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## EVALUATION OF AIMHIGHER: EXCELLENCE CHALLENGE THE VIEWS OF PARTNERSHIP COORDINATORS 2004

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### Introduction

Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge<sup>1</sup> was established in September 2001 with the aim of increasing participation in higher education amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Partnerships between Local Education Authorities (LEAs), schools, colleges of further education and higher education institutions (HEIs) were established in areas of socio-economic deprivation to implement Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge. Between September 2001 and September 2003, these partnerships were instituted in areas that were already engaged in the government's Excellence in Cities (EiC) and Education Action Zone (EAZ) initiatives.

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

### Aims

The DfES commissioned an evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge in 2001 to explore the outcomes of the programme and the extent to which it had met its aims and objectives. The overall evaluation comprises<sup>2</sup> large scale surveys, a programme of case-study visits and qualitative interviews with partnership coordinators. This research brief focuses on the findings from the latter and examines:

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

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

<sup>2</sup> Further details of the research methods are provided at the end of this brief.

## Key findings

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

## Structural developments in the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

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

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

Reflecting on their experience of working in partnership over the three years of the evaluation, coordinators observed that effective partnership working was facilitated by the development of positive working relationships which were informed by clear

strategic direction and planning, with which all parties agreed, and effective communication. A further contributory factor was through partners gaining a mutual understanding of each other's institution and educational sector. Underpinning these factors was ensuring that there was sufficient funding and time to establish such effective partnerships. Conversely, partnership working was said to be inhibited where partners had insufficient time and where there was poor communication and a lack of trust and understanding between partners. In some areas, partnership working to implement Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge was inhibited where there was a lack of capacity or appropriate personnel in the partner institutions.

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

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

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

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

## Developments in the activities of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

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

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

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

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

## Impact and outcomes of the Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Partnerships

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

Activities which sought to raise the aspirations of young people towards higher education, had been a particular emphasis in the partnerships. Visits to HEIs, through day visits, residential activities and summer schools, were said to play an important role in achieving this through 'demystifying' universities and providing young people with an opportunity to spend time in a different environment away from home. The use of higher education students as mentors also emerged as an effective approach to raising aspirations through the work they did with individual pupils and students and because they were role models for younger students. Partnership coordinators also emphasised the need for a school culture that promoted higher education, and high expectations, and a programme of activities that included a focus on study skills and learning activities in school alongside high-profile motivational events.

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

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

It emerged that partnership coordinators were more positive about the plan for integration than they had been previously and cited potential benefits such as the avoidance of duplication through a more streamlined approach and more effective use of resources and sharing of good practice. In addition they noted that more young people would benefit and a wider range of activities could

be offered. Nevertheless, some degree of apprehension remained regarding the integration. Particular concerns expressed by partnership coordinators related to a loss of 'local voice' due to the HEI-led approach of the new programme, uncertainty over the role of the local area coordinators under the integrated regional programme and a lack of understanding between partners from different educational sectors of the differences between them. In addition, interviewees expressed concern about transitional issues during the initial stages of integration and changes in the funding arrangements.

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

### **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

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

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

Partnership coordinators' role in establishing relationships between institutions and facilitating

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

### **Summary of Research Methods**

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

The wider evaluation comprises:

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

### **Additional Information**

*Copies of the full report (RR650) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

*Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".*

*Copies of this Research Brief (RB650) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/)*

*Further information about this research can be obtained from Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, N4, DfES, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.*

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