it feel that they have ownership over it. They have to be careful not to centralise it too much or allow too much to be led by the HEIs'*. The fear that areas would lose the ability to tailor provision and local need was said to have implications for the continued success of the initiative. One interviewee, for example, described a successful mentoring activity in which undergraduates supported Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge students with their learning. This was considered by the partnership coordinator to be a locally developed programme: *'This is very much a "grass-roots" initiative which couldn't be initiated through HEFCE... we want to make sure that the local flavour of the area is maintained'*. This view was reflected in the observation of a second coordinator who said that, *'HEIs don't tailor their programmes to specific needs and they haven't got the local knowledge. An HEI menu of activities won't be attractive to schools'*.

It was clear that there was **uncertainty over the role of partnership coordinators** and the extent to which they would be able to guide the direction of the initiative, if at all. Interviewees predicted ways in which this regionalised approach might impact on schools' ability to engage with Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge if there was no local coordinator to provide a *'voice'* for their area. One interviewee expressed the concern about a loss of *'local voice'* on a P4P/Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge steering group: *'To try and get one headteacher to represent the whole area is going to be extremely difficult, as there is no way this one person can represent all the school perspectives'*. Another partnership coordinator was concerned that

there would be little communication between schools and the HEIs: *'What if a local school needs something? Who do they ask?'*. The role of an area coordinator was therefore considered important in maintaining input at a local level and acting as a conduit between the HEIs and the schools and colleges.

In addition to a loss of local focus, interviewees were anxious about losing a degree of control over the direction of the initiative and expressed their uncertainty as to whether the initiative would remain focused on learner need rather than on institutional need. One partnership coordinator was concerned that the merger was an opportunity for HEIs to take over Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and to use it to attract the best 'non-traditional students' rather than developing those with potential and encouraging them to access higher education. As they explained, *'it might become a big marketing exercise, with money spent saying "come to our University" rather than "go to a university"'*. Coordinators were concerned over this perceived lack of control after coordinating Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge for so many years.

There were also concerns from many interviewees over the **distribution and administration of funds**. There was a lack of clarity over whether Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge areas would be holding an amount of funding centrally. For example, one interviewee said, *'we know every penny that comes in for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and it gets spent on Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge, but will this continue?'* Other interviewees were concerned that they may receive *'drips from the tap instead of receiving the full flow of funding'*, with the fear that this may create a less collegiate feel to the initiative. In total, 13 coordinators were concerned that the allocation for their area may be reduced. Five interviewees were also concerned that HEIs might use the majority of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge funding to recruit extra staff and to fund new widening participation posts instead of primarily investing it in the schools and young people (which was the strategy primarily adopted under Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge).

Cultural differences between educational sectors, such as between schools and HEIs, was considered a potential problem by five partnership coordinators. There was concern among some interviewees that HEI personnel would not fully understand the general issues schools and colleges faced on a day-to-day basis, as well as the changing nature of teaching and learning and the issues facing young people from the widening participation cohort. For example, Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge students were said by one coordinator to be a different cohort to the general student population P4P engage with. Interviewees hoped that HEIs would be able to empathise with schools and would be proactive in developing this understanding. One coordinator noted in particular, the challenge of HEIs working with younger students: *'Faculties in universities don't want to work with Year 8s; they have no training in working with kids and most find the idea frightening'*. Such a

level of understanding, however, was thought by one interviewee to be a two-way appreciation: it was not only HEIs who needed to further their understanding but it was also up to the schools and colleges to realise that universities had changed and developed in the years since teachers and tutors may have attended them.

There was concern from three interviewees that the delivery of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge might be adversely affected during the **transition** from the existing Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme to the integrated Aimhigher programme. In some cases it was felt that this might mean that some Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge plans would need to go on hold while practicalities of the merger were resolved. For example, one partnership coordinator had already planned to give some school staff time off timetable next year to help with activities and staff development. He was unsure whether they would be able to do this and was generally concerned that certain aspects of their Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge plan would need to be adjusted. Another interviewee was anxious about losing funds through the transition and consequently adversely affecting the current Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge plan. Indeed, three coordinators suggested that the proposed integration had already caused a few disruptions to their plans. For example, the uncertainty of the merger had, according to one, slowed down the strategic planning of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and he said that how this uncertainty had meant that it was difficult for him to make plans for the future. As one interviewee commented planning had also slowed down delivery *'We are spending too much time on planning to the detriment of the programme goals'*.

5.3 The sustainability of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge

The future of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge is, of course, related closely to the integration. However, there was evidence that the work of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge had become established in the partnership areas and would continue in some respect, whether through the spirit of partnership working, commitment to the principles of higher education and widening participation or through embedded activities.

The existence of partnership working and collaboration within Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge areas had appeared to develop year-on-year. Three interviewees commented that many **networks would still continue** if the funding ceased in 2006, but would perhaps remain on a more informal basis: *'If the funding dries up, the spirit of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge will continue, I'm sure. It's certainly some of the best things we've done'*. Interviewees argued that it was important for HEIs, schools and colleges to sustain communicative links and to work as a community in the best interest of the students.

Nine partnership coordinators were seeking to embed a few Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities within schools and colleges in the lead up to the proposed cessation of the initiative in 2006. For example, activities such as the Student Ambassador scheme, revision classes and study skills seminars were considered activities that could be sustained. However, interviewees also recognised that there was a limit to the extent to which widening participation activities can be embedded without funding.

5.4 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has revealed that partnership coordinators were not entirely opposed to the integration of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and P4P; in fact the large majority of those interviewed were quite assured in their view that an integrated initiative was an appropriate way forward for widening participation and on the whole, it made sense to integrate the two programmes. There were levels of apprehension however, mainly drawn out of a lack of understanding of the policy change and a concern that the local voice would disappear within a broader regional partnership. Evidently, partnership coordinators need clarification on the management and strategic operation of the new initiative in order for them to understand how best the initiative would impact in their area.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since the initial implementation of Aimhigher (as Excellence Challenge) in September 2001, there have been some notable developments, particularly in terms of the partnerships that have emerged between schools, colleges and HEIs and in the range of coordinated activities designed to raise awareness, promote pupils' aspirations and address barriers to progression. Fewer advances had been made in the monitoring and evaluation of these activities, which had led to a lack of hard evidence on progress to national targets and, in many areas, a reliance on data that coordinators indicated was largely anecdotal to assess the value of activities, rather than a systematic appraisal of their relative impact. It could be argued, however, that since many partnerships had focused their work on raising awareness and aspirations amongst the younger cohorts (those in Year 9 onwards) the achievement of these targets (related to progression to higher education and levels of attainment at A level) might still (and legitimately) be some way off. Where, therefore, have partnerships met with most success in contributing to the overall aims of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge and what messages can be taken from these for the operation of the integrated programme?

6.1 Partnership working

The local partnerships that had been established for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge clearly varied in size, level of central coordination, the balance between strategic and operational management and the extent to which local networks liaised with wider widening participation networks in other areas. However, the significant variations in models of operation that had been noticed at the outset of the initiative (particularly between centralised and devolved operations) had become less evident over the three year period of the evaluation. In the main, coordinators in both EiC and EAZ areas had moved away from a focus on operational management to a more strategic approach, devolving day-to-day administration of the project more to school- or college-based coordinators and concentrating more on widening the scope of partnerships and, in many areas (though by no means all), liaising with P4P partnerships prior to the implementation of the integrated programme. This does not mean that all partnerships operated in the same manner, since financial constraints largely prevented some of the smaller partnerships, particularly in EAZ areas, from developing dedicated teams such as the one in which, in addition to the coordinator, staff at Connexions and in the local HEI were part-funded from Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge monies.

However, some of the differences noted at the outset between EAZ areas and EiC areas had become less evident over time. It was still the case that many Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in EiC areas continued to benefit from the infrastructure of pre-existing EiC partnerships, particularly in relation to management fora and data collection and processing strategies and in access to extant Learning Mentor and gifted and talented programmes. They also benefited from wider local or regional networks that had been established through EiC, networks that were largely not available to EAZs (with one notable exception) in the early days of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Yet many of the EAZ areas appeared to have overcome the isolation (geographical or operational) that they identified at the outset of the programme and many had built up substantial networks within their local area, with other Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and with HEIs outside their own area. Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships in many EAZ areas appeared to recognise the need to share practice and experience and were clearly proactive in identifying or forming inter-partnership networks in order to achieve this. Regional coordination of the integrated programme could usefully take into account the potential risk of isolation of partnerships that are geographically isolated or, alternatively, those that are working with comparatively small number of schools, and the mechanisms whereby the EAZs and the smaller EiC partnerships have sought to redress these concerns.

Thus, by 2004, there were fewer differences apparent between many of the EAZ-based Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships and those located in EiC areas and there was no conclusive evidence that either had been more effective in terms of building relationships with relevant organisations, delivering Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge or achieving positive outcomes in terms of raising aspirations. There was some evidence that EiC areas may have found it easier to set and monitor progress to national and local targets, with more partnerships in EiC areas having identified clear baseline data and indicating levels of achievement against targets. However, the slow rate of progress that has been made in developing comprehensive reliable local monitoring and evaluation strategies suggests that it will be important, under the integrated programme, for any national or regional expectations with respect to outcomes to be made clear and unambiguous, for clear guidance to be given about the ways in which data is to be collated and presented and for support to be made available in setting up monitoring and evaluation strategies at a regional or local level. This is a particular challenge in relation to tracking data, an aspect of local monitoring that was relatively poor. Without reliable data, the relative longer-term impact of widening participation activities and initiatives on young people's progression cannot be assessed with any degree of confidence.

6.2 Partnership stability

As the partnerships have developed over the three years, it appears that they have remained relatively stable in terms of the core institutions that have contributed to them. The evidence suggests that partnership coordinators have actively sought to build links with appropriate organisations and that effective relationships were established where there was commitment from all parties, time and funding to support these links and an understanding by partners of other institutions. However, over the three years, changes in personnel have occurred both in the coordination of the partnership and among partner institutions. In some partnerships, the subsequent disruption has been minimal, with the primary exercise being simply to establish new relationships. In others, personnel changes, particularly in emerging organisations such as Connexions and the LSC, had led occasionally to an increase in the prominence of the partner in the partnership or to reduction in partner involvement. The extent to which all schools in a partnership have remained actively engaged in Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge has also been affected by personnel changes, with the delegation of school coordinator posts from senior managers to more junior staff, or the loss of coordinator when school staff changed posts, sometimes (though not always) leading to a significant reduction in impetus or status of the initiative in the school.

However, there was no conclusive evidence that the work of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had been significantly adversely affected by the various changes that had take place. This relative stability suggests that there has been a commitment to the initiative among the participating organisations. It also suggests that their experience of working in partnership to facilitate widening participation had been largely positive. Where coordinators had established good operational links with partners such as Connexions, this was thought to have contributed both to the nature of the work that was done and to the positive outcomes of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Where LLSCs were actively involved in partnerships their ability to draw on their broader overview of other relevant initiatives and strategies, such as the 14-19 strategy and work-based learning was valued. In addition, they were able to draw on other networks to inform the development of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships. Where partnerships had already established these local working relationships with their local LSCs and Connexions Services, it is apparent that they could usefully contribute to the development of the regional partnerships under the integrated programme. Where there is scope for further development of these relationships, the partnerships could draw on their experience of establishing and maintaining effective working relationships, which, they indicated, entailed good communication, clear strategic direction and planning and an understanding of partner institutions which was supported by sufficient time and funds.

6.3 Partnership coordination

One factor which appears to have contributed to the development of effective partnerships was the role of the partnership coordinator. This role appeared to have developed over the life of the partnerships from an initial focus on gaining the involvement of appropriate organisations such as schools, colleges and HEIs to an emerging strategic role in ensuring that the systems were in place for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge to become embedded and continue, and for the outcomes to be captured and assessed through developing systems for monitoring and data management. This suggests that the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had matured and become increasingly embedded over the three years of the evaluation. Nevertheless, partnership coordinators continued to make a distinctive contribution to delivery, through drawing on their local knowledge to build links with other agencies, and through their close relationships with the schools involved, as a conduit facilitating communication between organisations. This could include feeding back to HEIs and other agencies involved to ensure that they best met the needs which coordinators identified of the young people locally in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge cohorts. There was evidence of apprehension among some coordinators that, should they not continue in such a role under the integrated programme, the need would remain for a mechanism to mediate between institutions and provide guidance and advice on local issues. Such a system would help to ensure that HEIs, which might be working in partnership with a considerable number of schools and colleges, were aware of, and able to respond to, local priorities and the needs of individual institutions.

6.4 The local focus

The Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships had experienced some success over the three years of coordinating and initiating activities, and communicating information, to encourage participation in further and higher education of students from a wide range of backgrounds. In doing so, it could be argued that they had raised the profile of post-compulsory education, and particularly higher education, in areas where this was not part of the local culture. They had developed an awareness of such participation among school and college staff and amongst young people that can be further built on under the integrated Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge programme. The partnerships themselves provided a mechanism for driving widening participation at a local level, taking on responsibility for establishing coherence in existing activities and initiating new ones. In some areas, this has required significant efforts in keeping widening participation on the agenda of all local educational institutions. The integrated programme would benefit from ensuring that this focus on school and college accord is maintained in order to facilitate the longer-term success of widening participation strategies.

6.5 Engaging parents

Partnership coordinators recognised the important influence which parents and carers of young people had over their children's decisions and sought to engage with them and provide information and guidance. However, it was evident that engaging with parents of pupils and students in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort had proved a significant challenge for partnership coordinators. This was said to be due to the attitudes of parents who had not experienced higher education themselves and did not consider it was a possible route for their child. Moreover, practical difficulties relating to identifying a time and location which was appropriate and appealing to parents was problematic and, in some areas, staged events were poorly attended. Nevertheless, through their experience, partnership coordinators had identified some strategies that appeared to have been more successful, such as identifying opportunities for face-to-face personal contact with parents, seeking creative solutions to the timing and location of events, and targeting their content at the primary concerns of parents, particularly the financial implications of undertaking a higher education course. This experience could be built upon through the integrated Aimhigher programme by facilitating the sharing of practice across a region. The integrated programme could also benefit from the evidence which suggests that parents recognise the 'brand' of Aimhigher which will continue under the integrated programme.

6.6 In conclusion

There are some clear policy lessons for the new integrated programme emerging from the operation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge partnerships between schools, colleges and HEIs. These include maintaining an awareness of local imperatives, facilitating local mediation between HEIs and schools and colleges, ensuring ownership (hence status) of the initiative in institutions and building on the various operational and strategic networks that have already been developed for Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. It will also be important to clarify expectations of anticipated outcomes and to ascertain the validity and reliability of the data, be it quantitative or qualitative, that local or regional groups might be expected to collect in order to monitor and evaluate local, regional or national goals.

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© NFER, LSE and IFS Aimhgher:Excellence Challenge Evaluation Consortium 2005

Produced by the Department for Education and Skills

ISBN 1 84478 503 3
Ref No: RR650
www.dfes.go.uk/research