Collaboration and partnership working in a competitive environment. A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive.

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1. Core definitions of synthesis theme

Collaboration and partnership working in the context of widening participation and supporting student success in higher education involve a range of structures within which institutions and organisations define shared interests and objectives and work together to design and deliver activities. Collaboration brings institutions together around common concerns and may lead to the design of shared projects. Partnership working requires a structured approach in which institutions plan a common approach and deliver a programme of work to meet agreed objectives. Structural models vary to suit the scale and purpose of the partnership and the complexity and extent of the work they aim to do together. Partnerships and collaboratives may be called consortia, networks, alliances or collectives.

Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks were both initiatives in which the funding was granted only to formal inter-institutional partnerships. Both generated geographically defined partnerships working to overarching objectives but with considerable flexibility to adapt their structures and approaches to local conditions. Both were formally constituted and mostly used written agreements between partners to govern the use of devolved funding.

Since 2010, competition in higher education has become both more intense and more changeable. The unpredictability of student behaviour in the face of new tuition fees, together with the changes in the method of allocating institutional student numbers have created an environment in which institutions face less certainty about meeting recruitment targets. At the same time, the development of academies and other new school types increases individualism and autonomy in the school sector and fragments the coordination function of local authorities. Colleges compete with school sixth forms and with each other to recruit students at age 16, and some also compete with HEIs to expand or secure their college’s higher education provision. Working collaboratively with others may benefit the national objectives to widen access for under-represented groups, but individual institutions will wish to weigh carefully the resources required and the advantage to be gained before entering into substantial partnership commitments.

2. Summary

This report is a synthesis of the evidence in the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success (WASRS) archive about partnership working and collaboration to widen participation. It draws on reports from the Lifelong Learning Networks and the Aimhigher programme. Although funding for national partnership programmes is no longer available, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) encourages higher education institutions to plan in their access agreements to collaborate with other HEIs and with schools to maximise the impact of their outreach activities. Nonetheless, as competition to recruit students increases in higher education and in the school and college sectors, institutions will wish to be sure of the benefits and the costs of collaboration.

Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks were both HEFCE national initiatives that provided funding to complex cross-sectoral partnerships of institutions in geographical areas. New partnerships may take a range of forms. In this report, collaboration involves institutions coming together around issues of common concern. It may or may not lead to joint projects. Working in partnership requires a structured approach to sharing responsibility to achieve agreed objectives.

Research reports in the archive present extensive evidence of the benefits of working in partnership. These include:

- staff and institutional development, especially increases in cross-sectoral understanding of perspectives and practical issues affecting progression to higher education for disadvantaged groups. In some schools, this influenced key changes in school culture and policy;
• valuable working links between institutions and between sectors and the development of practical working relationships between individuals;
• the creation of a ‘third space’ outside any of the institutional partners, where the focus was on the agreed objectives of the partnership and there was freedom to share ideas and knowledge and resources, both financial and human, to develop flexible, innovative approaches to entrenched issues;
• delivery of impartial information about options and opportunities in higher education for learners and other key stakeholders including employers;
• brokerage of delivery of outreach that enabled HEIs to use resources more cost-effectively.

Research in the archive shows that success in partnerships is facilitated by:

• the commitment and increasingly sophisticated knowledge and expertise of those staff in the core team and within partner institutions – the ‘blended professionals’ who work across institutional boundaries – who facilitated the work of the partnership;
• regular communication, knowledge sharing and transparency in decision-making and the allocation of funding to partners.

The reports are not uncritical of the work of the partnerships. They identify constraints and issues that include:

• the risk of loss of focus or diversion from the principal objectives of the partnership as institutional priorities and national policies changed;
• the difficulty of securing sustained engagement from key partner institutions and the need to acknowledge the time and work required for partnerships.

Institutional and individual commitment was also affected by the uncertainty of future funding.

As Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks neared the end of their funded period, many commissioned external evaluations to advise on options to sustain their work. Their findings include:

• some activities and projects could be sustained by embedding them in the access programmes of individual higher education institutions;
• sustaining the collaborative partnership approach was thought to be difficult without funded co-ordination. Local consortia of universities were proposed in some cases to fund a new partnership programme;
• both initiatives have left a substantial legacy in relation to resources for targeting and project delivery and changes in staff and institutional attitudes to and understanding of access issues and approaches. The evidence is that the legacy will continue to benefit the work of institutions, but there are doubts about the durability of the legacy as key individuals leave the field.

The implications for policy and practice are that institutional strategies would benefit from developing new ways to facilitate the continuing exchange of knowledge and understanding between institutions and across sectors. Recognition and support for widening participation practitioners to develop and sustain the ‘blended professional’ skills developed through working in partnership is likely to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of work to widen access in higher education.
Potential areas for further research include the importance of geographical context in widening participation partnerships and further analysis of the concepts and the impact on institutions of the growth of ‘third space’ and ‘blended professionals’ in external partnerships. There is also scope for longitudinal evaluation of the legacy of the partnerships both in relation to their long term impact on learner aspirations and progression and their influence on continuing or new forms of collaboration.

3. Explanatory context

3.1. Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning partnerships

When central funding was provided at national level for widening access, partnerships offered a means to implement policy while minimising the differences in approaches and outcomes that arise where funding is granted to individual institutions. The first England-wide partnership widening participation programme was jointly funded by HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2002 under the title of Partnerships for Progression (P4P). This was rapidly succeeded by Aimhigher in 2004, by merging the P4P initiative with the pre-existing work of the Department for Education’s Excellence Challenge programme. Aimhigher created 42 partnerships of universities, colleges and schools covering every area of England. Aimhigher worked to widen participation in higher education by young people from low socio-economic and other disadvantaged groups. The Lifelong Learning Networks were launched in 2004 based on bids from consortia of universities and colleges working with employers and skills agencies to increase progression options for vocational learners. Both initiatives closed in 2011.

The guidance issued to Aimhigher partnerships for the 2006-2008 phase of the programme (DfES/HEFCE/LSC, 2006, para 15) defines the purpose of collaboration through Aimhigher:

- provides opportunities for synergy as individual stakeholders combine resources to pursue individual as well as partnership goals
- breaks down barriers that institutions, sectors and systems unwittingly create for learners.

3.2. New partnerships for widening participation: collaboration within access agreements

The responsibility for funding collaborative widening access work shifted in 2011 to institutional budgets. However, it is up to individual institutions to define their priorities for collaboration.

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) guidance for access agreements relating to students entering higher education in 2013 encourages institutions to collaborate in order to maximise the impact of their investment in widening access (OFFA, 2012). The guidance proposes:

- collaboration between HEIs to deliver broader widening participation goals and impartial HE-related information and advice;
- collaboration between HEIs to develop common targets, in addition to institutional targets, and shared approaches to monitoring and evaluation;
- collaboration between HEIs with different student profiles or between selective institutions across geographical regions to increase the reach of opportunity awareness activities and widen student choices, including collaboration to widen access in specific subject disciplines;
- collaboration between HEIs to employ peripatetic staff to work with younger students at key transition points;
- institutional links with individual schools and colleges, including sponsorship of academies.
The work involved to set up collaborative programmes is recognised as legitimate expenditure in the access agreement (OFFA, 2012, p. 17).

**Partnerships with employers and enhancing student employability**

Tim Wilson’s (2011) review of collaborations between businesses and universities also proposes new partnerships to open up opportunities for higher education students to increase their employment prospects and practical experience and enable employers to influence curriculum content and delivery methods.

**Research interest in collaboration and partnership working**

While Government policies to widen access in higher education have been the subject of academic studies, few independent researchers have undertaken detailed studies of the partnership approaches of Aimhigher or the Lifelong Learning Networks. HEFCE, on the other hand, has commissioned a number of evaluations of the impact of widening participation. These include a review of widening participation research that concludes that the evidence base is limited and sometimes of dubious quality (Gorard et al., 2006). On partnerships, the report says:

> *Partnerships are a key strategy to both promote access to higher education and to change the structure and contents of HE provision, but collaboration poses practical, organisational and cultural challenges. The review found no evidence that partnership provision of new programmes and/or in new locations increases the number of students from under-represented groups entering HE.*

Other studies in the HEFCE series are less negative. HEFCE’s commissioned evaluation of their widening participation support strategy (HEFCE, 2003a) found that 86% of institutions responding to their survey identified local and regional partnerships as useful or essential in widening the reach and increasing the visibility of the HEI’s outreach. Only 30% of respondents had been actively engaged in partnerships prior to HEFCE’s funded strategies. Dissenting voices in the survey pointed to the imposed partnerships’ potential for disruption of existing institutional arrangements and around 15% of respondents indicated problems arising in partnership working, notably around short-term funding, the low status within institutions of widening participation partnership project work and conflicts with institutional recruitment strategies.

Evaluation of collaboration between HEIs and FECs (HEFCE, 2003b) found inequality within these cross-sectoral partnerships, with HEIs perceived as the ‘senior’ partners even when FECs were leading many of the activities. The report stressed the need for excellent communication from the outset to ensure transparency within the partnership and to keep all partners ‘on the same page’.

Thomas et al. (2010), examining the ways in which universities work in partnership with schools and colleges through a case study of the partnerships of Edgehill University, list the benefits of collaboration to partner institutions as increased cross-sectoral understanding, shared research and data, curriculum enrichment and development, increased prestige through external recognition and contribution to a range of institutional priorities.

Woods and Kendall (2010) place learner-centred approaches at the heart of successful partnerships. By sustaining a clear focus on the learner journey and the needs of widening participation learners, collaboration can “bridge perceptual and attitudinal barriers between HE, FE and school education in the minds of learners” and “embed the University in the community as an open, accessible centre of culture and knowledge” (p. 29).

In other OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, efforts to tackle the social class gap in higher education participation have generally focused on approaches funded in individual HEIs. Since 2008, the federal government in Australia has developed a programme of funded widening
participation initiatives to meet national targets through partnerships between universities and schools (Bradley, 2008). The guidance on the programme also encourages universities to work together (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). This has sparked some research and policy interest in the approaches of Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks (Stewart, 2010).

A collation of Aimhigher evaluations describes local partnership as providing “the conditions for clear co-ordination without blanket prescription and with the freedom to create projects that suit local needs” (Moore and Dunworth, 2011). Doyle and Griffin (2012) define this as a “fine-grained approach to situating policy”, which fed into changing policy just as it was influenced and changed itself by shifting priorities in HEFCE. This paper emphasises the impact of Aimhigher at local level:

> The impact of Aimhigher has been hard to measure in narrow, macro cause and effect terms. Its success has been localised and cumulative – a reflection of effective delivery in diverse local policy landscapes with often differing social and educational priorities.

**National evaluations of Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)**

HEFCE has, over the years, commissioned research to evaluate the work of Aimhigher (Morris et al., 2005; EKOS, 2007; Passy and Morris, 2010). All three report that stakeholders identified the partnership approach as a major benefit of the programme. The researchers identify a clear focus on strategy and purpose, transparency and good communications between partners, and the catalyst role of partnership co-ordinators as important factors in securing successful collaboration.

Issues they identify as arising directly from working in partnership include:

- getting the balance right between fully engaging partners by devolving responsibility for delivery to them and ensuring accountability for the uses and outcomes of funding (Morris et al., 2005, EKOS, 2007);
- tensions arising between competitor institutions (EKOS, 2007);
- sustaining the commitment of partner institutions, especially schools, in the face of an uncertain funding future and slow measurable progress (Passy and Morris, 2010).

Morris et al. (2005) find two distinct structural approaches to building the partnerships: a devolved approach, in which the partnership co-ordinator supported institutional partners to deliver the programme; a “specialist team approach” where the partnership appointed specialists to deliver activities. EKOS (2007), reviewing six Aimhigher partnerships, define their delivery approaches as more or less ‘centralised’ – programme delivery managed by a central team – or ‘decentralised’ – devolved responsibility and funding to partner schools, universities and colleges. The larger partnerships included elements of both models. The research teams found merits in both the models they described.

Passy and Morris (2010) present three features of the partnership approach as central to success in Aimhigher: “the partnership infrastructure, which draws on the expertise of a wide range of practitioners, the energy and commitment of Aimhigher staff, and the coordinated processes through which learners could engage with the idea of and be supported in their journey towards HE” (p. 16).

The summative evaluation report of the Lifelong Learning Networks, commissioned by HEFCE (SQW 2010) also found that research respondents identified both the strengthening of existing collaboration and the creation of new partnerships as important and valuable outcomes of the initiative. Where there were weaknesses in the partnerships, these involved either limited involvement by particular partner institutions or difficulties encountered by some LLN partnerships in engaging employers in the area.
4. Methods

The initial search of the archive identified those reports that addressed partnership and collaboration in the text. A further search of key terms was undertaken. Eighty-seven reports were examined, the large majority from the Aimhigher and LLN archives.

Fifty-two reports were read and logged on a spreadsheet against the following criteria:

- degree of relevance to this synthesis – high/medium/low;
- evaluation of partnership working explicit in the research – yes/no;
- contains examples of partnership practice;
- external or internal report;
- report based on empirical research;
- evaluative or descriptive report;
- local/national/cross-partnership evaluation.

Reports based on empirical research were prioritised to minimise the risk of bias resulting from vested interests in the partnerships. The large majority of the selected reports are independent external evaluations. Twenty-eight reports were selected at this stage and these provide the majority of the evidence in the findings below. All are from the Aimhigher and LLN archives or Action on Access. The seven key texts (see Section 5 below) were selected because they expressly set out to analyse the processes and outcomes of partnership working.

The principal themes of the synthesis were identified from the key texts whose findings commonly referred to the benefits and constraints of working in partnership and discussed issues related to sustainability and lasting impact. These provided a framework for the analysis of the additional reports. The methodological approach is best described as a “meta-ethnography” (Rickinson and May, 2009).

The concepts of ‘third space’ and ‘blended professionals’

The use of two concepts in particular, ‘third space’ and the ‘blended professional’, made it possible to frame the more complex findings from the research.

Hudson and Storan (2010) for Aimhigher Hampshire conceptualised their findings about partnerships by reference to research by Celia Whitchurch (2008). Whitchurch examines higher education staff roles that bridge traditional academic and administrative functions and thereby create a new working territory – a “third space”:

In this space, the concept of administrative service has been re-oriented towards one of partnership, both with academic colleagues and with the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact.

Whitchurch classifies such staff according to the extent to which they are ‘bounded’ by the working rules of the department or staff group, or ‘unbounded’ or ‘blended professionals’ who operate, to a greater or lesser extent, both within and outside departmental or institutional boundaries and norms. The ‘third space’ created by inter-institutional partnerships provides these staff with opportunities to develop new professional knowledge and skills.
5. Key research reports

Action on Access (2010) Effective partnerships

A brief review of partnership working in Aimhigher, based on desk research of evaluation studies, Aimhigher plans and other documents and a series of semi-structured telephone interviews and email exchanges with a range of Aimhigher partners in eight of the partnerships. These were selected because they displayed contrasting or unique features.

Booth, J. for Aimhigher Nottinghamshire (2007) A rough guide to working in partnership

Commissioned by Aimhigher Nottinghamshire this report offers guidance on building and sustaining partnerships based on the reflective accounts of a range of stakeholders and partnership workers in the five Aimhigher areas in the East Midlands. The report includes detailed case studies of collaborative activities from each of the five partnerships, focusing on the processes involved in working together. With sections that cover ‘What is working in partnership?’, ‘Forming, maintaining and ending partnerships’ and ‘Partnership roles and skills’, the report provides the most detailed analysis of the practice of partnership work in Aimhigher in the archive.

Hatt, S. and Tate, J. (2010) Impact, relationships and sustainability: a study of higher education institutions and Aimhigher partnerships in the South West of England

This research, commissioned by the three Aimhigher partnerships in the South West, is based on a review of Aimhigher documents, analysis of HESA KPIs for South West institutions and semi-structured interviews with ten widening participation managers in HEIs and six strategic managers in Aimhigher. The report analyses the relationships between HEIs and Aimhigher, identifying the value of cross-sector networks, of the impartial and generic work of Aimhigher, the value added to institutional outreach programmes and the opportunities created by Aimhigher for knowledge exchange. There are more detailed examinations of relationships within each of the three areas under the same headings, drawing out the local differences between the partnership models. The report concludes with a chapter on the potential for sustaining elements of the work of Aimhigher.


A commissioned evaluation of the Aimhigher partnership and activities in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, based on the perspectives of practitioner partners including student ambassadors, associates and mentors and those involved in the delivery of programmes and activities as well as strategic managers in partner schools, colleges and HEIs. The report includes an evaluation of partnership working which identifies what contributed to effectiveness and analyses the relationships involved. The research also assesses the added value to partner institutions and the opportunities to sustain the work of Aimhigher in the future. A qualitative approach was taken, using semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal conversations plus data collected in workshops at the partnership’s annual conference. The report covers governance, structures, shared goals, relationships, leaders and capacities for partnership working, issues of trust and includes a section on ‘blended professionals’ and ‘third space’.


This report of the Lifelong Learning Network for London, commissioned by Linking London, specifically addresses the governance and management of the initiative and collaboration and partnership working. The research team undertook desk research and some secondary research, online surveys of partners and
stakeholders and in-depth interviews with eight university partners, five FE college partners and three members of the central team. They also developed some case studies and returned to facilitate a sustainability workshop after the completion of the primary research. The report evaluates the benefits to partners and the constraints of working collaboratively, methods of communication and dissemination, the resources and activities generated by the partnership. The report concludes with a chapter on sustainability.


Commissioned in 2009 and using desk-based research to explore the strategic and operational plans of local authorities plus 13 interviews with 14-19 advisers and local authority senior staff, this report explores the extent to which Aimhigher and progression to higher education have become a core element of strategic support to schools in seven local authorities in the West of England. The researcher also enquired how far local authorities would seek to maintain the Aimhigher programme if funding ceased.


Commissioned by the Lancashire Lifelong Learning Network this research evaluated the effectiveness and the impacts of the network and developed a sustainability strategy. The evidence comes from desk research to examine LLN documentation, and interviews and focus groups with 70 individuals from partner HEIs, FECs and other stakeholder groups, and staff in the core LLN team. The report examines the collaborative structures and processes and the perceived benefits to institutions and individuals, in addition to the activities and outcomes. It concludes with recommendations about the sustainable aspects of the network.

6. Synthesis of research findings

While both Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks worked to nationally defined objectives and guidance was given on the overarching structures, at local level the partnerships developed operating structures to suit their particular situations and varied these for different kinds of activity.

… no two situations are the same. Nothing is fixed. The political context, funding, organisations, personalities – all are dynamic and continually evolving. There can be no single ‘right way’ to approach working in partnership. (Booth, 2007)

Booth (2007) identifies four ways of working in partnership. These she labels as:

- **Federalism**: in which there are central and devolved functions and authority is allocated in accordance with the agreed division of functions.
- **Co-opetition**: in which institutional autonomy is maintained within a structure that combines the strengths of partners in a plan to pursue goals that meet both institutional and shared objectives. In this model, partners make different contributions to build an overall project, through a team approach, delivering more and higher quality outputs by using the complementary resources and knowledge that they bring to the collective approach. In this model, the differences between partner organisations provide some of the richest and most interesting project outcomes.
- **Sharing platforms**: in which the product is more important than the partnership and partners combine some elements of their own activities to build a bigger picture while maintaining the distinctiveness of individual providers.
- **Networked organisations**: in which individual organisations come together to share ideas, discuss approaches and sometimes, but not always, to act together.
There are examples of all these forms of practice in Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks. It is not possible to ‘tag’ one partnership as a federal model and another as a sharing platforms model. They all produced materials through a sharing platforms approach. Each devolved some functions and funding to partners and retained others in the centre. At their most productive, they achieved innovative outputs through co-operation.

6.1. Partnerships in practice

However, the proof of the value of the partnerships is principally in the work they did. Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks were campaigning initiatives working to change entrenched patterns of low progression to higher education. The examples below are illustrations of the innovative practice developed as a direct result of cross-sectoral and inter-institutional partnership work.

**Higher Education Progression Framework**

From 2008, Aimhigher partnerships developed an area-wide programme for those learners identified as the key target group from age 13 or 14 to 18. The programme, known as a Higher Education Progression Framework, identified the learner outcomes that would support aspirations, knowledge and skills to enable young learners with no higher education heritage to make the choices and reach the levels that would enable them to progress to higher education. It followed key transition stages and included core interventions and information needs for each stage. Each identified target learner would participate in at least one and sometimes up to six activities in each successive year in the programme. Partner schools and colleges organised and supported their targeted learners to participate in the programme. Universities and project staff were involved in planning and co-ordinating the provision of activities both within the schools and on HE campuses. The programme gave choice to learners about which campus visit or summer school, for example, they would attend while also providing regular in-school support and information. Further information about the HEPF is found in Action on Access (2008) and Moore and Dunworth (2011).

**Progression agreements**

Progression agreements were a key output of the Lifelong Learning Networks that showed vocational learners in the area the range of locally available options open to them at higher education level. Progression agreements were formal memoranda issued by higher education providers to learners on Level 3 vocational programmes, including apprenticeships in some partnership areas, that demonstrated a clear pathway to higher education from their current programme of study. In some cases, the agreement also offered additional opportunities to particular learner groups or those in specified partner institutions, including interviews or transition support. The higher education partners in the LLN specified the entry requirements and the agreements were publicised through the network, by agreement of all partners. In this way, higher education partners were encouraged to clarify and make transparent their entry requirements and colleges and Level 3 providers were able to readily identify the higher level courses open to their learners. For examples, see the report on the London Lifelong Learning Network (Kewin et al, 2011).

**Progression data and information**

Both Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks used information collected from partners to develop local knowledge of progression to higher education, the barriers confronting learners and the opportunities available in the area. Aimhigher partnerships made extensive use of data from a range of sources to identify target schools and neighbourhoods and particular progression challenges. Many partnerships purchased UCAS and other data, used available deprivation data and some were able to obtain data-sharing agreements to use school, college and local authority data to provide a rich picture of progression patterns in the area. The statistical reports that the partnerships were then able to produce were extensively used by partners to inform their own planning and reporting – for example in Joint Area Reviews and 14-19 strategies in local
authorities and in school reports for OFSTED. Lifelong Learning Network worked with partners to map local Level 3 and higher education pathway provision in key employment sectors, often including web-based tools to enable learners to identify specific local qualification routes to a range of careers. The partnerships exploited the information held by individual partners for the benefit of all partners. For an example of the use of data to inform partnership planning, see the evaluation of Aimhigher in the South West (Hatt and Tate, 2010).

6.2. The benefits of partnership working and collaboration

Achieving institutional objectives through partnership and collaboration

Many respondents, especially senior managers in partner institutions, identified that working in the partnership had delivered wider benefits to their institutions. These included developing staff understanding, increasing links with institutions in other sectors and, in some cases, changing the ways in which the institution thought about and profiled the issue of widening participation in higher education.

EARN (n.d.) suggests that the impact of Aimhigher partnerships on changing culture, ethos and priorities is greatest in schools, for whom progression to higher education was generally not a strategic priority. Here they found that Aimhigher was the catalyst for widening participation work, where there had previously been none and often the sole locus of thinking and activity to raise aspirations to progress to higher education. In some cases, they also found that teacher attitudes about which pupils had the potential to go to university had also been changed.

Fretwell and Smith’s (2010) survey of headteachers found that 90% said membership of the partnership had added value to the work of the school, including “developing a culture of progression in the school”. Passy (2011) cited the example of the ‘Wall of Fame’ in the entrance to a school, showing images of pupils who had gone on to higher education as evidence of the cultural change that the school said resulted from embedding the Aimhigher ethos in the work of the school.

For more complex institutional partners like local authorities, the location of Aimhigher in internal structures was influential. Rouncefield-Swales’ (2009) research found that, at operational level, the work of Aimhigher was aligned by local authorities to the 14-19 strategy or to extended learning, study support or gifted and talented initiatives. Aimhigher supported and enhanced local authority priorities, including progression at 16, which was becoming increasingly important as policies to raise the school participation age emerged. It was most effectively embedded where it was linked to school improvement.

In some higher education institutions, particularly those whose priority at the time would be to increase retention rates, Aimhigher allowed them to play an active role in delivering outreach at a time when they would not prioritise institutional resources for this work (EARN, n.d.).

Hudson and Storan (2010) report that senior managers in four HEIs and in partner FECs cited considerable benefits from the partnership approach of Aimhigher in relation to ‘supply chain management’ — identifying those schools and colleges whose students had potential to progress to their institution and managing relationships with them through efficient shared services and a single point of contact. The same report cited the development of their staff and the provision of valuable information and data as additional benefits. Action on Access (2010) found that working in the Aimhigher partnership had a high profile in the widening participation strategies of HEIs. Indeed for some it was the leading element of their outreach strategy. HEIs also borrowed practical approaches from Aimhigher to develop their institutional approaches, for example using the targeting models developed for the partnership and evaluation techniques and strategies in a way that improved the consistency and the quality of institutional outreach work (Hatt and Tate, 2010).
**Working links between and within institutions**

Survey respondents cited the practical benefits to their institution from new links with institutions in other sectors. For schools, the links with local universities resulted in an increase in ‘social capital’ for the school and impressed OFSTED (Action on Access, 2010). Action on Access (2010) also found that the partnership between HEIs “helped to overcome some historic tensions”, while Leonard (2011) found that cross-sector protocols enabled tracking and appropriate support to learners, managing transitions from school to college to university for care leavers. Both the direct relationships between individuals and the greater understanding of the work of other sectors within the partnership were valued:

Knowing who to talk to, when to talk to them, you know, knowing what’s happening in the wider context outside of your own sector. That kind of information and communication is quite invaluable. (University partner, quoted in Kewin et al., 2011)

Sanders (2011) reported that working in partnership with external institutions improved collaboration and communication between departments within partner institutions, principally as a result of the work of the progression champion appointed with funding from the partnership to provide a bridge to carry work and ideas between the partnership and the institution.

Partnership working also enabled the development of data-sharing protocols between institutions and across sectors, so that the progress of targeted learners could be tracked (Action on Access, 2010).

The partnerships also connected with other networks. For example, the Bradford LLN devised a strategy to link with the developing structures of the City Region by placing Higher Level Skills Co-ordinators in each of the five Employment and Skills Boards in the local authorities in Bradford district (West Yorkshire Lifelong Learning Network, 2011).

**Cost benefits**

Several studies illustrate the economies of scale to be gained from working collaboratively to plan and design activities and produce shared materials (Hudson and Storan, 2010; Hatt and Tate, 2010). A study commissioned by HEFCE into the costing of Aimhigher activities (York Consulting, 2007) cited sourcing at scale, activity co-ordination, sharing of institutional staff and resources and developing replica models of activity delivery as all ways in which the partnerships were able to drive down the unit cost of activities.

**Staff development and the exchange of knowledge**

The benefit most cited by respondents in many studies was the knowledge gained about HE progression issues both by individuals and by institutions. Hudson and Storan (2010) report that training and staff development were the first thing that respondents reported as the benefit from working in partnership.

Many of those interviewed in the Rouncefield-Swales (2009) study stressed the importance of the Aimhigher partnership as a bridge to higher education and pointed to the benefits of increased knowledge and understanding resulting from participation in the partnership. Similar findings come through many other studies (Fretwell and Smith, 2010; Kewin et al., 2011; SQW, 2010). Both LLNs and Aimhigher invested in conferences and seminars, formal information exchanges. They also facilitated a large number of informal exchanges of knowledge in meetings and working groups.

As they matured, the partnerships became a repository for accumulated expertise about progression to HE for under-represented groups:

So in a sense Aimhigher has acted as a sort of ‘academy for widening participation’ at a regional and sub-regional level. (Aimhigher strategic manager, quoted in Hatt and Tate, 2010)
Impartial information

For those outside the partnership, the independence of the organisation increased the credibility of its work. It was able to provide messages to targeted learners that represented opportunities at all partner institutions, favouring none, and it facilitated the targeting of learners that institutions may otherwise marginalise or ignore (Action on Access, 2010). The partnership held comprehensive information about opportunities at many HEIs (Progress South Central, 2011). It presented a “credible message about the full range of HE options, finances, social life and the chance to explore what higher education is about before, and as a foundation for, assessing the differences and specific opportunities at individual HEIs” (Hatt and Tate, 2010). In the LLNs, it was seen by employers as a more reliable source of information than individual institutions and more likely to have the wider interests of the region or sub-region at heart (SQW, 2010).

The ‘third space’

The knowledge academy, the programme of collaborative interventions, the impartiality of the information and advice, all were products of collaborative work undertaken outside institutional boundaries. The partnership created a new working organisation separate from all the partner institutions. Whitchurch (2008) describes it as a “third space”. Sanders (2011) finds that the partnership avoided the “safeguarding of ideas by institutions” and facilitated opportunities for new ideas to flourish and be developed within a wider understanding of the needs of the different institutions and sectors that were working together. This ‘third space’ was both a physical location – usually the partnership office – that embodied the separate identity of the partnership and a community of practice where ideas and knowledge were shared and sifted and translated into plans and practice. It was open to anybody in the partnership and many outside of it who interacted with those individuals whose continuous presence facilitated, sustained and developed the potential for the partnership to deliver. Booth (2007) stresses the importance of independence for the partnership co-ordination team. She quotes a respondent in her research:

... as ‘facilitator’ yours should be the ‘organisation without an ego’.

Whitchurch (2008) defines the staff working in a ‘third space’ as ‘unbounded professionals’ whose roles allow them to operate outside the norms and priorities of the departments in which they are based.

The factors and conditions for successful partnerships

This section draws on the evidence and findings in the archive reports about the principal factors that contribute to success in collaborative and partnership working. More details of the practical lessons that can be taken from the archive reports and advice to new or developing partnerships are included in the partnerships toolkit, published separately.

The facilitation role of the ‘blended professionals’

Both the national evaluations (EKOS, 2007; Passy and Morris, 2010) and many of the local reports emphasise the importance of the individuals who worked to facilitate and co-ordinate partnership activities.

These individuals were the staff appointed to lead and administer the work of the partnership, employed by the nominated lead higher education institution but working for the benefit of the partnership as a whole. Equally important are those key individuals in all the institutions in the inner wheel of the partnership who were often together in meetings, in touch with the core team, working for both their own institution and for the partnership. Many of these people occupied posts funded or part-funded by Aimhigher or the Lifelong Learning Networks.
A particular responsibility of staff appointed to lead and facilitate the partnership was to command the intellectual territory and sustain the focus of the partnership on the agreed and declared objectives. As one study says, considerable experience and knowledge was vested in individuals responsible for leading the work of the partnerships (Hatt and Tate, 2010).

Action on Access (2010) found that respondents cited the importance of the work of the core partnership team, including those in partner institutions, in “prioritising cohesion and avoiding fragmentation”. Booth (2007) analyses the qualities and skills required for an effective partnership co-ordinator. Her list includes the ability to continue to be creative and to manage uncertainty including job insecurity and to be aware of the needs of partners while focusing firmly on the goals of the partnership. According to Booth credible partnership leaders need “entrepreneurial personalities” so that they are able to manage strategy and implementation simultaneously.

For those ‘blended professionals’ who were operating on behalf of the partnership within partner institutions, the role could be difficult. Their work was not always integrated and recognised in their institutional roles. Rouncefield-Swales (2009) cites the finding that local authorities’ connection with the partnership was maintained by dedicated Aimhigher co-ordination staff. These staff had more ‘purchase’ within the authority where they were managed as internal appointments, integrated within the authority structures. Researchers also found that finding the ‘right’ people in partner institutions to work with the partnership was key to early success. Engagement of senior leaders ensured high level institutional support (EKOS, 2007). On the other hand, practitioner-level staff were more likely to ensure effective delivery of activities. Since many partner institutions, particularly schools, would nominate one individual, some research found that it was not necessarily somebody in the senior leadership team who was best placed to take the work forward. It could be a ‘humble class teacher’ provided it was someone who had ‘sufficient standing’ in the institution (ERS, 2010).

The need for impartiality and honest brokerage in the lead institution that hosts the partnership core team is also a theme in Kewin et al. (2011), whose research found that the role of the LLN host institution offered assurances of neutrality and financial probity to partners.

6.3. Constraints and issues in partnership working and collaboration

Sustaining the focus of the partnership

For Aimhigher, there was a constant tension between approaches that were demand-led and those that were supplier-led (Action on Access, 2010). It was a key function of the partnership to sustain the focus on what was needed to enable targeted learners to progress to higher education rather than what partner institutions most wished to offer to learners.

Relationships were also complex and subgroups within the larger partnerships were common:

There is an Aimhigher co-ordinator within each local authority, but as a group they are a cadre of people, in much the same way as the HEI representatives are a cadre of people and … the FE co-ordinators are a cadre of people as well. (Aimhigher strategic manager, quoted in Hatt and Tate, 2010)

In large geographical areas, a degree of devolution of responsibility, and funding, was necessary to reach the target groups and keep partners on board. All these “layers of people doing their bit” (Passy, 2011) were co-ordinated through the partnership structures.
The costs to partners of partnership working

Kewin et al. (2011) found that the most persistent barriers to partnership working were “most fundamentally, partners’ finding time to participate in network activities”.

This issue of the time needed, and the resource therefore required, to sustain effective collaboration, is a recurrent theme in the evaluation of Aimhigher (Passy, 2011). As Booth (2007) says:

The trouble with working in partnership is that the working never stops.

Nor is it simply a question of funding. While dedicated funding secured a core team, institutions had their own priorities and even additional money did not always allow them to divert staff time to the needs of the partnership (Action on Access, 2010). Many reports allude to the commitment of staff working for the partnership and it is clear that most, if not all, of the partnerships in the LLNs and Aimhigher depended heavily on this team of people to sustain the delivery of the partnership programme. Partnerships may have been cost-effective but they were not cost-free.

Working on the margins of institutions

The objectives of the partnership did not always successfully penetrate into the institutional thinking of partners. The benefits, though they vastly outweigh the reported issues in the research reports in the archive, were not universal. While some schools were able to point to changes in institutional culture, others reported that the work of Aimhigher remained on the edge of what the school did and was taken forward only through the dedication and commitment of an individual teacher in the school (Action on Access, 2010). At times, partner institutions seemed to take little responsibility for the agenda of the partnership:

Aimhigher is conceived by the schools as something that the local authority is doing. For the HEIs it is something that a partnership office does; for FE a funding stream. (Aimhigher partnership manager, quoted in Action on Access, 2010).

Difficulty in engaging employers and other stakeholders

Sanders (2011) found that one of the key objectives that remained unmet in the LLN in Lancashire was the establishment of full partnership with employers and the Employers Forum. Instead, the network had worked through regular consultation with employers facilitated by the team of sector co-ordinators appointed by the LLN. While collaboration within and between sectors that share a primary interest in education was possible, it proved more difficult to engage those whose primary purpose is not educational.

The insecurity of short-term funding

Both for staff and for institutions seeking to commit to long-term agendas, the short-term nature of funding for LLNs and Aimhigher constrained attitudes to the programme. Both Rouncefield-Swales (2009) and Passy and Morris (2010) found that resistance to the principles and practices of widening participation persisted in some schools. Hatt and Tate (2010) cited the insecurity of job contracts as a major risk to the programme.

6.4. The question of sustainability

The risks identified from loss of partnership funding

The Lifelong Learning Networks and Aimhigher ended at similar times with the loss of two major partnership infrastructures for HE progression in most areas of England. The networks depended heavily on
relationships between individuals in the institutions and time had been too short to ‘person-proof’ the partnerships and ensure institutional commitment to continuity (SQW, 2010). Institutional partners in HEIs argued that the loss of partnership funding would herald a return to duplication of the services offered to schools and loss of the impartiality and consistency of messages to younger learners, along with loss to institutional staff of the knowledge bank and good practice resources generated by the partnership (Passy, 2011).

**Options for sustainability**

Some of the key reports written to inform the final stages of the projects directly addressed the issue of sustainability. Hudson and Storan (2010) and Hatt and Tate (2010) identify the main options for sustaining the work of Aimhigher as ‘embedding and mainstreaming’ and ‘continuity funding’. Most reports focus on ways in which the individual activities may be separated from the overall programmes of the LLNs and Aimhigher and adapted to fit into institutional delivery plans when the partnerships close (see, for example, Sanders, 2011; EARN, n.d.). Action on Access (2010) found a number of examples where Aimhigher partnerships were also actively seeking to align their work with other continuing policies at both national and local level – including, for example, in the policies to support progression for care leavers, the new 14-19 progression strategies, HE access agreements and changes in IAG policies. Their hope was that some national initiatives or regional strategies would include aspects of the former partnership programmes in future planning.

Several reports recommend that institutional partners seek to sustain the staff roles that had been created to facilitate the partnership (Fretwell and Smith, 2010; Sanders, 2011). Fretwell and Smith (2010) reports that the headteachers they surveyed would seek to retain the work of the staff appointed within their schools to manage the links with higher education for the benefit of learners. Sanders (2011) recommends that partner institutions in the LLN sustain the role of the ‘progression champions’ that were appointed to develop progression agreements and pathways in colleges and universities. In some cases, the functions of these staff that were of particular value to institutions would be absorbed within the roles of existing staff (SQW, 2010).

However, there were many respondents in the research reports whose findings indicated that most of the work would be lost without dedicated funding. Schools and local authorities had particular difficulties in embedding progression to higher education in their strategies in the absence of a policy priority. Fretwell and Smith’s (2010) survey of headteachers found that although two-thirds would miss the co-ordinated programme of activities, only 14% would commit school funds to sustain it. Rouncefield-Swales’ (2009) study of local authorities concluded that, with the exception of some discreet areas of work, it was unlikely that local authorities would sustain the values and outcomes promoted by Aimhigher in the absence of dedicated funding and central co-ordination.

**Continuing collaboration**

In all the examined reports, it was assumed that any new collaborative structure would be led and largely funded by HEIs.

Researchers report respondents to their surveys as identifying a small central team as essential to support continued collaboration. The ‘honest brokerage’ and focus for co-ordinated activity remained key, in the view of most respondents. Three approaches to generating new income to fund this partnership infrastructure were identified in the national LLN evaluation report (SQW, 2010). These were membership subscriptions, self-funding from a range of sources, and the development of a commercial enterprise that would sell services to partners and others. Across England, a few of both Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Network partnerships have developed new models to sustain collaboration. Most are based on some form
of subscription funding. Many also look to generate additional funds by charging for services and bidding for grants for specific projects.

The research shows that partners expected that a subscription-based approach to collaboration would involve changes to the focus and objectives of the partnership. Once ‘imposed’ objectives and priorities were removed with the withdrawal of funding, subscribing members would define the priorities. Not all institutions would choose to subscribe and partnerships may need to cover wider territory in order to draw in more potential partners and to reduce the size of the core team. In London, the LLN had succeeded in sustaining a subscription network, although the researchers questioned whether institutional commitment would be sufficient to maintain this over time. The report emphasises that the small core team must demonstrate its value to members in order to secure sustained funding (Kewin et al., 2011).

There are risks inherent in this approach to continuity. The varied ways in which the partner institutions may align the work of the partnership to their own strategies poses a threat to clarity of focus and the shared objectives that were key to the collaborative process. The loss of the wider network, particularly staff in schools, through which the programmes were delivered, is likely to make it more difficult to meet targets. As a result, Hatt and Tate (2010) and EARN (n.d.) have doubts about the viability of continued partnership. All the research that asked the question found that, while partners regretted the potential loss of the collaboration in both Aimhigher and the LLNs, only a minority, mainly HEIs, were willing to contribute financially to secure continuity (see also Progress South Central, 2011).

The legacy of the partnerships

The research has more positive messages about the lasting legacy of collaboration. There was evidence that some things had changed, and changed for good, in partner institutions. The methods developed to target under-represented and low socio-economic group learners had become part of the strategies employed by universities to plan their outreach programmes (Action on Access, 2010). The quality and consistency of monitoring and evaluation had improved and university partners had developed more learner-centred information and guidance materials.

Both LLNs and Aimhigher partnerships were also working to secure as much of the legacy as possible, both through the production of legacy resources for use by individuals and institutions in the future and by increasing their investment in staff development and dissemination in the final stages of the programme. Hatt and Tate (2010) found grounds for confidence that many Aimhigher activities and approaches were evident in partner HEIs’ access strategies. Although they express concern that the philosophy of impartial, learner-centred approaches would no longer inform the activities, they were encouraged by the fact that some former Aimhigher staff now held senior positions in HEIs. They recommend that HEIs in the area seek ways to sustain the exchange of knowledge and good practice through a local professional network.

In local authorities, Rouncefield-Swales (2009) found that understanding of the issues had increased among key staff, although there were fears that this understanding may not have permeated school or local authority strategies.

For the LLNs, researchers found that HE partners would continue to link bilaterally with FECs (Progress South Central, 2011). In some instances, the progression agreements developed in the life of the LLN would continue, at least in the short term.

7. Implications for policy and practice

There is a remarkable degree of commonality in the findings about partnership working in the archive, and it is not uncritical. Respondents to the various surveys pointed out the constraints and issues, though they did not dwell on the difficulties and the research reveals overwhelming support for the collaborative approaches
developed in both Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks. Institutional partners in all sectors of education pointed to the benefits they had gained from collaborating, especially in relation to knowledge exchange, deeper cross-sectoral understanding, working links between institutions, and high quality learner-centred programmes.

The story the archive tells about partnership and collaboration in a competitive environment shows that working together did generate innovative approaches to tackling entrenched patterns of progression. It also shows that individuals benefited from an exchange of knowledge that, over time, created a ‘bank’ of WP expertise, much of which resides still in the WASRS archive materials and in those staff now in institutions who worked with the partnerships. This concept of partnerships generating a ‘third space’ that existed outside the partner institutions and of the ‘blended professionals’ who work within the ‘third space’, across sectors and between institutions, is a major finding of this synthesis. To secure this learning for the future, and enable it to inform the collaborative access strategies of institutions, new collaborations may start by recognising the skills, knowledge and ideas partnership facilitators develop through working outside departmental and institutional boundaries. Then there could be a strategy to cascade this knowledge to others in the widening access community, both within the institution and between partners. Staff development, impartial and collaborative resources and information, and opportunities to share good practice serve to cement collaborative partnerships and add value to institutional strategies.

There are clear lessons for those lead practitioners who continue to seek to sustain collaborative approaches for the benefit of learners in widening participation target groups. This synthesis offers some practical pointers to help others avoid the pitfalls and develop the structures that will work. However, sustaining the work of the partnerships in the absence of dedicated funding requires some rethinking of what partnerships can do. On the road to widening participation, Lifelong Learning Networks and Aimhigher represent the Rolls-Royce of partnerships. Those who wish to continue to collaborate may need to develop a simpler model, borrowing some of the engineering but taking account of the need for a clear and agreed focus. In today’s context where institutions are more vulnerable to competition and uncertain recruitment, perhaps there will need to be explicit delineation of the territory in which partners work together.

8. Gaps and areas for future research

The nuanced and detailed experience and understanding of collaboration that emerges from the reports in the archive merits further analysis and research, especially to explore further the concepts of the ‘third space’ and of ‘blended professionals’. Collaboration has been assumed to be a process through which activities are delivered but the evidence from the archive is that collaboration itself delivered distinct and important benefits, though outputs and process cannot be entirely separated. The reports in the archive were written at a time before the end of funding, and further research into the remaining models of collaboration that were developed in legacy programmes and into the interpretation of collaboration now found in HE access agreements would develop this evidence base.

New empirical research might also seek to find out what was lost as a result of the withdrawal of funding, and how much of this loss can be shown to result from the loss of the partnerships, as opposed to the loss of the activities themselves. It could assess the durability of the legacy of the funded partnerships. Research might also seek to evaluate the difference perceived by learners and schools between institution-led and collaborative approaches.

The interaction between purpose, partnership and place is not problematised in the archive reports. The research has focused either, in the case of national evaluations, on the common elements between the partnerships (EKOS, 2007, Passy and Morris, 2010) or, in the case of local evaluations, on the outcomes for those in the area. There is no analysis that compares progress in different areas. Even the HEFCE analysis of trends in HE participation (Corver, 2010), does not disaggregate the data at regional level. Many of the archive reports do contain a sophisticated analysis of local progression data. A few point out how the
context influenced the ways in which the area partnerships developed, for example in London (Kewin et al., 2011) and in the rural areas of South West England (Hatt and Tate, 2010). As policy changes so too does the extent to which regional differences are reflected in national planning. Other researchers have found that geographical differences are an essential consideration in policy to tackle entrenched patterns of progression (Kintrea et al., 2011). The archive provides evidence of success at local level, but no comparative analysis to identify how far context and place mattered in creating successful partnerships.

9. References


http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/aim_higher/Aimhigher_Costs_Study_29_03_07 [Accessed: 26 November 2012]