Work-Based & Vocational Learners: Aiming Higher in Greater Manchester

Progression Strand Report 2008
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1. Introduction

Greater Manchester Aimhigher was the largest Aimhigher partnership in 2006-2008, with a budget of £8,557,000. Most of the funding was devolved directly to schools and colleges via the local authorities. A pot of £1,577,000 went to centrally managed projects, of which £502,700 was allocated to activities for prospective and current learners in work-based provision under the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Progression Strand. The programme of activities targeted vocational learners and adults, with the objective of supporting progression to higher levels of study.

This report provides information on the activities and achievements through the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Progression Strand 2006-2008, and highlights the outcomes and lessons from the programme. The report is relevant to all agencies involved in the work-based learning agenda in Greater Manchester, and particularly those concerned about progression to higher education from vocational provision. Sources of information have included project planning documents, monitoring reports and evaluations, and a ‘round-robin’ brainstorming exercise involving project leaders and other stakeholders undertaken in April 2008.

1.1 Report Structure

Section One provides an introduction including the aims of Aimhigher and the context for vocational progression in Greater Manchester. Section Two describes the key activities during the funding period 2006-2008, and gives information about the target groups and evidence of outcomes so far. Section Three discusses the strengths of the approach, and the challenges faced. The report concludes with a discussion of ‘what works’ and lessons learnt (Section Four), and provides information on the 2008-2011 programme (Section Five).

1.2 Looking to the Future

The need to target young people and adults outside of full-time education and training has been recognised by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and identified as an area which will expand in future:

“Work-based learning pathways to higher education are likely to grow significantly over the next phase of Aimhigher … training provider partners have added an important dimension to the local (Aimhigher) offering”(1).

From Autumn 2008 a new Greater Manchester-wide work based learning provider partnership will be established to support a framework of progression activity. The framework will offer a coherent sequence of progression related activity to vocational learners including Young Apprentices, Level 2 Apprentices, Advanced Apprentices and adult learners. Work-based learning providers will be asked to identify target learners who meet Aimhigher criteria. Local providers will benefit from the enrichment they are able to offer target learners and will have the opportunity to contribute to the development of future activities.

Contact the Progression Manager at the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Co-ordination Unit if you would like more information.

Dictionary: pro-gres-sion (pr -gr sh n)
The act of moving forward (as toward a goal).
1.3 Aimhigher: Supporting Progression to Higher Education

Education to higher levels of study has been shown to have benefits for individuals, and society as a whole. Aimhigher is a national programme, supported through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which aims to ensure that everyone is aware of the benefits of higher education (HE), and that people from under-represented groups have the support, encouragement, and options to allow them to study in a way that suits them.

Learners who leave school at 16 have the option of continuing in learning full-time or pursuing part-time training through work-based learning and the employment route. Evidence suggests that those who follow a vocational learning trajectory (whether full-time or part-time) are much less likely to progress to HE than those who stay on in full-time education to do academic qualifications. Progression to HE by the age of 21 for those with Level 3 vocational qualifications is estimated to be only half the rate for those with GCE A levels (about 45% compared to 90%).

The debate about the so-called ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ routes is long-running, and the issues are complex. Much has been written about the lack of ‘parity of esteem’ between the two routes, in the minds of learners themselves, their key influencers such as parents, and within some educational institutions. For some people the situation is made worse by a lack of information and understanding of the options available, disaffection with education due to poor experience of schooling, and limited aspirations relating to low self-esteem. Broadening people’s perceptions, raising their aspirations, widening the range of options available, and improving learners’ understanding of these, are at the heart of Greater Manchester Aimhigher progression strand activities.

1.4 Greater Manchester Context

The Greater Manchester sub-region encompasses well over 2.5 million residents, across ten local authority districts. There are around 87,600 businesses, with nearly 1.2 million employees. Greater Manchester lags behind other areas in terms of the numbers of young people achieving qualifications at Level 3 by age 19. The most recent figures show that 44% of Greater Manchester young people had reached Level 3 by age 19 at the end of 2006/07, compared to 48% across England.

On average there were more than 12,500 Greater Manchester residents on Apprenticeships with the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in each period during 2006/07. 62% of all Apprentices were aged 16-18. The largest share of Apprentices (64%) were on Advanced Apprenticeships. Priority sectors in the Greater Manchester context include: Child Care, Adult Care, Hair, Food and Drink, ICT, Manufacturing, Financial, Retail and Logistics, Hospitality, Biomedical and Health. Projections estimate a Level 4/5 management skills gap in all of these sectors in the period up to 2021.

![Average in Learning Periods 1-12 2006/07 Greater Manchester LSC](image_url)

1. HEFCE, Guidance for Aimhigher partnerships, (2008/05)
2. Since 2007 widening participation in HE is a Public Service Agreement, in raising aspirations, narrowing achievement gaps and improving social mobility. HM Treasury, April 2008
3. Action on Access (2005), Progression to higher education from vocational, work-based and work-related learning: Making a difference, the Impact of Aimhigher
4. Office for National Statistics
5. LSC, matched administrative data, http://www.lsc.gov.uk/providers/data/statistics/learner/Level2and3attainmentbyyoungpeople-Localsummary.htm
6. LSC quarterly cumulative statistics 2006/07. Advanced Apprentices are aiming for qualifications at Level 3.
2. Activities & Outcomes

2.1 Overview of Activities

Aimhigher Greater Manchester Progression Strand activities can be categorised with reference to four key target groups of learners, as shown below. A key feature is support for vocational learners at the point of transition between different phases of education, in order to support progression to the next level.

a) Vocational Learners and Young Apprentices

The focus of the first strand of activities was vocational options for young people in compulsory education (pre-16). This work linked to the national Aimhigher initiative to promote careers in healthcare, and education routes into these, in partnership with the NHS. In Greater Manchester, activities included further and higher education workshops which supported the delivery of the vocational curriculum in health and social care subjects, taster days and summer schools, initiatives for parents and teachers and other activities to bring young people into contact with clinical professionals, including E-mentoring for Year 10-13 learners (Pathways to Healthcare project).

In addition, promotion of engineering vocational pathways to learners in high schools, and those progressing from pre-16 within colleges, was another key focus of activity with young people. Activities included awareness raising events in schools with Years 9 and 10, specialist engineering workshops during Year 11 and enrichment activities for vocational learners doing GCSEs in schools and colleges. Taster events and placements were also offered to 14-19 year old students in engineering provision in colleges (Vocational Pathways to Engineering project).

From 2007/08 funding was identified to develop an 'entitlement' approach for young apprentices – delivered through Connexions, and involving pre-entry guidance, termly interviews, help with applications to the next level of learning, guidance on progression pathways, motivational sessions, university visits and a celebration event for parents and others supporting the young people (Young Apprentices project).

b) Vocational Learners & Apprentices (aged 16-18 and 19+)

Progression routes were promoted to Apprentices across a range of sectors (including construction, financial and professional services, ICT and hairdressing). Activities included presentations designed to raise aspirations, one to one support sessions and information, advice and guidance (IAG). This work was located within the largest local work-based learning provider in order to gain access to a significant number of Apprentices (Apprentices into HE project).

A parallel strand of activities directed work on raising aspirations and raising levels of understanding of HE amongst Apprentices through the Learning Provider Network for Greater Manchester. Support to individuals through one to one and group sessions, and university visits were key elements. Resources were developed in the form of a toolkit, which providers, teachers and employers can use to promote progression routes (Next Steps to Success for Advanced Apprentices project).
Another strand of activity put the focus on developing on-line resources to support young people to develop study skills and prepare for study at university level. These were used by non-traditional learners on A/S NVQ and BTEC courses in several local colleges. Some users were completing work-based pathways in the sports sector (Headstart project).

c) Advanced Apprentices (aged 16-18 and 19+)

Advanced Apprentices nearing completion of their frameworks, and those who had already completed, were targeted through an initiative to offer a HE taster programme, delivered at four local centres and validated by the University of Bolton. The module is worth ten credits at Level 4 and enables learners to recognise, develop and demonstrate the study skills required for successful HE study. (Step-in to HE project 2007/08 onwards).

d) Adult Learners (16+)

Employees in a range of local workplaces with Trade Union links were targeted for support in the first instance. Activities included offering initial advice and guidance, a menu of short courses, a supportive learning club network, workplace study skills support and tuition as well as ongoing information and advice (Union Learning Clubs project).

Local people working in the Community and Health sectors were also targeted through activities to promote vocational access to HE by offering individually tailored learning, with Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) at Level 2 and 3 (Vocational Access project).

In the period 2006-2008, the largest share of Progression Strand resources went towards work with current Apprentices (29%) and the pre-16 age group of young apprentices (28%).
2.2 Target Groups

Aimhigher is required to maintain records on the numbers participating in activities, and to collect feedback on the outcomes. Recently emphasis has been placed on the inclusion of key target groups using measures of disadvantage linked to area deprivation and low socio-economic class. Most projects also collect information on HE-heritage, with a focus on including people who do not have a background in HE in their immediate family. Support for projects on monitoring and evaluation of their activities is provided by the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Co-ordination Unit.

As noted above, the range of interventions with young people and adults under the progression strand is wide ranging including information and awareness activities, one to one support, and development of pathways. It is estimated that in 2006-08 as many as 7,000 took part in low-intensity information/awareness activities, and 1,200 each year benefited from more in-depth support including one to one interventions.

A number of pilot data collection exercises have been undertaken to monitor the profile of participants in Aimhigher Greater Manchester activities. Results for the progression strand show that the profile of participants varies across different types of interventions. Projects working with pre-16 groups and Level 2 Apprentices had the highest levels of participation from disadvantaged groups: around eight out of ten participants lived in the most deprived areas of Greater Manchester, and two-thirds were from low socio-economic group households. Projects targeting Advanced Apprentices and adults have had relatively low levels of participation from disadvantaged groups so far, compared to the interventions with young people, highlighting the difficulty in engaging disadvantaged learners in the workplace.

### Delivery Partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apprentices into HE</th>
<th>Skills Solutions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pathways to Healthcare</td>
<td>Stockport College with local HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Steps to Success for Advanced Apprentices</td>
<td>Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Learning Clubs</td>
<td>Open University, University of Bolton, Unison, Amicus, CWU, PCS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Access</td>
<td>Open College Network NW, New Deal for Communities in East Manchester with Tameside College, Tameside College with Sure Start, MAES with Sure Start, University of Salford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Pathways in Engineering</td>
<td>Tameside College, North Trafford College, Bury College, Bolton Community College, MANCAT, MMU &amp; University of Bolton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headstart</td>
<td>City College Manchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step-in to HE</td>
<td>Aimhigher GM/GMSA, Wigan and Leigh College, Skills Solutions, Bury College, Stockport College, University of Bolton</td>
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</tbody>
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### Scale of Progression Activities During 2006-08

- Post-16 Awareness Raising (Apprentices into HE), 250
- Post-16 One to One support (Next Steps to Success), 360
- Post-16 Guidance & Support in workplace (Union Learning Clubs), 300
- Pre-16 Study Skills Support (Headstart), 1,500
- Pre-16 Presentations (Pathways to Engineering), 1,500
- Pre-16 Healthcare events/activities (Pathways to Healthcare), 3,000
- Post-16 Vocational Access, 80
Practice Example: Apprentices into HE

Target: Apprentices on Level 2 and Level 3 programmes in different sectors

Key activities: Apprentice presentations and one to one sessions, plus awareness sessions with Training Consultants and Assessors.

Key achievements: Through Skills Solutions, Apprentices into HE invited 800 framework completers and 700 current learners to take part in an Aimhigher activity. Around 200 took part. Support for individuals has been a useful addition to general information activities. Feedback shows that horizons have been widened - some learners had no idea that HE was an option for them, and many stated that they will consider HE in future. Fourteen of 54 respondents to a follow-up survey (26%) had progressed to HE or further professional qualifications.

Due to the awareness sessions with Training Consultants and Assessors, some Skills Solutions staff members have built up high levels of awareness and commitment to supporting progression, although there is still work to be done to get commitment across all sectors.

2.3 Raising Awareness

Presentations and activities, such as taster sessions and theatre performances, have been found to be effective in raising awareness of progression options:

- on average 85% said they understood more about progression pathways, in feedback for sessions on engineering options.

- 96% taking part in ‘choices at 16’ activities said they knew more about pathways at 16 (96% also said they knew more about Apprenticeships and BTEC National Diplomas).

- 95% of respondents at a healthcare taster day said that the event had increased their knowledge of different courses at university.

2.4 Supporting Progression

Awareness raising is just the first stage of the progression process. The key question is whether raised awareness leads to a change in attitudes and behaviour in relation to vocational pathways and progression to higher levels of learning. Outcomes, in terms of more sustained change in prospects for young people, so far have included:

- Increased recruitment of new students into engineering, growing provision and potential progression to Level 3 and 4 at both Tameside College and North Trafford College. One college saw a 30% rise in Level 3 learners on the previous year.

- High rates of progression of high school learners involved in the full series of Pathways to Healthcare activities to Year 11 (including 12 out of 19 students at St Peters RC High School and 14 out of 15 students at Stockport School).

- Increased retention amongst vocational learners within the college that piloted study skills materials – retention was up 3% on the previous year at both Level 2 and Level 3 (attributed to a rise in confidence amongst users of the study skills package).

- Apprentices nearing completion of their framework, and staff, are starting to approach project leads pro-actively for assistance on progression issues.

There have also been developments in terms of commitment to support young apprentice progression by parents. Activities with parents/carers in 2006/07 included both careers events and celebration events linked to young learners’ achievements. Evaluation of feedback suggests that the approach is building up support for vocational progression amongst these key influencers (see practice example overleaf).
Practice Example: Working with Parents

Sector: Health and social care

Target: Parents/carers

Key Activities: The ‘Parents Guide to Careers in Health’ event was a collaborative event with The Oldham College and Aimhigher Oldham, engaging parents of students who had taken part in ‘Take Your Pick’ Health and Social Care Vocational Tasters and HEI progression events at The University of Bolton and The University of Manchester.

Key Achievements: The event was well attended, with very positive evaluations. Amongst those taking part in a feedback survey, 21 out of 28 respondents said that as a result they would encourage their son or daughter to study a Health and Social Care related diploma/degree course at university.

Statistics on progression from vocational and work based qualifications are not readily available. The Learning and Skills Council does not routinely collect data required to monitor progress in this important area. Aimhigher partners worked with learning providers to put processes in place to make sure there is better recording and reporting on this issue in future. However, only eight providers amongst a total of 57 Greater Manchester learning Provider Network (GMLPN) members provided progression data, equating to 112 known progressions between 1st August 2007 and 30th April 2008. The largest numbers progressing to Level 4 were in Financial and Professional Services (73 during the period).

The overall number progressing from Advanced Apprenticeships to HE is small compared to the totals on Advanced Apprenticeships (only 3% are known to have progressed out of a total of around 3,000 starters).

Amongst projects working with other adult learners, progression outcomes have included:

- Six learners from disadvantaged areas of East Manchester progressed to HE and secured jobs in line with qualifications achieved as part of Aimhigher activity in community and health sectors. This was out of an initial cohort of thirteen learners.

- Of the initial group 48 learners engaged through Union Learning Club activity, 43 completed courses with the Open University. Four learners have gone on to other Open University courses.

- Of the 32 learners who completed the pilot Step-In module, 12 (38%) stated the intention to progress to HE as soon as possible and a further 13 (41%) stated the intention to progress within 1-2 years.
2.5 Other Outcomes

The scale of Aimhigher activities was relatively small, given the limited funding. This is one reason why it was important to make sure trainers and teachers were involved appropriately, in order to generate spin-offs for future groups of learners, and to build expertise and a degree of sustainability over time. Key achievements in this respect so far have included:

- The strengthening of linkages between local training provider organisations and academic departments in local universities. This has been demonstrated by the joint delivery of sector-specific events. In some cases partners have developed formalised progression routes from work-based provision to degree programmes. For example, links between Skills Solutions and MMU led to the development of a Conversion Course providing a progression pathway for part-time learners in Financial Services.

- Improvements in the knowledge and understanding of those delivering IAG. For example, Connexions staff have gained a better understanding of the career opportunities and progression routes from engineering, which will help support the selection of suitable candidates for vocational provision.

- A ‘Progression Toolkit’ was developed for teachers and trainers (which also includes information for parents/carers and Apprentice careers advisers). Two events were held, providing hints and tips about using the resources to promote Apprenticeships as an alternative route to HE. The approach has successfully supported several training providers to get Matrix accreditation, by allowing them to offer progression IAG as part of the Matrix standard.

A further positive development has been the ‘mainstreaming’ of activities through inclusion in the on-going activities of partners. For example, the pilot college for study skills support has committed to continuing the costs of operating the programme after 2008, following improved retention for the college and increased confidence to progress for its users.

Progression Strand
Resources/Materials & Contacts

- Aimhigher Greater Manchester Progression Toolkit:
  http://www.aimhighergreatermanchester.com

- Headstart online study support package:
  http://www.headstart4u.net

- Vocational Access team have developed and accredited with OCNNWR a series of units specially tailored for employers:
  http://ocnnwr.org.uk

- Step-In 10 credit module accredited by University of Bolton
  http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/sites/Uni4me/stepin/stepin.cfm

General Resources for Practitioners
http://www.aimhigher.com/downloads/resources

NB. The Progression Toolkit has been taken and reproduced as good practice by other Aimhigher partnerships in Cornwall, Merseyside, South-West and the North-East provider network.
3. Successes & Challenges

3.1 Partnerships and Linkages

The progression strand involved a range of different types of partnerships, as discussed below. Partnership working has been supported by wider policy and programme developments with a sector focus, through the Lifelong Learning Network. Longer term tracking and monitoring of the beneficiaries of progression activities will require all these types of partnerships to be maintained. Central coordination has helped to maintain good communication across partners, avoid duplication of effort, and identify gaps in provision.

**Partnerships with Aimhigher Borough Coordinators for targeting and prioritisation of areas for action.** This aspect has had increasing focus since mid 2007 with the introduction of new guidance from HEFCE on targeting disadvantaged learners. Developments such as the 14-19 Diplomas mean that links with local authorities and a strong focus on progression will remain high priorities.

**Partnerships with schools, colleges and training providers for identification of learners for inclusion in activities or packages of support.** Being able to involve participants appropriately demands good understanding on behalf of staff in these organisations of what the partners can offer, and buy-in to the aims and objectives. Tutors working with vocational learners in colleges are key gate-keepers. In one project a lot of work was required to encourage tutors to take ownership of the materials to support their students. Barriers for tutors include lack of time and understanding of the issues. Getting buy-in from staff in training provider organisations has proved to be problematic. One project lead commented:

“…trainers working for training providers are target driven and are anxious about letting their learners take part in any activity which could detract from the achievement of the Apprenticeship framework”.

Andrew, now 22 years old, went to work as a Joiner in his family’s business after leaving Woodhey High School in Bury. He took up an Apprenticeship, and after completing Business Administration Level 2 & Customer Service Level 3, settled in full time employment.

Andrew was interested in doing Computing at MMU, but didn’t know how to go about it. On obtaining information about returning to education as part of the Higher Futures for Apprentices Project, he was encouraged to enrol on the Step-In module at Bury College. No one else in Andrew’s immediate family has been to university, except for his sister who completed her first year but did not continue. Andrew commented:

“I was never encouraged to go to university and it’s something I’ve taken on myself – and I feel I can benefit a lot from it. My girlfriend has provided me with a lot of support and the Aimhigher course has given me a lot more confidence about starting university. When speaking to the college and university tutors, it’s easy to find out useful information about the different opportunities available for higher education and they provide a great deal of support and assistance. The course has given me a lot of beneficial knowledge and understanding of what will be expected at university level. The sessions covered a wide range of skills that will come in useful for higher education, from writing reports to presentation skills. I feel the course could benefit most people and was definitely worth completing. The skills learnt will be invaluable for university and I’m looking forward to starting in September”. 

Case Study: Successful Progression

**Aimhigher Higher Futures 4 Apprentices & Step-In to HE**
Partnerships with HEIs (and colleges) to access expertise, taster experiences or placements. Strong links with universities are essential if pathways to HE are to be opened up in practice. The work in the initial stages showed that a divide often exists between HE and work-based learning staff (even between staff working in separate departments within the same institution). Whilst good progress has been made in some quarters to bring staff with a vocational and academic focus together, there is still work to be done in this area.

Partnerships with Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) providers, to reinforce messages and provide a broader basis of support. Working relationships between progression strand partners and Connexions services are well established in some areas of Greater Manchester, but the picture is not consistent across the sub-region. Importantly, different Connexions services have taken varying approaches to HE progression support; for example, some are heavily involved with young apprentices - offering IAG support – other services have no involvement with work-based learning providers. Where Connexions are not involved, IAG from work-based learning provider organisations becomes of even greater significance.

Partnerships with other delivery partners (mainly colleges and training providers) in order to set up a broader offering across the patch. The trend is away from direct delivery to one of facilitation within the wider partnership. Materials have been developed (eg. presentations and promotional packs) which can be rolled out more widely, within a continuing framework of coordination and monitoring. There is also increasing opportunities to share expertise and contacts, and to assist in referrals to activities within the overall programmes. An example of the latter includes recruitment of Level 3 Advanced Apprentices nearing Framework completion to the Step-In module through the Apprentices into HE delivery partnership.

Practice Example: Discovering.....Society, Health and Development

Target: 30 Year 9 students from 10 Stockport secondary schools

Key Activities: The students spent Wednesday evenings in Nov-Dec 2007 at Stockport College or Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College taking part in a Society, Health and Development programme. The aim was to provide insight into potential subject options in Year 10, career pathways and related FE and HE qualifications in health and social care, early years and justice. Sessions included: team building, emergency first aid, a day in the life of a paramedic, pathology, infection control, drugs awareness and creative activities for children and older people.

Key Achievements: The students fully engaged with all aspects of the programme, taking part in applied learning. Students developed skills, knowledge and understanding of Society, Health and Development through interactive hands-on activities, classroom discussions and visiting speakers from local and regional employers. They explored careers and identified the training requirements. The feedback shows they found it an interesting and rewarding experience. Subsequently 20 students have said they would like to progress into related subjects post-16 and 15 students have said they would like to continue to study related qualifications in HE. In January 2008 students parents and teachers attended a Celebration Evening.
3.2 Employer Buy-in

Aimhigher has aimed to link where necessary with employers. One example is the Union Learning Club project which has worked with over 20 large Manchester-based employers, plus other smaller employers. Following on from the Vocational Access activities, the team has developed and accredited with OCNNWR units specially tailored for employers, and gained financial support from JIF Funding (a partnership between the NHS and LSC) to support Pennine Acute NHS Trust staff to follow the Vocational Access route.

In general, however, the focus has been on the learners - direct employer engagement is not funded through Aimhigher Greater Manchester. This area of work has been incorporated into the activities of the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) Lifelong Learning Network in a variety of ways. Links with GMSA have been established in order to forge a synergy between employer engagement initiatives and Aimhigher widening participation activities.

The experience of the progression strand suggests that unless a degree is a requirement of the job, young Apprentices are unlikely to be supported by their employer. One Progression project lead described:

“...a substantial gulf in understanding between the HE worldview and that of the Apprentices, employers, and in some case their trainers”

Indeed, a conclusion of the evaluation of Union Learning Clubs found that most learners do not discuss their course with their employer. This has two implications for learners who go onto higher levels of study: either that the individual learner is self-motivated or that they are looking to progress their career beyond their current employer. Unfortunately learners may therefore be unsupported in their learning and at risk of facing difficulties in combining work and study. There will also be missed opportunities for higher level skills within learners’ current employment - in terms of the spin-off effects for employers through skills development.

3.3 Making it Relevant to the Target Groups

Where participants have already entered the workforce it has proved difficult to engage them in the same ways as the general Aimhigher cohort. For instance the timing and presentation of activities is much more problematic. Apprentices tend not to be allowed paid time off work to attend events/university visits (and in several cases planned visits had to be abandoned due to lack of take up for this reason). Learners whose framework programme involves day-release with a training provider/college have been engaged more easily than the majority of Apprentices who are not required to attend classes and need to be communicated with individually at a distance. Organising group visits to local universities has proved to be particularly problematic due to the individualised scheduling of work-based learning programmes. In some cases progression support has been given outside of work/college time. Telephone support has been necessary where one-to-one meetings proved too difficult to set up. Lack of common timetabling has been a barrier to group work with young apprentices.

Offering support in the workplace through Union Learning Clubs suggests that many employees may be considering learning and looking for routes suitable to them.

For example, one person commented: “I was returning to (formal) learning after 15-20 years, I left school with some GCSEs, but not very many…. I thought it is time to go on and do something higher”.

Another learner said: “I’d been thinking about FE/HE study for the last four years since leaving college”.

Course choice was found to be mainly linked to job-related goals. However, most learners did not discuss their course with their employer.

Source: Open University. Union Learning Clubs: Greater Manchester ULC Learner Feedback, June 2007
In some instances the focus has been on introducing concepts of progression to learners whose focus was already set below this level. Formalising progression planning with young learners from an earlier starting point will help to make progression pathways better understood. Importantly, the timing of advice and guidance needs to be right to get maximum impact. In the work on engineering it is intended to begin the process much earlier in the academic year, initially targeting Year 9 learners in the first term with presentations, before they make GCSE choices. The concept of HE progression through vocational routes, even in routes such as engineering which have a relatively long-standing tradition of progression to higher levels, still requires an early intervention approach.

Tutors and trainers working with the target groups can be a barrier to progression where they are HE gate-keepers. The initial experience has shown this is a particular issue in work-based learning. Unfortunately some educational staff may have limited aspirations for their learners. Of course time and pressure from other priorities is also going to be an issue. Staff members should therefore be seen as a key target group for intervention alongside learners themselves.

3.4 Working with HEIs

Strong collaboration with HEIs and Further Education Colleges has enabled progression events to be delivered effectively, with maximum potential impact on learners. The links with universities and colleges has been essential to draw in sector specific expertise and perspectives. For example, Pathways to Healthcare progression events during 2006/07 included Early Years and Childhood, Health and Social Care, and Biomedical Science.

Whilst there are several good examples of specific partnership work between progression projects and universities, overall within HE there is a lack of understanding of work-based qualifications, evidenced by the response of admissions staff to applications from this group.

Awareness of the requirement of the Level 3 Apprenticeship framework amongst HE tutors/admissions staff can be improved. There is currently a lack of understanding about how much a young person has to attain before they can achieve an Apprenticeship at Level 3.

Practice Example: Pathways to Healthcare – University Taster Days

Target: Year 9, 10 and 11 learners

Key Activities: The Pathways to Healthcare project aims to raise awareness and interest in health related careers, including careers which require NVQs. Topics for tasters events included: Early Years and Childhood, Health and Social Care, and Biomedical Science.

Key Achievements: Strong collaboration with HEIs and Further Education Colleges including The University of Salford, The University of Manchester and The Manchester Metropolitan University, The Oldham College and Stockport College have enabled the project to deliver progression events that have highlighted a range of courses related to health and social care, including work-based learning options. Students have taken part in a series of activities and taster sessions as part of a programme. In feedback, 95% said they had learnt something about university that they didn’t know before.
3.5 Routes into HE

Having clear routes to progress from one type of provision to further learning is obviously important in opening up a pathway to HE. Clarity on progression routes supports the delivery of advice and guidance, and hopefully enables learners to get information on the options to suit them. Approaches so far include:

- Identifying the options for learners into Level 4 programmes at HEIs. For example, the Vocational Access course demonstrated a range of options within health and social care – including courses at Edge Hill University, The University of Salford, MMU, and The University of Manchester. Continuous and close liaison with local universities has culminated in the University of Bolton delivering the ‘Providing Business Services in a Health Environment’ programme in partnership with Pennine Acute NHS Trust.

- Setting up bridging or transitional provision. An example is the Step-In to HE project.

Practice Example: Vocational Access To HE Project

Target Group: Residents of New East Manchester regeneration zone

Key Activities: NEM/NDC worked with OCNNWR and the University of Salford to develop Level 2 and Level 3 Vocational Access programmes ‘Working in the Community’. Progression routes were agreed with the University of Salford and other local universities including Bolton, Manchester and Edge Hill.

Key Achievements: A qualification has been developed allowing local residents to progress in education and providing the chance to gain relevant skills, practical knowledge and qualifications in regeneration practice which would open up related job opportunities. Tameside College and Manchester Adult Education Service (MAES) have run programmes, and over 100 learners have followed Level 2/3 Vocational Access.

Of the initial group of thirteen participants, three progressed to a Foundation Degree at the University of Salford and one progressed to a Level 3 course at Tameside College. Two learners who have achieved the Foundation Degree in Regeneration (Neighbourhood Renewal) at The University of Salford made the following comments:

"I am proud of my achievement, gaining additional qualifications and improving my career prospects. Since commencing the Foundation Degree, I have changed jobs, which was a significant promotion...I would like to continue to the second phase and top this qualification up to a full honours degree, as I feel this will be beneficial to my career progression."

"I feel that completing the degree has been a real achievement for me on a personal level as going to university is something that I never thought I would be able to do. It has been hard with two small children and a full time job but the satisfaction I have got from undertaking the course has made it all worthwhile. Since starting the degree I have been promoted and I am proud of what I have achieved."
Practice Example: The Step-In to HE Project

**Target:** All Advanced Apprentices in Greater Manchester who have completed or are about to complete an Advanced Apprenticeship.

**Key Activities:** The main purpose of the project is to build Advanced Apprentices’ confidence in their ability to progress to HE with the help of a new course called the Step-In module. The course, accredited via The University of Bolton and offered at four local delivery centres, is designed to help learners to develop the study skills needed to progress to an occupationally relevant HE qualification and to demonstrate the transferability of these higher level skills in the workplace for career advancement. Completers receive a university certificate worth 10 credits at Level 4.

**Key Achievements:** The project has shown the importance of partnership working in the agreement of a shared vision of the course and the development of common teaching materials and procedures for the course. Just under 40 learners were enrolled on the pilot Step-In module. Learners originated from a wide variety of occupational areas including construction, hair and beauty, automotive engineering, administration and housing. 79% of completers said they planned to progress to HE either immediately or within 1-2 years. Progression routes include HNDs, Foundation Degrees, Level 4 Management courses or professional courses.

Case Study: Presentations and 1-2-1 interviews

Anna is completing an Advanced Apprenticeship in IT. She initially discounted the possibility of continuing her studies past Advanced Apprenticeship level for a number of reasons – but attending a HE presentation through Skills Solutions gave her new information and provoked a re-evaluation. Following the presentation she had a 1-2-1 discussion with the project worker, looking at her options and concerns and ways to address these. Anna was particularly concerned that she couldn’t attend HE full-time due to work commitments, and felt her ability level wasn’t up to HE level. Step-In aims to build confidence through a process of personal development planning and development of academic skills. This option would allow Anna to see if it is something she would be able to cope with academically and in terms of time management. On completion a wide range of progression opportunities would be available, including HNCs and HNDs, Foundation Degrees, Honours Degrees and professional qualifications. Skills Solutions are expanding to offer a number of Foundation Degrees so Anna could even choose to study with her current training provider. When interviewed in the fourth week of the Step-In module, Anna commented:

“I have thoroughly enjoyed it and gained more confidence in my own abilities”.

This example suggests that by offering a series of linked activities, Aimhigher has the potential to have an impact on Advanced Apprentices in a relatively short space of time.
4. Lessons & Recommendations

4.1 Targeting

The Aimhigher Borough Coordinators have a key role to play in terms of maintaining an overview of the range of activities, and identifying priority target learners. Better prior information about vocational learners within the key target groups in each area would allow for better planning with the aim of involving a larger group of learners. This needs to be underpinned by a structured approach to working with Borough Coordinators.

As well as learners themselves, interventions need to target key influencers, such as training providers, employers, teachers, and tutors, as they can be a barrier to progression both through low expectations of learners and a lack of expertise about higher levels of study. There is a need in particular for staff development for work-based learning providers, ideally as part of a sustained programme rather than a ‘one off’.

For the investment in progression activities to be maximised, there is a need to continue working with young people who have had experience of initial awareness raising activities. This requires follow-up over time.

Progression strand activities in the past have been inconsistently applied across the ten Greater Manchester local authority districts. In future, activities need to be offered on a Greater Manchester-wide basis in order to ensure learners across the board have the opportunity to benefit.

The new ‘hybrid’ 14-19 Diplomas offer an important opportunity to link progression activities to qualifications delivery. They provide an opportunity to ensure progression opportunities are presented from the outset as an integral part of the Diploma offer.

4.2 Delivery

Strong partnerships are needed between all the key players – schools, boroughs, training providers, colleges, and universities – not only to ensure that progression support is appropriately targeted, but also to enable sector-specific expertise to be maximised.

In future, activities will be defined within a package of interventions delivered through the progression framework – e.g. master classes, mentors, after school programmes, University visits/taster events and individual support. Having delivery partners will provide sector specific expertise and local knowledge, as well as sharing the workload. Formalised partner agreements can have value in specifying basic requirements and inputs to activities, and providing a framework for getting data back from partners in a common format.

Linkages between activities have potential benefits in terms of providing learners with further options and offering a continuum of support. Links between advice and guidance staff working with completers of Advanced Apprenticeships, and specially designed HE transition courses, such as Step-In to HE, have worked particularly well.

Projects have often had to work within the limitations of employers, which has restricted the time and support given to learners to take part in progression activities. This has meant that some sessions, including university visits, have been outside of working hours, and guidance and other types of personal support have been delivered at a distance (using phone/email).

Parents have a role to play in reinforcing messages around progression. Opportunities for involving parents include career-specific sessions and events linked to learners’ activities, such as celebration/awards events.

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4.3 Timing

Vocational learners need to be engaged early in the career decision making process – from Year 9 onwards – in order that information on vocational routes can influence their options choices. It is important to get early information into target schools, and ensure that this is backed up by support from school coordinators/tutors.

Contact sessions with Apprentices are needed early on in the Apprentice programme, to build up confidence and aspirations to progress.

4.4 Staff Development

Expertise, materials and tools have been developed. It is possible to envisage a programme of staff development for teachers, trainers and work based learning staff. Options for consideration include: dedicated events for training providers and college staff members; Aimhigher content being included in existing events; networking, presentations and meetings with staff and managers in the sector.

4.5 Marketing/Promotion

Career opportunities via vocational pathways need to be demonstrated in order to show the benefits of higher education. One approach is to use testimonials from industry expert speakers. Another approach is to recruit learners progressing to HE from a vocational route to act as student ambassadors working with young people (eg. as mentors).

Development time and resources have led to a range of common materials and aids. To maximise this investment these now need to be promoted for widespread use.

4.6 Monitoring and Evaluation

Clear systems and processes are required for the recording of participant characteristics in order to ensure targeting principles are being met.

Tracking systems are needed to show which participants are involved in a series of activities over time.

Measuring the impact of interventions, in terms of improvements in progression to higher levels of study and through to higher education, requires collaborative efforts and follow-up over time. The Aimhigher Borough Coordinators, together with universities, can have a role in demonstrating improvements in the numbers taking up places in HE from a vocational route.

Recommendations for Aimhigher Greater Manchester partners

Borough coordinators:

★ Maintain detailed information about the nature of work-based provision locally;
★ Pro-active communication and joint-working to target priority learners;
★ Partnerships and data sharing to measure impact.

Coordination Unit:

★ Build progression support packages for students taking 14-19 Diplomas;
★ Help to share information (eg. a database of contacts);
★ Pro-active work to engage with providers in the work-based learning sector;
★ Aimhigher events for trainers/teachers, and staff development for Connexions staff and other IAG professionals;
★ Assist with analysis of data.

Others:

★ GMSA progression agreements need to continue including bringing in employers if possible;
★ Staff members in colleges & universities working across the range of academic and vocationally-orientated provision should be encouraged to work together;
★ Key funders (such as LSC) can support HE progression within the context of provider agreements.
Apprentices, and a high percentage of adults in work, lack aspirations and an understanding of the benefits and opportunities in higher level qualifications. Apprentices and indeed adults will never progress to higher education in any great numbers unless the mould is broken and opportunity is put within reach of these important groups.

Employers sometimes fail to appreciate both the potential of their Apprentices and the future needs of their industry for higher level skills; but, more importantly, Apprentices themselves are stuck in thinking that ‘this is your lot, complete your Apprenticeship Framework and then get on with your job, for life!’

With this in mind, the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Work-based Learner Progression Strategy 2008-2011 has been developed that will meet the needs of identified cohorts, including Young Apprentices, Apprentices, Advanced Apprentices and adults. The Strategy includes a learner-centred progression framework which provides a coherent sequence of developmental opportunities for people in the target groups from Year 10 to adult.

The progression framework sets out a menu of activities that will best meet the needs of work-based learners to enable appropriate opportunities to progress at various key intervention points throughout their programme. Each activity is designed to build on previous experience, where possible or appropriate, in order to develop aspirations, awareness, confidence and motivation to progress to HE.

From Autumn 2008, a new Work-based Learning Progression Partnership group will meet six times a year to oversee the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Work-based Learner Progression Strategic Plan. In addition group members will be involved in promoting the Aimhigher ethos and facilitating the planned activities where possible within their own employing organisation and within others.

The Aimhigher Greater Manchester Work-based Learning Progression Partnership aims to provide a strategic approach that ensures the most appropriate and cost effective delivery of activities for vocational and work-based learners. The Partnership will also ensure that the needs of work-based learners are met by facilitating the development of appropriate opportunities to progress and the provision of a range of interventions throughout their learning pathway.
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