“[Aimhigher] makes you realise what you can actually accomplish.”

A longitudinal study of Aimhigher Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire learners

Emma Church and Michael Kerrigan
August 2011
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We are also grateful to our friends and colleagues at Aimhigher in the East Midlands who volunteered to help us facilitate focus groups at busy periods. Special thanks go to Chris Carpenter, who has since gone on to pastures new, but who was instrumental in the initial discussions and the design of the research methods.

Finally, and most importantly, we would like to thank the teaching professionals and students who took the time to take part in the research and whose candid thoughts and opinions made this report possible.
Executive summary

This study of a group of Aimhigher Nottinghamshire learners is one of four research projects carried out amongst Aimhigher area partnerships in the East Midlands, to complement existing quantitative evaluation and the evaluation of discrete interventions. The report presents the findings of a three year longitudinal qualitative research project focusing on the impact of the Aimhigher programme on participating students.

Aims of the research
The main aim of the study was to gain an insight into the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme. As the study was longitudinal, it was envisaged that the cumulative impact of the Higher Education Progression Framework, which adopts a ‘learner journey’ approach to outreach, rather than a series of ‘one-off’ interventions, would also be considered. In light of the recent announcement that Aimhigher funding would cease from July 2011, it was equally important to use the emerging research findings to share best practice and inform future university outreach policies in the post-Aimhigher structure.

Research methods
The research was conducted over a three year period during which time the chosen schools had engaged in a whole range of different activities which enabled the capture of Aimhigher effectiveness. Four schools and one FE college were identified as core evaluation partners and within each target institution at least six learners were identified. The research team engaged with the learners of various ages via focus groups in order to capture views at different stages of the learner journey. Participants were encouraged to discuss a variety of topics relating to Aimhigher, particularly in terms of any potential impact the programme may have had on their present and future educational trajectories. Research with the selected students was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with teaching professionals to gain a school/college perspective on the potential value of Aimhigher.

Whilst the research upon which this report is based was predominantly qualitative, findings were triangulated using other associated quantitative studies. In particular, a questionnaire was issued to teaching professionals at schools and colleges throughout Nottinghamshire, analyses of which are referred to throughout the report.

Key findings and recommendations
The report discusses the outcomes of a three year longitudinal research project, the aim of which was to ascertain the impacts of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme. In light of the recent announcement that Aimhigher funding will cease from July 2011, we have identified a number of potential areas worthy of further consideration for future university outreach programmes. Within this section a number of recommendations (emboldened) are provided.

Targeting disadvantaged learners
Schools and colleges over recent years have been provided with an Aimhigher cohort list which can be used to select students for activities. It has long been recognised that these robust lists are a good basis for inclusion into the Aimhigher programme due to the criteria used to define target learners and as such the cohort list should be used as a tool to support the initial targeting process. However it is also important to acknowledge that the schools and colleges themselves will have a true insight into which students are likely to gain the most from the Aimhigher experience. It is therefore essential...
that schools are given some leeway in the recruitment process so as not to exclude all non-cohort students from outreach opportunities.

Knowledge and awareness of Higher Education
Most target cohort students will start out with little knowledge and awareness of higher education. Their sources of information at this point are often outside agencies such as the media whose portrayals are not wholly accurate. It therefore essential to use activities to dispel the myths surrounding HE. Activities, information and guidance surrounding the financial aspects of HE are key to these students gaining an understanding that HE is accessible to all. It is therefore important to make sure that financial information is integrated into outreach programmes.

Perception of HE and its students
Images of higher education and the types of people who become students are often stereotypical and inaccurate. Therefore providing students with a taste of university life, through campus visits, is a fundamental aspect of any outreach programme. These types of activities enable young people to envisage themselves in an unfamiliar setting which can elevate some of the anxieties which are associated with making the decision to attend university.

Aspirations
One of the main objectives of the Aimhigher programme of activities is to raise future learning aspirations with a particular focus on higher education progression. Interventions, such as those offered by the Aimhigher programme, were shown to be an effective means to raising the educational aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental input can have an impact on a young persons’ aspirations and future progression. Parents and other family members act as role models and their thoughts and opinions are often widely accepted by younger generations. Given the likelihood that many parents will have had little exposure themselves to HE it is important to engage parents in outreach interventions in order to promote the value of these activities to the younger generation.

Motivation and Confidence
It has been shown that, as a result of participation in the Aimhigher programme, students can be more motivated to do well in their studies in order to give themselves a better platform for progressing to higher education. Raising student motivation to achieve is one of the key ingredients in improving attainment. Boosting the confidence of these students is also critical in helping them to raise their aspirations and attainment.

Higher Education Progression Framework
One of the main aims of the HEPF is to raise awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from the most disadvantaged section of society. Some of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire participants had taken part in several interventions over the three years and it became clear that these sequential and varied activities over the years had greatly benefited the participants.

There has been much debate surrounding the optimum age for learners to start outreach activities. For young people from disadvantages backgrounds with little experience of HE it appears to be important to initiate a programme of outreach interventions at a relatively early stage in their education.

An essential part of any outreach programme is that the activities need to be tailored around the specific needs of individual learners, and there needs to be considerable flexibility in the
support offered to participating schools. It has to acknowledged that no one size fits all. There will be occasions where the HEPF does not work to the benefit of all individuals and all institutions. A consequence of the targeted cohort is that it can limit the overall number of students who will benefit from the programme of activities as the programme tends to concentrate on the same group of young people. It is therefore important that a HEPF should be run in conjunction with a more inclusive programme, where there is the capacity to engage more students, and a pragmatic approach to targeting students for such interventions is often the most cost effective.

Profile of the Outreach Coordinator in schools
The role of the Aimhigher coordinator in schools within the outreach programme is pivotal. Good planning and management are essential in order for the programme of activities to be delivered in the most effective manner. Within each target school there needs to be an outreach coordinator who is responsible for identifying the needs of the school and individual students, and selecting appropriate activities from the menu. It is also extremely important that the outreach activities are embedded in the school calendar.

Conclusion
The Aimhigher programme of activities has played an important role in helping young people reach their full potential by raising confidence, aspirations and attainment. Those who took part in the research were overwhelmingly positive about the programme and its impact and on their future learning options.

There was also positive feedback from teaching professionals who were involved in the research. They valued the Aimhigher programme as an essential and important tool in helping to raise attainment and aspirations amongst the most disadvantaged learners in their area.

Summary of main findings

- The activities have increased learners’ knowledge of HE.
- The activities have helped learners feel more confident and motivated about the thought of progressing to HE.
- The learners appear to be more informed, inspired and confident to enter higher education.
- The activities have encouraged the learners to think about their options now and what effect their current choices may have on their future learning aspirations.
- The activities have increased awareness and understanding of HE opportunities for learners, especially in terms of finance, the realities of studying and student life.
- The teaching professionals participating in the research valued the role of Aimhigher within their school.
Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that school and college students from disadvantaged backgrounds face a wide range of barriers preventing them from realising their full potential. Evidence suggests that patterns of participation and non-participation in HE are a result of deeply embedded and complex social, historical and biographical circumstances and experiences (Fuller et al, 2010).

The Aimhigher programme aims to raise awareness, attainment and aspirations amongst young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and to promote opportunities on offer in higher education. The Aimhigher programme is a national initiative funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The programme operates mainly through 42 Area Partnerships across England, each of which is made up of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the area, the local authorities, schools, academies and colleges from the locality, and other stakeholders.

Aimhigher utilises a wide range of activities to engage and motivate learners who have the potential to enter HE but may be under-achieving, undecided or lacking in confidence. The programme particularly focuses on young people from lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC groups 4-8) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low. Most Aimhigher activities are developed and delivered at an area level, which allows them to be tailored to the needs of specific communities. The core programme of activities includes campus visits; mentoring; master classes; student ambassadors; information, advice and guidance (IAG); and summer schools and HE-related residential experiences. (http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/sites/practitioner/programme_information/about_aimhigher.cfm)

Whilst it is difficult to attribute improved attainment and progression rates directly to Aimhigher it is clear that since the mid-2000s, when the scheme was introduced, young people from disadvantaged areas are substantially more likely to enter higher education. The proportion of young people living in the most disadvantaged areas who enter higher education has increased by around +30% over the past five years and by +50% over the past 15 years (Cover, 2010 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_03/10_03.pdf)

In order to assess the contribution that Aimhigher has made to learners’ aspirations, attainment and progression, Aimhigher Nottinghamshire identified a number of core evaluation partner (CEP) schools and colleges to provide the platform for in depth, longitudinal qualitative research over the three years (2008/09 to 2010/11) of the funding programme.

This report provides the findings of the three year study which takes into account the views of teaching professionals, and most importantly the participating learners’ themselves. This report is divided into five sections:

Section 1 describes the research methodologies employed in the research project and their associated implications for the findings.

Section 2 provides an overview of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme, including information on targeting disadvantaged learners.

Section 3 discusses the main evaluative findings based on the various research methodologies which were employed.
Section 4 discusses the principles, aims and impacts of the Higher Education Progression Framework (HEPF).

Section 5 highlights implications of the research including identifying potential areas worthy of further consideration for future university outreach programmes in light of the demise of Aimhigher.
Section 1: Research Methodology

HEFCE (2008a) guidance required all Aimhigher areas to submit evaluation plans for the 2008-11 funding phase. As part of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire evaluation plan, and in order to help understand the full effects of interventions, an in depth evaluation of a group of ‘core’ schools was proposed. The research would be conducted over a three year period and during this time it was envisaged that the chosen schools would engage in a whole range of different activities, thus enabling the capture of Aimhigher effectiveness. As part of the research strategy the views of teaching professionals would be sought alongside those of the learners themselves. Four schools and one FE college were identified as core evaluation partners and within each target institution at least six learners were identified. It was envisaged that by the end of the three year period the learners would have taken part in a range of activities which would enable them to be classified as ‘Experience 2’ learners1. It was expected that the research team would engage with the learners of various ages in order to capture views at different stages of the learner journey.

Five cohorts of learners from five different schools and colleges (further details of which are provided in Tables 1 & 2) were identified in conjunction with the core evaluation partners to take part in the research. The research participants identified covered a range of year groups to enable the research team to measure progress at different transitional points. Focus groups, with ideally around eight to ten participants in each, would be organised once a year with a view to measuring any changes in higher education awareness and aspirations over time, as well as learners’ motivation to attain.

In the initial process of identifying research participants, it was stressed to the participating institutions that, although it wasn’t necessary that the young people taking part in the research had previously participated in any Aimhigher activities, they should be highly likely to take part in future activities (preferably several) over the three year period. This would ensure that the potential cumulative impact of Aimhigher interventions, i.e. the higher education progression framework, could be explored. It would also help overcome the problems associated with a potential short-term ‘wow’ factor, immediately following participation in a specific intervention, which might mask medium and longer-term impacts of the programme. Research with the selected students was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with teaching professionals to gain a school / college perspective on the potential value of Aimhigher. HEFCE (2008b) guidance stresses the importance of collecting evaluative feedback from teaching professionals to gain a school / college perspective on the potential value of Aimhigher.

With the assistance of the participating schools, the research team conducted focus groups with small groups of learners in Nottinghamshire. Focus group participants were encouraged to discuss a variety of topics relating to Aimhigher, particularly in terms of any potential impact the programme may have had on their present and future educational trajectories. Permission was granted (by parents/carers of those in compulsory education and by participants themselves if they had left compulsory education) to record the sessions to enable subsequent transcription.

As part of the focus groups process, participating students often took the opportunity to ask the research teams questions about higher education, such as finance and fees. The research team chose to answer such questions to the best of their ability and therefore in some way the research sessions could also be seen as soft interventions in their own right.

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1 Experience 2 learners are those who have taken part in numerous activities as part of a Higher Education Progression Framework.
Table 1 (below) provides details of the participating institutions and the year groups of the identified students, whilst Table 2 shows the variety of Aimhigher interventions the young people had taken part in before and during the three year research project.

In year 1, in an attempt to capture the initial views of young people before exposure to Aimhigher, the research team undertook focus groups with young people (and interviews with teaching professionals) in the first term and second term of the 2008/09 academic year. At the start of the second year one of the schools withdrew from the research. In 2009/10 (the second year of the project), the research team gained access to four cohorts of learners via focus groups. In 2010/11 (the third year of the project), the research team gain access to three cohorts of learners via focus groups. One cohort were now in ‘Yr 14’, so we attempted to contact them via a questionnaire to gain their thoughts about the Aimhigher programme. Overall we received two replies to our questionnaire.

As Table 1 illustrates, not all of the students seen in the initial research were seen again in subsequent years. Nevertheless, students dropping out of the longitudinal project was to be expected, hence the relatively large numbers of students identified in the initial research. Furthermore, focus groups were held with students before and after various interventions, thus allowing the research team to explore the cumulative impact of the Aimhigher programme.
### Table 1: Core Evaluation Partner School and College research: Aimhigher Nottinghamshire

<table>
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<th>Institution Details</th>
<th>Year 1 Research</th>
<th>Year 2 Research</th>
<th>Year 3 Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institution code</strong></td>
<td><strong>Year group</strong></td>
<td><strong>Date of year 1 focus group</strong></td>
<td><strong>No. of students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>12 (2008/09)</td>
<td>March 09</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dec 08</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>April 09</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>March 09</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>12 (2009/10)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes year 3 research captured via questionnaire as students had left school / teaching professionals unavailable

### Table 2: Aimhigher activities focus group participants have taken part in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution name</th>
<th>Year group</th>
<th>Sample activities attended before first research visit</th>
<th>Sample activities attended between first and second research visit</th>
<th>Sample activities attended between second and third research visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>12 (2008/09)</td>
<td>All had visited Lincoln Uni in yr 12 &amp; AH Roadshow in yr 9</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cragrats theatre, Indigo Brave, Residential at NTU (Brackenhurst), NTU taster day, AH Roadshow</td>
<td>One had been on residential @ NTU, Student finance talk (at school)</td>
<td>Independent You Motivational event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Two had been to NTU. (Group had little knowledge of HE)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3 had done Smallpeice MC, 6 had been on a uni visit.</td>
<td>All seen APA, All went on Y9 taster day to NTU, 2 went on Science taster day UoN</td>
<td>Summer School, Pre-Summer School visit, University taster day, College visit. Motivational event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>12 (2009/10)</td>
<td>Cragrats, 9 had visited a HEI when at school, Peer Mentoring</td>
<td>Aspirational Workshops</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School A

School A is an 11-18 secondary school located in a relatively deprived area of Nottinghamshire. Latest statistics show that a significant number of students live in areas of relative deprivation (according to IMD data) where progression rates to higher education are low (according to POLAR2 data). Thus the school was identified as a priority for Aimhigher interventions, in accordance with HEFCE (2007) targeting guidance.

School A has historically had relatively low rates of attainment compared to the national average. However, over recent years attainment has improved considerably and there is now a much greater proportion of pupils achieving the Level 2 benchmark of five or more A*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and maths. The main area which the school serves is seen as having historically low educational aspirations amongst its population.

A total of six year 12 students took part in initial focus group in year one of the research. Five of the year 12 were seen a second time one year later when they were in year 13. In year 3 of the research we contacted the five remaining students (via email, letter and facebook), two of whom completed a short questionnaire. The group of participating student had taken part in a taster day and an Aimhigher roadshow both of which took place prior to the start of the research project

Of the six year 12 students taking part in the initial research, three of these were hoping to go to university in the future, whilst the others were not yet sure what they wanted to do. It should be noted that at the time of the initial research all of the students had already been exposed to Aimhigher, so some of the students may have already been encouraged to think about their future educational options. At the time of the year 2 research all five remaining students had applied to go to university. At the time of the year 3 research we contacted all five remaining participants to see what they were now doing. Two of the students replied but neither were currently studying higher education, although both were planning to do so in the future.
School B

School B is an 11-18 secondary school located in a relatively deprived area of Nottinghamshire. Latest statistics show that the majority of students live in areas of relative deprivation (according to IMD data) where progression rates to higher education are low (according to POLAR2 data). Thus the school was identified as a priority for Aimhigher interventions, in accordance with HEFCE (2007) targeting guidance.

School B has historically had relatively low rates of attainment compared to the national average. However, over recent years attainment has improved considerably and there is now a much greater proportion of pupils achieving the Level 2 benchmark of five or more A*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and maths. The main area which the school serves is seen as having historically low educational aspirations amongst its population.

A total of eleven year 10 students took part in initial focus groups in year one of the research. Ten of the year 10 students were seen a second time one year later when they were in year 11. Four of the students were seen a third and final time when they were in year 12. Over the research period, the participating students had taken part in a variety of Aimhigher interventions including taster days, residential, Aimhigher finance talks, Indigo Brave, Aimhigher roadshow and Cragrats theatre performance.

Of the eleven year 10 students taking part in the initial research, six of these were hoping to go to university in the future, whilst the others were not yet sure what they wanted to do. At the time of the year 2 research eight of the original year 10 students were hoping to go to university. By the time of the year 3 research, when they had been on numerous Aimhigher activities as part of a Higher Education Progression Framework (HEPF) programme, none of the four remaining students now in year 12 were sure if they would end up at university.
School C

School C is an 11-18 secondary school located in a relatively deprived area of Nottinghamshire. Latest statistics show that the majority of students live in areas of relative deprivation (according to IMD data) where progression rates to higher education are low (according to POLAR2 data). Thus the school was identified as a priority for Aimhigher interventions, in accordance with HEFCE (2007) targeting guidance.

School A has historically had relatively low rates of attainment compared to the national average. However, over recent years attainment has improved considerably and there is now a much greater proportion of pupils achieving the Level 2 benchmark of five or more A*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and maths. The main area which the school serves is seen as having historically low educational aspirations amongst its population.

A total of six year 11 students took part in initial focus groups in year one of the research. Unfortunately we were unable to gain any further access to these students during the course of the research.

Of the six year 11 students taking part in the initial research, five of these were hoping to stay on into sixth form, and four were hoping to progress to university in the future. At the time of the initial research they had taken part in no Aimhigher activities.
School D

School D is an 11-18 secondary school located in a relatively deprived area of Nottinghamshire. Latest statistics show that the majority of students live in areas of relative deprivation (according to IMD data) where progression rates to higher education are low (according to POLAR2 data). Thus the school was identified as a priority for Aimhigher interventions, in accordance with HEFCE (2007) targeting guidance.

School A has historically had relatively low rates of attainment compared to the national average. However, over recent years attainment has improved considerably and there is now a much greater proportion of pupils achieving the Level 2 benchmark of five or more A*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and maths. The main area which the school serves is seen as having historically low educational aspirations amongst its population.

A total of nine year 9 students took part in initial focus groups in year one of the research. Five of the year 9 students were seen a second time one year later when they were in year 10. Six of the original students were seen a third and final time when they were in year 11. Over the research period, the participating students had taken part in a variety of Aimhigher interventions including Smallpeice, masterclasses, taster days, university visits, Aimhigher Personal Advisor, summer school residential and Aimhigher talks (motivational event).

Of the nine year 9 students taking part in the initial research, six of these were hoping to go to university in the future, one said it was very unlikely that they would go, whilst the others were not yet sure what they wanted to do. It should be noted that at the time of the initial research three of the students had already been exposed to Aimhigher, so they may have already been encouraged to think about their future educational options. At the time of the year 2 research four of the remaining five students were hoping to go to university. By the time of the year 3 research, when they had been on numerous Aimhigher activities as part of a Higher Education Progression Framework (HEPF) programme, five of the remaining six students now in year 11 were planning to progress to university, whilst one was joining the Armed Forces and hoped that they may fund a HE course.
College A

College A is a further education college located in a relatively deprived area of Nottinghamshire. Latest statistics show that the over 60% of students studying at College A resided in the 40% most deprived area nationally. Thus the college was identified as a priority for Aimhigher interventions, in accordance with HEFCE (2007) targeting guidance.

A total of twenty-one FE year 1 students took part in initial focus groups in year two of the research. Six of these students were seen a second time one year later when they were in FE year 2. Over the research period, the participating students had taken part in a couple of Aimhigher interventions including aspirational workshops and peer mentoring.

Of the twenty-one FE year 1 students taking part in the initial research, eleven of these were hoping to go to university in the future. When they were in FE year 2, two of the six remaining student were hoping to stay on at college next year and move into a different subject area, three were not sure, but one had already applied via UCAS to attend university.
Section 2: The Aimhigher Programme

Nottinghamshire was once a thriving industrial and agricultural county, renowned for its coal mining and textiles industries as well as its rich cultural heritage. Today, the picture is very different. Although the City of Nottingham contains a number of prosperous suburbs, as a whole it is one of the most deprived areas in England. It also has the highest concentration of deprivation in the East Midlands. Plus, in the county of Nottinghamshire there are, in parts, significant levels of deprivation which are characterised by low levels of educational attainment and progression (http://www.aimhighernotts.co.uk/about/about-aimhigher-nottingham).

Aimhigher Nottinghamshire seeks to improve the prospects of young people in Nottinghamshire by working in partnership to raise aspirations, improve attainment and increase participation in higher education through different routes and opportunities. Aimhigher activities and interventions are offered within a learner framework that recognises the needs of individuals at key transition points and builds on their previous experiences. They work with schools and colleges that serve the most disadvantaged communities to introduce and implement this approach with an identified cohort within their institutions. Aimhigher Nottinghamshire have identified the following broad learner outcomes that could be achieved through Aimhigher interventions including awareness of progression opportunities; aspiration to progress to higher education; improved attainment and skills to achieve progression and ability to identify choices and make appropriate decisions (http://www.aimhighernotts.co.uk/about/about-aimhigher-nottingham).

Aimhigher Nottinghamshire works with local authorities, schools, colleges and training providers, to identify those students who have the potential to progress to higher education, but lack the heritage. In addition, they work in partnership with local further and higher education institutions and third party providers to deliver a broad range of activities to increase attainment and aspiration to higher education for selected students from years 9-13 (http://www.aimhighernotts.co.uk/about/about-aimhigher-nottingham).

The Higher Education Progression Framework (HEPF) is designed to deliver Aimhigher activities and interventions in a way that recognises the needs of the individual at key transition points and builds on their previous experiences. Rather than simply providing a menu of opportunities, the HEPF seeks to allow practitioners to plan activities and experiences that deliver identified learner outcomes to ensure that individuals achieve a clear progression in their learner journey (http://activities.aimhighernotts.co.uk/).

The activities outlined in the HEPF are split into three distinct phases. Activities in the first stage of the HEPF are designed to give students a general introduction to higher education and to raise their aspirations and motivation. Having completed the first stage, it is envisaged that students are familiar with the language of higher education and should understand the link between hard work and opportunities. During the second phase the objective is that students develop a deeper understanding of the different types of progression routes and educational establishments that are available at a higher level. Activities are designed to help improve skills with a view to raising attainment and to further develop a positive learner identity where students are able to make informed decisions about their future and feel confident in their ability to progress. The third phase is seen as a transitional phase, where it is envisaged that students will now be able demonstrate and apply the skills they have acquired in the introductory and developmental stages, to help them make informed decisions about their future. Activities in this stage are designed to support students with their transition to higher level
study by providing information, advice and guidance on practical matters such as making applications to higher education, finance and student life (http://activities.aimhighernotts.co.uk/).

Good planning and management are essential in order for the programme of activities to be delivered in the most effective manner. Within each target school there is a specific Aimhigher co-ordinator who is responsible for identifying the needs of the school and individual students, and selecting appropriate activities from the menu. As the bridge between schools and Aimhigher practitioners, the role of the Aimhigher co-ordinator is an essential element of the overall programme.

2.1: Targeting Disadvantaged Learners

Aimhigher Nottinghamshire identify their Aimhigher cohort using criteria including Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) data, free school meals (FSM) data and a proxy for students’ potential.

There has been an increase in the percentage of participants meeting the various targeting criteria since 2007/08. HEFCE (2007) targets of two-thirds of participants to be from the 40% most deprived areas and two-thirds of participants to be from NS-SEC 4-8 have been met in 2010/11, and significant progress has been made since the HEFCE targeting guidelines were implemented. Between 2007/08 and 2010/11, proportions from the target group have increased by 32 percentage points using IMD (from 49% to 81%) and 21 percentage points using POLAR2 qYPR (from 66% to 87%). An increase of 17 percentage points (from 49% to 66%) using NS-SEC as a measure has also been achieved. The percentage of parents with no experience of HE has increased from 62% in 2007/08 to 82% in 2010/11.

Figure 1: Percentage of Nottinghamshire participants in the target group by funding year based on various indicators²

² 2010/11 is a partial year, correct as at January 2011.
It is well documented that children of parents without higher education experience tend to be less informed about HE, less likely to aspire to HE by year 11, and less likely to progress to level 3 or to study A-levels (Hatt et al, 2007). Whilst first generation students are no longer seen as a primary target group following the publication of HEFCE (2007), targeting guidelines by targeting students on other proxies for disadvantage such as, IMD and FSM data, by default, a large proportion of participants are likely to be first generation3.

Whilst a cohort list provides robust, objective data on students’ socio-economic circumstances and academic potential, only schools have the in-depth, local knowledge that is required to identify the most appropriate students to take part in resource intensive Aimhigher activities. For this reason, the cohort list tends to be used as a tool to support Aimhigher co-ordinators in the initial targeting process, but not to exclude all non-cohort students from outreach opportunities. For example, there may be other reasons why able students may need Aimhigher support, or have not met the essentially arbitrary ‘potential’ criteria. Also, schools are likely to know which students are already highly likely to progress to HE without further intensive support, and it makes little sense to use scarce resources ‘preaching to the converted’. Therefore, it is very important that schools are given some leeway in the recruitment process:

For less-intensive activities, such as taster days, which can cater for larger groups of students, it makes little sense to limit the number of places for the sole reason of achieving targeting objectives. For example, filling only half a bus taking Aimhigher target students to a university trip when there is capacity for more students to take part is not cost-effective. Therefore, a pragmatic approach to targeting students is often the most appropriate.

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3 This has been reflected in analysis of participant data of four Aimhigher area partnerships in the East Midlands (Kerrigan, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c & 2011d).
Section 3: The Impacts?

There are numerous barriers which may prevent people with the potential to benefit from higher education from doing so. For example, people from low socio-economic groups are more likely to face early disengagement from education (Auditor General, 2002); are more likely to reject the culture and values of HE at an early age (Warwick, 2001); are more likely to lack self-esteem and faith in their ability to succeed in HE (Universities UK, 2001A); have lower aspirations and are less confident that HE is a worthwhile goal (Warwick, 2001); place more value on immediate employment (Warwick, 2001); and are more likely to be anti-debt (Universities UK, 2001A). This section of the report provides details of the impacts of the activities on Aimhigher participants.

3.1 Knowledge and awareness of higher education

Knowledge and awareness of higher education is intrinsically linked to factors which are external to the individual such as parental experience of HE, social and economic aspects of the family, and media portrayals. Activities, such as those provided by Aimhigher, which are designed to enlighten students and break down the myths surrounding higher education are an essential addition to the general academic curriculum. There was evidence from the research that taking part in various, ongoing Aimhigher activities had increased students’ knowledge and awareness of higher education:

“[The university trip] made it more real. It is not just ‘yeah I am going to university because it is going to help me in the future’, it is ‘OK I am going to university, I am going next year’. It made it more real and I was really excited and I can’t wait to go.” (Year 12, School A)

“If I had not been on any of the trips then, I wouldn’t know what it was like at all … If I hadn’t been on the residential … to see what it was like, I would get there and it would be the complete opposite to what I think it was.” (Year 12, School B)

“I think this is about the third time I have spoken to people from Aimhigher and school and that is where I have found out about all the information really.” (Year 10 student, School B)

It appeared that the activities had enabled students to have their own thoughts about what going to university would be like and this in turn allowed them to make their own decisions about their future:

“Some people don’t understand the opportunities that are out there. I don’t think unless I spoke to Aimhigher… I don’t think I would have gone to do what I enjoy, because I wouldn’t know it was out there. I would have thought, uni is just for studying Law, studying all the academic stuff … I would have never thought there was … a university to go and do something practical I enjoy. So … for that it has done wonders. It is just making people realise what is actually out there for them.” (Year 11, School B)

“I never was interested in going and then I went on the residential and it changed my mind completely [about my future].” (Year 11, School B)

“[Visiting university] helps you set a goal as well. Like if you’re there you can say in a couple of years time I want to be studying here.” (Year 11, School D)
From the research it was evident that the students' were better prepared to make informed choices about their future education having taken part in Aimhigher interventions. Whilst it is difficult to isolate the Aimhigher effect from other potential impacts, such as maturity, parental influence and school interventions, it was clear that collective activities had increased students' knowledge and awareness of higher education over the duration of the research project.

3.2 Perception of HE and its students

Often students, especially those who have little or no actual knowledge of higher education, rely on outsider information such as media portrayals to inform them of what university life and the types of people who go to university are like. Activities which allow students to enter into this world are therefore a crucial way of allowing these students to see the reality of higher education:

“I think [visiting the university] helped you discover that it’s actually less daunting than you think it’s going to be.” (Year 11, School D)

“I think that just looking round the university you want to go to. It just gives you more experience about what they’re like and how the rooms are set out and what you’ll be facing so you’re not as nervous or scared.” (Year 11, School D)

“You hear things about uni but everyone says it’s not always the case. It helps you get your own perspective of it.” (Year 11, School D)

It is also clear that the involvement of current university students in breaking down the mis-guided perceptions these students have have is seen as critical from the students' perspective. Employing current higher education students to work on outreach initiatives to widen participation has become increasingly common in universities. Employing student ambassadors to work with learners has the potential to help at all stages of the student lifecycle (Austin and Hatt, 2005). Often students find it difficult to comprehend unless they have been able to experience it firsthand. From the research it is evident that speaking directly to current university students helps learners gain a true insight into university life before they actually get there:

“You hear like everyone’s story about how they got there [to university] and … well obviously everyone ain’t the same, but … they all come from different backgrounds … so it is like, well it don’t really matter what background you come from, if you try like your hardest then you can get there.” (Year 10, School D)

“[The Aimhigher activity showed me] that it is all sorts of people that go [to university] and it don’t matter what your background is” (Year 11, School D)

Talking to undergraduates is seen to provide a critical part of the process because of key subliminal messages that they send to learners (Passy & Morris, 2010). It is evident that participants’ perceptions of university had changed as a direct result of the Aimhigher programme. Students felt they were better prepared and more able to make an informed decision and their greater insight would help smooth the transition to further and higher education.
3.3 Knowledge of HE Finance and Fees

Research has shown that widening participation target students are more likely to be anti-debt than their more privileged counterparts (Universities UK, 2001A), and higher education opportunities are hindered by economic disadvantage (Schwartz, 2004). Within the study the most frequent barrier to progression to higher education cited by students was affordability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students and teaching professionals seemed to be particularly concerned about finance in year three of the research, after the much publicised changes to variable tuition fees post-Browne (Lord Browne of Madingley, 2010):

“It is basically making it so that the poorer can’t afford it, and the middles classes can… So it is polarisation of the education system.” (Year 12, School B)

“I think now people start to think that because the fees are rising … it’s going to create the divide of rich people being able to go and like people from like low income families not being able to go.” (Year 11, School D)

“I think it will … disproportionally affect, students who are, low income students. Underrepresented groups I am fairly certain will only become less likely to move on to higher education.” (Year 13, College A)

The level of student knowledge with regards to existing and associated financial support varied considerably at both an individual and institution level. At the beginning of the research programme knowledge of fees and finance was varied and not wholly accurate:

“I didn’t think it was thousands. Haven’t got a clue.” (Year 12, College A)

“I just thought you had to pay for books and stuff, I didn’t know you had to actually pay, because you don’t have to pay to go to school do you. So I didn’t expect you would have to pay to get that education.” (Year 11, School C)

“My sister said you have to pay for all the lessons you take and the money sometimes goes higher every year, it depends what course you are doing and how many years you are staying on.” (Year 11, School C)

However during the course of the programme on the whole it appeared that students were better informed with some arguing it was good value for money and they were not worried about paying the money back:

“[The cost is worth it] definitely, if you get a good job when you leave then definitely.” (Year 13, School A)

“I am not worried about paying it back.” (Year 13, School A)

“I am not too bothered [about paying the money back].” (Year 13, School A).

A recent survey found that more than half of final-year students at top universities in England say they would not have enrolled if annual fees had been £9,000, with state school students more likely to have been put off (Anon, 2011). This was reflected in the thoughts of the research participants:
“[Now that the fees have increased] I know what I don’t want to do, I don’t think I want to go to uni anymore.” (Year 12, School B)

From the research it appeared that for those students who had received information from Aimhigher, and other sources, about the financial aspect of studying higher education, that some of their fears and (mis)conceptions have been alleviated:

“We have been told when you are paying your loan back they only take out a certain amount each month like it depends on how much you are earning a month is how much they take out of your account.” (Year 10, School B)

 “[The fees are] quite a lot, but the fact that you don’t have to pay it back until you are earning over a certain amount, that kind of makes it better.” (Year 11, School C)

It was also the case that where parents had been involved in discussions about finance their initial thoughts and fears had been changed as a result of being better informed:

“[There was a finance meeting the other week, my parents] went to that and now they are more excited because there are better opportunities, like grants and stuff to help me with the finance. So now they are a lot more happy about it.” (Year 13, School A)

3.4 Aspirations

Students from low-socio-economic groups tend to be less confident that higher education is a worthwhile goal and place more value on immediate employment (Warwick, 2001). One of the main objectives of the Aimhigher programme of activities is to raise future learning aspirations of these disadvantaged groups with a particular focus on higher education progression.

As noted above, a small number of students taking part in the three year research project replied to an invitation from the research team to contact them in the third and final year of the research project. Although these students had not currently progressed onto a higher education course it was evident that as a result of the Aimhigher interventions this was still a pathway that they were looking to explore. This reinforces the impact that the Aimhigher programme can play in terms of raising their motivation and aspirations to progress to higher education courses:

“I can remember taking part in a university campus visit in year 12, and remember finding it very interesting, and … it is one of the reasons that I am still currently exploring the university route in life.” (Year 14, School A)

The above provides evidence, albeit from a small sample, that raising students’ aspirations via Aimhigher outreach programmes can have a lasting impact. This bodes well for the younger students taking part in the research, for whom there is also evidence of raised educational aspirations.

The findings from the Nottinghamshire teaching professional questionnaire also indicate that Aimhigher activities have had an impact on learners’ aspirations, as will be shown in this section of the report.
An overwhelming 95% of respondents agreed (78% strongly) that the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme had helped raise student awareness that higher education was a realistic goal for students if they achieved the necessary grades required to progress (Figure 2).

Figure 3: Impact on student aspirations

As illustrated in Figure 3, as many as 95% of teaching professionals agreed (56% strongly) that the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme had contributed positively to raising the aspirations of students to study at higher levels:

“A lot of the Aimhigher students are more ambitious and motivated as a result of Aimhigher initiatives.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“The programme has raised awareness of the students’ abilities and potential and has de-mystified higher education so that students now believe that this is a place they want to go to and have the ability to go to. It has also motivated the majority of students (not just in the Aimhigher cohort, but as a result of the programme) to achieve in their exam so that they can progress to further and then higher education.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)
“They have seen the university come to the school and heard that uni is for everyone who is capable [and] that finance should not be an obstruction.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“For many students it has resulted in increased motivation and ambition. The students often had more to aspire towards and many talked about going to university. Some have also felt a sense of privilege from being part of the cohort; that they are special in a sense. This has led to greater confidence.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

From our research in a number of cases students who, in phase one of the study, had suggested that they were not planning on going to university, had since changed their mind. There was evidence that Aimhigher interventions had helped raise young people’s aspirations to progress to higher education:

“When you don’t know about it, it is like you don’t really know that you want to go [to university]. But once you have gone and seen what it is like then you think, ‘oh there might be something there that I like and what I want to do.’” (Year 10, School D)

“I never was interested in going and then I went on the residential and it changed my mind completely. … Ever since I have been set on wanting to go to university. … The opportunities that it can bring for you … if you do well it is going to bring you so much chance to do … anything you wanted.” (Year 11, School B)

“I have always wanted to go to college but I was like, ‘after I go to college I just want to get in to work, earn some money, do my thing’ … Now I am just like uni, I just know that is the best path, because of what I have been taught about like university and stuff.” (Year 11, School B)

“Sometimes they [my parents] convince me not to go, but that [Aimhigher university] trip really made me want to go.” (Year 12, School A)

“It convinced me to go. Before I was half in half about if I wanted to go to university or not, and the style of learning there [but] I will enjoy it so I would really like to go.” (Year 12, School A)

There was also evidence from the findings that where students had already made choices about their future these were validated as a result of taking part in the activities:

“The main thing for me is that [the university visit] really reaffirmed that I wanted to go … When I went there it looked friendly, it all felt really real and suddenly university was this really real option.” (Year 13, School A)

There was evidence that the activities had made students more aware of their future in real terms and what steps they needed to take in order to make this a reality:

 “[Taking part in the] activities made me realise what you have got to do to get [to university].” (Year 10, School B)

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It is also prudent to acknowledge that parental input can have an impact on a young person’s aspirations and future progression. Parents and other family members act as role models and their thoughts and opinions are often widely accepted by younger generations. Foster and Higson, recognise that many students see their families as the most important source of motivation and advice right through from school age to when they make decisions about HE (Foster and Higson, 2008). In some instances where parents have had no exposure to higher education themselves, or there is no experience of university within the wider family their opinions can be magnified. Sometimes this manifests in encouragement as parents want their children to have the opportunities they were not privy to, as acknowledged by Blatchford who claims that disadvantaged families often have high aspirations for their children and provide significant educational support through 'concerted cultivation' (Blatchford, 2010), but equally being uninformed can lead to parents almost fearing higher education as they are unaware of the implications, both positive and negative, that university brings.

From the research it was clear that those students who spoke with their parents about the prospect of going to university, received mixed messages:

“My mum didn’t go to university and she regrets it, so she is … trying to encourage me to do it.” (Year 13, School A)

“My parents weren’t keen on the finance bit, but there was a finance meeting the other week, they went to that and now they are more excited because there are better opportunities, like grants and stuff to help me with the finance. So now they are a lot more happy about it.” (Year 13, School A)

“[My parents] want me to go, because my dad missed out on the opportunity and he wishes he had taken it and he thinks that it would be better for me later on in life, so he wants me to go because he didn’t take it as a personal choice himself.” (Year 11, School B)

“My mum and dad definitely want me to go, they said they don’t want me just to get by, they want me to have a good job and not worry about money and stuff like that. They don’t want me to worry I think.” (Year 12, School A)

“I would love to go to university but I don’t think my parents want me to … I think most of it is cost. They just want me to leave school now and just get a job now.” (Year 12, School A)

“My mum … would not support me [in going to university], she thinks it is a waste of time.” (Year 12, School A)

Some students revealed that they had chosen to talk to other family members about the prospect of going to university rather than their parents:

“I don’t talk to my mum and dad, I talk to other family members. … My mum and dad never went to university, whereas all of my older cousins went to university and passed their courses. … It is easier for me to talk to them, because they have experienced it themselves, than talk to my mum and dad when they have not. Which I think has helped a lot, I have got a rough idea of like how things work and stuff, whereas my mum and dad have not got a clue.” (Year 12, School B)
3.5 Motivation, Confidence and Attainment
Research suggests that the very students that Aimhigher funded interventions seek to target are the ones more likely to be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers to educational achievement (Furlong & Forsythe, 2003; Gorard et al, 2006). Students with a more positive view of their academic capabilities are more likely to expect to continue to higher education even after controlling for observable measures of their ability (Chevalier et al, 2009). As different interventions develop and increase students’ confidence, this enables them to begin to break down some of these barriers and develop their abilities more effectively (Purcell et al, 2002).

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to lack self-esteem and faith in their ability to succeed in HE (Universities UK, 2001A). It is assumed that by raising aspirations via numerous widening participation initiatives, young people from less affluent backgrounds will be motivated to improve their performance in order to pursue their HE goals (EKOS Consulting, 2006).

Teaching professionals taking part in the research felt that Aimhigher had a role to play in raising young people’s attainment through increased motivation resulting from exposure to various interventions:

“I think [Aimhigher] has made some of our kids realise that they succeed and opened their eyes to some of the courses and opportunities available.” (Teaching Professional, School D)

“[As a result of Aimhigher] more students have been encouraged to think about higher education and have thus been motivated to achieve higher grades.” (Teaching Professional, School B).

“Schools tend to be very focused on GCSE results, in particularly English and Maths, whereas I think the world of higher education is a lot more liberal and a lot more open. But I think the aspiration raising aspect of it is key to raising achievement and I have always strongly believed that.” (Teaching professional, School D)

From the teaching professional questionnaire findings the majority of teaching professionals (78%) felt that the Aimhigher programme had made a contribution to the raising of attainment amongst their participating students (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Impact on student attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aimhigher has contributed to the raising of attainment amongst its target group of students in our school/college (n=18)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As a result of their participation in the Aimhigher programme, students were more motivated to do well in their studies in order to give them a platform for progressing to higher education. Raising student motivation to achieve is one of the key ingredients in improving attainment. The potential of Aimhigher interventions to raise students’ motivation to attain was reinforced by a number of students:

“You see what a good time they are having and you are like, ‘well if I don’t do well in school then I can’t get in to college and then you can’t go to university’. … Before the trips you might not have known that you wanted to go to university.” (Year 10, School D)

“Because you talk about how you are going to get there and before you say, “Oh I want to do this” but then you never think how you are going to get there. [The Aimhigher activity] makes you think it through more and it is just like ‘I have got to do this so I better get my head down.”” (Year 10, School B)

“I didn’t go to one of my Psychology lessons for quite a while, I am doing four [A Levels], so I thought I am doing alright, I am predicted As in my other three, so I thought I was doing well in my other three, that is OK. But then I went [on the HEI visit] and thought I can get more points if I do better and I might as well so I have more chance of going to a better university. And then I got a really good exam grade which I wasn’t expecting ... in Psychology, so now I am really focussed on that.” (Year 12, School A)

“Yes, definitely [the activities have made me want to work harder in school]. It makes you realise that when you are messing about thinking you are being clever it does not get you anywhere. The only way you are going to achieve what you want to achieve is by getting your head down, concentrating and doing everything for yourself and pushing everything else aside.” (Year 10, School B)

“When we went on the residential … it did motivate me to think, ‘yes I want to go to university, I think this is great’” (Year 12, School B).

“Aimhigher was the reason that I went in to A. Levels.” (Year 12, School B)

There was also evidence of an increase in students’ confidence, both academically and socially, after taking part in Aimhigher activities:

“All the information … really does influence you, it makes you realise what you can actually accomplish the things that you get taught.” (Year 11, School B)

“They made us do a debate and we all had to speak. You had to stand up and stuff like that. It was a bit scary at first, but I think it did actually build your confidence, … They were pushing you when you didn’t really want to, but that is the only way you are really going to get better.” (Year 12, School A)

 “[Aimhigher is] giving you more knowledge on how things work when you move on from school. I think it is kind of like a safety zone so you are not too worried about it if you decide you want to go on further and you know things about it and you are not going to be as scared when you do move on.” (Year 10, School B)
Section 4: Higher Education Progression Framework

Guidance on a Higher Education Progression Framework (HEPF), developed by Action on Access, provided a set of principles to help guide partnerships and institutions in moving from a system of one-off widening participation interventions to a programme of sustained and systematic activities for targeted learners (Action on Access, 2008).

One of the core principles of the HEPF model suggests that a targeted cohort of students should be supported throughout a clear learner-centred journey via a cluster of tailored activities. The guidance suggests these activities should be varied in style, content and delivery to ensure each cohort is exposed to varying degrees of information, advice and guidance in relation to attainment and higher education progression. Types of activities may include campus visits, mentoring, master-classes, student ambassadors, Aimhigher Associates, school based activities and HE-related residential experiences. Following publication of this guidance, many partnerships, including Aimhigher Nottinghamshire, have developed and implemented a HEPF within their overall outreach programme.

As noted above one of the main aims of the HEPF is to raise awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from the most disadvantaged section of society. Throughout our research we have engaged in numerous discussions about the impact of the Aimhigher programme of activities with learners. Some of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire participants had taken part in several interventions over the three years and were therefore in a position to offer informed views of the overall impact of the programme.

From the research it became clear that these sequential and varied activities over the years had greatly benefited the participants:

“[All the activities] teach you different things in different ways.” (Year 11, School D)

Teaching professionals also spoke positively about the HEPF and the learner journey approach:

“If you have got a sequence of activities, I think it is always going to have more impact than you know, just doing a one-off activity.” (Teaching Professional, College A)

It was acknowledged that by adopting the HEPF and giving students information in sections rather than all at once the programme was able to reinforce previous activities and thus overall students would be better prepared:

“I think that [the HEPF] has a valuable role for targeted pupils and enables them to build upon prior activities.” (Teaching Professional, School D)

“I think that the continued long-term inputs are beneficial and we have tried a few of those and tried to get a few off the ground in the past.” (Teaching Professional, School D)

“I think [the HEPF] is really valuable, it makes the kids realise that it is not just a one off jolly, it is not just for getting out of school, it has actually got a purpose to it, it allows them to see different aspects of a particular sector of higher education.” (Teaching Professional, School D)
Findings from our supplementary teaching professional questionnaire indicated that a number of schools / colleges had taken advantage of the full programme of opportunities and had implemented the HEPF. Whilst respondents were, on the whole, positive with regards to the rationale behind the HEPF, some suggested there were a number of practicalities preventing its full implementation:

“It has meant that scepticism has diminished rapidly, therefore giving pupils the maximum opportunity of benefitting from Aimhigher provision.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“I simply used the cohort to take part in as many opportunities as possible. Finding the “magic” event is not a scientific process, but the more you get students to be involved in, the more open to opportunities they become.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“The aim has been to get as many as possible involved by getting extra options (the size of the school means [the] Aimhigher [cohort] in each year is 150). The targeted group have felt important and have moved to adapt a different view on the future.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“The thread was run all the way through from year 9-11 and has provided a continuity of approach which we would not normally have experienced.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“The targeting of students has not been entirely successful; the Aimhigher cohorts have sometimes appeared so broad in nature, with some students in them which seem inappropriate, whereas other more worthy students are missed out altogether. We have found the generic, whole-year group activities more beneficial and realistic to implement.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“Our Aimhigher [cohort] is very large (70+ students per year group) so it has been difficult to fully adopt this [HEPF]. However all students have had some involvement with activity.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

“Release of students from time tabled lessons is problematic, so coherent ’journeys’ are more difficult.” (Teaching Professional Questionnaire response)

One key point to note with regards the HEPF is when is the most appropriate time to start the activities. There is lots of debate surrounding the optimum age of learners. Some argue that it is most appropriate for year 12 students to be involved as they are at the stage when continuing in further or higher education is most relevant. However others argue that learners should be targeted as young as year 9 (or earlier), as it is at this stage that they start to map out their own futures, initially by choosing their GCSE options. If learners of this age are aware of options for post-16 education then their choices at this time may be influenced, and this in turn may impact upon the choices that they make about further and/or higher education further down the line.

It has also been reported that people from low socio-economic groups are more likely to face early disengagement from education (Auditor General, 2002) and more likely to reject the culture and values of HE at an early age (Warwick, 2001). Evidence shows that inequalities between socio-
economic groups appear early in life and continue into school in terms of attainment, in the range of
the options available and selected at 14 and 16, qualifications at 18 and in higher education
aspirations (Gorard et al, 2007). It has also been noted that the use of the family network as role
models may serve as a mechanism for maintaining the shortfall in HE aspiration and participation in
young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Role models from the family network may have been
influencing these young people from an early age, and as such may have already impacted on these
thoughts and beliefs about HE. These findings add weight to the growing recognition that interventions
aimed at raising young people’s aspirations need to be integrated early in students’ educational life-
cycle (Cochrane, 2010; Martin, 2010; Croll, 2009):

“The earlier you know what you want to do the better really. Because then you’ve
got a goal to work towards. Otherwise you’re just working for nothing really.” (Year
11, School D)

At the same time some students did question whether the activities which were specifically about
higher education may have been started too soon:

“I think they did [start the activities] too early. Because they [started them in] Year
Eight and Nine, when everyone was still deciding what GCSEs to pick, never mind
what university course you were going to do.” (Year 12, School B)

It has to be acknowledged that no one size fits all. There will be occasions where the HEPF does not
work to the benefit of all individuals and all institutions:

“The problem with the learner journey is that you don’t know at what stage along
the journey the learner is able to take the journey on themselves.” (Teaching
Professional, School A)

One of the consequences of the targeted cohort is that it can limit the overall number of students who
will benefit from the numerous activities as the programme will always be concentrating on the same
group of young people. As a result they may mean that the same students are participating regularly in
similar activities:

“[Going on] a couple of [the activities] is alright but when you go on loads it’s just
like a repeat.” (Year 11, School D)

Closure of Aimhigher

During the course of the research, funding for Aimhigher had only been confirmed up to July 2011.
Teaching professionals were asked about the impact of the scheme not being able continue after this
time:

“If [the Aimhigher funding] was to cease to exist … I think it would be very short
sighted … because we have to keep kids informed and we have to keep them
trying to … achieve their best, and just making sure they know what is out there.
Because it is going to be tougher and tougher for those kids to find jobs and
courses … when they leave here.” (Teaching Professional, School D)
In November 2010 it was announced by the coalition government that Aimhigher funding would cease from July 2011. The year 3 research visits took place after this announcement, and research participants were thus able to give an insightful perspective of what this could mean to future generations of young people:

“It’s stupid because the amount of help it actually gives you to know what you want to do in life. Then to just take it away. People are just going to end up going on the dole or something if they don’t do what they want to do. They’re not going to try at school if they don’t know what they want to do.” (Year 11, School D)

“If you don’t get the opportunity to go to university or find out about it then they’re not going to be encouraged to go. They’re not going to get better jobs.” (Year 11, School D)

“I think without Aimhigher then obviously they are going to be missing out on opportunities.” (Year 12, School B)

“If [Aimhigher] weren’t here to tell us then I don’t think we would have anybody telling us about higher education.” (Year 12, School B)
Section 5: Recommendations for the Future

This report has discussed the outcomes of a three year longitudinal research project, the aim of which was to ascertain the impacts of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme. In light of the recent announcement that Aimhigher funding will cease from July 2011, we have identified a number of potential areas worthy of further consideration for future university outreach programmes. Within this section a number of recommendations (emboldened) are provided.

Targeting disadvantaged learners
Schools and colleges over recent years have been provided with an Aimhigher cohort list which can be used to select students for activities. It has long been recognised that these robust lists are a good basis for inclusion into the Aimhigher programme due to the criteria used to define target learners and as such the cohort list should be used as a tool to support the initial targeting process. However it is also important to acknowledge that the schools and colleges themselves will have a true insight into which students are likely to gain the most from the Aimhigher experience. It is therefore essential that schools are given some leeway in the recruitment process so as not to exclude all non-cohort students from outreach opportunities.

Knowledge and awareness of Higher Education
Most target cohort students will start out with little knowledge and awareness of higher education. Their sources of information at this point are often outside agencies such as the media whose portrayals are not wholly accurate. It therefore essential to use activities to dispel the myths surrounding HE. Activities, information and guidance surrounding the financial aspects of HE are key to these students gaining an understanding that HE is accessible to all. It is therefore important to make sure that financial information is integrated into outreach programmes.

Perception of HE and its students
Images of higher education and the types of people who become students are often stereotypical and inaccurate. Therefore providing students with a taste of university life, through campus visits, is a fundamental aspect of any outreach programme. These types of activities enable young people to envisage themselves in an unfamiliar setting which can elevate some of the anxieties which are associated with making the decision to attend university.

Aspirations
One of the main objectives of the Aimhigher programme of activities is to raise future learning aspirations with a particular focus on higher education progression. Interventions, such as those offered by the Aimhigher programme, were shown to be an effective means to raising the educational aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental input can have an impact on a young person’s aspirations and future progression. Parents and other family members act as role models and their thoughts and opinions are often widely accepted by younger generations. Given the likelihood that many parents will have had little exposure themselves to HE it is important to engage parents in outreach interventions in order to promote the value of these activities to the younger generation.

Motivation and Confidence
It has been shown that, as a result of participation in the Aimhigher programme, students can be more motivated to do well in their studies in order to give themselves a better platform for progressing to higher education. Raising student motivation to achieve is one of the key ingredients in improving
attainment. Boosting the confidence of these students is also critical in helping them to raise their aspirations and attainment.

Higher Education Progression Framework
One of the main aims of the HEPF is to raise awareness, aspirations and attainment of young people from the most disadvantaged section of society. Some of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire participants had taken part in several interventions over the three years and it became clear that these sequential and varied activities over the years had greatly benefited the participants.

There has been much debate surrounding the optimum age for learners to start outreach activities. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with little experience of HE it appears to be important to initiate a programme of outreach interventions at a relatively early stage in their education.

An essential part of any outreach programme is that the activities need to be tailored around the specific needs of individual learners, and there needs to be considerable flexibility in the support offered to participating schools. It has to acknowledged that no one size fits all. There will be occasions where the HEPF does not work to the benefit of all individuals and all institutions. A consequence of the targeted cohort is that it can limit the overall number of students who will benefit from the programme of activities as the programme tends to concentrate on the same group of young people. It is therefore important that a HEPF should be run in conjunction with a more inclusive programme, where there is the capacity to engage more students, and a pragmatic approach to targeting students for such interventions is often the most cost effective.

Profile of the Outreach Coordinator in schools
The role of the Aimhigher coordinator in schools within the outreach programme is pivotal. Good planning and management are essential in order for the programme of activities to be delivered in the most effective manner. Within each target school there needs to be an outreach coordinator who is responsible for identifying the needs of the school and individual students, and selecting appropriate activities from the menu. It is also extremely important that the outreach activities are embedded in the school calendar.
Conclusion

This report has discussed the outcomes of a three year longitudinal research project, the aim of which was to ascertain the impacts of the Aimhigher Nottinghamshire programme.

The Aimhigher programme of activities has played an important role in helping young people reach their full potential by raising confidence, aspirations and attainment. Those who took part in the research were overwhelmingly positive about the programme and its impact and on their future learning options:

“I believe that projects like Aimhigher are very important, it helps students make one of the most difficult choices in life!” (Year 14, School A)

There was also positive feedback from teaching professionals who were involved in the research. They valued the Aimhigher programme as an essential and important tool in helping to raise attainment and aspirations amongst the most disadvantaged learners in their school:

“I think that the kids here have a very good insight to the potential for higher education, compared with perhaps schools which don’t have an input from Aimhigher. That is certainly my feeling and that is the sort of vibe that I get and the feedback that we get from our kids. They all know about university and quite a lot of them actually seriously think about it.” (Teaching Professional, School D)

“Why do we go and see a university? Well if you have never seen one, it is a fantastic experience … and the reason that these kids need to go is because they have got absolutely no idea what it is like. And it does widen horizons … there is no doubt about it.” (Teaching Professional, School A)

“So there is that rope that pulls people up, “I know him, if he can do it, I can do it”, it is that sort of culture that you have to try to create and I think Aimhigher provides a very valuable way to focus that and push it forward.” (Teaching Professional, School A)

“I think [Aimhigher] has made the concept of progression onto HE more realistic to some of our pupils.” (Teaching Professional School D)

“[Aimhigher] has allowed us to access a large number of opportunities and given many students experiences of university life they would not otherwise have had.” (Teaching Professional, School B)

The evaluation, summarised below, has shown that the programme has made a real difference to young people’s aspirations and had a direct influence on learners’ increased confidence and greater motivation to do well in their education. This will in turn have helped ensure that these young people are more equipped to reach their true potential.

Summary of main findings

- The activities have increased learners’ knowledge of HE.
• The activities have helped learners feel more confident and motivated about the thought of progressing to HE.
• The learners appear to be more informed, inspired and confident to enter higher education.
• The activities have encouraged the learners to think about their options now and what effect their current choices may have on their future learning aspirations.
• The activities have increased awareness and understanding of HE opportunities for learners, especially in terms of finance, the realities of studying and student life.
• The teaching professionals participating in the research valued the role of Aimhigher within their school.
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