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# Evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Interim Report 2005

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creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary is based on the interim report for the evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, and draws on the analyses, to date, of the data from:

♦ The first two years (2001/02 and 2002/03) of longitudinal surveys of young people

♦ Annual surveys of management teams, teachers and tutors in schools and further education institutions (2001/02, 2002/03 and 2003/04)

♦ Annual surveys of higher education providers (2001/02, 2002/03 and 2003/04)

♦ Surveys of young people eligible for Opportunity Bursaries

♦ Annual interviews with 42 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators (2001/02, 2002/03 and 2003/04)

♦ Area-based studies of ten selected partnerships and the higher education institutions linked to them.

## What is Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge? (paragraph 101)

The Excellence Challenge programme was initially established by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001, with the aim of increasing the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who had the qualifications and aspirations necessary to enter higher education.

It became known as Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in 2003 and in August 2004, was integrated with Aimhigher: Partnership for Progression (P4P), a programme that had been run by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The unified programme, known as Aimhigher, is managed by HEFCE on behalf of the LSC and DfES and covers the whole of England.

## Why was Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge introduced? (paragraphs 104-106)

Between the 1960s and the present day there has been a marked increase in the numbers of young people entering higher education. Total numbers in higher education in the UK rose from around 300,000 in the 1960s to nearly 1,800,000 by 2002/03. Despite this growth, there are still many groups in society that remain under-represented in higher education. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge seeks to improve access to higher education for young students from deprived areas and to reduce some of the gaps in representation between different socio-economic groups through the provision of targeted interventions.

**What are Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions?** (paragraphs 209-211)

The interventions that were made through partnerships under Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were of two different types. The first type related specifically to individuals and was the designation of young people to a particular targeted cohort (pre-16, this was the widening participation cohort and, post-16, the gifted and talented cohort). The second type related to the provision of specific activities such as summer schools, residential courses and day visits to universities, mentoring programmes involving undergraduates and higher education staff, Masterclasses and a range of study support activities, including homework clubs. These activities were made available to the designated widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts, but were also open to other young people. In addition, post-18, young people who met the eligibility criteria and who were offered a place in a higher education institution, could apply to the institution for an Opportunity Bursary to help fund their studies.

**Key Findings**

The impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge can be identified at a number of different levels:

♦ **First-level impacts related to changes in inputs and institutional processes**. The additional resources made available by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge led to improvements in the coordination of outreach activities. The resources were also associated with an increase in the extent to which providers of higher education and local partnerships had been able to offer a range of targeted activities to raise the awareness and aspirations of young people, particularly those in the pre- and post-16 widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts.

♦ **Second-level impacts related to changes in routines, experiences and attitudes**. There were indications that pre-conceptions (amongst teachers, tutors and higher education staff) about young people who were in the widening participation cohorts had been challenged and that there was now a greater understanding of their needs and the barriers they faced to entry to higher education. Young people, in turn, had been exposed to university life and their reflections and those of their teachers, as well as those of partnership coordinators, indicated that many now had broader horizons and a more realistic understanding of higher education opportunities.

♦ **Third-level impacts related to outcomes for pupils and student and teaching staff.** For young people, designation as a member of the pre-16 widening participation cohort and participation in particular Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related activities were both associated with higher levels of achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4. The association with raised aspirations, in terms of stated intentions to enter higher education, was less clear at this stage, although there was an association between being in receipt of an Opportunity Bursary and student retention in Higher Education Providers. For institutions,

relationships between educational institutions within and across the sectors were said to have improved.

♦ **Fourth level impacts, where the effects of the initiative become embedded and institutional change is observed**, had yet to emerge at the time of the surveys and interviews.

## The Research Findings

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge targets young people from age 13 to 19. As such, it is a long-term policy, since it will be at least five years before the youngest group of targeted pupils would progress to higher education. Even so, within the first two years of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there is evidence to suggest that the initiative, or activities promoted by (though not necessarily organised by) partnerships, have had an impact on some young people, on some groups of young people and on institutions.

## What has been the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on individuals? (paragraphs 214-229)

♦ Within schools in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas, there was evidence of overall gains in GCSE performance and in performance in mathematics at Key Stage 3. These gains were associated with:

  ➢ Young people being designated as members of the widening participation cohort and/or the gifted and talented cohort (longer membership of either cohort was also associated with better GCSE results)

  ➢ Participation in specific Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge–related activities (particularly summer schools, visits to higher education institutions, discussions with higher education staff and discussions with undergraduates)

♦ The proportion of young people in Year 11 who stated an intention to go to higher education was greater in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools than in comparison schools. Such intentions were associated with:

  ➢ Being in a school in which young people were encouraged to think about the value of higher education.

  ➢ The opportunity to discuss university life with higher education staff and undergraduates.

However, there was no indication that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had yet played a significant part in changing young people's minds about going to higher education. Young people in the widening participation cohort, or who had taken part in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, who, in Year 10, said they did not want to follow a higher education course, were no more likely than young people who were outwith these groups to have changed their mind by Year 11.

**What has been the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on different groups of young people?** (paragraphs 307-320)

The key target groups for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were young people from households with no tradition of higher education.  Within this broad group, a variety of sub-groups were recognised, including young people from **different minority ethnic groups,** from **low income families** and with some measure of **Special Educational Needs**.  What evidence is there that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has had any impact on these different groups of young people?

♦ The extent to which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has been accessed by different groups of young people has not been uniform.  Young people from some **minority ethnic groups** (particularly Indian and Bangladeshi pupils) were under-represented in both widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts.

♦ Young people from Black African backgrounds in the gifted and talented cohort achieved higher GCSE scores than their academic peers in the gifted and talented cohort, once all other background characteristics had been taken into account.

♦ However, with the exception of this group, there is no evidence, as yet, to suggest that belonging to either the widening participation or gifted and talented cohorts had any significantly different impact on young people from minority ethnic groups in these cohorts, over and above the impact that it had on young people from white UK backgrounds.  Nor was there any indication that other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related interventions (such as summer schools, university visits or other activities) have had any significantly differential impact on the attitudes, aspirations or attainment of young people from minority ethnic groups.

The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge policy targeted young people from **low income families** through two separate routes.  Firstly, through Strand 1 and 2 activities aimed at raising attainment and aspirations amongst young people aged 13 to 19 and, secondly, through the provision of Opportunity Bursaries.

♦ The widening participation strategy reached out to more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of their socio-economic circumstances) than the gifted and talented strategy.

♦ However, once all other background variables had been taken into account (including designation as a member of the gifted and talented or widening participation cohorts), levels of attainment amongst young people in receipt of free school meals (a proxy measure for low income families) remained significantly lower across all measures of attainment, at both Key Stage 3 and GCSE, amongst those in both Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools and comparison schools.

♦ There is evidence that elements of the policy may have played a part in increasing retention in higher education amongst young adults (those aged over 19) from low income families.  Young people in receipt of an Opportunity Bursary were more likely to be still in higher education after one year than those not in receipt of such a Bursary.  There was also evidence that young people holding Opportunity

Bursaries might have had lower levels of liquid debt (credit card and bank overdrafts) than non-recipients. However, neither of these two findings were statistically significant across all the different tests that were carried out and so, at this stage, it is not possible to assess whether the long-term benefits of this element of the policy outweigh the costs.

There is qualitative data to suggest that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities may have contributed to a widening of horizons amongst young people from **families with no history of higher education** (not least through the provision of enhanced advice and guidance) and to overcoming or ameliorating the impact of lower parental levels of education on post-16 students' attitudes, but no conclusive statistical evidence that such interventions have then led to increased aspirations to enter higher education.

## What has been the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on institutions? (paragraphs 404-411)

- ♦ Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was said to have led to the creation of sustained relationships between schools, colleges and higher education providers. In many partnerships in the study, it was reported that these relationships did not previously exist or were *ad hoc* only.

- ♦ Since the implementation of the policy, there has been an increase in the number and type of widening participation activities deployed by higher education providers and those used by schools and colleges.

- ♦ Participation in such activities appears to have challenged the preconceptions of higher education provider staff about the ability and motivation of young people, while teaching staff in schools and colleges referred to professional development opportunities arising out of the their own involvement in the initiative.

- ♦ A particular and positive outcome of the programme appears to have been the improvement in working relationships between institutions from different educational sectors – schools, colleges and higher education providers – with some partnership coordinators highlighting the specific contribution of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to the initiation of both new collaborations and the improvement of previous more tenuous and *ad hoc* groupings.

## In what circumstances are activities most and least effective? (paragraphs 507-511)

Throughout the evaluation, interviewees commented on the perceived motivational aspects of university visits and summer schools. Such activities, however, were thought to be *more* effective when they were planned jointly by school, college and university staff and involved interactive, subject-based activities and *less* effective when they were lecture based. Unfocused campus tours, in which young people were simply given a tour of facilities, were deemed irrelevant and unproductive by a wide range of interviewees, from pre-16 pupils to partnership coordinators.

Partnership coordinators and others identified groups for whom even well run and planned activities were sometimes thought to be less effective. Such young people included those in the widening participation cohorts who had spent little time away from home or from their family network (who were thought to lack confidence to take up places at summer schools, or to make the most of any visits in which they took part) and those for whom there were cultural barriers and/or parental antipathy to residential experiences. It was suggested that these young people would benefit from '*stepping stones*'; experiences such as an event involving an overnight stay that would prepare them more fully for longer residential experiences.

The role of higher education mentors – particularly undergraduates or recent graduates – was commended by coordinators because of the way in interaction with higher education students could play a part in breaking down cultural barriers: '*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'*. This reflects the finding of the recent evaluation of Strand 6 (the Student Associates scheme) in which the authors summarised the view that, '*By being close in age and experience, Students Associates can relate to the issues young people face'*.

### The implications (paragraphs 609-612)

The research suggests that there are implications from these findings for:

### Aimhigher Partnerships

♦ It will be important to continue to acknowledge the value of collaborative partnerships. These have been vital in developing a better understanding of educational cultures and in ensuring that activities for young people are appropriately designed, well paced and properly focused.

♦ The value of providing young people with some experience of life in higher education, in terms of challenging (often erroneous) pre-conceptions and in terms of raising aspirations, has emerged as a consistent finding throughout the evaluation. These experiences appear to be as valuable pre-16 as post-16.

♦ It important to continue to find ways of reaching parents in order to address and overcome some of the existing barriers to progression to further and higher education.

♦ In order to maximise the impact of Aimhigher activities, the approach adopted by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, of targeting young people pre-16 in schools, as well as in post-16 education, has many advantages, not least in building the groundwork for developing a positive attitude to higher education, particularly in communities where there is no real history of such transitions.

## Higher Education Providers

- There is value in staff from Higher Education providers engaging with activities that aim to widen participation. These usefully inform their interaction with students who embark on their courses.

- Higher Education providers should consider ensuring that any widening participation activities and events that aim to raise aspirations and awareness among young people incorporate opportunities to meet with, and interact with, current undergraduates. Such interaction enabled young people to gain an insight into the mode of learning in higher education and how to manage socially and financially when pursuing their chosen course.

## Schools and Colleges

- While there was evidence that individual activities and events contributed to raising awareness and aspirations, there was both a prevailing view amongst interviewees and statistical evidence that institution culture was a key factor in raising aspirations. The creation of an environment where the ethos of the institution as a whole embraced the possibility that young people might progress onto higher education was a significant underpinning factor in motivating young people to consider such a course, post-18.

- It is important that schools and colleges become actively involved in evaluating the impact of the activities in which targeted young people take part and in reviewing programmes of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities in terms of their ability to meet the needs of their pupils and students.

- The findings suggest that there is value in schools identifying specific cohorts of students and enabling them to access activities that supplement their normal curriculum, extending their experiences, raising their awareness and increasing their aspirations.

- However, it is also imperative that careful consideration is given to the identification of students in the cohorts to ensure that all students who meet the criteria have the potential to access, and benefit from, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. For example, at present, the data suggests that young people from some ethnic minority communities are under-represented in the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts.

- There is real value in schools and colleges working together with higher education providers to overcome some of the logistical challenges they may encounter in arranging extra-curricular activities. These include visits to higher education providers, specific opportunities for young people to discuss higher education with staff and students in higher education providers, as well as opportunities to participate in summer schools, all of which were found to be particularly associated with increases in attainment. One-to-one contact with undergraduates, either through a mentoring or other programme, emerged as a significant factor associated with higher levels of attainment and higher levels of aspiration in both the statistical analyses and the qualitative studies.

**The Research**

The evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge is being undertaken by a consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The interim report for the evaluation draws together data from a series of qualitative and quantitative analyses that have been conducted since the start of the academic year 2001/02. These analyses are based on data obtained from young people (in compulsory education, in further education, training or work and in higher education), from schools, colleges and higher education institutions and from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a brief overview of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme, introduced by the DfES as part of a national widening participation strategy. It outlines the approach that was adopted for the evaluation of the programme and indicates the structure of the report.

## What is Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge?

101　The Excellence Challenge programme was initially established by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001, with the aim of increasing the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who had the qualifications and aspirations necessary to enter higher education. It became known as Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in 2003, following the publication of the Government's White Paper, '*The Future of Higher Education*'.[i] This White Paper signalled the extension and expansion of the programme and a commitment to bring together Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge with the Aimhigher: Partnership for Progression (P4P) programme that had been run by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This integration took place in August 2004, with the unified programme known as Aimhigher and managed by HEFCE on behalf of the LSC and DfES. The unified programme covers the whole of England and operates at three levels: national, regional and local.

102　At the outset, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had four specific strands:

- ♦ To develop partnerships between schools, colleges and higher education institutions in order to raise aspirations and attainment in Excellence in Cities (EiC) areas and Education Action Zones (EAZs) and so encourage greater progression to higher education (**Strand 1**)

- ♦ To increase funding to higher education institutions to facilitate outreach to young people in disadvantaged areas and to areas where there was little or no history of progression to higher education (**Strand 2**)

- ♦ To provide clearer information and better marketing of the route to higher education for young people (**Strand 3**)

- ♦ To pilot new forms of additional financial help through 26,000 Opportunity Bursaries to young people, worth £2000 per student over three years (**Strand 4**).

103　Subsequently, two further strands were introduced:

- ♦ To evaluate the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge through a multi-faceted research programme.[ii] The evaluation 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 5**)

♦ To provide payments, through the student associates pilot programme, to undergraduates to work in schools and further education colleges (**Strand 6**). The aim of this strand (introduced in 2003) is to encourage undergraduates to act as role models for the young people concerned and to help them to learn more about higher education.

## Why was Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge introduced?

104    Between the 1960s and the present day there has been a marked increase in the numbers of young people entering higher education. Total numbers in higher education in the UK rose from around 300,000 in the 1960s to nearly 1,800,000 by 2002/03.[iii] The Age Participation Index (API) for young people aged under 21 in Great Britain also rose from 19% in 1990/1 to 35% in 2001/02.[iv] During this time, other significant changes were noted, with a sharp increase in the numbers of part-time students (most of whom are mature students) and of female students. There has also been an increase in overall participation amongst minority ethnic groups. Proportionally, there is a higher rate of participation amongst young people from minority ethnic backgrounds than amongst young people from white UK backgrounds,[v] although the pattern of entry may differ; the proportion of minority ethnic students as a percentage of all students ranges from 1% to almost 60% at individual universities. Compared with the student population overall, minority ethnic students are more likely to be studying in post-1992 universities,[vi] particularly in Greater London and are significantly more likely to be studying computer science, medicine and dentistry and law, and less likely to be studying Education or Humanities.[vii]

105    Despite this growth, there are still many groups in society that remain under-represented in higher education. These include females from Bangladeshi backgrounds, young people with disabilities, those who are looked after by local authorities and those who enter higher education via a vocational route.[viii] There are also strong negative links with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. In a recent paper, Gilchrist *et al.* (2003) indicated that while nearly 90% of young people from social classes I and II who have appropriate entry qualifications at age 21 achieve higher education qualifications by the age of 30, the proportion of qualified young people from social classes III (non-manual) to V (unskilled) achieving such higher education qualifications by the same age is significantly lower.[ix] The figures for young people from such backgrounds ranged from 36% for social class III (non-manual) down to 18% for social classes III (manual) and V (unskilled).

106    The challenge to widen participation in higher education continues, therefore. It is not unique to the UK – indeed it has been recognised as a significant element in the promotion of lifelong learning across Europe. Of the four main

strategies identified in member states in 2000,[x] two have been key to the government policies for increasing participation in higher education amongst young people in England.[xi]  Specifically, these have been directed towards increasing provision, with additional places made available in further and higher education, and extending access to sectors of society that have previously been unrepresented.  This latter is the major premise behind Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, which seeks to improve access to higher education for young students from deprived areas and to reduce some of the gaps that currently exist in terms of the representation of different socio-economic groups.

## How is Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge being evaluated?

107    The DfES commissioned a consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies to undertake the evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.  The evaluation is multifaceted, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods being used to evaluate the programme.  Methods include:

- ♦ Large-scale longitudinal surveys of young people and tutors in schools and further education sector institutions, in order to provide information about such factors as the activities undertaken as part of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme and young people's attitudes towards pre-and post-16 education.  The information obtained from these surveys (combined with administrative data sources) will also be used to look at the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on attainment and progression.

- ♦ Surveys of higher education providers to establish information about activities aimed at widening participation, and policies and practices in relation to access to higher education and perceived effectiveness;

- ♦ Surveys of young people eligible for Opportunity Bursaries to ascertain their characteristics, financial circumstances and experiences;

- ♦ Annual interviews with 42 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators;

- ♦ Area-based studies of selected partnerships and higher education institutions to explore policy and practice at a local level and the perceived effectiveness of the various strands of the programme.

108    The overall aim of the evaluation is to explore the effectiveness of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme in terms of the extent to which it appears to contribute to widening participation in higher education.  The quantitative methods are being used to explore associations between activities and outcomes (see paragraphs 203 and 204).  The qualitative methods (including annual interviews and in-depth case-studies) seek to examine the

processes involved and to identify practice that is perceived to be effective in terms of the overall programme aims.

## What is included in this report?

109    This report draws together data from the qualitative and quantitative analyses that have been conducted since the start of the academic year 2001/02.  These analyses have been based on data obtained from young people (in compulsory education, in further education, training or work and in higher education), from schools, colleges and higher education institutions and from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships.  It should be emphasised that the young people who were in the pre-16 target cohorts in 2001/02 would not have progressed to higher education by the time the second round of surveys took place in 2002/03.  It will be at least five years, therefore, before the longer-term impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on entry to higher education can be measured for those who were in Year 9 when the initiative was first implemented.

110    The report seeks to address a series of questions about the implementation and impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and to summarise the implications of these findings for the unified Aimhigher programme.  In particular, it examines the evidence about the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on individuals, on institutions and on the provision of widening participation activities.  It explores the apparent effectiveness of these activities, the groups of young people with whom they appear to have been most effective and the reasons why they may have been, or are seen as, effective.  Finally, it seeks to highlight the implications of these findings for schools, colleges, HEI providers and partnerships and for the wider implementation of the unified Aimhigher programme.

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[i]    GREAT BRITAIN. PARLIAMENT. HOUSE OF COMMONS (2003). *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm. 5735). London: The Stationery Office.  As a result of this expansion, 86 new local partnerships would be involved in implementing the Excellence Challenge (now Aimhigher) initiative.

[ii]    Funds for such an evaluation were earmarked by the DfES at the outset of the programme; the identification of the evaluation as a distinct strand, however, was a later strategy.

[iii]    DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (2004). *4.7: Post 16 Learning: Higher Education Student Population* [online]. Available: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/trends/upload/xls/4_7t.xls  [14 October, 2004].

[iv]    DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (2004). *Welcome to Trends in Education and Skills* [online].  Available:  http://www.dfes.gov.uk/trends  [14 October, 2004].  The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR), which replaces the previous Initial Entry Rate (IER), for 2002/03 was 44% in 2002/03.  This indicates the proportion of 17-30 year old England domiciled first-time entrants to Higher Education and is the way in which DfES measures progress toward its stated aim of 50% of young people having the opportunity to benefit from Higher Education by 2010.

[v]    CONNOR, H., TYERS, C., MODOOD, T. and HILLAGE, J. (2004). *Why the Difference: a Closer Look at Higher Education Minority Ethnic Students and Graduates* (DfES Research Report 552). London: DfES.

vi    See also SHINER, M. and MODOOD, T. (2002). 'Help or hindrance?' Hither education the route to ethnic equality', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, June. Cited in: CONNOR, H., TYERS, C., MODOOD, T. and HILLAGE, J. (2004). *Why the Difference: a Closer Look at Higher Education Minority Ethnic Students and Graduates* (DfES Research Report 552). London: DfES.

vii   Ibid.

viii  See, for example, Connor *et al.*, 2004 (op cit) and NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE (2002). *Widening Participation in Higher Education in England* [online]. Available: http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/01-02/0102485.pdf [9 September, 2004].

ix    GILCHRIST, R., PHILLIPS, D. and ROSS, A. (2003). 'Participation and potential participation in UK higher education.' In: ARCHER, L., HUTCHINGS, M. and ROSS, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

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

xi    The third strategy, the diversification of provision, could, arguably, be said to have been a significant factor behind the creation of the Open University during the 1970s. Strategies to reduce failure and dropout (the fourth element) have, to date, been focused primarily on those in compulsory education and post-16 further education and training.

## 2. WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PROGRAMME ON INDIVIDUALS?

201     At the time of its introduction, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was one of a number of policy initiatives focused on the young people from disadvantaged areas.  While not necessarily focused on higher education *per se* (Excellence in Cities, for example, sought to raise attainment and enhance motivation amongst young people pre-16) many of these policies were likely to have an impact on eventual rates of participation in higher education amongst the target groups of students.  They included policies focused on alleviating student hardship (including Learner Support Funds, Education Maintenance Allowances; the Childcare Support Fund; and FE bursaries for students attending certain specialist colleges) and enhancing student support and guidance.  These latter policies included the phased introduction of local Connexions Services and increased pastoral support funding in colleges, which was aimed at improving retention and achievement (2000/2001) and improving transition and retention (2001/2002).  In addition, there was a wide variety of widening participation projects taking place in individual Higher Education Institutions, and funded by various means, including HEFCE, the LSC and a number of different charitable bodies such as the Sutton Trust.

202     Alongside policies aimed specifically at promoting and supporting participation, there are indications that some of the changes that took place between 1998 and 2000 to the post-16 curriculum and to provision of advice and guidance for young people might have had some short-term unintended, and possibly negative, 'knock-on' effects on participation rates in higher education over the next few years.  These include the longer-term impact of the focusing agenda for careers services, implemented in 1998.  The longer-term consequences of the agenda (a reported deterioration in careers service inputs to those who might be seen as '*of average ability or the most able*',[xii] and a widening of the gap between schools with good careers education and guidance programmes and those where provision was poor[xiii]), combined with uncertainty over the implications of the post-16 curriculum,[xiv] were a reported increase in dropout from post-16 academic courses amongst the affected cohorts.[xv]  As a result, there was concern that many young people from those cohorts who would be expected, or who would have been encouraged, to make the transition to higher education in 2001/2002 and 2002/2003, might already have been '*lost to the system*'.[xvi]

203     In order to identify the specific impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on raising the aspirations of young people to enter higher education, over and above the impact arising from the various and inter-connected policies and

strategies aimed at raising and widening participation, the research design adopted by the consortium sought to use a variety of statistical and analytical techniques. In particular, and using survey data matched to the National Pupil Database (NPD) and policy-specific information gleaned from schools, the evaluation used a number complementary statistical modelling methods as outlined below.

204    The first method involved economic modelling techniques, using two different methodologies, both in a difference-in-differences approach. The first of these, linear regression, places more restrictions on the data than the second, propensity score matching, which is used primarily to check the robustness of the estimates produced using the linear regression technique. These techniques, which were applied to data on young people in EiC areas alone,[xvii] sought to compare pupil attainment and other outcomes in the 'treatment' areas (Phase 1 and 2 EiC areas) with the 'comparison' areas (EiC Phase 3 areas) in 2001/02 (the year in which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was launched) and in 2002/03. Under certain assumptions, these two techniques can identify the impact of the policy on outcomes. By comparing the change in outcomes in the 'treatment' areas to the change in outcomes in the 'comparison' areas, the approaches *'difference out'* any time-constant effect of unobserved factors that differ between the two areas and are correlated with attainment.

205    The second method involved multilevel modelling, which is an extension of multiple regression analysis that allows a hierarchical approach to data and allows estimates of standard errors to be calculated for each level in the model. This technique was applied to pupil- and school-level data from *all* 'treatment' areas (including EAZs) and comparison areas. It sought to identify any significant associations between specific interventions (such as designation to a widening participation cohort, or participation in a summer school, university visit or Masterclass, for example) and young people's attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4. For some outcomes, such as a stated intention to go to university or the achievement (or not) of five or more higher grade GCSEs for which the outcome measure could be expressed as a dichotomous variable (yes or no), a variation of this technique, using logistic regression, was applied.

206    The analysis also adopted the four-stage model of impact (Figure 1) originally developed for the evaluation of Excellence in Cities.[xviii] This model comprises:

   ♦ First-level impacts that largely change inputs (infrastructure, staffing and resources) and institutional processes, such as partnership operations, curriculum offerings and the modes of, and approaches towards, curriculum delivery.

- Second-level impacts that especially make their presence felt on the key players (teachers, tutors and lecturers) within the main initiative institutions (schools, colleges and HEIs) and cause change to occur in their everyday routines, experiences and attitudes. Many of these can also be considered as *'soft'* impacts that are dependent upon perceptual evidence.

- Third-level impacts that change outcomes for the target population(s) in both intended and unintended ways. These can be assessed by the use of both *'hard'* and *'soft'* measures of change in:

  - schools and colleges in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas, with changes in relationships with higher education institutions and parents, improving standards and higher proportions of young people staying in learning at 16 and 18, etc.

  - pupils, with improvements in performance, skills, motivation, attitudes and aspirations, and the type of destinations entered at post-16 and post-18.

  - other third-level impacts reflect the widening influence of the initiative, encompassing, for instance, initial spill-over effects onto other pupils and students and changes to the attitudes and behaviour of key players outside, as well as inside, the initiative (e.g. the wider community).

- Fourth-level impacts that are associated with longer-term, more durable, more stable and more embedded change to infrastructure, systems and processes within initiative institutions and more widespread transference of practices and ideas to institutions outside the initiative.

## Figure 1. The four stage model of impact
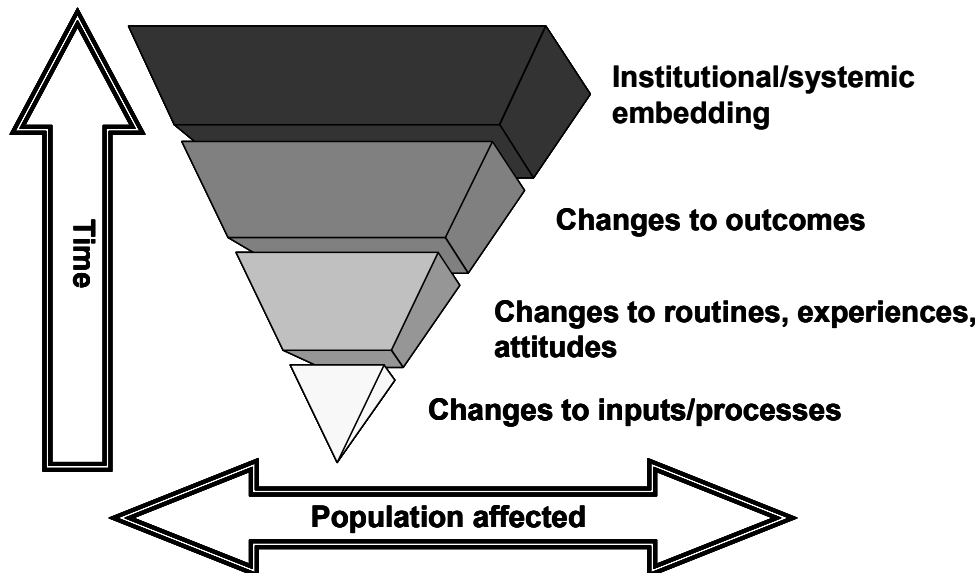
207    The following sub-sections seek to summarise emerging findings based, primarily, on the analysis of data from young people collected over two academic years (2001/02 and 2002/03)[xix] from 19,998 young people who were in Year 11 and 17,116 who were in Year 9.[xx]  It also draws on follow-up surveys of 2,280 young people who completed Year 11 in 2000/01 and of 1,854 who completed Year 11 in 2001/02.[xxi]

208    It should be noted that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was targeted at young people aged 13 to 19, with much of the early focus being on young people in Years 9 to 11 in school.  This means that, by 2002/03, it was not anticipated that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (and in particular activities funded through Strands 1 and 2) would have had time to have played a significant role in increasing applications to higher education.  However, it was anticipated that the initiative would have an impact on young people's attitudes, achievements and aspirations to higher education and, potentially, on progression to further education.

## What are Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions?

209    Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions can be identified at two different levels.  The first of these relates to designation to a particular cohort, whilst the second relates to the provision of specific activities.

210    As part of the initiative, schools and colleges identified young people as members of the widening participation cohort; that is, young people who were in learning (whether pre- or post-16) who had the ability to progress to higher education, but who came from disadvantaged backgrounds without any family history of higher education.  Just below eight per cent of the young people in the Year 11 cohorts in the study (and five per cent of the Year 9 cohorts) were identified as part of the widening participation group in their school.[xxii]

211    A further cohort, young people who are designated as gifted and talented, is primarily an artefact of the EiC initiative, although the concept of a gifted and talented cohort also predates that policy.  Under EiC, participating schools were required to identify a gifted and talented cohort of some five to ten per cent of each year group in Key Stages 3 and 4.  At least two thirds of this cohort are expected to be those with the highest levels of attainment in academic areas of the curriculum.[xxiii]  Amongst the young people in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge study, 10% of the Year 11 cohort and over nine per cent of the Year 9 cohort were designated as gifted and talented.  Under Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, however, further post-16 gifted and talented cohorts were identified, although the researchers do not have access to any national data to indicate the actual size of this cohort.[xxiv]

212    It is possible for young people to be identified in both gifted and talented and widening participation groups (both pre- and post-16).  Indeed, 21% of the

young people in the Year 11 widening participation cohort were also identified as gifted and talented.[xxv]  This means that some 79% of the widening participation cohort were not designated as gifted and/or talented, but were still seen as having the ability to progress to higher education with the appropriate encouragement and support.  In Year 9, 18% of the young people in the widening participation cohort were identified as gifted and talented. Young people designated to either gifted and talented or widening participation cohorts were (typically) given the opportunity to take part in a range of awareness-raising or aspiration-raising activities (as outlined below), although the data suggests that there was no specific set of interventions associated solely with being a member of a particular cohort.

213     The second type of intervention is related to young people's participation in specific Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funded activities.  These include activities such as summer schools, residential courses and day visits to universities, mentoring programmes involving undergraduates and higher education staff, Masterclasses and a range of study support activities, including homework clubs.  While many of these activities were primarily targeted at young people in either the widening participation or the gifted and talented cohorts, some were open to other groups of pupils.  Moreover, not all young people in the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts would necessarily have experienced all of the activities.  Across the cohorts, 30% of the Year 11 pupils had taken part in visits to universities, for example. Eleven per cent of these pupils were from the widening participation cohort (some 44% of the designated cohort), while the remainder included pupils from the gifted and talented cohort (15%, or 47% of the designated gifted and talented cohort) and other Year 11 pupils.  Amongst attendees at summer schools (30% of Year 11 pupils), the proportion of widening participation students was nine per cent (some 35% of the designated cohort).  Thirteen per cent of the attendees were gifted and talented pupils (38% of the gifted and talented cohort) and the remainder were other Year 11 pupils.

**What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions on young people's attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4?**

214     The outcomes of the difference-in-differences approach suggest that there is a relationship between attending a school in an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge area and attainment in Mathematics at Key Stage 3.  The analysis found a statistically significantly improvement in the proportion of young people in such 'treatment' schools attaining levels 4, 5 or 6 in such Key Stage 3 tests between 2001/02 (the year in which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was implemented) and 2002/03.[xxvi]

215     The difference-in-differences analysis also suggested that there was a statistically significant improvement in GCSE outcomes of young people in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools by comparison with young people

in other schools. There was a comparative improvement in total GCSE points of 2.5 points in 'treatment' schools compared to the performance of young people in 'comparison' schools,[xxvii] while average GCSE scores were 0.1 points higher and average GCSE English scores were 0.2 points higher.[xxviii] Young people in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools achieved, on average 0.3 more GCSEs at grades A* to C than young people in the 'comparison' schools.

216     These findings raise the question, therefore, as to which elements of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge may have contributed to these improvements. Are they an indication of significant third-level impacts of the policy, or are they an artefact of other interventions or background characteristics at school or pupil level? The multilevel modelling analysis sought to address this question.

217     Once all known school and pupil background variables were included in the models, the analysis indicated that there were indeed associations between particular policy-related interventions and attainment at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.[xxix] To begin with, young people in the widening participation cohort were associated with higher levels of attainment at Key Stage 3, both in terms of overall attainment (an additional 0.18 of a level, equivalent to approximately 6.48 months of progress) and for both English and maths (0.2 and 0.17 of a level, or 7.2 and 6.12 months of progress, respectively).[xxx]

218     The effect size of being in the widening participation cohort on GCSE attainment was smaller (approximately one additional GCSE point per pupil in total). However, there are indications that longer 'membership' of the cohort may be advantageous. A longitudinal analysis of the Key Stage 4 cohort who completed questionnaires in Year 10 (2001/02) and in Year 11 (2002/03) suggested that those who were designated as a member of the widening participation only when they were in Year 11 (2002/03), appeared, on average, to have attained an additional 1.18 GCSE points more than would have been expected, given their prior attainment and other characteristics, and to be about one and a half times as likely as their peers to have achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C (an odds multiplier of 1.45). Those who had been so designated in both Year 10 and Year 11 were associated with an additional 1.68 GCSE points and were nearly twice as likely to have achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C (an odds multiplier of 1.94).[xxxi]

219     The apparent impact of being designated as part of the gifted and talented cohort appeared to be greater than being a member of the widening participation cohort. This was evident at Key Stage 3, where young people in the gifted and talented cohort were associated with an additional 0.37 of a level, or over 13 months of progress and higher scores in English (0.3 of a level) and maths (0.43 of a level). The association was also evident at Key Stage 4, where the mean attainment of gifted and talented pupils was

equivalent to an additional GCSE at grade D (in terms of total GCSE points) or higher capped eight GCSE scores (equivalent to raising three grade Ds to three grade Cs). For some young people, the impact of being in the cohort was more marked than for others, with the improvement in GCSE scores being more evident amongst the young people who were at the lower end of the cohort. It should be noted that there may well be a ceiling effect for young people at the top end of the cohort, but the findings suggest that the gifted and talented strand of EiC in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas has been effective in raising attainment to reduce the differential between the highest and lowest performance of young people in the cohort.

220    The cumulative impact of being part of the gifted and talented cohort over two years (established through the longitudinal analysis) was more clearly evident in relation to the probability of achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C than to the total number of GCSE points achieved. Young people who had been part of the cohort for two years were more than four times more likely to have achieved these higher grades than their academic and social peers. Being designated as part of the cohort in Year 10 or Year 11 alone was still associated with a probability of achieving five or more higher grade GCSEs, although the effect size was smaller than for those who had been so designated in both years (just over twice as likely as other young people with the same prior attainment and background characteristics). Such a designation in either year was also associated with higher than expected GCSE point scores, particularly for those young people who were targeted during Year 11.

221    In addition to the impact of being designated as part of the widening participation or gifted and talented cohort (and the activities associated with such designations), the longitudinal analysis identified four specific interventions that were associated with higher levels of attainment at Key Stage 4 than would have been anticipated from young people's prior attainment and background characteristics alone. These included organised activities, such as summer schools, visits to universities and discussions with university staff and students and informal activities (such as discussions about higher education with family and friends).

222    In each case, participation in such activities during Key Stage 4 was associated with higher GCSE point scores (generally in the order of one additional GCSE point) and, in the case of summer schools and discussions with university staff, undergraduates, family and friends, an increased likelihood of achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C. At Key Stage 3, higher levels of attainment were associated with summer schools (the equivalent of around two and a half month's additional progress for such pupils) and discussions with university staff and students.

223    It was not always possible, however, to be certain that all of the activities had been specifically organised by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. While

schools may have encouraged young people to have discussions about higher education with their families or with university staff, they may not have been instrumental in organising or supporting such discussions, for example. Moreover, even in the case of particular activities, such as summer schools, there is no way of ascertaining from the survey data that these were all directly attributable to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Even though 79% of responding schools indicated in 2003 that they promoted or organised summer schools as a means of encouraging young people to think about higher education, there is no guarantee that the young people participating in the survey were referring solely to such summer schools in their questionnaire responses.[xxxii] Thirty per cent of the Year 11 pupils (including 35% of those in the widening participation cohort) and 37% of the Year 9 pupils reported taking part in at least one summer school or other holiday programme. It is quite possible, however, that some of these summer schools (particularly for the younger pupils) may have been unrelated to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Nonetheless, it is clear that participation in such organised out-of-term activities, which were a feature of all partnerships' work, were significantly associated with higher levels of achievement at both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

**What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions on young people's attitudes and behaviour at Key Stages 3 and 4?**

224     There was little statistical evidence to suggest that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities had yet played a major part in influencing young people's attitudes towards pre- or post-16 education, in terms of their enjoyment of school or lessons or in their stated belief in the value of post-16 or post-18 education.[xxxiii] Nor was there any evidence that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities had played a part in promoting better (self-reported) behaviour in school. While positive attitudes to pre- and post-16 education and good behaviour were more likely to be associated with members of the gifted and talented cohort than with other young people, there was no such association with being designated as a member of the widening participation cohort and no indication in the longitudinal survey that their attitudes or actions had developed any further than that of their peers.

**What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions on young people's aspirations to higher education in Key Stages 3 and 4?**

225     The difference-in-differences analysis found that there was no evidence that being in an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge school had led to any significant difference at Key Stage 3 in the proportion of young people stating an intention to participate in higher education.[xxxiv] However, while the multilevel analysis indicated that family background (such as level of parental education) and family attitudes to education were paramount in such decisions, there was evidence to suggest that some of the strategies adopted under the Aimhigher:

Excellence Challenge initiative were significantly associated with the intentions of young people in Year 9 to aim for higher education in the future.[xxxv] These were less to do with particular events or activities or to designation to a particular cohort (although young people in the gifted and talented cohort were more than one a half times as likely as other young people to state an intention to go to university) than to the creation of a school ethos in which young people were encouraged to think about going to higher education.

226 At Key Stage 4, the difference-in-differences analysis found an increase in the relative proportion of such stated intentions amongst those in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools.[xxxvi] The proportion saying they intended to remain in full-time education until at least the age of 20 was 3.9 percentage points higher than in schools that were not involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. It was found that the factors that appeared to influence that decision were similar to those highlighted at Key Stage 3, with the multilevel analysis identifying the apparent importance of school ethos in making young people consider higher education.[xxxvii] Young people in schools in which they were encouraged to think about the value of higher education and in which they had an opportunity to discuss university life with higher education staff and undergraduates were significantly more likely than their academic and social peers to consider higher education, when all other known background characteristics were taken into account.

227 The question that arises, however, is whether young people in Years 9 and 11 took advantage of opportunities to discuss higher education because they had already decided to go to university, or whether the opportunities had led young people to reconsider their options. The longitudinal models explored the relationship that existed between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge related interventions and young people's changes in aspirations between Year 10 and Year 11. Some 1055 young people who had not expressed an intention to go on to university when they were in Year 10 had changed their mind by the time they were in Year 11 and indicated that this was now their aspiration.[xxxviii] A further 807 who had considered such an option had, by 2002/03, decided that this was not their preferred destination. The profile of these groups revealed that there were some differences between those who had changed their mind and decided to follow the higher education route and those who had not. Relatively, a higher proportion of those who decided to follow the higher education route:

- were female (58% of those choosing to go to university were female compared with 49% of the group who chose to abandon such plans)
- were living with both parents (68% against 61%)
- were in high performing schools (8% against 3%)

- were members of the gifted and talented cohort in 2001/02 (12% compared with 8%) or 2002/03 (16% compared with 11%)
- had talked about life at university with their family (76% against 68%) or friends (63% against 54%) or undergraduates (39% against 33%).

228    There were no differences between those who had changed their minds about going to higher education and those who had not in terms of their membership of the widening participation cohort or whether or not they had taken part in summer schools or visits to universities.  Similar proportions of young people in both groups were designated as part of the widening participation cohort had taken part in summer schools, had visited a university, or had talked to teachers, Personal Advisers, or university lecturers about higher education.

229    The modelling process revealed that, for these 1,862 young people and once prior attainment had been taken into account, the key factors associated with a changed and positive decision to enter higher education were:

- home background (young people living with both parents were more likely than other young people to have become more motivated towards undertaking a university course since Year 10)
- sex (girls were more likely than they had been in Year 10 to be considering a degree or equivalent course)
- speaking to family members about life at university.

230    Visits to a higher education institution during the academic year were highly related to positive decisions, but were not statistically significant at the 95% level.  Young people in both high performing and low performing schools were associated with a greater chance of making a positive decision about higher education than those in mid-performing schools.[xxxix]

231    At this stage, therefore, it does not appear that the interventions that have been implemented under Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge for this group of young people have significantly influenced the decision-making process between Year 10 and Year 11 for this cohort.  Future analysis for this evaluation will explore the decision-making process more fully, particularly in terms of longitudinal change from Year 9 to Year 11.  It will also examine the role that may have been played by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities in helping young people to maintain their motivation and aspirations towards entering higher education.

232    However, while no clear links between policy-related interventions and changed decisions for this group of young people, the analysis has re-emphasised the importance of parental involvement in decision-making and has indicated that there is potential for leverage even amongst young people in low performing schools.  It should be noted that, in discussions carried out

with 43 parents of young people in Years 9 and 11 in nine selected Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools across England in spring and summer 2002 (some six to 10 months after the launch of the programme), parental knowledge of post–16 and post-18 education appeared to be very limited.[xl] Interviewees did not appear to have much access to information and reported that they were not party (generally) to any information that was made available to their children.  They felt that, in order to provide better support and guidance to their children, they needed to receive more information, and at appropriate points.   The research suggests that partnerships have sought actively to reach out to parents, with some limited success to date.

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[xii] MORRIS, M., RICKINSON, M. and DAVIES, D. (2001). *The Delivery of Careers Education and Guidance in Schools* (DfES Research Report 296). London: DfEE.

[xiii] The DfEE's 1998 revision of Requirements for Guidance for Careers Services (1998b) and subsequent Planning Guidance indicated that the careers service should prioritise specific target groups for careers service support.  These included those not in learning or work post-16 and young people in both compulsory and post-16 education who were 'at risk' of not remaining in learning.  Schools were primarily responsible for supporting students outside the target group.

[xiv] The changes made by Curriculum 2000 to the post-16 curriculum meant that a further decision point, following the completion of AS, has been introduced for young people on academic courses.

[xv] Whilst many FE colleges reported increases in drop-out during the first year of post-16 courses, the extent of any actual or potential drop-out is difficult to ascertain, since the period also coincided with changes in the recording of post-16 destinations and in post-16 monitoring systems. MORRIS, M., AISTON, S., LINES, A., O'DONNELL, L., SPIELHOFER, T. and STONEY, S.M. (2002). *16-19 Learner Support Arrangements – Financial and Non-Financial Support* [online]. Available: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/youngpeople/docs/Finalreport&ExecutiveSummaryCameraReadyCopyFe 2003%20.doc [29, April 2003].

[xvi] Irons and Mullen (2001) found that the two most frequent responses to a question about non-participation in further and higher education were related to a lack of awareness of courses (26%) and the need for further guidance (24%).  IRONS, A.R. and MULLEN, M. (2001). 'Community learning – a pathway to inclusion?' Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education, Southampton, 2-4 July.

[xvii] Significant pre-policy differences between the EAZ areas involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and the EiC Phase 3 (or comparison) areas meant that the economic analysis techniques could not be deployed to draw conclusions about the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on EAZ areas.

[xviii] MORRIS, M. (2002). *Overview Report*. (Unpublished report to sponsor).

[xix] Tables showing the representativeness of the schools involved in the annual surveys (and indicating the number of respondents) are provided in Appendix 1.

[xx] The samples used in the differences-in differences analysis were larger – 20,197 and 19,283 respectively – since these analyses did not require the data to be complete for as many background variables as the multilevel modelling.

[xxi] Data collected from young people who were in other year groups (Years 8 and 10) in 2001/02 is incorporated in the longitudinal analyses.

[xxii] This information, along with policy-related information, such as whether or not young people were part of the gifted and talented cohort, whether or not they had been referred to a learning mentor or Learning Support Unit and their level of attendance, for instance, was collected from schools on a pupil-by-pupil basis.  It should be noted that some EiC Phase 3 schools outside Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had identified young people as members of the widening participation cohort (less than one per cent of all respondents), even though Phase 3 schools were not officially funded under Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge at the time of the research.

[xxiii] In the first data collection exercise carried out by the evaluation consortium, schools were asked to identify gifted pupils and talented pupils separately, but in practice it was difficult for schools to

provide the information in this way, and subsequent data has been gathered for the whole gifted and talented cohort.

xxiv Although partnerships were asked to provide details of the size of their post-16 gifted and talented cohort in their annual monitoring returns to DfES, they have done so in different ways and it is not always possible to estimate the actual size of the cohort in relation to the number of post-16 students on roll. No accurate measure of the post-16 cohort is available, therefore.

xxv Of the gifted and talented cohort, 16.5% were identified as part of the widening participation cohort. MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming) *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: Pupil Outcomes One Year On.*

xxvi EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., MCNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming). *The Early Impact of Aimhigher on Pre-16 Outcomes: An Economic Evaluation.*

xxvii One GCSE point is equivalent to one GCSE grade, such that an increase in one point from a grade D would mean that a young person achieved a grade C. A pupil achieving a grade A would have the equivalent of seven points, while a B would be the equivalent of six points, and so forth.

xxviii EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., MCNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxix MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: Pupil Outcomes One Year On.*

xxx The equivalence for months of progress is based on an expected progression of at least one level from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 over a period of 36 months from Year 6 to Year 9. The DfES state that the target for 11 year olds at Key Stage 2 is level 4, that for 14 year olds at Key Stage 3 is Level 5 or Level 6.

xxxi MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxii MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.* In addition to summer schools provided under Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, groups such as the Sutton Trust, as well as theatre groups, sports charities and similar organisations all organise activities during school holiday periods.

xxxiii Ibid.

xxxiv EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., McNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxv MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxvi EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., McNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxvii MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxviii The numbers indicating a change of mind, whether to go to higher education or not to go to higher education, were very slightly higher than this (1128 and 843), but prior attainment data was only available for the 1055 and 807 who were subsequently included in the analysis. MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xxxix MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

xl AISTON S. (2002) *Parent Focus Groups: Perceptions of Further and Higher Education.* Unpublished report to DfES.

18

# 3.   WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE INTERVENTIONS ON DIFFERENT GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE?

301    The key target group for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were young people from households with no tradition of higher education.  Within this broad group, a variety of sub-groups were recognised, including young people from different minority ethnic groups, from low income families and with some measure of Special Educational Needs.  What evidence is there that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has had any impact on these different groups of young people?

**What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions on young people from different minority ethnic groups?**

302    There were some clear differences between young people from different minority ethnic groups in terms of their attainment levels.  From the analysis of Year 11, data, for example, it was evident that pupils from African and Bangladeshi backgrounds had higher than expected GCSE point scores at Key Stage 4 (once all known background characteristics had been taken into account) than young people from other ethnic backgrounds.[xli]  African pupils were also more than twice as likely to have achieved five or more higher grades at GCSE.  Amongst the Year 9 cohorts, Bangladeshi pupils attained higher average levels at Key Stage 3 than their socio-economic and academic peers, as did Indian and Chinese girls.  To what extent are these variations in attainment related to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions?

303    Amongst the two policy-related cohorts (the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts) there was evidence of high levels of inclusion for young people from some minority ethnic groups (notably Chinese and Black African), whilst others (particularly from Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds) were under-represented in terms of the relative size of their population, as outlined below.

304    The mean proportion of young people in the widening participation cohorts in Year 11, across all ethnic groups, was 7.6%.  However, the cohort included a higher proportion of pupils from Black African (16%), Chinese (15.5%) and White European backgrounds (12.6%), whilst those from Indian (5.8%) and Bangladeshi (3.3 %) pupils were less well represented.  In Year 9, where the mean proportion of pupils in the cohort was 5.4%, Indian (1.8%) and Bangladeshi (4.6%) pupils were again under-represented.  Two further groups, young people from Pakistani (3.2%) and Black African (4.1%) backgrounds

were also under-represented. By contrast, the proportion of young people from Black Caribbean backgrounds was much higher (11.9%).

305     This picture, of different levels of representation was also evident in the gifted and talented cohorts. The Year 11 gifted and talented cohorts (where the mean proportion of pupils from all ethnic groups was 10.6%) included high levels of representation from Chinese (24%), Black other (18%), white other (14%) and Black African (13%) backgrounds. Those from Indian (6.5%) Black Caribbean (7.1%) and Bangladeshi (7.7%) backgrounds were less well represented. In Year 9, the proportion of young people from a Chinese background in the gifted and talented cohorts was very much higher (25%) than might be expected, given the mean representation of 9.9% across all ethnic groups. The proportions of young people from white European (13.1%), Indian (11.8%) and Black other (10.4%) backgrounds were also high. However, those from Pakistani (6%) and Bangladeshi (4.6%) backgrounds were less well represented.

306     While it should be remembered that young people were designated as gifted and talented or as a member of the widening participation cohort for a variety of reasons, not all of which were to do with levels of prior attainment, the low levels of representation of young people from Indian backgrounds and Bangladeshi backgrounds amongst the Year 11 targeted cohorts (particularly the gifted and talented cohort) appear surprising. Indian pupils in the Year 11 cohort had achieved, on average, a mean of 4.9 at Key Stage 3 and attained a mean of 5.7 GCSEs at Key Stage 4. Bangladeshi pupils had achieved, on average, a mean of 4.6 at Key Stage 3 and attained a mean of 5.2 GCSEs at Key Stage 4. Those from Black African backgrounds in the same cohort, who had a higher level of representation in both policy-related cohorts, had lower levels of mean prior attainment and Key Stage 4 attainment (4.4 at Key Stage 3 and a mean of 4.8 GCSEs at Key Stage 4). However, once all known background characteristics were taken into account, Black African pupils in the Year 11 gifted and talented cohorts achieved higher than expected capped GCSE scores (an additional 3.53 GCSE points compared with 3.13 points) and higher mean GCSE scores (the average score per GCSE was 0.35 points higher than other young people in the gifted and talented cohort). Their likelihood of achieving five or more GCSEs at grade C or above was no higher than for the rest of the young people in the gifted and talented cohort.

307     As indicated in paragraphs 217 to 220, designation to either the gifted and talented or the widening participation cohorts was associated, on average, with higher than expected levels of attainment, given young people's background characteristics. However, with the exception of young people from Black African backgrounds, there is no evidence, as yet, to suggest that belonging to either of these cohorts has had any significantly different impact on young people from minority ethnic groups in these cohorts over and above the impact that it has had on young people from white UK backgrounds. Nor is there any

indication that other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related interventions (such as summer schools, university visits or other activities) have had any significantly differential impact on the attitudes, aspirations or attainment of young people from minority ethnic groups.

## What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people from low income families?

308　The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge policy targeted young people from low income families through two separate routes. Firstly, through Strand 1 and 2 activities aimed at raising attainment and aspirations amongst young people aged 13 to 19 and, secondly, through the provision of Opportunity Bursaries. These Bursaries were made available under Strand 4 of the initiative. Young people from low income families (defined as below £21,000 a year before tax, or in receipt of certain means tested benefits) were eligible for an Opportunity Bursary (worth £2,000 a year over a three year course) to help support them through a higher education course.

309　Marginally more of the Year 11 pupils in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools appeared to be from low income families (as indicated by eligibility for free school meals).[xlii] Over 18% of respondents in these schools were in this category, compared with 16.8% of the young people from the non Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools (the comparison schools). The levels of socio-economic disadvantage were also higher in the treatment schools in Year 9; 23.6% of the respondents from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools were in receipt of free school meals,[xliii] compared with 18.2% of those in the comparison group.

310　In the widening participation cohorts in Year 11, the proportion of young people known to be from low income families was 20.6%; while for the gifted and talented cohort it was three per cent. In Year 9, just over one quarter (26%) of the widening participation cohort in Year 9 were in receipt of free school meals. A smaller proportion of the gifted and talented cohorts (13.9%) were from families with similarly low levels of income. These proportions suggest that the widening participation strategy reached out to more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of their socio-economic circumstances) than the gifted and talented strategy.

311　However, once all other background variables had been taken into account (including designation as a member of the gifted and talented or widening participation cohorts), levels of attainment amongst young people in receipt of free school meals remained significantly lower across all measures of attainment, at both Key Stage 3 and GCSE, amongst those in both Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools and comparison schools. There is no evidence, therefore, that, as yet, pre-16 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions

have played a significant role in raising attainment levels amongst young people from the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

312     There was an association between levels of family income and aspirations to enter higher education, but there was little statistical evidence that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had yet made any significant impact on the aspirations of those from the lowest income groups.  Young people from lower income families in the Year 9 cohorts for example, were less likely than their peers to suggest that they hoped to go to university, whether they were in the 'treatment' or the 'comparison' groups.  Amongst the Year 11 cohorts, there was no apparent association between young people's eligibility (or not) for free school meals and their expressed higher education aspirations, but (again in both treatment and comparison groups) young people with a higher number of books in the home (a proxy measure for socio-economic circumstances) were significantly associated with higher aspirations.  To date, the impact of family financial circumstances do not appear to have been redressed (at a statistical level) by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions.

313     There is evidence, however, that elements of the policy may have played a part in increasing retention in higher education amongst young adults (those aged over 19) from low income families.  Comparisons of the survey responses from just over 1000 Opportunity Bursary recipients with matched and weighted non-recipients indicated that those in receipt of a Bursary were more likely to be still in higher education after one year than those not in receipt of such a Bursary.[xliv]  However, whilst the ordinary least squares approach used in the difference-in-differences analysis suggested that the impact of the policy was in the order of 2.6 percentage points, propensity score matching indicated that the difference was lower (1.6 percentage points) and was not statistically significant.[xlv]

314     There was also evidence that young people holding Opportunity Bursaries might have had lower levels of liquid debt (credit card and bank overdrafts) than non-recipients.  As before, however, the level of statistical significance varied according to the analytical approach adopted.  The ordinary least squares analysis suggested that there was statistically significant difference of £205.97, but propensity score matching indicated that the difference was lower (£160.89) and was not statistically significant.[xlvi]

315     At this stage, therefore, it is not possible to assess whether the long-term benefits of this element of the policy outweigh the costs.  It could be argued that, if levels of debt are lower, young people would be more likely to complete their higher education course.  A simple cost-benefit calculation suggests that, to justify Opportunity Bursaries on the sole basis of the increased (gross) wages of those who complete higher education as a result of the policy would require the policy to increase completion rates amongst those

eligible by at least 3.5% if the required rate of return was 3.5% a year.[xlvii] At present, it is not clear whether these rates will be reached.

## What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people whose parents did not experience higher education?

316    Partnership coordinators, teachers and college and university staff believed that a lack of family and community experience of higher education, the availability of local employment at age 18 and family pressures on young people to contribute to family finances acted as significant barriers both to progression to higher education and, in many cases, as barriers to learning.[xlviii] The statistical analysis of data from young people in the Year 11 cohorts suggests that parental backgrounds and home circumstances continue to be significantly related to young people's attainment outcomes and that some of the apparent social barriers to high attainment at Key Stage 4 and, therefore, subsequent entry to higher education have not yet been fully moderated through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions.[xlix]

317    In particular, young people who lived with both parents at home had higher levels of attainment across all measures at GCSE than other pupils with the same background characteristics.  Those with at least one birth parent in their home had higher levels of attainment than young people who were looked after or who lived only with other members of their family.  Parental levels of education were significant, with paternal education to degree level associated with higher levels of GCSE attainment across every measure (including the likelihood of achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C), and maternal education to at least 16 associated with higher total and capped eight GCSE scores.  Higher than average mean GCSE scores were associated with mothers educated to degree level and fathers educated to at least post-16.  To date, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge does not appear to have played a major role in reducing the differential in attainment outcomes between young people from homes where parents had or had not experienced higher education.

318    However, when one examines young people's attitudes to higher education, the story, though mixed, may be more encouraging.  In order to explore the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, two different factors, attitudes to higher education and aspirations towards higher education, need to be examined.  The statistical evidence, to date, is that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related interventions may have played a significant role in overcoming or ameliorating the impact of the level of parental education on some young people's attitudes to higher education.  Pre-16, young people whose parents were educated to degree level were still more likely than their peers to have a positive attitude to education.  Post-16, however, the role played by parental educational levels was less apparent in the analysis, except in EAZ areas (see paragraph 324).[1]  Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related interventions appear to be significantly associated with positive attitudes to

higher education amongst all respondents (including those from non-traditional backgrounds), even though many of these activities were undertaken when young people were still in compulsory education.

319    Positive attitudes to higher education appear to be a significant predictor of aspirations to enter higher education and it is possible to infer that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge would thus have played a part in increasing young people's aspirations.  While there is no conclusive statistical evidence that such interventions have increased aspirations to enter higher education amongst young people from non-traditional backgrounds or have changed such young people's minds about following a higher education route, there is some qualitative data that suggests that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities have contributed to a widening of horizons.  Twenty four of the 42 partnerships visited during the course of 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.[li]  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'.*[lii]

320    In particular, visits to higher education institutions and residential experiences were widely regarded by interviewees (pupils, teachers, FE and HE staff and partnership coordinators) as invaluable for helping young people from non-traditional backgrounds to consider the possibility of higher education; '*any kind of higher education visit is an eye opener.  It makes them* [pupils] *think that they can do it and allows them to see that it's not actually as scary as they may think*'.  Young people concurred:  '*now, when I think of going to university, I can imagine it, and it seems real because I have been there and seen it*'.  For some, such visits clearly helped to overcome family prejudices: '*you were expecting them to be posh, but it is not always like that and…we just got the wrong idea…it's not impossible to get into.*'

## What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people with Special Educational Needs?

321    The data on individual special educational needs available to the research team is related solely to their level of identified support needs, rather than to the nature of those needs.  To date, there is no evidence that young people with special educational needs have benefited specifically from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.  Attainment levels amongst such young people, when all other background variables are taken into account, remain lower than for other young people with no identified needs, while attitudes to education appear to be less positive than amongst their peers.[liii]

322    Only one of the 42 partnerships visited for this study had set a local target for students with SEN or disabilities; they reported success in progression rates to FE (though not yet to HE) for young people in their target group.[liv]

## What is the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people in EiC and EAZ areas?

323    There was some evidence to suggest that the policy may either be operating in different environments in EiC and EAZ areas, or may be having a different effect, to date, in the various areas.  The size of EAZ partnerships (small by comparison to EiC areas) and the relative extent of deprivation (EAZs were often seen as pockets of deprivation within more affluent areas) meant that, organisationally and operationally, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had often been implemented and managed in different ways in EAZ areas. However, across the various pre-16 cohorts, there was no statistical evidence of any differences in attainment levels at Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4, or in aspirations to enter higher education, between young people in EiC and EAZ areas.[lv]

324    Post-16, an examination of the significant factors affecting attitudes to higher education suggested, however, that there was still a statistically significant difference between EiC areas and EAZ areas in terms of the role played by the level of parental education.[lvi]  When the data from young people in EiC areas alone was examined, levels of parental education did not emerge as a key predictor of attitudes.  However, once data from EAZ areas was included, parental education to degree level emerged as an important factor associated with the probability of a respondent having a positive attitude to higher education.  This may suggest that, in non-EiC EAZ areas in particular, more work may still need to be done to raise awareness of higher education amongst non-traditional entrants to higher education.

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[xli]    MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: Pupil Outcomes One Year On.* Data in paragraphs 302 to 307 are from this report.

[xlii]   ibid. Data in paragraphs 308 to 312 are from this report.

[xliii]  While free school meals is an indicator of socio-economic disadvantage, not all young people who are eligible for such support apply for, or are in receipt of it.  As such, free school meals are a useful proxy indicator, but cannot be viewed as a comprehensive indicator.

[xliv]   WEST, A., HIND, A. and XAVIER, R. with JUPP, J. (2003). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Survey of Opportunity Bursary Applicants 2001/02: Preliminary Findings* (DfES Research Report 497). London: DfES.

[xlv]    EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., McNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming).  *Economic Evaluation of Opportunity Bursaries*.

[xlvi]   Ibid.

[xlvii]  This rate of 3.5% is the rate of return normally used by Treasury in examining the impact of policy interventions.

[xlviii] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming).  *Implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge – the Experience of Ten Partnerships*.

[xlix]   MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[l]      MORRIS, M. and RUTT, S. (forthcoming) *Aspirations to Higher Education: One Year On.*

li    MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of Aimhigher. Excellence Challenge: the Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004.*

lii   JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

liii  MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

liv   MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

lv    The feasibility study undertaken for the economic analysis suggested that the background characteristics of the pupils in the EAZ areas differed substantially from those in the non-EiC, non-EAZ comparison areas and so precluded their use in the econometric analyses, where matching on a pupil-by-pupil basis was necessary. These (potentially systematic) differences, however, did not pose the same challenge to the multilevel modelling approach, which can control for differences at individual pupil level.

lvi   MORRIS, M. and RUTT, S. (forthcoming). *op cit.* Differences in reported parental attitudes were also identified in the feasibility study. This was one of the reasons that suitable matched cohorts for pupils in EAZ areas were not found.

# 4. WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE PROGRAMME ON INSTITUTIONS?

401    In addition to the impact on individuals and groups of young people, outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, was there any evidence of an impact of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme on institutions? This section presents the available evidence of the extent of any impact on higher education providers, schools and colleges and on partnership working between institutions. The main sources of evidence for this section are the surveys undertaken in 2002, 2003 and 2004 of senior managers, form tutors and sixth form tutors in schools, of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators and tutors in colleges, and of staff in higher education providers. In addition, the section draws on the findings from the interviews conducted with 42 partnership coordinators in 2002, 2003 and 2004 and the programme of area studies which entailed visits to a range of organisations in ten Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas between 2002 and 2004.

402    As outlined in Chapter 2, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme could have four levels of impact on participating institutions. At the first level, the institutions could experience changes in their institutional processes – in other words are they offering something now that they did not offer before? This could include an expansion in institutions' capacity to raise awareness of higher education through receiving resources to increase and develop the outreach and other activities they could offer. At the second level, the institutions could see changes in the attitudes of their staff to young people and in the experiences of activities. At the third level, the institutions may experience changes that affect their institution such as stronger relationships with other institutions including across educational sectors. Finally, the fourth level of impact relates to more embedded changes to infrastructure and internal systems that result in, for example, an increase in the number, or a change in the nature, of applications and admissions to higher education providers involved in the programme.

**What has been the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on HEIs?**

403    The surveys of higher education providers[lvii] undertaken between 2002 and 2004 found that institutions offered a wide range of activities, with the aim of widening participation, in each of the three years. Moreover, the proportions of institutions that offered outreach activities increased in each year of the survey.[lviii] Increases included the following[lix]:

   ♦ summer schools were reported to be offered by 88% of institutions in 2001/02, 96% in 2002/03, and offered or planned by 99% in 2003/04

- presentations to schools about higher education were reported to be offered by 84% of institutions in 2001/02, 93% in 2002/03 and offered or planned by 97% in 2003/04

- mentoring of school pupils by undergraduates was reported to be offered by 42% of institutions in 2001/02, 58% in 2002/03 and offered or planned by 69% in 2003/04

- student ambassador schemes were reported to be in place in 49% of institutions in 2001/02, 72% in 2002/03 and in place or planned in 85% in 2003/04

- outreach work with community groups was reported to be undertaken by 51% of institutions in 2001/02, 66% in 2002/03 and undertaken or planned by 81% in 2002/03.

404    The widening participation activities undertaken by institutions include those which are funded from sources other than Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, and the increases in the proportions of higher education providers offering such activities may not be attributed solely to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme.  Nevertheless, when specifically asked if particular activities were introduced or extended as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, respondents frequently affirmed that they had been; this applied to activities closely associated with the Programme, such as Masterclasses, and more long-standing activities.  For example, in a quarter of institutions in 2002/03 Masterclasses had been introduced, and in about a quarter they had been extended, as a result of the Programme while presentations to schools about higher education – one of the more longstanding outreach activities – had been extended by around a third of institutions as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge  In the 2004 survey, respondents at institutions that had introduced new activities in 2003/04 were asked why they had been introduced.    The main reason given was the availability of funding predominantly through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Aimhigher:P4P and HEFCE/ESF.  It is notable that much of the increased activity involved linking with schools.  Qualitative visits to higher education providers[lx] revealed that some believed that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators played a valuable role in acting as a broker between the higher education providers and the schools and colleges.  This role was reported to have helped to '*make relationships work*' and to enable higher education providers to work '*in tandem with schools in a way we couldn't before*' and may have contributed to increased links with schools.  Thus, it could be argued that participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had contributed, in some instances, to higher education providers' overall widening participation strategies and activities and had supported their development.

405    A further institutional effect of participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge among higher education providers was the impact on staff involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.  Evidence from qualitative visits[lxi] suggested that, in some cases, participation in subject-related activities

for young people had challenged the preconceptions of staff in higher education about the ability and motivation of young people and had raised their awareness of young people's commitment and the quality of their work. The surveys of higher education providers similarly revealed a positive impact on academic staff with the majority (69%) of higher education providers surveyed in 2004[lxii] reporting that this was the case. Only a minority (18%) indicated that there was minimal or limited impact and six per cent reported that the impact on academic staff was variable or mixed (seven per cent did not respond). In comments from respondents, it was suggested that this positive impact was an outcome of the academic staff in institutions developing awareness and understanding of pre-16 education and of schools and colleges as a result of their involvement in widening participation activities. There was also a suggestion that achieving this impact was facilitated by increasing the status of widening participation activities within higher education institutions, through senior management endorsement and by minimising the administrative burden on academic staff associated with delivering activities, such as liaising with schools, enabling academic staff to concentrate on the content of the event.

406     However, the evidence from the surveys of higher education providers suggests that the effect of widening participation activities on admissions to the institutions had yet to be widely experienced. In the 2004 survey, just under half of the respondents (46% or 31 institutions) indicated that the activities had a positive impact on admissions, but the remaining respondents were almost equally divided between those who felt that it was too early to say (27%) or did not know (24%). Three per cent did not answer the question.

## What has been the impact on schools?

407     Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to the introduction of out of hours learning activities in a number of schools that were surveyed in 2004[lxiii]. Among the 83 schools, 42% had introduced enrichment activities as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and 36% indicated that summer schools had been introduced as a result of the initiative. In addition, 31% reported that they had introduced the opportunity for their students to participate in residential activities as a result of the programme and, in 22% of schools, guest speakers from higher education providers had been introduced.

408     As with higher education providers, schools participating in the programme experienced some wider benefits from their involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The surveys of school senior managers, including head teachers, in 2004 indicated that participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had provided opportunities for professional development in 35% of schools.[lxiv] Six per cent of form tutors in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools said that they had personally benefited from professional development as a result of the programme. In addition, 28% of senior managers reported

that their school had benefited from an increase in the opportunities to visit and link with HEIs while 24% valued the improved awareness of higher education that had come about through participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. School staff also experienced some disadvantages which could have a wider impact on their institution. In an unprompted response, their comments included concerns about the impact on staff's time (22% of schools) and the increased workload and stress associated with involvement (15% of schools).

409     There was some evidence from the surveys of an improvement in the relationships between school form tutors and other sectors of education such as FE and sixth form colleges and HEIs. Across the three years of the surveys,[lxv] there was an increase in the proportions of teachers who reported that their relationships with partners in other education sectors were good or very good. More specifically:

- 21% of form tutors in 2002 said that their relationship with FE colleges and sixth form colleges was very good or good, and the same proportion stated this in 2003. By 2004, this had increased to 28%.

- 21% of form tutors in 2002 said that their relationship with local HEIs was very good or good. In 2003, 23% indicated that they had good relationships with HEIs while 28% reported this in 2004.

- 12% of respondents in 2002 said that their relationships with other HEIs was very good or good. This increased to 13% in 2003 and 16% in 2004.

410     In addition to the year-on-year comparisons which indicate an increase over time in the proportions of staff in schools who felt that their relationships were good or very good, around one in ten staff (nine per cent) in each year reported that their relationships with FE and sixth form colleges, and local HEIs had improved and five per cent considered that their relationships with other HEIs had improved. Moreover, in 2004, smaller proportions of school staff in schools in Phase 3 areas, all of which had been involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge for less time than Phase 1 and 2 areas, said that their relationships with FE and sixth form colleges (five per cent), local HEIs (six per cent) and other HEIs (two per cent) had improved. The effect of involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on working in partnership was further corroborated through interviews with partnership coordinators,[lxvi] some of whom noted the improvements in collaborative working, such as the coordinator who said that '*the collaboration has improved considerably…collaboration and partnership working on a scale not previously seen in the city*'.

**What has been the impact on colleges?**

411    The evidence from surveys of FE Colleges that were involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge revealed that colleges also experienced some wider benefits from their involvement in the programme.  Just over a third (37%) of FE college coordinators surveyed in 2004 indicated that participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had provided opportunities for professional development.  Moreover, four per cent of the tutors surveyed in FE colleges, said that they had personally benefited from professional development as a result of the programme.  In addition, around half (51%) of FE college coordinators said that students had benefited from an increased awareness of higher education.  In an unprompted response, college staff also noted some disadvantages which could have a wider impact on their institution.  Indeed, 32% raised the impact on staff time and workload of involvement in the programme.

412    There was some evidence of an improvement in the relationships between FE colleges and other educational institutions, according to coordinators of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge based in FE colleges.[lxvii]   Around half (51%) of those surveyed in 2004, said that their relationships with local secondary schools had improved and 44% felt that their relationships with local HEIs had improved.  A smaller proportion considered that their relationship with other HEIs (27%) and other FE or sixth form colleges (25%) had improved.  Tutors in FE colleges and sixth form colleges[lxviii] were slightly more circumspect in their perceptions of the extent to which relationships with partners institutions had improved.  About one third (32%) of tutors in sixth form colleges considered that their relationships with secondary schools had improved, and 18% of FE tutors thought that this was the case.  A total of 21% of sixth form tutors, and 26% of FE college tutors, said that relationships with local HEIs had improved and 14% of tutors in both FE colleges and sixth forms indicated that their relationships with other HEIs had improved.

**What has been the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on partnerships?**

413    Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge led to the creation of partnerships between schools, post-16 providers and HEIs, or a formalisation of existing partnerships under the banner of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.[lxix]   What evidence is there of the effect of this programme on institutional partnership working both within and between educational sectors and what appears to have facilitated this?

414    In some of the 42 partnerships where partnership coordinators were interviewed, interviewees indicated that the partnership had benefited from building on relationships between individuals and institutions that had existed

prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. However, in ten partnerships, partnership coordinators noted particularly that involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had forged relationships that had not previously existed.[lxx] Moreover, ten partnership coordinators commented that their participation had led to improvements in the collaboration between institutions working to meet the aims of the programme, such as the partnership coordinator who observed that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was '*allowing institutions and partnerships…to work together, allowing people to be innovative and creative, which wouldn't have happened if the initiative hadn't gone ahead*'. As the programme had progressed, there were indications that some partnerships had engaged with more and different partners in order to meet the needs of their students.[lxxi] For example, some had begun to establish relationships with work-based learning providers in order to meet the need to raise awareness and understanding of the vocational route into further learning. In addition, some partnerships had extended the number or type of HEIs with whom they worked to meet the needs of the young people.

415    In addition to working in partnership with educational providers across the sectors, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships included representatives of the Connexions Service and LSCs. Evidence from the interviews with partnership coordinators[lxxii] and the ten in-depth Area Studies[lxxiii] revealed that, in general, these agencies had become increasingly involved in the partnerships over the two years of the evaluation. In some cases, representatives of the LSC and Connexions Services only attended steering groups, and in some cases the extent to which these agencies could contribute to the partnership was said to be influenced by their priorities and range of demands for their time. Nevertheless, where they were more actively involved, the LSCs appeared to be in a largely strategic role providing funding and monitoring the partnership in addition to providing useful suggestions and strategies. The LSCs were also said to help ensure coherence in provision across an area and to facilitate communication through existing appropriate networks. Where the Connexions Service was actively involved, they were said to engage in planning and organising activities, and providing supporting information and advice to school staff and to students, including before and after an event.

## What features of partnership collaboration appear to facilitate the effectiveness of the programme?

416    The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships appeared to have developed and matured over the three years of the programme. Interviews with partnership coordinators, staff in schools, colleges and HEIs, who were drawing on their experiences, provide an insight into what appeared to facilitate effective partnership working in relation to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.[lxxiv] Partnerships were said to be more effective where:

♦ The individuals involved were enthusiastic and committed and had credibility with staff in all types of education sectors and were sufficiently senior within their institution to make decisions.

♦ Senior managers in each institution were supportive of the programme and of the staff involved in implementing it.

♦ Productive working relationships were established that were based on mutual trust, openness and an understanding of each institution's concerns and priorities.

♦ There was clear strategic direction and the involvement of all parties in planning, thus enabling the partnership to take into consideration how the aims of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme fit with each institution's own aims and strategic plans.

♦ Communication was effective.  This could be achieved through, for example, having a central partnership coordinator and through ensuring that each institution had one named coordinator who could act as a conduit for all communication.

♦ Partnership coordinators, and other staff, were proactive in establishing and maintaining links with other agencies who could contribute to the overall aims of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme.

417    Interviewees who had been involved in implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge also identified some factors which had inhibited partnership working.  In many respects, these reflected the converse of the factors that facilitated working together.  Partnerships were said to work less well where key staff lacked time and the capacity to implement the programme and had a considerable workload already, where communication was poor and where there was a lack of trust between partners.  Moreover, where partners lacked understanding of each other's institutions and of each other's concerns, priorities and aims, partnerships were said to work less well.  Staff turnover inhibited the development of effective partnerships which, as noted above, depended on effective working relationships between individuals which take time to establish.

## What is the overall impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on participating institutions?

418    The quantitative and qualitative evidence from the evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge indicates that there has been some effect on participating institutions.  This effect is primarily at the first three levels of impact outlined in section 402.  At the first level, there appeared to have been an increase in the extent to which HEIs were able to offer activities to raise the awareness and aspirations of young people, which was facilitated (in some cases) both by the additional resources and by the brokering or networking role of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator.  At the second level, there were some indications that the understanding of staff in

HEIs of young people who could be potential recruits had improved and that, in some instances, their preconceptions had been challenged in some instances. At the third level, it appeared that relationships between educational institutions within and across the sectors had improved in the view of notable minorities of respondents to the surveys. The fourth level of impact, where the effects become embedded and institutional change is observed, had yet to emerge at the time of the surveys and interviews. These may emerge as the young people, who have participated in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, continue to progress through their educational and working careers and make decisions to embark on higher education courses.

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[lvii] A total of 56 higher education providers responded in 2002, 67 in 2003 (higher and further education institutions who provided higher education courses responded in both years) and 67 (higher education institutions only) in 2004. WEST, A., XAVIER, R. and HIND, A. (2003). *Evaluation of Excellence Challenge: Survey of Higher Education Providers 2002* (DfES Research Report 449). London: DfES. PENNELL, H., WEST, A. and HIND, A. (2004). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Survey of Higher Education Providers 2003* (DfES Research Report 537). London: DfES. PENNELL, H., WEST, A. and HIND, A. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Survey of Higher Education Providers 2004.*

[lviii] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *Implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge – the Experience of Ten Partnerships*.

[59] The figures refer to activities that took place in 2001/02 (Pennell *et al*., 2004) and those that took place /were planned in 2003/2004 (Pennell *et al*., 2005).

[lx] ibid.

[lxi] ibid.

[lxii] PENNELL, H., WEST, A. and HIND, A. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxiii] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Survey of schools, 2004. N=83

[lxiv] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge School Survey 2004 – N=85

[lxv] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge form tutor surveys 2002 n=1307, 2003 n=1632 and 2004 n=432. It is worth noting that the noticeably smaller number of respondents in 2004 may influence the findings.

[lxvi] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of Aimhigher. Excellence Challenge: the Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004.*

[lxvii] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge survey of FE coordinators 2004. N=75

[lxviii] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge surveys of tutors in FE and sixth form colleges, 2004. N=277 FE tutors and 138 sixth form tutors

[lxix] It should be noted that throughout the report the term partnership refers to groups of schools, further education colleges and partnership coordinators funded by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Strand 1. Within these partnerships although higher education institutions were not funded by the programme, they acted as providers of activities and as such had some input into the organisation of the partnership.

[lxx] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxi] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxii] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxiii] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxiv] ibid. MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

# 5. WHICH ACTIVITIES APPEARED TO BE MOST EFFECTIVE?

**To what extent has the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme extended existing provision?**

501  As outlined in Chapter 4, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to the introduction of a range of activities aimed at raising awareness of higher education and the aspirations of young people. This section explores the extent to which the programme had enhanced or extended existing provision.

502  It was evident in the interviews with 42 partnership coordinators,[lxxv] and in the in-depth studies in ten areas[lxxvi] that, in most cases, the partnerships that were formed to implement the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme built on existing provision to some extent. Some interviewees commented that they took into consideration the existing provision and aimed to minimise duplication and overlap but rather to continue activities and extend them to a different target group. On the whole, the instigation of a partnership that could assist the coordination across an area of activities (which had similar aims) was welcomed and many partnership coordinators commented that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to the creation of sustained relationships between schools, colleges and HEIs that did not previously exist. As one partnership coordinator explained, there was value in being able to '*join forces*' as '*it is good that more than one person in the community is working towards the same goal, as it means we can dovetail the work and build foundations year on year*'. Nevertheless, in a minority of cases, it was noted that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to some duplication of activities and one interviewee observed that the number of initiatives with broadly the same aim led to resources being '*spread too thinly*'. Overall, however, it appears that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships had aimed both to continue and extend existing provision which was often in place.

503  It appears, therefore, that comparisons over time indicated that the proportions of HEIs offering a range of widening participation activities had increased in each year of the surveys. In some cases, this could be attributed to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, as noted above. Among some post-16 providers surveyed in 2004,[lxxvii] there were indications that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had enhanced advice and guidance for young people that related to accessing higher education. A notable minority of tutors in FE colleges and sixth form colleges indicated that a range of higher education-related advice and guidance for students within the tutorial programme had been enhanced as

a result of the organisation's involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. More specifically:

- 40% of tutors in FE colleges, and 36% of sixth form tutors, said that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had enhanced the provision of general information and advice relating to higher education

- 38% of FE college tutors, and 36% of sixth form tutors, said that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to an enhancement of discussions about higher education

- 34% of FE tutors, and a similar proportion of sixth form tutors (33%), said that the provision of information about HEIs had been enhanced through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

- 31% of FE tutors, and 37% of sixth form tutors, indicated that the provision of information on FE and HE courses had been enhanced through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

- 28% of FE college tutors, and the same proportion of sixth form tutors, said that advice on the completion of UCAS forms had been enhanced as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

- 27% of FE tutors, and 23% of sixth form tutors, said that allowing students the time to research higher education had been enhanced through their participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

## Which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities appear to be most effective and why?

504    The analysis in Chapter 2 suggested that longer-term involvement in widening participation and gifted and talented activities were more effective than short-term or ad hoc exposure. It also indicated that the activities linked with being designated as a member of the widening participation or gifted and talented cohorts were associated with higher than expected attainment levels at Key stages 3 and 4, as were activities such as summer schools, visits to higher education institutions and discussions about university life with higher education staff and undergraduates. Such discussions also appeared to be significantly associated with decisions to take up a place in a higher education institution. Why are such interventions more effective than others? With whom are the interventions most effective as a means of improving motivation, raising attainment or increasing aspirations? To address these questions, the evaluation sought to draw on the perceptions of those who were involved in organising, delivering and evaluating activities through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships, and the participants.

505    It needs to be acknowledged that, as yet, little systematic evaluation of activities had taken place in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. In general, partnership coordinators believed 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'.* 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'.*

506     Since the launch of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there appears to have been a subtle change in the focus of activities. During the first two years of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative, partnership coordinators[lxxviii] 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, as indicated below.

## In what circumstances are activities most and least effective?

507     Throughout the evaluation, interviewees have commented on the perceived motivational aspects of university visits. The continued demand (and in some areas, 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. Such activities, however, were thought to be more effective when they were planned jointly by school, college and university staff and less effective where the pedagogical style adopted by higher education staff was felt to be inappropriate to the target audience; lectures were thought to be less effective than interactive, subject-based activities. Unfocused campus tours, in which young people were simply given a tour of facilities, were deemed irrelevant and unproductive by a wide range of interviewees, from pre-16 pupils to partnership coordinators.[lxxix]

508     While there was widespread support for the principle of residential university visits, partnership coordinators[lxxx] and others identified groups for whom even well run and planned activities were sometimes thought to be less effective. Such young people included those in the widening participation cohorts who

had spent little time away from home or from their family network, who were thought to lack confidence to take up places at summer schools, or to make the most of any visits in which they took part, and those for whom there were cultural barriers and parental antipathy to residential experiences. For these young people there was a recognition of the need for the provision of experiences that could act as '*stepping stones*'; experiences such as an event involving an overnight stay that would prepare them more fully for longer residential experiences.

509    The role of higher education mentors – particularly undergraduates or recent graduates – was commended by coordinators[lxxxi] because of the way in which interaction with higher education students could play a part in breaking down cultural barriers: '*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'*. This reflects the finding of the recent evaluation of Strand 6 (the Student Associates scheme) in which the authors summarised the view that, '*By being close in age and experience, Students Associates can relate to the issues young people face'*.[lxxxii] 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.

510    Outreach activities such as presentations by theatre groups, external motivational training seminars and the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshows were credited, variously, with contributing to the creation of a positive attitude to higher education amongst many young people. 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 more focused on the individual) that had a longer-lasting impact on young people's attitudes and aspirations.[lxxxiii]

511    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. Over one quarter of the partnerships in the study 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.[lxxxiv] To date, the statistical evidence to support such claims is limited, although this may be an artefact of such activities being specifically targeted at young people in the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts; designation to such groups was associated with higher attainment levels at Key Stages 3 and 4.

**Which activities appear to be most effective with pre-16 students?**

512    In working with pupils, pre-16, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships have sought to overcome social and cultural attitudes that saw higher education as '*not for people like us*'.  For many young people and their families, barriers to considering higher education were not only to do with a lack of family experience of university ('*nobody has been to university and because they are first generation,* [they] *don't know about the university system, don't know they have the potential to apply*'), but, amongst other things, were related to a lack of willingness to travel ('*I don't think a lot of them would even think about going off to universities in other towns*'), concerns about the need to preserve family ties ('*There is a strong fear factor when the thought of going away to study is being discussed within families*') and financial pressures '*you need* [to get] *yourself into a trade…you need to start earning money*'. [lxxxv]

513    For others, lack of self-esteem and perceptions of the lack of an appropriate academic background acted as barriers to any consideration of a higher education route (*"University, Miss?* [But] *we're from Any Town High"* '). [lxxxvi] In some schools, indeed, reference was made to the development of an anti-learning culture: '*this is a school where having a reputation for being 'naughty' is the only thing that gets you popularity…You make yourself popular by being disruptive and rejecting learning*'.

514    In order to break down these various barriers and thus to widen participation in higher education, there is a need first to raise achievement at Key Stage 4 and to increase participation post-16.  Partnerships had responded variously to these challenges, both in terms of the activities they had set in place and the means by which they assessed their level of success.  Some, for example, set themselves specific local targets for GCSE attainment, with 16 of the 42 partnerships that were visited for this study establishing targets for higher level GCSE attainment at Key Stage 4. [lxxxvii] Ten of these 16 indicated success within the first two years of the programme, although acknowledged that such success was not always true for all schools in the partnership.  Nearly two-thirds of the 42 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 in at least some of their institutions.  Eighteen partnerships, however, 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.

515    Which activities are believed to have contributed to any such raised attainment or increased progression at 16?  Much of the initial work in partnership areas had been about raising awareness of higher education through, for example, visits to universities and, as indicated in paragraph 219, there is evidence to

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suggest that such external visits were associated with higher levels of attainment. More recently, however, a stronger focus on '*front-line achievement raising activities*' has emerged, particularly in EiC areas, where links had sometimes been made between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and EIC interventions such as Learning Mentors. Such links were said to have led to increased post-16 staying-on rates, although hard evidence was not always available at a local level. Links with existing EiC programmes for gifted and talented pupils were also noted and particular 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 pupils had been more motivated by curriculum linked on-site activities than they had been by previous external visits.[lxxxviii]

516     The extent to which teaching and learning activities had been affected in the classroom as a whole, however, was unclear. Whilst there was evidence of stronger links being built up between university departments and subject departments and faculties in schools, as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there was less hard evidence that this had led, as yet, to changes in teaching and learning approaches culminating in higher attainment, increased staying-on rates or increased numbers of applications to higher education.

517     Nonetheless, although the direct link between better institutional and subject relationships and pupil attainment outcomes was not established, there was evidence that the ethos in such higher education-focused schools may have contributed to higher aspirations. 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*'.[lxxxix]   As indicated in paragraph 225, young people in such schools were significantly more likely than their academic and social peers to consider higher education, when all other known background characteristics were taken into account.

518     Pre-16, therefore, the most effective activities appear to be those that are on-going rather than *ad hoc*, that address young people's individual needs (be they related to issues of self-esteem or to over-coming barriers to learning), that are grounded in, but extend, their curriculum and cultural experiences and that serve to widen their horizons.

## Which activities appear to be most effective with post-16 students?

519     The potential barriers to higher education entry faced by young people, post-16, were largely akin to those faced by their peers, pre-16. Lack of family experience of university was significant, but financial concerns were often

more evident amongst these older students than amongst those from younger pupils. Many of the strategies that partnerships had put in place reflected the need to raise aspirations and to encourage young people to consider subject areas (through Masterclasses, for instance) and study locations that were outwith their current experiences.

520     At a partnership level, the extent to which coordinators were able to assess progress towards Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge national targets highlighted some of the challenges they faced with regard to assessing the effectiveness of such post-16 activities. By January 2004, only 28 of the 42 partnerships in the study,[xc] for example, were able to indicate whether they had achieved (or had failed to achieve) the target they had set for progression to higher education amongst young people who were at risk of underachieving at 18. The difficulties that they had encountered in reporting progress towards the various targets were related to issues of definition (there was little agreement across the partnerships at the outset as to what constituted an underachieving student), of data presentation (changes in the ways that UCAS points were calculated and differences in partnerships' definition of top UCAS points, for example) and of tracking students from compulsory education into post-16, thence post-18 destinations (there were many concerns about the comprehensiveness of the progression data partnerships received from colleges and sixth forms, as well as longer-term tracking issues).

521     Partnership coordinators singled out mentors, whether linked to EiC or recruited by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (and partly or wholly funded by the initiative) as having had a specific impact on increased applications to higher education and increased applications to Russell Group universities. However, apart from mentioning specific singular activities (such as the leadership events run for Year 12 students in one area), coordinators rarely identified particular activities as being especially effective with post-16 students.

522     Amongst young people in Years 12 and 13 (or equivalent) those in sixth forms in schools were more than three times as likely (and those in colleges were more than twice as likely) as other young people not on full-time education courses to indicate an intention to go to university. An analysis of data from these young people suggested that pre-16 interventions played an important part in raising their aspirations and motivating them to consider higher education. In addition to such key predictors as level of study and prior attainment, level of parental education and lack of financial concerns, the likelihood that young people would state an intention to enter higher education increased where young people, during compulsory education, had taken part in discussions with teachers about higher education, had the opportunity to visit universities or higher education institutions (including summer schools) and had lessons on transition skills such as writing curriculum vitae and preparing job or course applications.[xci]

523    Amongst the Year 13 students, the post-16 interventions that appeared to be significantly related to decisions to follow a higher education course included undertaking a post-16 school or college course that they felt had provided them with helpful information about higher education and, post-16, talking to teachers, tutors, higher education staff or family and friends about higher education.  The part played by Opportunity Bursaries in young people's decisions about whether or not to take up a university place seemed to be key, but since respondents would not have applied for such a bursary without having at least a clear intention to go to university in the first place, the apparent effect of this intervention is more difficult to ascertain.[xcii]

524    The indications are, therefore, that post-16 provision may need to be supported by previous pre-16 interventions in order to develop positive attitudes towards, and an intention to enter, higher education.  The development of such positive attitudes alone is insufficient, however.  Attitudes towards higher education were as high amongst young people in colleges as amongst those who were in school sixth forms, although aspirations to higher education were lower amongst the former.  There may be a need to focus more on raising aspirations to higher education amongst young people in colleges than on simply raising awareness of such opportunities.

525    It must be acknowledged that there were some young people, post-16, for whom neither pre-16 nor post-16 interventions appeared to be sufficient to overcome potential barriers to aspiring to a university.  These young people differed from their peers primarily in terms of their lower levels of motivation within their post-16 course and in terms of their attitudes towards incurring debt.  While they had taken part in as many of the awareness raising and aspiration raising activities (pre- and post-16) as their peers and, indeed, shared the same level of financial concerns, their responses to such activities suggested that they had been insufficient to overcome their financial concerns or to mitigate their dissatisfaction with their post-16 course.[xciii]  Young people (in Year 12 or 13) who were not motivated by their course were significantly less likely than their peers to aspire to higher education.  Indeed, young people who had switched courses or post-16 destinations within the first year (and many within the first months) were significantly less likely than other young people to state an intention of going to university.  Those who had switched courses during their first year of post-compulsory education (eight per cent of the 2001 cohort and 16% of the 2002 cohort) were only half as likely as other young people to have reported an aspiration to higher education.

**Which activities appear to be most effective with particular groups?**

526    There was little evidence to suggest that any particular activity was significantly more effective with one group of young people by comparison with any other.  Black African pupils in the Year 11 gifted and talented

cohorts achieved higher than expected capped GCSE scores and higher mean GCSE than other young people in the cohort, but were no more likely than their peers to have achieved five or more GCSEs at grade C or above (paragraph 306).[xciv] Young people from low income families in receipt of Opportunity Bursaries appeared to have lower levels of liquid debt and to be more likely to stay in higher education than their peers, although such associations emerged as statistically significant during ordinary least squares analysis and not when propensity score matching was used (paragraph 313).[xcv] However, there are some early indications that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related interventions may be addressing some of the barriers faced by young people from families with no history of higher education. While there is no conclusive statistical evidence that such interventions have increased aspirations to higher education amongst these young people, visits to higher education institutions and residential experiences were widely regarded by interviewees as invaluable for helping young people from non-traditional backgrounds to consider the possibility of higher education (paragraph 320).

## What strategies appear to be most effective in addressing students' and parents' financial concerns?

527     Surveys of students highlighted the concern for many about the potential costs of undertaking a higher education course. For example, 35% of students in Year 13 or equivalent and 34% of those in Year 12 or equivalent said that they did not think that they could afford to go to university. Moreover, 63% those in Year 12 or equivalent, and 70% of those in Year 13 or equivalent, believed that most people who are at university end up in debt.[xcvi] Interviews with partnership coordinators[xcvii], and staff in schools, colleges and HEIs[xcviii] who were engaged in implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge revealed that a primary concern among parents was the cost of supporting their child through a higher education course. Indeed, interviewees noted the misperceptions amongst many parents and students regarding the costs of higher education and cited the significant influence of the media on perceptions. This was often said to misrepresent the true costs and provide only a partial picture.

528     Addressing this concern was, therefore, a key focus of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. Their reflections on the most effective approaches to meeting this need revealed some common themes. Partnerships had used events which focused specifically on the financial implications of pursuing a higher education course. At such events, partnerships had used financial specialists from HEIs and local education authorities, and in a few instances banks, to explain the funding arrangements and possible sources of additional support to parents and students. In addition, the use of undergraduates was also identified as of particular value in addressing young people's concerns about financial matters. As one interviewee explained

*'talking to* [undergraduate] *students about how they managed their finances has had an important impact'* as students were said to value the opportunity to hear real examples of how undergraduates managed financially.   Some interviewees explained that it was important to provide details of '*literally pounds and pence*' to young people to guide them in relation to financial matters.   However, it emerged that it was important to consider the timing of providing such detailed information so that it coincided with the time when a young person would be likely to be embarking on a course, for example students in Year 11 or Year 13, and could make immediate use of the information.   Many partnerships also provided written information in the form of leaflets for parents and students with the aim of clarifying the financial implications of participating in higher education.   In presenting information about financing higher education, they emphasised the need to take account of cultural attitudes towards debt.   By using appropriate language, such as describing the costs as an '*investment*' rather than a '*debt*', some sought to address the apprehension which some working class families were said to have towards debt.

**What is the evidence of the contribution of Opportunity Bursaries to addressing financial concerns?**

529     The surveys of young people who had progressed to higher education indicated that the Opportunity Bursaries[xcix] had been influential in reducing the concern about the costs of higher education among recipients and contributed to their retention on their course.   More specifically, the majority of those who had received an Opportunity Bursary (85%) had felt less worried about embarking on a higher education course because of these additional funds.     Moreover, a similar proportion of undergraduates who had not received an Opportunity Bursary said that would have been less concerned about funding their higher education had they received an Opportunity Bursary.   Although for most students (around six in ten) the possibility of receiving an Opportunity Bursary had not influenced their decision to embark on a higher education course, for around half, it was said to have enabled them to continue studying.   This suggests that, although Opportunity Bursaries may not influence admissions to higher education, they are related to retention in higher education courses.   Receiving an Opportunity Bursary also influenced students' decisions to engage in part-time work while studying.   A third of Opportunity Bursary recipients said that it had enabled them not to take a part-time job or to work for fewer hours in a part-time job.   Furthermore around half of those who had not received an Opportunity Bursary indicated that they would have worked fewer hours in a part-time job had they received a bursary and two-fifths would not have taken a part-time job.

530     Other differences were found between recipients and non-recipients of Opportunity Bursaries in terms of their attitudes after their first year in higher education. More non-recipients reported that part-time work interfered with

their studies and that they sometimes had difficulties keeping up with their studies. However, similar proportions of bursary recipients and non-recipients reported that they had worked and the mean number of hours worked in a normal week was also similar for both groups of students. This suggests that Opportunity Bursary recipients felt less anxious about their financial situation and less anxious about the effect of part-time work on their studies. Notwithstanding these findings, it is interesting to note that the actual number of hours that Opportunity Bursary recipients and non-recipients reported working was very similar and it is worth noting that there may be a range of reasons, other than financial reasons, for an individual choosing to work part-time while studying a higher education course.

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[lxxv] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of Aimhigher. Excellence Challenge: the Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004.*

[lxxvi] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *Implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge – the Experience of Ten Partnerships*.

[lxxvii] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge surveys of tutors in FE colleges and sixth forms 2004. N=138 sixth form tutors and 277 FE tutors

[lxxviii] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxix] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxx] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxxi] ibid.

[lxxxii] YORK CONSULTING (2004). *The Evaluation of the Student Associates Scheme: Aimhigher Pilot Final Report.* London: Teacher Training Agency.

[lxxxiii] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxxiv] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxxv] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxxvi] Ibid.

[lxxxvii] These targets were generally related to the achievement of five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, although three partnerships set targets for the achievement of A* and A grades. MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[lxxxviii] ibid.

[lxxxix] ibid.

[xc] ibid.

[xci] MORRIS, M. and RUTT, S. (forthcoming). *Aspirations to Higher Education: One Year On.*

[xcii] Of the 416 young people who had heard of Opportunity Bursaries, 38% (158) had applied for one and over half (51% or 81 young people) knew that they had been successful in their application at the time that the survey was conducted. Thirty five (22%) had been unsuccessful and a further 35 were still waiting to hear (eight young people indicated that they preferred not to say whether or not they had received the offer of a Bursary). Young people who had successfully applied for an Opportunity Bursary (81), for example, were more than 12 times as likely as other young people (who had either been unsuccessful, or who had not applied) to be taking up a university place.

[xciii] ibid.

[xciv] MORRIS, M., RUTT, S. and YESHANEW, T. (forthcoming). *Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge: Pupil Outcomes One Year On.*

[xcv] EMMERSON, C., FRAYNE, C., McNALLY, S. and SILVA, O. (forthcoming). *Economic Evaluation of Opportunity Bursaries*.

[xcvi] Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge post 16 surveys 2004. N=2352 in Year 12 or equivalent 1042 in Year 13 or equivalent

[xcvii] MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[xcviii] JUDKINS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and MORRIS, M. (forthcoming). *op cit.*

[xcix] WEST, A., HIND, A. and PENNELL, H. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of Aimhigher – First Survey of Opportunity Bursary Applicants 2002/03: Preliminary Findings.*

# 6.   CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

601     Since its implementation in September 2001, it is already possible to identify some impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people, on institutions and on partnerships.   Within 18 months of its inception, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions have been associated with gains in young people's attainment and changes to their aspirations, while the programme as a whole appears to have led to developments in institutional inputs and processes as well as to modifications in routines, experiences and attitudes.   As yet, these changes are not uniform, nor can one say that they are durable, stable and embedded changes to infrastructure, systems and processes within initiative institutions.   However, there are some encouraging messages for the continuation of the initiative and for the further development of the unified programme.

## What is the overall impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to date?

602     Within schools in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas, there is evidence of overall gains in GCSE performance and in performance in mathematics at Key Stage 3.   More specifically, young people designated as part of the widening participation cohort were associated with higher levels of attainment at Key Stage 3 (in English, mathematics and overall) and with marginally higher point scores at GCSE.   Longer membership of the cohort (hence greater exposure to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related activities) appears to be advantageous, with young people who were designated earlier in their school careers attaining significantly higher point scores and being more likely to attain five or more GCSEs at grade C and above.   The impact of being designated as a member of the (pre-16) gifted and talented cohort was even more marked, both at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, with such young people achieving significantly higher levels of attainment than would be expected given their background characteristics (including prior attainment).

603     Over and above the impact of being designated to a specific cohort, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions were also associated with higher levels of pupil performance.   Participation in summer schools (and other university and school-based holiday programmes), visits to higher education institutions and discussions about life at university with higher education staff and students were all associated with higher attainment at Key Stage 4.

604     The impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on young people's aspirations to higher education was more apparent at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 3.   Of paramount importance at both Key Stages, however, was the creation of a school ethos in which young people were encouraged to think

about the value of higher education, while opportunities to discuss aspects of university life with higher education staff and undergraduates were significantly associated with a greater probability of expressing an intention to take up a higher education place.  It should be noted that, in some schools, the development of this ethos was a significant departure from a previous culture in which expectations of pupil progression to further and higher education were often low.

605    As yet there was little evidence to suggest that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions had led to young people, during Key Stage 4, specifically changing their mind about taking up a higher education place at a later date.  Nonetheless, the longer-term impact of such pre-16 interventions became more apparent when data from older students (who had experienced Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions pre- and post-16) was examined.  While the interventions might not have been significantly associated with any change of mind during Key Stage 4, participation in pre-16 activities (sometimes combined with post-16 activities) appeared to have contributed to developing a more positive attitude to higher education and to motivating them (as older students) to consider entering a university or other higher education institution.

606    The extent to which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has been accessed by different groups of young people has not been uniform.  While designation to widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts was associated with higher levels of performance at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 (suggesting that the initiative has had a beneficial impact on attainment for those so designated), young people from some minority ethnic groups (particularly Indian and Bangladeshi pupils) were under-represented in both cohorts, for example.

607    There is qualitative data to suggest that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities may have contributed to a widening of horizons amongst young people from families with no history of higher education (not least through the provision of enhanced advice and guidance) and to overcoming or ameliorating the impact of lower parental levels of education on post-16 students' attitudes, but no conclusive statistical evidence that such interventions have then led to increased aspirations to enter higher education. Nor is there any evidence that, as yet, pre-16 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions have played a significant role in raising attainment levels or aspirations to enter higher education amongst young people from the most disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.  It may, through the Opportunity Bursary Strand, have contributed to increasing retention in higher education amongst young adults (those aged over 19) from low income families, although the indicative data for this is not statistically significant.

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608    The impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has not been confined to young people.  Since the implementation of the policy, there has been an increase in the number and type of widening participation activities deployed by higher education institutions and those used by schools and colleges.  Participation in such activities appears to have challenged the preconceptions of staff in higher education providers about the ability and motivation of young people, while teaching staff in schools and colleges referred to professional development opportunities arising out of the their own involvement in the initiative.  A particular and positive outcome of the programme appears to have been the improvement in working relationships between institutions from different educational sectors – schools, colleges and higher education institutions – with some partnership coordinators highlighting the specific contribution of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to the initiation of both new collaborations and the improvement of previous more tenuous and *ad hoc* groupings.  These developments have not been without cost, primarily in terms of the impact on staff time and workload, but the development of partnership understanding of each other's institutions and of each other's concerns, priorities and aims was said to have been a major benefit and one which contributed to more effective collaboration through which greater coherence of activities and sharing of practice was possible.

## What are the implications for schools and colleges?

609    Students who were in the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts identified through the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme attained higher levels at key stages 3 and 4 than would be expected given their prior attainment and other background characteristics.  These findings suggest that there is value in schools identifying such specific cohorts of students and enabling them to access activities that supplement their normal curriculum, extending their experiences, raising their awareness and increasing their aspirations.  However, it is also imperative that careful consideration is given to the identification of students in the cohorts to ensure that all students who meet the criteria have the potential to access, and benefit from, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.  At present, the data suggests that young people from some ethnic minority communities are under-represented in the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts.

610    It is also important that schools and colleges become actively involved in evaluating the impact of the activities in which targeted young people take part and in reviewing programmes of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities in terms of their ability to meet the needs of their pupils and students.  There is some indication that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities may have contributed to raising aspirations (though not attainment) amongst young people from families with no history of higher education, but little indication that it has been associated with any increase in aspirations amongst those from families with lower incomes.  Although the widening participation cohort

includes a notable proportion of young people from lower-income groups, the activities that these cohorts may have participated in do not appear to have been sufficient, as yet, to overcome other existing barriers (be they financial or otherwise) to participation in higher education.

611    The research revealed that there was an association between particular awareness and aspiration raising activities, which could be provided through the programme, and attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4. More specifically, visits to higher education providers and specific individual opportunities to discuss higher education with staff and students in higher education providers, as well as participation in summer schools were found to be particularly associated with increases in attainment. Indeed, one-to-one contact with undergraduates, either through a mentoring or other programme, emerged as a significant factor associated with higher levels of attainment and higher levels of aspiration in both the statistical analyses and the qualitative studies. This suggests that there is real value in schools and colleges working together with higher education providers to overcome some of the logistical challenges they may encounter in arranging such extra-curricular activities.

612    It emerged that students in schools where the ethos promoted the possibility of progressing to higher education to students were more likely to consider embarking on a higher education course in future. This suggests that raising students' aspirations requires more than isolated activities and events, but rather that young people benefit from an environment where the culture of the school as a whole embraces the notion of the potential of students to progress onto higher education. The implications of this for schools are clear, though challenging, requiring a commitment on the part of senior management and all staff to promote higher education, actively, as one of the possible destinations open to young people in their school, whatever their home circumstances or family history.

**What are the implications for higher education providers?**

613    The research has shown that, in some instances, staff in higher education providers gained an insight into young people and their pre-16 education from their involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. Indeed, in some instances, they were impressed by the commitment and ability of the participating students. This suggests that there is value for the wider staff of higher education providers in engaging with activities which aim to widen participation that could usefully inform their interaction with students who embark on their courses.

614    The research revealed some implications for higher education providers that are engaged in delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. It emerged that these were most effective when they were focused or targeted towards the specific needs of the students and where they were interactive and

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engaging, rather than lecture-based. Moreover, the research suggests that HEIs should consider ensuring that any widening participation activities and events that aim to raise aspirations and awareness among young people incorporate opportunities to meet with, and interact with, currently undergraduates. Such interaction enabled young people to gain an insight into the mode of learning in higher education and how to manage socially and financially when pursuing their chosen course.

## What are the implications for the unified Aimhigher Programme?

615     The findings to date suggest that, in seeking to raise awareness of higher education amongst young people, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has also met with some success at an institutional level. In particular, this includes increasing understanding of current provision in higher education amongst teachers in schools and raising awareness, amongst higher education staff, both of the barriers that some young people have to surmount in order to enter higher education and of the potential for engagement and success that exists within many widening participation students. In acknowledging the relative achievement of the programme to date, it will be important for the unified Aimhigher programme, which began in August 2004, to continue to address the emerging and identified needs of young people, of their parents and of teachers and higher education staff.

616     In particular, it will be of paramount importance to continue to find ways of reaching parents in order to address and overcome some of the existing barriers to progression to further and higher education. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships found this an area of particular challenge and indeed, there was little evidence, in the early stages of the initiative, that they had made effective inroads into addressing parental concerns. More recently, however, some were beginning to identify strategies that enabled them particularly to address financial concerns – the concerns which, for many parents, were the most significant barrier to a consideration of higher education as a route for their child.

617     Secondly, it will be important to continue to acknowledge the value of collaborative partnerships. The evaluation, to date, has found that the nature of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships and the role of schools and colleges (and of higher education institutions) in those partnerships has been vital in developing a better understanding of educational cultures and in ensuring that activities for young people are appropriately designed, well paced and properly focused.

618     Finally, the value of providing young people with some experience of life in higher education, in terms of challenging (often erroneous) pre-conceptions and in terms of raising aspirations, has emerged as a consistent finding throughout the evaluation. These experiences appear to be as valuable pre-16

as post-16. Although there was little clear *statistical* evidence that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities led to young people significantly changing their minds during Key Stage 4 about whether or not they would aim for the higher education route when they were older, there was evidence a) that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities were associated with the development of positive attitudes to higher education and b) the attitudes and expectations of young people in further education or learning, post-16, were influenced by their pre-16 experiences.

## What are the implications of this evidence for the allocation of resources?

619    The findings summarised above suggest that, in order to maximise the impact of Aimhigher activities, the approach adopted by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, of targeting young people pre-16 in schools, as well as in post-16 education, has many advantages, not least in building the groundwork for developing a positive attitude to higher education, particularly in communities where there is no real history of such transitions. Although the evidence of change in such communities is limited and inconclusive as yet, there are indications of wider associations between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and young people's attainment and aspirations, both in the quantitative and qualitative data.

620    Some activities, particularly university visits, summer schools, opportunities for discussions with undergraduates and higher education staff, as well strategies such as mentoring and targeting widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts, appear to have been particularly successful. However, assessing the value of other activities is more difficult, partly because some (such as Masterclasses) affect few people; partly because it is difficult to isolate the impact of activities, such as in-lesson extension activities for gifted and talented pupils (which may have been informed by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funded continuing professional development for teachers), that may operate in a more subtle or diverse way; and partly because it is difficult to ascertain the rates of return to such activities. This is a broader problem for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, which has implications for the way Aimhigher could be monitored at a local and national level in the future.

621    At this stage it is not possible, for example, to assess whether the long-term benefits of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge policy outweigh the costs, although further investigation of this is taking place through the national evaluation and will be reported in 2006. The differences-in-differences analysis, for example, suggested that there was a potential 3.9 percentage point increase in participation in higher education amongst young people in participating areas (see paragraph 226). On the basis of increased (gross) wages due to such an increase, the policy, therefore, would need to cost no more than £342 per person to yield an annual real rate of return of at least 5%.

A lower annual rate of return of 2.5% would need a cost of, at most £725 per pupil, while a lower cost of £160 would yield a rate of return of the policy being 7.5%. To date, the actual real cost of the policy (per pupil) is not known to the evaluation team, since the number of different funding streams and the various accounting and monitoring mechanisms have made it very difficult to trace policy costs at an individual level.

622    The implications for the allocation of resources are, therefore, two-fold. As indicated above, the first implication relates to the appropriate targeting of resources, recognising the valuable contribution of schools, colleges, higher education institutions and partnership coordinators to the relative success of the initiative. The second is dependent upon the extent to which HEFCE and DfES wish to measure the cost benefits of the policy in the future. If the funders of the policy wish to ascertain which activities are most effective in meeting their aims (and in the most cost-effective manner) then this requires some clear guidelines to Aimhigher partnerships as to the ways in which they monitor and allocate funds, insofar as they have control of particular elements of the Aimhigher budget.

## What are the next steps?

623    The final stages of the evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge will involve the incorporation of data from a number of different sources in order to assess the extent to which the programme has been successful in meeting its aims. It is anticipated that this will include multilevel and other analyses of data from the final round of pupil, teacher and school surveys matched to the NPD for 2003/04; of data from post-16 sources, also matched to NPD and other post-16 attainment datasets; further analyses of the surveys of Opportunity Bursary recipients and non-recipients; and the economic analyses of outcome data for young people at ages 13/14, 16 and post-16. The final report for the project should be complete in spring 2006.

624    The evaluation of the unified Aimhigher programme builds on some of the data collection strategies that were implemented for the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. Under Strand 1 of the unified evaluation, young people who were in Year 11 cohorts in 2001/02, 2002/03 and 2003/04, for instance, and who agreed to take part in further research, have been sent surveys exploring their post-16 and post-18 experiences. The outcomes of the first year of these surveys (currently being conducted by NFER) will be reported in spring 2006. Two further external studies have also been commissioned by HEFCE, and include a series of area case studies (currently being conducted by EKOS consulting) and surveys of HEIs, FEIs and training organisations being undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University.

# Appendix 1

# Sample Representative Tables Year 9 and 11

**Table 1.  Characteristics of Schools Attended by Year 9 Pupils (2001/02), weighted by pupil numbers**

|  | EC schools in sample % | ALL EC schools % | Comparison Schools % | All Schools % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Met-Non Met Area** | | | | |
| Met | 73 | 74 | 65 | 36 |
| Non-Met | 27 | 26 | 35 | 64 |
| **Location** | | | | |
| North | 52 | 52 | 54 | 30 |
| Midlands | 19 | 19 | 39 | 33 |
| South | 29 | 29 | 8 | 37 |
| **Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language** | | | | |
| None | 30 | 29 | 13 | 34 |
| 1 - 5% | 36 | 28 | 41 | 41 |
| 6 - 49% | 22 | 28 | 24 | 20 |
| 50% + | 11 | 13 | 22 | 5 |
| Not Applicable | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| **Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals** | | | | |
| Lowest 20% | 0 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| 2nd lowest 20% | 6 | 6 | 11 | 25 |
| Middle 20% | 11 | 15 | 21 | 28 |
| 2nd highest 20% | 37 | 31 | 23 | 24 |
| Highest 20% | 47 | 47 | 45 | 17 |
| **KS3 Achievement Band** | | | | |
| Lowest band | 40 | 40 | 42 | 19 |
| 2nd lowest band | 19 | 21 | 26 | 19 |
| Middle band | 25 | 19 | 19 | 19 |
| 2nd highest band | 7 | 10 | 13 | 19 |
| Highest band | 9 | 9 | 0 | 18 |
| Not Applicable | 0 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| **GCSE Achievement Band** | | | | |
| Lowest band | 30 | 38 | 43 | 18 |
| 2nd lowest band | 30 | 25 | 8 | 20 |
| Middle band | 18 | 17 | 31 | 20 |
| 2nd highest band | 14 | 11 | 19 | 20 |
| Highest band | 7 | 7 | 0 | 15 |
| Not Applicable | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 |
| **Beacon School** | | | | |
| No | 87 | 88 | 92 | 91 |
| Yes | 13 | 12 | 8 | 9 |
| **Specialist School** | | | | |
| No | 70 | 70 | 75 | 77 |
| Yes | 30 | 30 | 25 | 23 |
| **Total number of schools** | **60** | **13** | **848** | **3598** |

**Table 2.  Characteristics of Schools Attended by Year 11 Pupils (2001/02), weighted by pupil numbers**

|  | EC schools in sample % | ALL EC schools % | Comparison Schools % | All Schools % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Met-Non Met Area** | | | | |
| Met | 78 | 74 | 77 | 35 |
| Non-Met | 22 | 26 | 23 | 65 |
| **Location** | | | | |
| North | 70 | 53 | 11 | 30 |
| Midlands | 18 | 19 | 89 | 33 |
| South | 13 | 28 | 0 | 37 |
| **Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language** | | | | |
| None | 55 | 29 | 0 | 34 |
| 1 - 5% | 22 | 28 | 0 | 41 |
| 6 - 49% | 18 | 28 | 68 | 20 |
| 50% + | 5 | 13 | 32 | 5 |
| Not Applicable | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| **Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals** | | | | |
| Lowest 20% | 0 | 1 | 11 | 6 |
| 2nd lowest 20% | 8 | 6 | 0 | 26 |
| Middle 20% | 19 | 16 | 23 | 28 |
| 2nd highest 20% | 42 | 31 | 34 | 24 |
| Highest 20% | 31 | 47 | 32 | 16 |
| **KS3 Achievement Band** | | | | |
| Lowest band | 28 | 39 | 32 | 18 |
| 2nd lowest band | 27 | 20 | 34 | 19 |
| Middle band | 19 | 19 | 23 | 19 |
| 2nd highest band | 17 | 10 | 0 | 19 |
| Highest band | 9 | 10 | 11 | 18 |
| Not Applicable | 0 | 2 | 0 | 7 |
| **GCSE Achievement Band** | | | | |
| Lowest band | 32 | 37 | 11 | 18 |
| 2nd lowest band | 23 | 24 | 36 | 20 |
| Middle band | 22 | 17 | 41 | 20 |
| 2nd highest band | 14 | 11 | 0 | 20 |
| Highest band | 9 | 7 | 11 | 15 |
| Not Applicable | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7 |
| **Beacon School** | | | | |
| No | 89 | 88 | 79 | 91 |
| Yes | 11 | 12 | 21 | 9 |
| **Specialist School** | | | | |
| No | 60 | 70 | 66 | 77 |
| Yes | 40 | 30 | 34 | 23 |
| **Total number of schools** | **63** | **6** | **848** | **3598** |

**Table 3. Characteristics of Schools Attended by Year 9 Pupils (2002/03), weighted by pupil numbers**

| | | Pupils | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Responding pupils | | Sample pupils | | All pupils | |
| | | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| **Metropolitan** | Non-Metropolitan | 3938 | 32 | 4638 | 19 | 366521 | 63 |
| | Metropolitan | 8262 | 68 | 19418 | 81 | 211631 | 37 |
| **Region** | North | 6431 | 53 | 12982 | 54 | 173504 | 30 |
| | Midlands | 2884 | 24 | 4328 | 18 | 187756 | 32 |
| | South | 2885 | 24 | 6746 | 28 | 216893 | 38 |
| **% of EAL pupils (NOT-Quintiles)** | None | 3601 | 30 | 5758 | 24 | 191994 | 33 |
| | 1 - 5% | 4259 | 35 | 7195 | 30 | 237817 | 41 |
| | 6 - 49% | 3064 | 25 | 8064 | 34 | 114948 | 20 |
| | 50% + | 973 | 8 | 2268 | 9 | 27923 | 5 |
| | Not available | 303 | 2 | 771 | 3 | 5471 | 1 |
| **% eligible FSM 2001 (5 pt scale)** | Lowest 20% | 0 | 0 | 196 | 1 | 33202 | 6 |
| | 2nd lowest 20% | 456 | 4 | 1464 | 6 | 148165 | 26 |
| | Middle 20% | 2239 | 18 | 3589 | 15 | 156252 | 27 |
| | 2nd highest 20% | 3708 | 30 | 6015 | 25 | 140041 | 24 |
| | Highest 20% | 5797 | 48 | 12792 | 53 | 100014 | 17 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 479 | 0 |
| **Achievement Band (KS3 Overall performance)** | Lowest band | 4478 | 37 | 9473 | 39 | 112070 | 19 |
| | 2nd lowest band | 4056 | 33 | 5717 | 24 | 117013 | 20 |
| | Middle band | 1174 | 10 | 3368 | 14 | 116687 | 20 |
| | 2nd highest band | 1364 | 11 | 2333 | 10 | 115043 | 20 |
| | Highest band | 1128 | 9 | 3165 | 13 | 109490 | 19 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7849 | 1 |
| **Achievement Band (GCSE total point score)** | Lowest band | 4811 | 39 | 9152 | 38 | 109468 | 19 |
| | 2nd lowest band | 3880 | 32 | 6910 | 29 | 124059 | 21 |
| | Middle band | 1940 | 16 | 4090 | 17 | 122172 | 21 |
| | 2nd highest band | 658 | 5 | 1454 | 6 | 121608 | 21 |
| | Highest band | 911 | 7 | 2298 | 10 | 90221 | 16 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 152 | 1 | 10625 | 2 |
| **Beacon School** | No | 10263 | 84 | 19776 | 82 | 516760 | 89 |
| | Yes | 1937 | 16 | 4280 | 18 | 61392 | 11 |
| **Specialist School** | No | 7317 | 60 | 15891 | 66 | 376143 | 65 |
| | Yes | 4883 | 40 | 8165 | 34 | 202009 | 35 |
| **Total pupils** | | **12200** | **100** | **24056** | **100** | **578152** | **100** |

**Table 4.** **Characteristics of Schools Attended by Year 11 Pupils (2002/03), weighted by pupil numbers**

| | | Pupils | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Responding pupils | | Sample pupils | | All pupils | |
| | | Number | % | Number | % | Number | % |
| **Metropolitan** | Non-Metropolitan | 4398 | 34 | 4388 | 16 | 342153 | 63 |
| | Metropolitan | 8412 | 66 | 23466 | 84 | 200163 | 37 |
| **Region** | North | 6740 | 53 | 16456 | 59 | 165844 | 31 |
| | Midlands | 3361 | 26 | 5239 | 19 | 172986 | 32 |
| | South | 2709 | 21 | 6159 | 22 | 203486 | 38 |
| **% of EAL pupils (NOT-Quintiles)** | None | 4508 | 35 | 7566 | 27 | 179860 | 33 |
| | 1 - 5% | 2757 | 22 | 7082 | 25 | 222864 | 41 |
| | 6 - 49% | 3739 | 29 | 8723 | 31 | 107120 | 20 |
| | 50% + | 1806 | 14 | 4011 | 14 | 26500 | 5 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 472 | 2 | 5973 | 1 |
| **% eligible FSM 2001 (5 pt scale)** | Lowest 20% | 0 | 0 | 343 | 1 | 32498 | 6 |
| | 2nd lowest 20% | 426 | 3 | 1362 | 5 | 138210 | 25 |
| | Middle 20% | 2382 | 19 | 4232 | 15 | 145865 | 27 |
| | 2nd highest 20% | 4662 | 36 | 7854 | 28 | 131342 | 24 |
| | Highest 20% | 5340 | 42 | 14063 | 50 | 93923 | 17 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 479 | 0 |
| **Achievement Band (KS3 Overall performance)** | Lowest band | 4417 | 34 | 10772 | 39 | 106158 | 20 |
| | 2nd lowest band | 2989 | 23 | 5697 | 20 | 109024 | 20 |
| | Middle band | 2462 | 19 | 5302 | 19 | 108928 | 20 |
| | 2nd highest band | 1735 | 14 | 3811 | 14 | 106631 | 20 |
| | Highest band | 1207 | 9 | 2272 | 8 | 102654 | 19 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8922 | 2 |
| **Achievement Band (GCSE total point score)** | Lowest band | 4335 | 34 | 10875 | 39 | 103491 | 19 |
| | 2nd lowest band | 3969 | 31 | 7596 | 27 | 116213 | 21 |
| | Middle band | 2103 | 16 | 3751 | 13 | 117034 | 22 |
| | 2nd highest band | 1665 | 13 | 4201 | 15 | 116563 | 21 |
| | Highest band | 738 | 6 | 1431 | 5 | 86301 | 16 |
| | Not available | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2714 | 1 |
| **Beacon School** | No | 11416 | 89 | 24371 | 87 | 484137 | 89 |
| | Yes | 1394 | 11 | 3483 | 13 | 58179 | 11 |
| **Specialist School** | No | 7075 | 55 | 17182 | 62 | 350231 | 65 |
| | Yes | 5735 | 45 | 10672 | 38 | 192086 | 35 |
| **Total pupils** | | **12810** | **100** | **27854** | **100** | **542316** | **100** |