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Bringing the Tapestry Together: Building Systemic Partnership In and Beyond Bedfordshire

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Bedfordshire

BRINGING THE TAPESTRY TOGETHER: BUILDING SYSTEMIC PARTNERSHIP IN AND BEYOND BEDFORDSHIRE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. The research reported here was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and undertaken to ascertain partners' views of the University of Bedfordshire's collaborative links with schools and colleges, out of which a model of partnership and a strategic plan for its development has been generated.
2. Semi-structured telephone interviews with 20 respondents and three focus groups have taken place. A feedback seminar was held to present and discuss the findings. The extensive literature on university/school partnerships, much of it from the US on the provision of teacher training and development, and the literature on organisational collaboration that can inform consideration of educational partnerships was sampled. The particularities of the University's environment include the replacement by two unitary authorities of Bedfordshire County Council resulting, with Luton Borough Council, in the University having to relate to three neighbouring local authorities. The two new authorities have a tripartite system which raises challenges for widening participation and recruitment initiatives.

The University of Bedfordshire in Partnership

3. Whilst the University has a long history of collaboration with local schools and colleges, from which it draws a large proportion of its undergraduate students, the drive to partnership working has been significantly stepped up since 2003 when the current Vice-Chancellor joined the University. There are various strands of collaboration with schools and colleges.
4. Widening participation is predominantly driven from the University's Partnership Office through Aimhigher Bedfordshire. The Partnership Office was established in 2004 to lead the collaborative drive around widening participation and the delivery by partner colleges of the University's foundation degrees (FDs). The University's recently written Widening Participation Strategic Assessment stresses that: "Universities are, in our view, agents of social transformation. Excellence in the generation of opportunity is, or should be, of equal importance with excellence in innovation and research, excellence in teaching and learning, excellence in employer engagement or excellence in international reputation" (p3).
5. Progression to the University is primarily the responsibility of the Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department, drawing on faculties as required. It is notable that the main suppliers of students to the University are further education colleges (FECs), most of which are local to the University.
6. Teacher training and development is delivered by the School of Education which has links with over 500 schools. It only became part of the University of Bedfordshire in 2006 and full synergy between the School of Education and the Partnership Office continues to be built. The School of Education has established a Schools Partnership Steering Group which has developed a strong sense of commitment between partners. The University is the co-sponsor of one academy, partner with another and increasingly involved with the other two academies in the area, and an active member on the boards of the four Trust Consortia in Bedfordshire. Unusually, it is represented on both the Luton 14 – 19 Strategic Partnership (Campus Luton Partnership) and the joint Bedfordshire Partnership.
7. Engagement with further education (FE) partners includes the partnership groups of the Bedfordshire Federation of Further and Higher Education and the Polhill Group of Colleges, both of which have significantly grown the number of students on the University's FDs over the last five years. The University is also involved with three

colleges, one as the main partner, in bidding for University Challenge monies to establish University Centres.

8. The coherence between these strands of collaboration can be increased to find synergies in joint working across the University. The furtherance of this is a major aspect of the developments proposed in the report.

Mechanisms of Partnership

9. A range of posts and roles have been established in the University and in colleges and schools to facilitate more effective partnership working. As well as several management posts, these include link tutors in each academic department to liaise with course leaders of FDs in the FECs and Aimhigher co-ordinators in schools. Meetings bringing these post and role holders together act as policy development, information dissemination and problem-solving forums.

Partners' Perceptions

10. Findings from interviews suggest that key features of collaborative working can be categorised by the attitudes that inform a "collaborative will", the strategic fit that is required for any organisation to undertake partnership working, issues of authority and equality, and the risk factors to partnerships. Respondents identified that key characteristics for successful partnership working were trust and transparency, being available and welcoming, taking time and being patient and accepting difference between organisational cultures. However, it would appear that such characteristics are not essential where there is a very strong strategic fit, that is, there is significant return from working in collaboration.
11. A strong commitment to partnership working by senior managers was seen as critical and appropriate delegation of authority could also affect the efficiency of collaborations. Some respondents thought that universities often suffered a degree of dissonance between senior management and faculties and departments, with centrally made agreements not being fully implemented by faculties. Equality between partners was not a particular concern, but having a sense of shared ownership and vision was appreciated. Some FEC managers spoke of being made to feel subservient in relation to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), although commended the University of Bedfordshire in this respect. Colleges had a counter measure in establishing links with a number of universities. These tensions did not appear to exist with the University's links with schools, arguably because there is not a shared learner group or overlap of curriculum. There were a number of different patterns for chairing meetings, and therefore controlling agendas, exhibited in the partnerships surveyed. In some the University held the chair, in one there was a revolving chair, and in another, the chair was held by a school. Partnership working could be at risk when there was a change in membership or in the external environment; such latter changes include the demise of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the new unitary authorities and restrictions on student numbers.
12. These findings can be summarised into a number of conditions required for successful collaborative working, including having agreed lines of communication, developing arrangements to contain and resolve disagreements or other tensions and taking a long-term perspective on the partnership.
13. Two areas impeding the development of collaborative links emerged. The first was the current complex and complicated pattern of collaborations between the University and its partner schools and colleges. This required simplifying to gain greater effectiveness and to utilise synergies. The second was the limitation in the capacity of the University and its partners for sustaining partnership working and the subsequent need to identify

means to enhance it. The probable ending of funding for Aimhigher and the apparent reluctance of schools to allow students out on visits are also current problems.

Developing the Tapestry of Partnerships

14. The University's collaborative working is driven by a vision of achieving transformational change in learners, their families and communities. This vision is founded on the principles of:
 - Placing the learner at the centre of all partnership planning and functioning with the aim of improving their life chances and giving opportunities to those who otherwise would not have them;
 - Bridging perceptual and attitudinal barriers between higher education (HE), FE and school education in the minds of learners, their families and staff in educational institutions;
 - Embedding the University in the community as an open, accessible centre of culture and knowledge and as a partner with the health and social services.
15. Much is already in place to further these principles, but development projects with indicative action plans to progress them further are proposed. The development projects are designed to additionally address the problems of over-complexity and limited capacity.

The Learner at the Centre: The Assumption of Progression

16. The goal of collaboration with schools and colleges should be to build a learning environment enabling learners to fulfil their potential with those who could benefit from HE being encouraged and supported to find a place and helping parents or carers to see progression to HE as the norm. That is, partnership working should build an 'assumption of progression' to HE. It is observed that a young person's aspiration to progress to HE can be engendered through awareness that their school and college works in partnership with the local university.
17. If the learner is at the centre of partnership working, the voice of the learner has to be heard, but this is not consistently the case. Developing a methodology to discover what young learners think about their educational experience and progression opportunities, through surveying the tools used by Aimhigher elsewhere is one development project to be undertaken. It will inform the other proposed project of developing a coherent Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) campaign with partner local authorities, 14 – 19 Partnerships and colleges, drawing on the expertise in marketing and communications in the University centrally and in the Business School. This is in response to the new developments in IAG as driven by the Education and Skills Act 2008.

Bridging Perceptual Barriers between Educational Sectors

18. The frequent lack of understanding of other educational sectors by teaching staff as well as learners and their families, can lead to young learners from backgrounds with no experience of HE having distorted notions of university life. It can also lead school teachers to misrepresent HE and to lecturers in HEIs having unrealistic expectations about the knowledge and skills of students coming straight from a school or college. This can lead some young people to reject HE as an option or to drop out.
19. It is therefore important for the University to be a presence within schools. As well as the links through teacher training and Aimhigher or other outreach interventions, the University delivers a Level 4 unit at one school and will provide the venue for delivering

a 14 – 19 Diploma. Involvement in the Pupil Voice initiative in some schools can also allow the University to make itself known to school students. The University is involved, through membership of 14 – 19 Partnerships, with the development of 14 –19 Diplomas, and offers progression from these into undergraduate programmes, including the FDs delivered at partner colleges. .

20. Whether the University should aim to have as seamless as possible alignment between the Level 3 and 4 curricula, as part of an ‘all-through curriculum’ is debateable. The argument concerns how this would meet the needs of international and the many mature undergraduates and whether the first, and foundation, year at the University can be more productively considered as offering learners a fresh start.
21. The associated development project is to pilot an exchange scheme whereby staff from selected academic departments at the University spend a day a term in a school or college to observe practice and to deliver a guest lecture or otherwise engage with the Level 3 students. Opportunities for school and college staff to spend time in the University would be offered, although it is expected that most schools would be unable to take this up.

Embedding the University in the Community

22. The University has a strong commitment to deepening its engagement with the community, opening up to local people and making HE a familiar reality to children and young people and their parents. For example, the University has a coffee shop in the foyer open to students, staff and local people alike and is making its theatre and sports facilities available to the public. The University collaborates closely with the neighbouring UK Centre for Carnival Arts and has started an arts festival drawing on local creativity in Luton. The University has been involved with the Marsh Farm New Deal Project for nine years, supports local businesses through the Knowledge Hub and, in partnership with Bedfordshire Olympic Opportunities Support Team, oversees a group of Young Ambassadors taken to the Beijing Olympics and now raising the aspirations of their peers.
23. In the context of the *Every Child Matters* agenda, putting the learner at the centre implies that attention should be given to *all* places in which children and young people learn. A further implication is that ‘the learner’ is also ‘the child and young person alongside their families’ and suggests that the University should engage with the whole of the children’s workforce, including health and social care and youth work as well as education.
24. Aimhigher has been working with children and young people in and leaving care for some years, and the university has been awarded the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for its commitment to increasing participation in HE of young people in care. Work with young people on the verge of criminality has more recently commenced.
25. The final development project borrows from the University’s Widening Participation Strategic Assessment in proposing a scheme that places the child and young person in the context of educational and welfare services and more coherently brings together the strands of linkage between the University and the workforce of services for children and young people. Through the School of Education, the Department of Applied Social Studies and the Department of Midwifery and Child Health, a wide range of qualifying and post-qualifying programmes are delivered and research and consultancy is provided. However, currently the engagement is not as strategically coherent as it could be, and does not take advantage of opportunities for synergies and more effective working. Meetings between the relevant departments will be established to deliver a more strategic approach to engagement with Children’s Trusts.

Conclusion

26. This analysis has led to the development of a number of project proposals, each designed to tackle one of the key developmental challenges identified. The proposed development projects bring together central units of the University and a high proportion of academic departments to engage with schools, colleges, local authorities, Children's Trusts and Health Trusts, as well as the local community. The principle here is that greater internal co-operation can simplify the collaborative process and increase the University's capacity to further develop partnerships with other institutions and agencies.
27. The University has nearly completed the weaving of a tapestry of partnership. The process will be continued by taking a broad perspective as an agent of social transformation to improve the life chances of all the children and young people in the locality of the University, working with them directly through such interventions as Aimhigher and indirectly through increasing the quality of teaching, and social and health care staff and through making higher education a reality through the involvement of the University in the community.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Research

- 1.1.1 The research presented in this report was funded by a grant from the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) to research, develop and evaluate links between higher education institutions (HEIs), schools, colleges and academies as set out in Circular Letter 01/2009. Since acquiring university status as the University of Luton in 1993, the University of Bedfordshire (hereafter “the University”) has been a strong advocate of partnership. This has stepped up since 2003 with the appointment of the current Vice-Chancellor, Professor Les Ebdon. The Dean of Partnerships and others in the Partnership Office recognise that currently there are a multitude of threads of collaboration involving the University and welcome this grant from the HEFCE as enabling a further enhancement to partnership working by exploring conceptually and developmentally how these threads can be woven into a tapestry of partnership. This would consolidate collaboration by the University and, to complete the project’s title, build systemic partnership in and beyond Bedfordshire.
- 1.1.2 As a former College of Higher Education achieving university status a year after the Polytechnics and located in an unfashionable town, the then University of Luton had to quickly enhance its partnerships with local Further Education Colleges (FECs) and engage with schools in Luton and Bedfordshire. The University drew the majority of its undergraduate population from local districts, in particular areas of considerable deprivation in Luton and Bedford and some rural parts of the former county of Bedfordshire, and continues to do so¹. Over the last 16 years, it has thus established strong links with some schools in the area, and is a member of both local 14 – 19 Strategic Partnerships.
- 1.1.3 A key driver for the University to engage in partnership with schools and colleges has been to secure progression routes for learners. The availability of FDs and other higher education (HE) in FECs for local learners is a critical part of the progression route. FEC managers see this as offering Level 3 students the opportunity to progress and study locally. It is therefore thought about at the University in the same context as partnership with schools or with colleges in relation to their 14 – 19 provision.
- 1.1.4 The urge towards collaboration does not derive solely from necessity. The advantages in partnership working have been recognised across the private and public sectors in recent years and despite apparently contradictory policy thrusts within education to stimulate competition and rivalry, there have been as many directives to support working collaboratively². Indeed, as a college principal observed: “*Any successful organisation has to be outward looking and committed to partnership and to real collaboration*”.

1.2 Literature on Partnership

- 1.2.1 It is not the purpose of this research to undertake an extensive search of the literature on university/school links. However, to gain some familiarity with prior research and to make use of relevant categorisations and concepts a brief survey was undertaken. There is an extensive literature on university and school collaborative links. Connolly and James (2006) summarise the literature from the UK, and Miller and Hafner (2008) review the literature from the USA which is especially voluminous and long standing. Much of this American literature concerns collaboration around teacher training and development, in particular with “Professional Development Schools”, similar to but predating Training Schools in England. Miller and Hafner (2008) consider university/school links in the broader context of partnership with the local community. They note that in recent years, there have been strong demands in the US for universities to collaborate with the ‘community’ through “service-learning classes, university–school partnerships, literacy training programs, neighbourhood clean-up initiatives, job training programs, family health services, and tutoring services” (p68).

¹ See the recently submitted Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) for a detailed analysis of this.

² See Glatter (2004) on the origins and implications of the collaborative drive for schools in England.

- 1.2.2 Many of these North American partnerships are between a local university and schools in deprived neighbourhoods. In a Canadian study, James and Haig-Brown (2001) studied student's perceptions of the "University Pathway Program" developed by the Faculty of Education of York University in Toronto and the school board of a low-income, multi-cultural district located close to the university. In the partnership "all students from participating schools visit the university to tour the facilities and/or attend seminars, workshops, and lectures; and teacher candidates carry out their practice teaching in the area schools. In addition, high school students are able to participate in a future teachers club, take one university course, and work as interns on science projects in the Faculty of Science at the university. There is also assistance for students applying to the university and other support services for those who attend the university" (p231). An interesting observation from their research was that the school students studied had a strong sense of community and felt a responsibility to give back to the community the benefits of their education, and importantly that they see the local university as being a part of their community. It is not certain that these views would be replicated in England.
- 1.2.3 Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen have written extensively about collaboration in both the public and private sectors in the UK and have developed the concept introduced by Kanter (1990) of "collaborative advantage". In Huxham and Vangen (2005) they note that "collaborative advantage" can be gained when the primary objective of the partnership is one that is of concern to all partners but of central focus to none. That is, the aims that bring organisations together should not be central to their mainstream business, and only within the partnership is space created to pursue them. For example, with Aimhigher Partnerships, HEIs and FECs are concerned primarily with recruitment which may, in part, derive from widening participation, and secondary schools are not especially concerned about progression to higher education (it is not an OFSTED criteria), but are interested when widening participation activities have the effect of improving attainment levels.
- 1.2.4 Finally, numerous discussions of the meaning of "partnership" and "collaboration" are to be found in the literature. For the purpose of this report, these terms will not be problematised but will follow how the managers and practitioners involved in the research used the terms. Clearly, there is a difference between a bi-lateral partnership of an HEI and a school over outreach activity and a multi-lateral partnership involving FECs and schools with an HEI lasting over a number of years and making strategic decisions, but the former may take place in the context of the latter and be authorised through it.

1.3 Methodology

- 1.3.1 The initial intention of this research project had been to conduct interviews and focus groups with learners and staff in schools and colleges and key staff in the University. It was hoped that the views of learners could be secured through contacts that the University already had through Aimhigher or outreach activities. However, when attempting to construct a question schedule for learners, it was soon recognised that learners would not, or indeed should not, know about the partnerships behind the activity that they experience. Thus the questions drafted were largely identical to those used by Aimhigher about awareness of and aspiration for higher education. It was decided not to attempt to directly address learners in this phase, but to allow lines of inquiry on learners' perceptions and attitudes concerning partnership to emerge from the engagement with teaching staff and managers.
- 1.3.2 Semi-structured interviews were carried out over the telephone with 20 people:
- Four heads/deputy heads (from two middle and two upper schools in trust consortia);
 - A principal of a sixth form college;
 - A principal of an academy;
 - A senior local authority officer with responsibilities for the 14 – 19 agenda;
 - Four managers, including a principal, from three FECs in the Bedfordshire Federation of Further and Higher Education;

- Two managers at further education colleges bidding for University Centres under the University Challenge arrangement.
- The chief executive of an educational charity sponsoring an academy;
- An Aimhigher officer based at the University;
- The Vice Chancellor and four managers at the University.

Interviewees had been sent a list of question areas to be explored, although the questions put varied according to respondents' accounts of partnership working. Interviews lasted 30 – 60 minutes and were not recorded. The researcher made extensive notes which were written up and emailed to the interviewee by the next day for their comments and amendment. Where necessary, clarification was sought or further questions asked. The amended summary was the data used for analysis.

- 1.3.3 It had been hoped to undertake more interviews with school representatives, but securing these proved more difficult than with college managers. Access to schools improved when the University's School of Education's contacts were employed. However, the head and deputy head teachers interviewed represented upper and middle schools and all provided valuable information and views on partnership with a university.
- 1.3.4 Three focus groups were held, each of which was appended to a pre existing meeting. In all cases, the chair and other staff from the Partnership Office left the room prior to the focus group. The groups were:
- The Polhill Group of FECs (Seven managers representing five colleges)
 - Aimhigher Bedfordshire Area Partnership Committee (Three managers from FECs and a local authority 14 – 19 representative)
 - The FEHE (Further Education/Higher Education) Liaison Group (Two FEC liaison officers, two faculty sub deans for Quality Assurance, a faculty manager, a member of the Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning, a manager from Learning Resources at the University)

Prior to the focus groups the meetings were observed and used to formulate questions. Discussions were recorded and transcripts used to produce a summary with non-ascribed quotations of the session which was sent to participants for their approval and comments.

- 1.3.5 A feedback seminar was held for interviewees, focus group participants and other stakeholders. A draft executive summary was circulated prior to the event and a presentation of findings to date given. In addition to the researcher, ten people attended:
- Representatives from two local authority 14 – 19 teams
 - A principal-designate of an academy sponsored by the University
 - The deputy principal and the higher education (HE) liaison officer from a local FEC
 - Head of the School of Education of the University
 - An Aimhigher HE Progression Officer (HEPO)
 - Three members of the Partnership Office.

The seminar proved useful in discussion of some key emergent questions and informs this report. Some participants felt that such meetings could usefully oversee the development of further collaborative working.

- 1.3.6 The lack of the learners' voice in this report is to be regretted. Further evaluation of the Bedfordshire partnerships will pay particular attention to this. The observation from a Canadian study will inform this future research with learners:

“What became evident as the interviews and the analysis progressed was that, although the students did not name the partnership as significant, they named the people and the programs they worked with in the partnership who, for the most part, had made a positive difference to them. The partnership was not a singular event for them but an ongoing set

of relationships among people; the abstraction called “the partnership” was not part of their discourse. On the other hand, they clearly acknowledged the concrete presences of the coordinator of the program, an instructor in one of the advanced credit courses, and of their friends from school and community. For the most part, they did not see these as directly related to the partnership.” (James & Haig-Brown 2001 p246)

1.4 The University of Bedfordshire Environment

- 1.4.1 Bedfordshire, a small county, contains a disproportionately large set of complexities. Although part of the East of England Region, some feel it to have stronger ties with the Milton Keynes area to its west and the planned expansion of a South Midlands conurbation in the area will strengthen this view. Since April 2009 when Bedfordshire County Council was replaced by the unitary authorities of Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire Councils, the old Bedfordshire area as covered by the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC), now includes with Luton Borough three unitary authorities. For linkages with schools, this is especially complicated. Luton has predominantly 11 – 16 high schools with most post-16 education taking place in the Luton Sixth Form College, Barnfield College or Dunstable College. Central Bedfordshire employs a three tier system with middle schools for Years 5 – 8 and upper schools from Years 9 – 13. Bedford, whilst currently still retaining the three tier system, is likely to move to primary and 11 – 18 schooling in the near future. Finally, in addition, there are two academies open in Luton, another in Central Bedfordshire starting September 2009 and one in Bedford opening in 2010, as well as four trust consortia in Bedford and Central Bedfordshire.
- 1.4.2 The new unitary authorities and the demise of the local LSC in 2010 raise some questions about the continuing significance of the geography of “Bedfordshire”. It is only since 2006 with the transfer of the Polhill Campus and Schools of Business, Sports Science and, most significantly, Education from De Montfort University to the then University of Luton that it has taken the name of the University of Bedfordshire. However, any ambiguities about “Bedfordshire” as a geographical entity can probably be used to the University’s advantage as a major player holding that title.

1.5 Structure of the Report

- 1.5.1 The report initially describes the existing threads of collaboration through consideration of the functions that partnership working fulfils, the component parts of the University that drive partnership, and the main collaborations with schools and colleges with which the University is involved. It then looks at the mechanisms of posts, roles and meetings used to make the partnerships work successfully. Following this, participants’ perceptions of how and why partnerships succeed or fail are outlined and discussed.
- 1.5.2 In the latter part of the report, the collaborations are examined from the perspective of putting the learner at the centre, and asking whether these enhance the life chances of learners. This then drives an evaluation of the current approach to partnership in the University and developmental plans to take forward collaborative working with schools, academies and colleges that is motivated by the needs and interests of the learner.

THE PRESENT STATE OF THE BEDFORDSHIRE TAPESTRY

2. THE UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE IN PARTNERSHIP

2.1 Functions of Collaboration

2.1.1 In its Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) submitted to the HEFCE in June 2009, the University recognises that changes in the school sector “are potentially so profound that it is more and more difficult concisely to define the totality of arrangements for the provision of school-based education. The boundaries between sectors and between providers are less clear and the expectation that universities will engage with schools is more intense than it has ever been”. The patterns of collaboration are currently complex and seemingly complicated. These are represented in Figure 1. This shows four strands of collaboration with schools and colleges:

- Widening Participation;
- Progression to the University;
- Supporting schools (teacher training, research and consultancy, curriculum development and support for failing schools);
- Provision of HE in further education (FE).

Whilst most academic departments of the University will have involvement in some of these strands, they are mostly organised from three main partnership-seeking centres:

- The Partnership Office
- Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department
- School of Education

2.1.2 Finally, these link with a number of partnership groupings. A distinction has to be made between those partnerships with which the University plays a central role able to determine or strongly influence the form and functioning of a partnership and those in which control is shared with other partners or the University has a more peripheral role. In the former are:

- Aimhigher Bedfordshire
- The Polhill Group of Colleges
- Schools Partnership Committee
- Bi-lateral partnerships with schools, academies and colleges

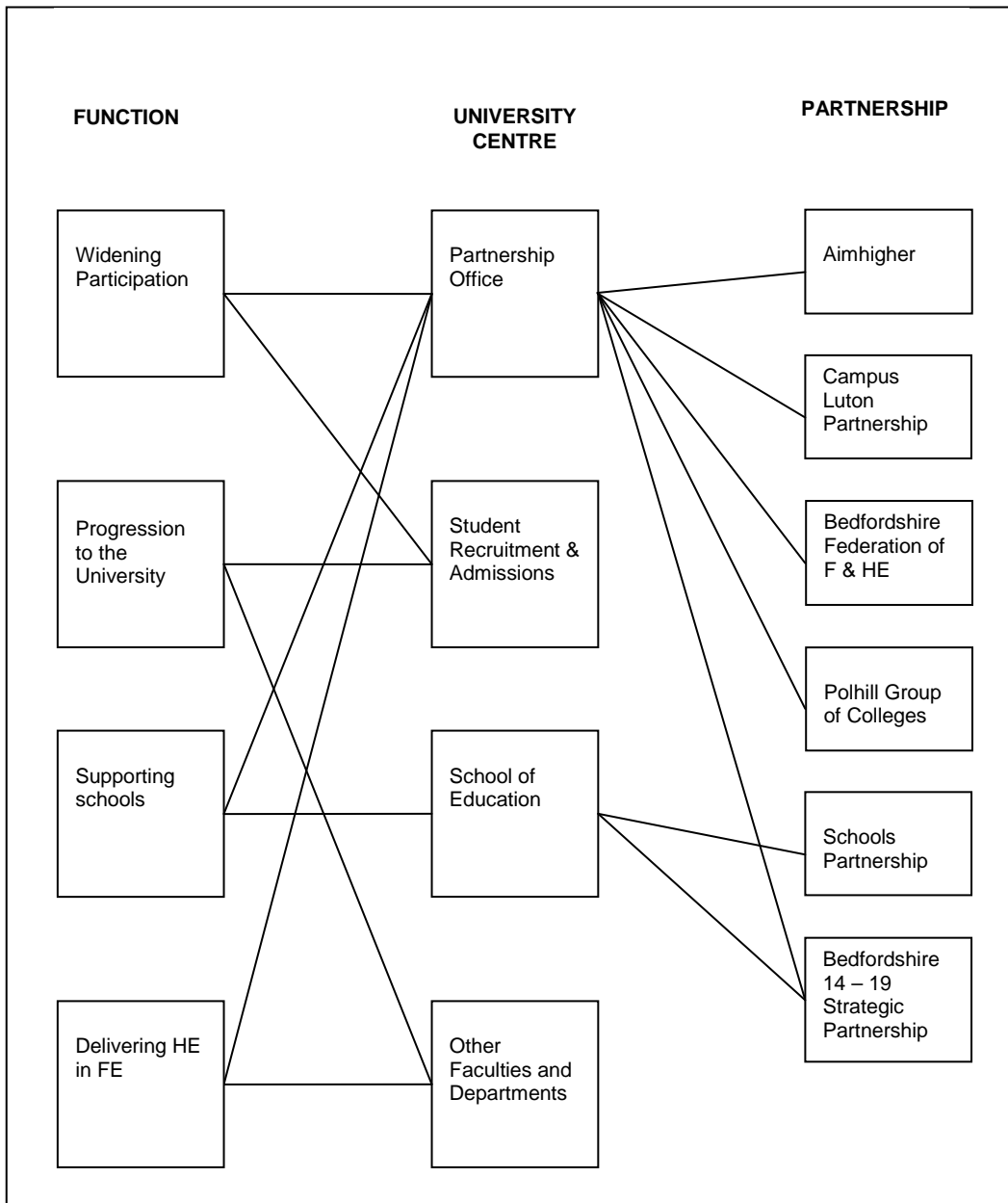
The latter set of partnerships includes:

- The Bedfordshire Federation of Further and Higher Education³
- University Challenge partnerships
- Campus Luton Partnership
- Partnerships around trust schools and academies

Participation in the latter group should be regarded as supporting the development of the strategic framework for partnership.

³ The Bedfordshire Federation would originally have been in the first group, but now with its apparent focus on the 14 – 19 agenda and the implications of the imminent demise of the LSC, the University would seem to have a position generally equivalent with the college partners.

FIGURE 1: The Bedfordshire Loom: Functions, centres and partnerships



2.2 Widening Participation

- 2.2.1 Since its inception in 1993, the University has been a leading widening participation institution providing HE opportunities to low participation areas across Luton and in parts of Bedfordshire and beyond. This led it to be an enthusiastic participant in the Excellence Challenge initiatives in the area, and more latterly, of Aimhigher. The University's WPSA comments that universities "are most successful in widening access... where the impulse to do so flows from the essential character of the institution and is fully embedded in its core values" and asserts that this is the case with the University of Bedfordshire. It continues with a clear statement of vision: "Universities are, in our view, agents of social transformation. Excellence in the generation of opportunity is, or should be, of equal importance with excellence in innovation and research, excellence in teaching and learning, excellence in employer engagement or excellence in international reputation" (p3) and "This emphasis on transformation is central to the institutional mission and fundamental to our identity. We

recognise ourselves as an access university, whose key purpose is to open up opportunities to those who might otherwise have been unable to fulfil their full potential” (p4).

- 2.2.2 Widening participation is primarily organised through the Aimhigher team located within the Partnership Office. The Partnership Office was established in 2004 to drive the University’s revised approach to partnership advocated by the then new Vice Chancellor who had previously had responsibility for the extensive partnership of colleges in the South West. Led by the Dean of Partnerships, the Office is responsible for links with colleges and schools, Aimhigher, the Academies, Trusts and Schools Group, Progression Accords and opportunities around the 2012 Olympics. From 2009/10, the Partnership Office will be regarded under the University’s financial arrangements as a ‘virtual faculty’, receiving the income for students studying HE in FECs, paying the colleges their allocation and commissioning faculties to provide support around quality assurance and link tutoring.
- 2.2.3 Aimhigher Bedfordshire has existed since 2004 and is relatively small although since April 2009 it relates to three local authorities. The University has played a leading role in the Aimhigher Partnership since its inception, chairs the Area Partnership Committee and employs the key workers, now the Higher Education Progression Officers. The Joint Area Review of Luton Children’s Services in April 2008 commented that “the Aimhigher programme has increased significantly the number of pupils from lower socio-economic groups applying for higher education places” (para 69). Aimhigher is perceived by one college manager as bringing institutions and projects together and, because it is well established, of providing a bank of local knowledge, such as the appropriate person in partner schools with whom to liaise. One example of partnership working through Aimhigher has been the funding of a publication *13+ Connect* produced by a local FEC offering a range of extra-curricula and school activities for 13 – 16 year olds. Another college representative saw Aimhigher “as the hub of a big wheel of partners and of great value for sharing good practice”.
- 2.2.4 The University also runs activities and provides information, advice and guidance to encourage progression to higher education through the Student Recruitment Team and academic departments. For example, surgeries are held for Year 13 students across the county to guide them on what institutions are looking for in their UCAS application. The Head of Student Recruitment at the University is quoted on the University website: “*Students are not always aware of what information universities are looking for and how to sell themselves, not just academically, but about what they get up to outside the classroom*”⁴.

2.3 Progression to the University

- 2.3.1 Recruitment to the University, especially in the case of full time undergraduate students, draws very strongly on the immediate locality. This includes areas with high levels of social, economic and educational deprivation and it is from these areas that the University recruits most strongly. In 2008/09, of new undergraduate students entering the University, many came from the following local institutions:

Bedford College	135
Barnfield College	116
Luton Sixth Form College	109
Milton Keynes College	79
Dunstable College	63

There is therefore a strong motivation to further develop and maintain partnership with local schools and colleges.

- 2.3.2 The Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department, responsible for representing the University to potential students, is being reorganized into teams to work with

⁴ <http://www.beds.ac.uk/news/2008/dec/081217-ucas> (accessed 22/7/09)

each faculty over outreach into schools and colleges. In conjunction with the faculties, there is an increasing spread of partnership links with schools and colleges.

2.4 Increasing Teaching Quality

- 2.4.1 The provision of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is nationally a long standing driver for collaboration between schools and universities. However, the University of Bedfordshire has only delivered ITT programmes since the transfer of the School of Education from De Montfort University in 2006. The Head of the School of Education, in post since 2007, felt that: *“There has been a real sea change in the attitude of schools to the University over this period. Secondary heads now regard the University of Bedfordshire as the local university from whom they will readily take student teachers and to which they will encourage staff to register for the MA or other CPD (Continuing Professional Development) programmes”*.
- 2.4.2 The School of Education has partnerships with more than 200 secondary schools and 260 primary schools to manage the placement of ITT students for teaching practice and to offer CPD opportunities. For ITT delivery, schools are being organised into clusters, normally based around a training school, and with a joint appointment to oversee teacher training and to manage newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Partner schools involved in the Masters programme are being grouped into hubs for delivery of the programme. Over the next few years, it is hoped to develop synergy between the hubs and clusters. The University is currently reviewing all of its qualifying teaching courses in the light of *Every Child Matters*, the developing 14-19 curriculum and the emerging needs of the Children’s workforce.
- 2.4.3 A deputy head of a middle school felt that having student teachers in the school improved recruitment and retention of staff and stimulated the rest of the staff group through the new ideas and uses of technology that they brought with them. The children also benefit from having new and, usually, younger staff in the school with fresh ideas about teaching. A head teacher of another school also noted the value for the professional development of staff to take on a mentoring role for trainee teachers. As the University gains through securing training places for its students there are strong mutual benefits. This has been taken further in some schools. For example, one upper school organises an annual Teaching and Learning conference and in 2009 this took place at the School of Education’s premises with attendance from the school, its partner middle schools and from the University. Being in partnership with the University is valued; the head of a middle school spoke of her sense of pride in displaying in her office the Certificate of Partnership presented by the University.
- 2.4.4 Establishing research links with schools is an area for development. The Head of the School of Education observed *“there is a need to develop the evidential basis for partnership working. Schools are more focused on undertaking self evaluation, and asking for assistance in this. Further, teachers on the MA in Education at the University carry out action research in their school, potentially benefiting the school, the student and the University”*. The chief executive of an educational charity hoped that *“the expertise of the University of Bedfordshire will be used to improve teaching and learning at All Saints Academy through teacher training and CPD and through research”*; and the Principal of an existing Academy also hopes to develop a research relationship with the University. The Luton Joint Area Review in April 2008 noted that *“external evaluation, mostly research based, is in place, with good links to the University of Bedfordshire”* (para 85).
- 2.4.5 The School of Education has established a Partnership Steering Committee to represent the views of schools and to influence the curriculum offered within the School. This committee has the chair, vice-chair and majority representation from schools. One head teacher thought the committee was more effective for not being chaired by the University, giving school representatives greater confidence. The committee spent time early on discussing the desired characteristics of a teacher trained through the University of Bedfordshire in the 21st century. In particular, it was felt that school students needed to learn how to learn to prepare themselves for fast changing skill needs over their future working lives.

2.5 Academies and Trusts

- 2.5.1 The University is the co-sponsor of the All Saints Academy in Dunstable opening September 2009, and a partner of the Bedford Academy due to open September 2010. Although not a formal partner of Barnfield West and Barnfield South Academies, the University has strong links with these two institutions situated close to its Luton campus. Both the Partnership Office and the School of Education are involved in these partnerships.
- 2.5.2 The University is represented on the boards of the four Trusts in Bedfordshire, which are each at different stages of development. The Head of the School of Education chairs the board of the North East Bedford Trust. The other trusts are:
- Harlington Area Schools Trust
 - Bedfordshire East Schools Trust
 - Kempston Education Trust

These trusts are all consortia of upper, middle and, in some cases, lower schools. They are all working towards providing seamless learning transition with an all-through curriculum offer and systems to avoid problems at transition points.

2.6 Curriculum Development

- 2.6.1 Strategically, there has been significant thinking about the alignment of the 14 – 19 and HE curriculum. The University's Education Strategy (2008 – 2013) states:

“The University must respond to the needs of an economically growing region for a highly skilled, creative and responsive workforce and for the wider social and cultural requirements of the local community. Providing appropriate progression routes though links with Schools, Colleges and partner organisations and with initiatives such as Campus Luton will be important here as well as ensuring that the academic community is effectively networked with the wider community of which it is part.

We will respond to changes in the 14 - 19 curriculum and the development of diplomas to ensure that these provide additional entry routes to vocational higher education, not additional barriers, and that our curricula are matched with students' prior experiences so that there is seamless developmental progression”.

- 2.6.2 The University is a member of both the Luton and Bedfordshire Strategic 14 – 19 Partnerships through the Partnership Office and the School of Education. Through these partnerships, the University is involved in the development of 14 – 19 Diplomas. Other initiatives in curriculum development by the academic departments include:
- The School of Physical Education and Sports Science supporting the BTEC in Sports Science delivered at Mark Rutherford Upper School in Bedford.
 - The Division of Science's provision of activities during Science Week, guest lectures and practicals at schools and colleges underpinning the AS/A-level syllabus and working with the Luton Astronomical Society and the University's telescope
 - The School of Education has attained Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) funding to provide a three day teaching experience for sixth formers.

2.7 Delivering HE in FE

- 2.7.1 There are strong business reasons for both HEIs and FECs with no or little direct HE funding to be in partnership over the delivery of FDs and other HE programmes through a franchise or similar relationship. This does play a vital widening participation role in bringing HE to towns without an HEI presence as well as providing a potentially less threatening

environment to some mature students or to younger learners who have undertaken their Level 3 studies in a FEC.

- 2.7.2 Whilst the Bedfordshire Federation of Higher and Further Education has increasingly focused on the 14 – 19 agenda, the University's predominant interest in the federation is on the delivery of its HE provision by partner colleges. The federation is a well-established forum for developing common systems and processes across Barnfield College, Bedford College, Dunstable College, Luton Sixth Form College and the University at senior management level. For example, the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review process has involved the colleges modelling their quality assurance arrangements for HE provision on those in place in the University. Initially dominated by the University, it has subsequently become a true federation with the chair circulating annually round the five partners. As the FE agenda has become more dominant, the local LSC has attended regularly to update on developments. Although there is a memorandum of understanding, the federation is relatively unstructured and does not employ staff.
- 2.7.3 The Polhill Group are FE Colleges that deliver post compulsory education courses validated by the School of Education and were previously associated with De Montfort University when located in Bedford. The Partnership Office organises an annual meeting of principals with the University's Vice Chancellor and termly meetings with vice principals primarily to discuss the delivery by the colleges of the University's FDs. All the colleges have collaborative relations with a number of other HEIs.
- 2.7.4 The 'University Challenge Group' comprises colleges which the University is supporting in University Challenge bids to develop HE centres. The University is the lead partner in the Aylesbury Vale project, and a partner for the University Centre Milton Keynes and for a centre in North Northamptonshire with the Tresham Institute. The University is the largest provider of HE at the University Centre Milton Keynes, and in the light of the proposed growth of a South Midlands conurbation centred on Milton Keynes, has a strong strategic interest in this development. These institutions do not meet as a group.
- 2.7.5 The University supports the progression accords recognised by the East of England Lifelong Learning Network (MOVE) and is involved with 38 progression accords across the three discipline areas supported by MOVE. It has successfully bid for the largest number of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) in the region and has recruited to these additional places.

2.8 Coherence between the Strands

- 2.8.1 The coherence and synergy between these strands is currently limited and represents an area for development. Whilst there is reasonable cohesion between the centrally based Aimhigher interventions and outreach activity linked to student recruitment, there have been examples of an Aimhigher visit to a school coinciding with an activity planned within a faculty. The University's WPSA recognises that:

"There are considerable opportunities to align our outreach work and our involvement in Aimhigher. For example, there is an expectation that Aimhigher partnerships will develop a 'higher education learner progression framework'. They will need to establish a coherent, progressive framework for widening participation activity aimed at young people from deprived backgrounds from age 11 – 19. This will align well with the University's own programme of activities for young people, contained in its home recruitment strategy. It will also fit well with the Lifelong Learning Network's progression accords, the compacts discussed above and with developments led by the Higher Education Related Framework (HERL) which is shortly to be launched by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust".

- 2.8.2 Other attempts to establish links between parallel initiatives include the recent discussions between the School of Education and Aimhigher about running a maths course taught by ITT

students for Year 9 pupils. This is also recognised in the WPSA: “There is scope to develop this partnership so that it is more reciprocal and can transmit the University of Bedfordshire ‘brand’ more strongly. In particular, we should establish better connections between this schools partnership and other initiatives such as Aimhigher. For example, the schools partnership could be a vehicle for the development of compacts with schools”.

3. MECHANISMS OF PARTNERSHIP

3.1 Posts

3.1.1 A set of posts and roles have been established over time to build and maintain collaborative links between the University and schools and colleges. A number of regular meetings have also been organised to cement these links.

3.1.2 There have been a number of posts established with the primary function of building and maintaining partnership. These are:

- **Dean of Partnership** – The most senior post holder concerned primarily with partnership working leads the Partnership Office and is a member of the University’s Senior Management Team.
- **Director of Widening Participation** – This is a recently created post also based in the Partnership Office to ensure continued corporate focus and sustained coherence on the University’s widening participation policy and practice.
- **Higher Education Progression Officers (HEPOs)** – These are three Aimhigher posts within the Partnership Office, each with a base in a FEC and responsible for working with the cluster of schools in the three unitary authorities in Bedfordshire and Luton. Their duties include the development and delivery of a programme of activities for learners (within the learner progression framework) in discussion with partner schools and colleges, facilitating interaction between HE tutors and staff and students in partner schools and colleges, the planning and delivery of summer schools and the development of specific projects to address the needs of key target groups such as care leavers, and young people at risk of offending. These post holders are “boundary spanners” (Sandholtz & Finan 1998) who have learnt to feel comfortable within the University, the FEC and in the schools with which they liaise. In particular, they tend to identify more with the partnership itself, that is, with Aimhigher, rather than with the University or other partners.
- **Transition Learning Mentors** – Also Aimhigher funded posts, the duties of a Transition Learning Mentor include the development and delivery of mentoring programmes with groups of pupils, especially at key points of transition, to raise attainment, aspiration and awareness of HE. They also liaise with schools, colleges and parents of mentees.
- **FEHE Liaison Officers** – The Liaison Officers are appointments by the three Luton and Bedfordshire FECs and Milton Keynes College to be the key point of contact between their college and the Partnership Office in the delivery of the University’s FDs and other programmes. The functions of these posts (or set of responsibilities undertaken by staff with wider briefs) appear to overlap with those of course leaders in the colleges and link tutors in academic departments of the University (see below).

3.2 Roles

3.2.1 There are also a number of roles in schools and colleges as well as the University that have been developed to support collaboration. These are functions added on to the responsibilities of existing staff or, in two cases, undertaken by students. There have been various

discussions about whether these should be recognised by additional pay or other reward or whether they should be seen as being inherent to the role. The roles are:

- **Link Tutors** - Recognising the importance of personal contact, the role of the University's Link Tutors has recently been developed. The Link Tutors, who are often junior lecturers with an eagerness for new experience, liaise with the course leaders of the University's FDs in partner colleges. To ensure the quality of their engagement with partner departments in FECs, steps are being taken to reduce the number of courses that Link Tutors manage to no more than two and preferably only one.
- **Education Champions** – Each academic department has its own 'education champion' whose role it is to form links with student groups and staff in local schools and colleges where there is the greatest scope to increase progression (especially from among students from groups under-represented in higher education, such as those from the lower socio-economic groups and some minority ethnic groups).
- **Aimhigher Co-ordinators** – Schools nominate a member of staff as an Aimhigher Co-ordinator who will take responsibility for liaising with the HEPO and organising with class teachers the Aimhigher cohort to take part in activities. Buying time to undertake these roles is funded through Aimhigher.
- **Associate Lecturers** – This role is currently being piloted. An FEC lecturer teaching on one of the University's FDs will be recognised as an Associate Lecturer of the University giving rights to use its facilities, including learning resources, staff development opportunities and free course registration.
- **Student Ambassadors** – These are students paid to represent the University at events in schools and colleges. They are managed through the Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department and are also used for Aimhigher activities.
- **Aimhigher Associates** – The University was successful in bidding to be a pathfinder for the Aimhigher Associates Scheme. The Aimhigher Associates are students at the University who are linked with a school or college, ideally where they themselves studied, to act as role models. The scheme has been oversubscribed from local schools and colleges and has been operating across Luton and Bedfordshire and in Milton Keynes. There is currently a drive to find Black and Ethnic Minority male students willing to be Aimhigher Associates as the need for such role models has been clearly signalled.
- **Director of Partnership, School of Education** – This role takes responsibility within the School of Education for building and growing links with schools.
- **School of Education teaching staff** – From September 2009, all teaching staff in the School will have an additional responsibility, as written into their job descriptions, to foster partnership with schools.

3.3 Meetings

- 3.3.1 **The FEHE Liaison Group** – The group is in part the operational forum of the Bedfordshire Federation, but also includes representation from Milton Keynes College. Meetings, chaired by the Director of Widening Participation, bring together the FEHE Liaison Officers from local partner colleges with faculty sub-deans responsible for quality assurance, faculty managers and representatives from Learning Resources and from Student Admissions. The bi-monthly meetings predominantly cover the annual cycle of student recruitment, induction, assessment issues and annual monitoring reports.

- 3.3.2 **The Academies, Trusts and Schools Group** – This is an internal University group chaired by the Dean of Partnerships bringing together staff from the Partnership Office and the School of Education to develop coherent strategies over partnership with academies, trusts and schools.

4. PARTNERS' PERCEPTIONS

4.1 Introduction

- 4.1.1 The perceptions of interviewees and focus group participants are categorised as:

- The Collaborative Will – factors that make partnerships successful or otherwise
- The Strategic Fit – the conditions providing collaborative advantage for partners
- Authority in Partnership – how issues of status and power are dealt with to ensure successful collaboration
- Risk factors – the internal or external changes that can threaten partnership working

4.2 The Collaborative Will

- 4.2.1 **Trusting and Transparency** – It was generally felt that trust between partners facilitated collaborative working. One FEC manager referred to it as *“an essential component of partnership working”*. A University respondent thought: *“partnerships have to be based on trust and the known track record of partners. Partners have to be able to respect each other as critical friends”*. Trust implies that communications will be transparent: *“partners had to be honest and open about what they are trying to achieve”* (FEC Manager). The chief executive of a charity sponsoring an academy in partnership with a FEC felt that potential for conflict of interest over the delivery of some Level 2 and 3 programmes had *“been met by open and honest discussion”*. Not surprisingly, the importance of trust has been discussed in the literature (Connolly and James 2006). Vangen and Huxham (2003) note that *“Trust leads to risk taking, and providing that initial expectations materialize, risk taking in turn buttresses a sense of trust”* (p12)⁵.
- 4.2.2 However, being open and honest is not comfortable if there are disagreements between partners. The development of two academies from failing schools in the Campus Luton Partnership was challenging for many members. A local authority manager recalled that over a series of difficult meetings it was critical to establish a context and framework for people to have their say: *“whilst being ‘open and honest’ is a necessity for partnership working, it has to be on the table and not whispered backstage. Some people found it very hard to hear some of the things that had to be said, but eventually this process worked through”*.
- 4.2.3 Providing the right information in a timely manner is important for cementing trust. In forming a consortium with middle schools, a manager from the upper school related how gaining commitment from middle school governors, who were questioning the benefit to them, required: *“a more managed process, a series of placatory meetings, the right information made available, transparency and flexibility”*. Similarly, an Aimhigher Progression Officer thought that schools responded positively to the more tightly drawn criteria for targeting learners for Aimhigher interventions, even if it reduced their Aimhigher input: *“they recognise that the allocation of funding of activities within any school is driven by the data”*.
- 4.2.4 On the other hand, poor communication can prevent collaboration. A senior manager at a FEC spoke about the unsuccessful attempt to establish a FD with an HE partner: *“This had not worked out and neither partner had called for an adult conversation to unblock the situation. The lack of a clear line of communication between partners was critical”*. Another FEC manager complained about the University not informing the college about students

⁵ The counter view is that encapsulated in the anonymous comment quoted in Glatter (2003) and elsewhere: *“Partnership means temporarily setting aside mutual loathing in order to obtain funding”*.

being accepted on to FDs running at the college: *“there needs to be better communication between the University and the college in order to ensure that applicants are fully informed about the nature of courses offered at the colleges including the work experience requirements of FDs”*. The FEHE Liaison Group has tackled this and other similar issues regarding the allocation of roles and responsibilities between partners. It was noted that arrangements had to be reasserted annually.

- 4.2.5 **Being Available and Welcoming** – Most respondents mentioned the importance of personal contacts in building and maintaining collaborative working and the necessity for those concerned to be positive and enthusiastic. The role played by the Partnership Office at the University in brokering relations between partners and other parts of the University was seen by several FE managers as critical. One reported *“There had been a problem in discussions with [a particular school] and the Partnership Office had been good at unblocking the lines of communication”*. Another thought *“this ability to contact a named person with any concerns or problems seems to be a critical factor for a successful partnership”*. Members of the Aimhigher focus group were very positive about the role played by individuals in the Partnership Office. They were felt to *“pull us together in an opportunity that we might not normally have... to sit round and discuss the kind of issues that we do with Aimhigher”*. He compared this with other experiences of HEIs *“where the partnership job is dumped on some frustrated academic”*. Another FE manager in the group contrasted her experience in Bedfordshire with that elsewhere: *“I felt that I was the lesser partner coming from a college into the university.”* Whereas in Bedfordshire, she felt *“welcomed in and your comments are valued, you have a chance to speak up”*. The Partnership Office was compared favourably to the rest of the University: *“without the regular contacts with university colleagues a lot of the things we would try and do would end up on somebody’s voicemail, because the average university person is not good at getting back, but these two are”*. A head teacher thought that the opportunity for informal networking with School of Education staff before and after Schools Partnership Steering Committee meetings was especially valuable.
- 4.2.6 Being outward-looking and responsive to collaborative opportunities may not be an option for a failing school or college, where partnership working may be seen as an unwanted intrusion. An Aimhigher Progression Officer had difficulty engaging with a couple of failing schools. They saw Aimhigher as *“an additional intervention, time-consuming and burdensome, and not assisting them in satisfying their OFSTED requirements”*. A local authority manager spoke of the grieving period that a school will normally experience after a bad OFSTED inspection. It will initially turn inwards and be closed to offers of help from outside before it can start to re-engage with external agencies. At that point, offers of assistance must be flexible, responsive and negotiable to meet the school’s specific needs.
- 4.2.7 **Taking time, being patient** – Partnership working can be regarded as a long-term or a short term, single-task activity, although some respondents questioned that the latter was ‘proper’ partnership. The similarities to personal relations have been noted by many observers⁶ and the presence of ‘commitment’ is often felt to be a necessary aspect of collaboration between organisations. It was felt by a number of respondents that building partnership can take time, perhaps especially where it is between institutions from different sectors and where relationships appear unequal. Successful partnership working requires participants to be able to take a longer term perspective, to be patient. In discussions about forming a Trust, the lower schools were initially hesitant, the Upper School Deputy Head recognised: *“they needed to watch it and feel how it developed before committing themselves”*.
- 4.2.8 A history of prior collaboration can be the basis for new partnership working. A FEC manager referred to the departmental level links with a university with which they had been in partnership for 16 years as being *“like family or wedded”*. On the other hand, a partnership may continue simply because of its longevity. Another college manager commented on a long relationship with an HEI in which curriculum development had largely ceased (the college

⁶ See, for example, Woodhouse & Pengelly (1991).

was offering HNDs rather than FDs): *“it seemed as if the partnership continued primarily because it had been in place for over 15 years”*.

- 4.2.9 **Accepting difference** – Successful partnership has to tolerate diversity in organisational cultures. Those involved in working across boundaries have to accept different systems and dynamics within other institutions and recognise the effect that their own organisation’s processes and procedures have on partners. This most often arises between the University and colleges over the delivery of FDs, whereas the distinctiveness of learners and curriculum in a school does not lead to the same expectation of a similarity of culture. FEC staff frequently complain about the slow pace in HEIs of curriculum development and validation, however a FEC principal admitted that *“On the other hand, FECs can sometimes ‘shoot from the hip’, they can be like a 100m sprinter, quick to move to some things but with little stamina for the long haul”*. This was echoed by a senior manager from another FEC: *“In FE we are very fast moving and rushing from one thing to another, and teachers teach a lot of hours. We often get the impression that this is not how HEIs work, that it’s slower and a tortuous process with everything”*. She recognised that: *“unless you can get through that barrier, then the process can’t get very far”*.
- 4.2.10 In her influential work on collaboration between large corporations, Kanter (1990) asserted that to work in strategic alliances with partners, organisations had to rid themselves, among other things, of slow decision-making practices and become fast and flexible. Whilst HEIs can rightly point to the danger of over-speedy curriculum development, they could be construed as examples of out dated ways of operating that will not facilitate collaboration

4.3 The Strategic Fit

- 4.3.1 Any partnership voluntarily entered into must add to the capacity of an organisation to fulfil its aims and objectives. That is, there must be strategic fit. Similarly, to attract other institutions into collaborative working, the advantages to them must be made transparent.
- 4.3.2 **Leadership and Delegated Authority** – The strong belief in partnership working by the head of an organisation was seen as an important factor⁷. Several respondents from colleges praised the commitment of the Vice-Chancellor of the University, and saw this as a guarantee of the University’s continuing allegiance to collaborative working. Some were concerned that any change of leadership could put the partnerships at risk. However, much of the work of partnership takes place below senior management. The level at which a partner organisation is represented and the extent of representatives’ delegated authority can influence the success of partnership, although the appropriate level will depend on the nature of the task. The Aimhigher Progression Officer advocated linking with the deputy head when engaging with a school as *“this ensures that the Aimhigher intervention is aligned with the strategic direction of the school, whereas this can be lacking if links are with more junior staff”*. For board meetings of some partnerships, representation at the highest level can ensure purposeful decision-making. The Campus Luton Partnership was deemed to work well *“because the people who attend are the people who can make decisions there and then without having to take things back”*. The local authority view was that heads continued to attend because they did not want to miss any high level decision-making.
- 4.3.3 **The Strategic and the Operational** – Commitment to partnership working can be uneven across an institution and the most frequent fault line is between senior management and operational departments. At the strategic and the operational levels, the balance between the benefits of autonomy and collaborative advantage might be seen differently. A number of FEC managers were critical of the potential in HEIs of a dissonance between *“senior management rhetoric and the actions of faculties”*. As one noted: *“compared to FE, where senior management decisions determine practice in teaching departments, in HE there could be blockages from faculty staff, including deans, in implementing decisions made at senior*

⁷ Lumby (2009) observes in her research across three 14 – 19 partnerships that “the absence of interest from many head teachers was noted and interpreted as a negative factor in developing partnership” (p317).

management level'. There is the danger that an HEI behaving in this way will be perceived as confusing and confused.

- 4.3.4 Despite the claim that this was more a problem with HEIs than FECs, a University faculty view was: *"The success of local partnerships with FDs has critically depended on the enthusiasm of FEC operational managers, even if senior managers are strongly committed. Those that see value in the relationship have been dedicated to making the partnership and the FD work, whereas others see it as a waste of time"*. There seemed to be a similar situation in schools, with teachers asking what the partnership was doing for them and their learners in the classroom. A deputy head explained that teachers can see external links as a distraction from the primary task of developing learning and progression in the classroom. Thus, the benefits that flow from partnership must be about – and be seen to be about – *"standards, learning and teaching or they will be dismissed as 'sexy PR'"*.
- 4.3.5 **Operational Co-ordination** – There is potential for different parts of a large organisation to develop linkages with the same institution unaware of the plurality. For example, the School of Physical Education and Sports Science organised a conference for staff and students for schools specialising in Sport independently of on-going Aimhigher work with those schools. A head teacher, whose school had links to the University around teacher training, Aimhigher and with faculties over curriculum development, felt that staff in the school recognised these as being the discrete functions of different parts of the University and did not think it confused. Neither did he see opportunity for synergy between these functions.

4.4 Authority in Partnerships

- 4.4.1 **Equality of partners** – Participants in partnerships do not necessarily expect to be treated as equals. A senior FEC manager argued that *"it is not a symmetrical relationship between colleges and universities, but we should not have an inferiority complex, we do different work very well. We have to understand where they're coming from; they have different priorities such as QAA [Quality Assurance Agency] and have different cultures"*. Another discussing the relationship with HE partners warned *"if you're not careful in some relationships, the university could automatically think it's more important, it's bigger, it's higher, it's got more financial clout, but that's not a very good basis for a marriage or partnership, it has to be much more equal esteem"*. For FECs dependent on partnerships with HEIs for HE numbers, the relationship will never be one of equality, but a sense of shared ownership and mutual respect was an important factor, although not a necessary condition if the potential gains from collaboration warranted it. A frequent strategy for colleges is to develop links with a number of HE partners, allowing them to use alliances to their advantage. As another FEC manager remarked: *"you need cover if you have to resort to Plan B"*. An academy principal also made use of multiple partners for teacher training and development, they *"will switch between Schools of Education depending on the places available at any one time"*. The size of an institution was seen by a number of respondents as a factor in partnership working. A manager of a smaller FEC thought that the size of the college made it important to act as a good partner. The Dean of Partnerships recognised that the size of the University relative to college and school partners was a factor that meant the University *"had to work hard to act collaboratively"*. These tensions and accommodations do not appear to be a factor for the University's links with schools.
- 4.4.2 It is arguably the case that there will be a greater sense of equality, albeit one blended with competition, when partners are part of the same sector or, at least in partnership, as in the Campus Luton Partnership, around a specific group of learners. The relationship with this 14 – 19 Partnership was described by one member as 'comradeship': *"that we are all in this together and all trying to do a job that will ultimately benefit learners throughout the town"*.
- 4.4.3 An established partnership can deliver a sense of authority to external agencies. A college principal felt that the Bedfordshire Federation *"had a life of its own outside of the membership and can be seen by other agencies in the county as a supra-brand speaking for the interests of FE"*. A manager in another FEC thought it *"gave muscle to what partners wanted to do"*.

Aimhigher locally also tends to be regarded as an entity beyond its members, generally enhancing its role.

- 4.4.4 **Governance** – Most of the partnerships had some form of contractual framework, with memoranda of understanding, but only the Trust Consortia and 14 – 19 Strategic Partnerships are legal entities. Aimhigher Bedfordshire is the main exception as a collaboration that does not have a legal or contractual basis, although establishing an Area Partnership Committee is a condition of funding.
- 4.4.5 There are a range of arrangements for chairing meetings, and thereby setting agendas, in place across the partnerships surveyed. In the case of meetings involving the University's Partnership Office (Aimhigher, FE/HE Liaison, the Polhill Group of Colleges), the University retains the chair and ordering of the meeting. There were no indications of dissent about these arrangements in the interviews conducted. Participants of partnership meetings chaired by the University felt that this made for a more task-directed and information-providing meeting than might have been the case. One member of the Aimhigher Area Partnership Committee thought that the chair "*should be a good chair in terms of meeting skills but also should be authoritative and knowledgeable and I can't see anybody else particularly coming forward to offer to chair... so I have no problems with that*". Arguably, where there is potential for rivalry and conflict between institutions or a function of the partnership is the allocation of funding, it is safer for the chairing to be done by an institution either distributing the resource or independent of it.
- 4.4.6 The Schools Partnership Steering Group is less subject to competition because the making available of placements for teacher training is regarded as an equal exchange for the benefits that can ensue from the School of Education, Thus, the chair, vice-chair and majority of membership of the Partnership Steering Committee are head teachers. This recognises that whilst both the University and schools benefit from collaboration (the former by having placements for ITT students and demand for its MA and other CPD offer, the latter by improving staff recruitment and retention), as the much larger partner, the University should give control of the Steering Committee to its school partners.
- 4.4.7 The chair of the Bedfordshire Federation of Further and Higher Education, originally held by the University, now revolves annually to each of the five member institutions. One college principal felt that the revolving chair had made it a "*true federation*".
- 4.4.8 There was some discussion in the focus groups about the structuring of meetings. One group complained about an item with no accompanying paper or proposals taken to the meeting preceding the focus group. About 30 minutes had been spent working out a procedure and it was felt that this could have been drafted prior to the meeting. A group from the Aimhigher Partnership Committee discussed the duplication of papers for the Executive Group and the full Committee when there was often a duplication of membership; one participant commented: "*life's too short to go over the same papers twice*" and was trying to ensure that she found another representative for the executive group meeting.
- 4.4.9 The reduction in the frequency of meetings was thought by some respondents to indicate the declining importance of a group. A member of the FEHE Liaison Group also felt it made the group less effective, observing that in changing meetings from being monthly to bi-monthly if an institution was not represented for two consecutive meetings "*that's quite a disjoint*". Surprisingly, no one complained about the number of meetings attended and at the Feedback Seminar there was no support for the suggestion of rationalising meetings. It appeared that most respondents enjoyed attending meetings outside of their own organisations, possibly because they offered opportunities for more creative thinking and planning.

4.5 Risks Factors

- 4.5.1 Changes in a partnership's membership or its external environment can become risks to its survival. The local authority lead on the Campus Luton Partnership referred to "*the continuing*

dynamic of autonomous institutions and collaborative partnership". The balance between the benefit derived from acting autonomously and the advantages of collaboration is potentially continually shifting within a context of the changes discussed below.

- 4.5.2 **Changes in the membership** – This can result from new partners being introduced into a collaborative consortium, existing partners leaving or a change of status of an existing partner. The case outlined above about the effect of two schools becoming academies on the Campus Luton Partnership is a powerful example of the difficulties caused by a change in membership. Also as noted above, the impact of a change of leadership of key partners, especially if it led to a new strategic direction, was considered a serious risk and some respondents spoke of the need to embed the partnership in the structures and systems of partner institutions.
- 4.5.3 **Changes in the external environment** – A local authority observer noted how *"an altered environment can change how the partnership and individual members need to respond"*. That is, the original rationale for collaboration may no longer exist, and questions about the purpose, membership and constitution of the partnership start to emerge. In the dynamic policy world of education, there are frequent changes that could impact on collaborative ventures. One example was the tendency of the Regional Development Agency to now require joint bids from FECs that are geographically distributed across the region, rather than from neighbouring colleges, reducing the joint bids that can be generated through the Bedfordshire Federation and possibly putting partners in competing bidding consortia.
- 4.5.4 The current scarcity of ASNs was seen by FEC managers as the most significant impediment and risk to future collaboration. One FEC manager spoke of it as *"a brake to allowing partnership working to develop"*. Continued capping was regarded as a major threat to the partnership, already holding back developments and making FECs subservient partners, even though the University of Bedfordshire is *"perceived to live up to its promise to freeze numbers equally within the University and with its partner colleges"*.
- 4.5.5 The principal of a Sixth Form College felt that a restriction on admissions to HE would give rise to a *"sea change in the balance between the demand and supply of university places which could radically change the tenor of compact arrangements with HE"*. The compacts with two local universities that the college currently had state only that they will receive qualified applicants from them, but in an environment in which demand for places was more competitive, the college might ask for a guaranteed number of places each year from these HEIs and, overall, this could lead to increased localism in recruitment to HE.
- 4.5.6 The Machinery of Government changes resulting in the dissolution of the LSC and the handing of responsibility for the funding of 16 – 19 education to local authorities in 2010 could pose considerable challenges to some partnerships in Bedfordshire, especially as there will be three relatively small authorities responsible for 16 – 19 policy and funding. One member of the Bedfordshire Federation felt that with the reduced rationale for a Bedfordshire-wide partnership, it would make sense to join with FECs in the neighbouring county, Hertfordshire, which with Bedfordshire constitutes the sub-regional commissioning agency, mirroring this as recommended by Government⁸. On the other hand, another member saw risks of instability in any geographical broadening and argued that this situation increased the necessity for the federation to negotiate with the three Unitary Authorities with a single voice.

⁸ Machinery of Government Changes (2008) <http://www.ggpg.org.uk/governance-and-fe-system/machinery-of-gov.html> (accessed 12/6/09)

5. LESSONS LEARNT AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

5.1 Conditions for Collaborative Working

5.1.1 From the interviews and focus groups emerged a picture of generally successful collaboration with one college manager's view of the University as "*the most genuinely partnership-inclined I've worked with*" being implied by many from partner schools and colleges. The key conditions for successful partnership working as identified by respondents are summarised below. Two areas impeding the development of collaborative working have also emerged. Firstly, the existing complicated web of partnership links needs to be simplified. Secondly, the capacity of the University and of its partners to sustain and grow collaborative ventures must be ensured. These relate to two other issues: concerns about the future funding of Aimhigher and an increased reluctance by (some) schools to allow students to leave the premises.

5.1.2 The conditions that it appears necessary to satisfy for a collaborative relationship to be successful are:

- Ensuring that there are strategic advantages from collaboration for all partners and that these are transparent. There must be strategic fit if partnership is to function successfully, but this may be reduced in changing external circumstances;
- Having senior manager endorsement of partnership working and representation at a level appropriate to the primary tasks of meetings. For decision-making meetings, partners need to be represented by a manager able to commit their institution;
- Having agreed lines of communication and named contacts who are enthusiasts for partnership;
- Recognising and respecting differences in organisational and sectoral culture and agreeing a common language to avoid misunderstandings;
- Establishing systems to contain and resolve disagreements or other tensions. Allowing space in meetings and having a chair skilful in facilitating the resolution of conflict could save a partnership from collapse;
- Taking a long-term perspective on partnership. Collaborative working can be time-consuming, requiring a longer period to accomplish tasks.

5.2 Simplifying Collaborative Links

5.2.1 It is apparent that the University's many links with schools and colleges are not exploited to their full extent. In particular, little use is made for widening participation, recruitment or curriculum development purposes of the School of Education's collaboration with over 500 schools⁹. To build closer links with schools across a broader span of functions, there needs to be greater internal collaboration within the University, probably impacting on the functions of existing posts and roles established to drive partnership working.

5.2.2 The University does not wish to curtail individual departments from building relationships with schools and colleges but these will be more productive if undertaken within a strategic framework. First, a full picture of what linkages exist has to be established, allowing overlaps and gaps in the University's engagement with the external world to be identified and rectified. There is an on-line system (REMI) for staff across the institution to log any visit to a partner school or college¹⁰. This could indicate linkage patterns, enable the sharing of information

⁹ Although It should be noted that the School of Education has been part of the University of Bedfordshire only since 2006 and is located on a campus about 18 miles from the partnership-seeking central components of the institution and the majority of faculties.

¹⁰ The Relationship, Marketing and Listing of Schools and Colleges (REMI) is a web-based customer relations management tool developed in the University to track involvement with partner and potential partner schools and

about partners and stimulate joint activity. The system is not used consistently and can not log the over 4,000 annual contacts that the School of Education have with partner schools. However, it should be possible to develop a process to merge information captured on REMI with that held in the School of Education.

- 5.2.3 The different geographies to which the centres of partnership work provide a challenge¹¹. However, there are firm proposals for Aimhigher officers to work in conjunction with teams from the Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department. The Academies and Trusts Working Group bringing together staff from the School of Education and Partnership Office also provides a building block.

5.3 The Capacity to Collaborate

- 5.3.1 Capacity issues were raised by a number of respondents questioning their institution's ability to engage in more collaborative work, even though others felt that partnership working could raise capacity. Both the School of Education and the Partnership Office had concerns that the speed of expansion in building partnerships with schools could make fulfilling every agreed action, if requested at the same time, a challenging task.
- 5.3.2 Building capacity is not a quick process, and funding restraints in the medium term are unlikely to allow additional staff to focus on partnership working. It is therefore essential to invest resource carefully to maximise return. For example, this might involve focusing effort on consortia of schools with trust status rather than on individual institutions. Capacity can also be increased by ensuring that the University is not duplicating activity from its different partnership-seeking centres and sharing all the information it has about partners and potential partners.

5.4 Future Funding of Aimhigher

- 5.4.1 Unsurprisingly, the Aimhigher focus group was concerned about the probable cessation of funding in 2011. Although the University and some college partners have offered to provide funding to continue the Aimhigher brand, there was scepticism about the volume of activity that this would allow. It was feared that work with schools would suffer most as although many appreciated the impact that Aimhigher had with their less motivated but able learners, it was doubted that most schools could fund trips to HEIs or other such visits. The pressures on the Aimhigher Partnership will intensify as 2011 approaches and will require strong leadership from the University to ensure that effectiveness is not lost prior to any termination of funding and that as much is enabled to continue as possible. The Partnership Office hopes that the well-researched summer school programme and the new Aimhigher Associates scheme will continue to receive additional funding after 2011. There is likely to be a focus on developing the scope of these elements of the Aimhigher programme.

5.5 Engagement with Schools

- 5.5.1 Local experience tallies with the observation by the HEFCE that recruitment to summer schools in 2009 has been more difficult than usual. Whilst in part this may be due to concerns about the swine flu pandemic, it appears that a tightening up in the Pay and Conditions of

college across the UK. Any member of staff contacting a school or college is expected to log the contact made and a brief summary of the meeting. This information is available to any member of staff using the site, allowing them to see if there have been other recent contacts. It aims to reduce confusion by partners from multiple contacts.

¹¹ Aimhigher activity by the University is restricted to the local authorities of Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Luton. Student recruitment focuses on these local authorities but also a wider area largely determined by rail and road transport links. They tend to operate by postcode areas rather than local authorities, although their internal organisation is by faculty. The School of Education has a still more widespread zone of operation and is re-organising into clusters of schools taking ITT students normally based round a training school and hubs of schools for the delivery of the Masters in Education. Finally, there is the geography of the University's partnership with colleges, which through the transfer of the School of Education from De Montfort University includes colleges located as far from Bedfordshire as Grantham, Nottingham, Leicester and Oxford, as well as other connections in Milton Keynes, Kettering and Aylesbury.

school teachers around covering for absent staff could be already having an impact on teaching staff being able to accompany students on out of school visits or other activities, especially when these are not whole class groups. If this is the case, the situation could become more difficult for working with Aimhigher cohorts when the change in Pay and Conditions is implemented from September 2009. If this continues to restrict school students from visiting HEIs, the University and Aimhigher will have to work hard with partners to design new ways to engage with the Aimhigher cohort.

DEVELOPING THE TAPESTRY OF PARTNERSHIPS

6. THE VISION OF PARTNERSHIP

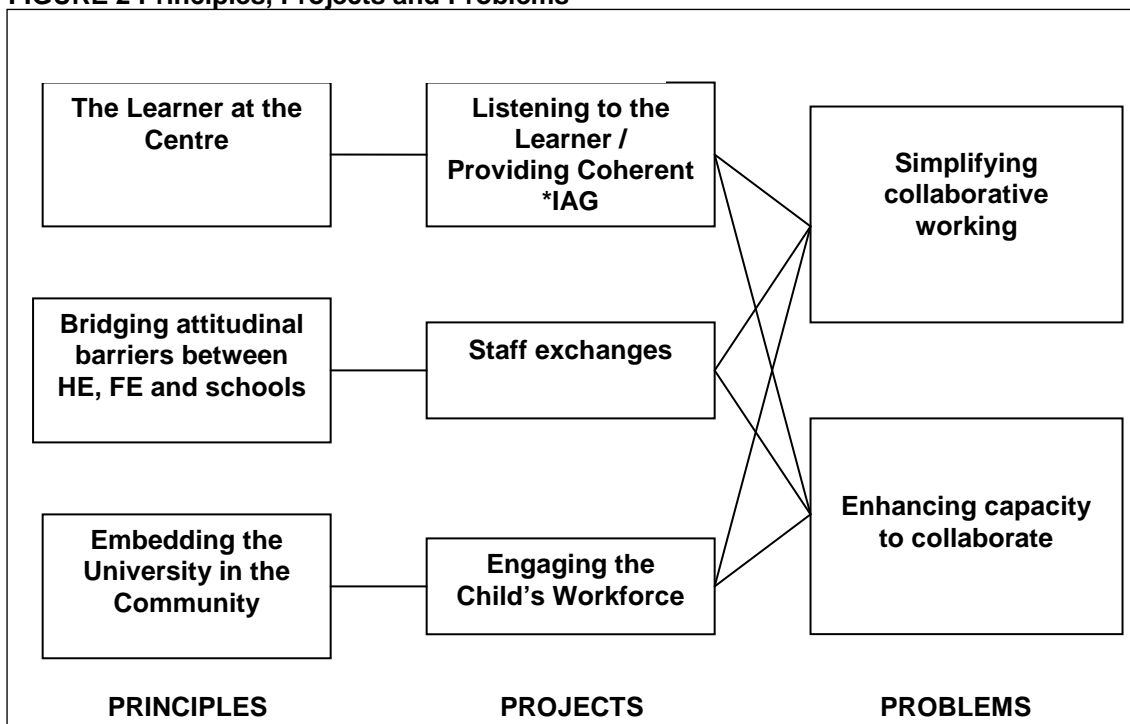
6.1 Achieving Transformational Change

6.1.1 The research has revealed a rich picture of multiple strands of engagement between the University of Bedfordshire and its partner schools and colleges and demonstrated how collaborative working has become engrained in the thinking and practice of many participants. Even if at times they may have been overly implicit, these multiple threads of partnership entwine to form an all-embracing vision of achieving transformational change in learners, families and communities. The vision, aiming to weave together learning opportunities across and throughout a learner's life, has three main principles:

- To place the learner at the centre of all partnership planning and functioning with the aim of improving their life chances and giving opportunities to those who otherwise would not have them;
- To bridge perceptual and attitudinal barriers between HE, FE and school education in the minds of learners, their families and staff in educational institutions;
- To embed the University in the community as an open, accessible centre of culture and knowledge and as a partner with the Health and Social Services.

6.1.2 The principles of transformation will be discussed in the sections below with examples of existing partnership activity. In addition, new partnership development projects have been identified, emerging in discussion in focus groups, the Feedback Seminar or with Partnership Office staff. In addition to progressing the University's transformational vision of collaborative work, they are intended to exemplify how the difficulties of simplifying collaborative working and enhancing capacity might be resolved and models of more effective working be developed. These are shown diagrammatically in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2 Principles, Projects and Problems



*Information Advice and Guidance

7. THE LEARNER AT THE CENTRE: THE ASSUMPTION OF PROGRESSION

7.1 The Assumption of Progression

- 7.1.1 The goal of the University's collaboration with schools and colleges should be to build a learning environment enabling learners to fulfil their potential, with those who could benefit from HE being encouraged and supported to find a place and helping parents or carers to see progression to HE as the norm. Whilst countering deep-seated suspicions about HE is not an easy task, the experience of HE participation in other countries suggests that it is achievable in the long term. A deputy head spoke about teaching in the US in the 1990s: *"The university-school links have been stronger for much longer there, and there is a far greater assumption of progression to HE which is not seen as a different educational phase"*.
- 7.1.2 At the Feedback Seminar at which the early findings of this research were discussed, there was discussion about whether learners should encounter or be made aware of the agencies involved in a partnership delivering learning opportunities for them. It was felt that learners needed to experience coherence and consistency in dealings with different institutions and they did not need to be confronted by the branding of the partners. However, it was important that learners were aware of their long-term opportunities. In particular, aspiration to progress to HE can be engendered through awareness that their school or college works in partnership with their local university. The principal of an academy sponsored by the University thought it important that pupils and their parents knew of the University's involvement, using such means as the newsletter to parents.

7.2 Listening to the Voice of the Learner (Development Project 1A)

- 7.2.1 It cannot be claimed that the learner is at the centre of partnership working if their voice is not clearly heard. Developing a method to better understand how young learners think about their educational experience and progression opportunities will require a survey of the tools used by Aimhigher Partnerships elsewhere and consideration of the Pupils Voice schemes. The local Aimhigher links with learners will be used to sample their views through questionnaires and interviews, although investigation will not be restricted only to the Aimhigher cohort.
- 7.2.2 The process of establishing a methodology and undertaking a survey will also build links across the University between Aimhigher and the School of Education, facilitating the simplification of collaboration and enhancing capacity through sharing knowledge and contacts. It will also establish deeper links with the selected schools. An indicative action plan for this and other development projects described below is set out in Annex 4.

7.3 Coherent Information, Advice and Guidance (Development Project 1B)

- 7.3.1 Current developments on the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG) as driven by the Education and Skills Act 2008 open up new collaborative opportunities to increase the awareness of young people about their educational and work options. The Act requires local authority maintained secondary schools to provide careers education and impartial information and advice to promote the best interests of pupils and to not advocate the interests of the school over other options. In the draft core statutory guidance out for consultation in July 2009¹², the proposed requirements offer opportunity for the University through Aimhigher and Outreach intervention to assist schools in fulfilling their duties by:
- Ensuring that young people understand the full range of learning opportunities open to them within the school and elsewhere and the progression opportunities afforded by each course/pathway, including to HE;

¹² See <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/CE%20Statutory%20guidance%20final%20draft.doc> (accessed 26/7/09)

- Raising young people's aspirations by challenging them to review their ambitions and to re-appraise their goals and ensuring their understanding of the benefits of FE and HE;
- Helping young people to progress by making sure they can follow applications procedures and prepare for interviews.

7.3.2 The indicative action plan builds on the University's involvement with the then two local authorities in developing the Bedfordshire 14 – 19 on-line prospectus. The University would consult with relevant local authorities, 14 – 19 Strategic Partnerships and FECs about establishing a Planning Group on Coherent IAG about FE and HE. The key tasks of such a group would be to evaluate existing IAG materials and approaches and to commission new materials, making use of the University's marketing expertise. Findings from the survey of learners' perceptions of their educational experience and of progression opportunities, proposed above, would play a significant role in determining new materials and approaches.

7.3.3 This development project will involve identifying and employing marketing expertise from the Marketing, Admissions, Recruitment and Communications Department and from academics in the Business School and the specialist knowledge and understanding of schools in the School of Education. This will be co-ordinated by the Partnership Office. As such, it will be a model for orchestrating a multiplicity of skills from across the University and simplifying the collaborative process. It will also enhance capacity through using knowledge and skills in the institution in a coherent and co-operative manner.

8. BRIDGING PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL SECTORS

8.1 Barriers of Understanding

8.1.1 Whilst almost all participants in the research have been strong advocates of partnership working across educational sectors, it is not surprising that many have demonstrated a limited knowledge and understanding of educational sectors other than their own. For staff not involved in collaborative working, understanding is predictably less. For young learners and their families understanding of sectors other than those they have experienced will be minimal, and this is not helped by being taught by teachers or lecturers whose knowledge of school, college or university life may come from 20 or 30 years ago. Indeed, even the university lecturer in their late twenties will have had a very different experience in school from new university students coming straight from school. The effects of such blinkered vision on young learners from families with no prior experience of HE can be profound. Despite the efforts of Aimhigher, it can result in their rejecting the option of HE because they imagine themselves as out-of-place in the cloistered grounds of an Oxbridge college. On the other hand, for the young person who does gain a university place, lecturers' out-of-date assumptions about what students should already know and how they should be able to express it in assignments could be a significant factor in a decision to drop out.

8.2 The University in the School

8.2.1 Any partnership working between universities, schools and colleges reduces the effect of these perceptual barriers, but more deliberate action may be necessary. The School of Education offers meeting space for school and local authority staff making the University more of a reality for those using it, and thus indirectly, for their learners. Over time, a critical mass of the teaching staff in many local schools will have trained with the University and, hopefully, will welcome interventions with their learners. This will be especially beneficial with middle schools in the Bedford and Central Bedfordshire Authorities as engagement with these schools, serving learners of an age (9 – 13) increasingly seen as the most productive in

affecting future educational choices, is a particular challenge for Aimhigher and outreach interventions¹³.

- 8.2.2 There are two examples of the University directly engaging with curriculum in schools. A Youth and Community Work lecturer delivers a Level 4 unit “Youth” to Year 12 and 13 students of the Samuel Whitbread Community College. Secondly, the Diploma in Society, Health and Development will from 2009/10 be delivered from the University’s Butterfield Campus, used mainly for Health Care programmes, and taught by staff from Barnfield College to pupils from Luton schools. It will also be supported by PGCE students who are specialising in the delivery of 14 –19 diplomas. There is considerable scope for extending such interventions.
- 8.2.3 The Student or Pupil Voice initiatives in schools, around which the School of Education is conducting research, may offer opportunities for Aimhigher and other outreach interventions. A middle school head teacher thought that the University involvement in research and support for Pupil Voice schemes could “*make the University a real presence for pupils and could increase aspiration to progress to higher education*”. Finally, many University staff are school governors, and the University encourages more staff to volunteer to join the governing bodies of secondary and upper schools in the three unitary authorities in Bedfordshire.

8.3 Developing Curriculum for Seamless Progression

- 8.3.1 The University collaborates in the development of 14 – 19 Diplomas through a number of channels. There is a strong expectation from the two 14 – 19 strategic partnerships in Bedfordshire that the University will make a significant contribution to building progression from the Diplomas to HE. Many of the Diplomas being developed in the three unitary authorities in Bedfordshire are in subject areas mapping closely on to the University’s curriculum allowing progression to HE, in particular the FDs offered by FE partners. The University is considering guaranteeing access to an appropriate HE programme to every local student who successfully completes a relevant diploma. A college manager responsible for 14 – 19 provision saw significant value in this alignment. She suggested that Level 3 Diploma students should be given the opportunity to take a Level 4 unit delivered through team teaching with University staff. A senior manager of another FEC suggested that academic staff from the University could work with college colleagues over 14 – 19 Diplomas, with University staff giving occasional guest lectures at the college.
- 8.3.2 The goal of an ‘all-through’ curriculum was asserted by school managers involved in trust consortia. More seamless progression can also be achieved indirectly by schools’ participation in partnership across sectors and developing a broader perspective, shifting their horizon beyond the limits of their own organisation and sector. In a recently formed trust consortium: “*It has led to those involved in the partnership attaining the bigger picture of a child’s progress from 5 to 19 and beyond. Because of the links with the University, staff in the middle schools are starting to see the bigger picture and the opportunities for lifelong learning. It is hoped that as lower schools join the Trust, this will also occur with very young children*” (Deputy Head of the Upper School).
- 8.3.3 There are numerous progression agreements and concords in place setting out guaranteed routes into the University’s programmes for local learners, many developed with the Regional Lifelong Learning Network, MOVE. However, those advocating a seamless, ‘all-through’ curriculum stretching into higher education are proposing an additional level of alignment such that the curriculum, and associated approach to teaching and learning, closely fit to reduce the difficulties often accounted by learners at transition points. The appropriateness of this degree of fit between the Level 3 and Level 4 experience is a matter of debate in the University. The main argument is that students entering an undergraduate programme in the first year are from a mix of backgrounds: international students (although many do not join

¹³ A recent intervention of the Aimhigher Associates Pathfinder Scheme into two middle schools in Bedford Borough Council is the first successful engagement with middle schools in the area.

programmes in the first year); home students from elsewhere in the country; mature students¹⁴ and those who do not come directly from a school or college. Thus, attempts to align the curriculum of the first undergraduate year with local learners' Level 3 experience could disadvantage others. The relevance of an aligned curriculum also varies considerably for different subjects. For disciplines with a hierarchical structure of knowledge, for example, the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, there is an argument for seeking to fit the first year curriculum with what a significant proportion of students will have experienced at Level 3. However, with most of the University's offer, there is no straightforward link to what students would have previously studied. Finally, the curriculum of undergraduate programmes has been developed most recently through a new approach to curriculum at the University, CRe8¹⁵, to make the first year a foundation experience offering the student the opportunity to start afresh.

8.4 Staff Exchanges (Development Project 2)

- 8.4.1 Whatever the value of aligning curriculum between Levels 3 and 4, it is thought at senior levels in the University that lecturers teaching on undergraduate programmes should be strongly encouraged to experience what and how Level 3 students in associated subjects are learning. Thus, whereas the detail of curriculum at Levels 3 and 4 need not be of concern, greater understanding of the contemporary sixth form or Level 3 experience could help mould more realistic expectations in University lecturing staff about each new intake. Such visits could additionally have the value, for example, by giving guest lectures, of bringing the University into the school or college and would build on the Education Champion role in the departments. The indicative development plan is to pilot a programme of visits to schools and colleges by some academic departments, and offering exchange visits into the University (although it is expected that this may prove impossible, especially for schools). The task of initiating these links would be undertaken by the Partnership Office in conjunction with the School of Education and the medium term expectation would be that 70% of staff teaching on undergraduate programmes in each department would visit one or more school or college each term in an agreed scheme of engagement as approved by the department. It is suggested that this is overseen by a steering group consisting of representation from the Partnership Office, the School of Education, the Teaching and Learning Directorate, the departments and a small sample of schools and colleges involved in the scheme. The scheme would be evaluated after the first and second years with the hope of it being rolled out across the University.
- 8.4.2 This project draws on the skills and contacts from a range of units across the University and enhances the links that the selected academic departments already have with schools and colleges. As with the development projects already discussed, the process of working together across the institution should facilitate the simplification of external collaboration. By embedding links to schools and colleges within academic departments, there is also an addition to capacity to engage collaboratively.

9. EMBEDDING THE UNIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

9.1 Community Engagement

- 9.1.1 Whilst community engagement by English HEIs may be less developed than is the case in North America, the University of Bedfordshire is playing an increasing role in its local communities. The Vice Chancellor on coming into post in 2003 saw making the University the most welcoming and friendly in the country a key task. An aspect of this is a deepening engagement with the community, opening up the University to local people and making HE a familiar reality to children and young people and their parents. There is now a coffee shop, open to students, staff and local people alike, in the foyer of the University's Park Square

¹⁴ 44.9% of full-time first degree entrants were mature in 2007/08 (HESA)
http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/performanceIndicators/0708/t2a_0708.xls

¹⁵ See <http://www.beds.ac.uk/learning> (accessed 3/8/09)

Campus in the centre of Luton. The theatre at the Polhill Campus in Bedfordshire is being made available for public use, as are the sports facilities. The opening of the University Library through the local authority to the general public is being considered.

- 9.1.2 There have been a number of initiatives to position the University in the cultural life of the community. Luton has the biggest one day carnival in the country, estimated to bring £3m into the town, and the University has collaborated with the UK Centre for Carnival Arts which opened in 2008 adjacent to the University's Park Square Campus in Luton in providing various free courses, including two at University Certificate level, and a FD in Carnival Arts¹⁶. The University has also set up B:Fest, the Luton Arts Festival to showcase creative arts and cultural activity in the town. B: Fest originated from the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Bridges CETL) initiative to enhance students' employability by funding projects linking students' talents with local arts employers. In future it is hoped that the festival will be self sustaining within the Creative Arts and Technology Faculty and managed and organised by students with the help of volunteers from across the University.
- 9.1.3 Senior managers see the University having a role to engage with other agencies to transform deprived communities with low levels of educational participation and progression. It has been a major partner in the Marsh Farm New Deal Project in Luton over the last eight years and is committed to working with local failing schools whether by supporting them to become academies or assisting in leadership or curriculum development.
- 9.1.4 A further element of engagement with the community is the considerable linkage with businesses, large and small, local to the University through its Knowledge Hub. Over time, this will have brought many parents, carers and relatives of young learners into contact with the University. There is potential for synergy between providing support for employers and CPD for their employees and involving younger learners in, for example, work experience projects with the intention of facilitating the young person's recognition that studying in HE can be undertaken part-time whilst in full time work.
- 9.1.5 Another example of community, and school, engagement, seen by the University as a model in using major events to enhance community engagement, is the Young Ambassador Scheme. This is a long term project involving 20 young people from a wide range of backgrounds, including some in care, who were taken to the Olympic Games in Beijing and are now encouraging their peers through aspiration-raising programmes to pursue excellence. The project, organised by the University in collaboration with Aimhigher and the Bedfordshire Olympic Opportunities Support Team (BOOST), has also established a new partnership bringing together professionals from the University, FECs, schools and local government. Finally, the University's Community Volunteering Project enables students to get involved with the local community and gain new skills.

9.2 The University and Children's Trusts

- 9.2.1 A further example of the University's engagement in the community is through its partnership work with Children's Trusts. Established under the Children Act 2004, Children's Trusts articulate the *Every Child Matters* Agenda bringing together services for children and young people. The most recent statutory guidance on Children's Trusts (DCSF 2008) states:

The local Children's Trust is the embodiment of the local partnership between all commissioners and current and potential providers of services for children, young people and their families. It exists to help make a reality of our commitment to make Britain the best place in the world for children to grow up – improving their prospects for the future and redressing inequalities between the most disadvantaged children and their peers.
(Para 1.1)

¹⁶ See for more detail <http://www.beds.ac.uk/rootstocarnival> (accessed 13/8/09)

However, it is indicative that HEIs are mentioned only twice: HEIs should be part of 14 – 19 Strategic Partnerships and be a source of research on well-being. The University of Bedfordshire already engages with its local Children's Trusts in excess of this and recognises this could be increased further.

- 9.2.2 The *Every Child Matters* agenda is a reminder that, in putting the learner at the centre, attention should be given to all places in which children and young people learn, including in addition to schools and colleges, pupil referral units, custodial centres, care homes and hospitals as well as the formal and informal learning that occurs in the home. A further implication is that 'the learner' is also 'the child and young person alongside their families'. It follows from taking this broad definition of improving children and young people's life chances, as advocated by *Every Child Matters*, that the University should engage with the whole of the children's workforce and this is recognised in its recent WPSA which proposes a University-wide strategy for planning with senior colleagues in Children's Services a workforce development plan for the children's workforce and playing a major role in delivering this, as well as aligning curriculum, research initiatives and consultancy with the Children and Young People's Plans of local authorities close to the University.
- 9.2.3 Such boundary crossing already exists with, for example, the work of Aimhigher Bedfordshire in engaging with children and young people in care. The University was awarded the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark in 2007 in recognition of its commitment to increasing participation in HE of young people who are in or leaving care. The Aimhigher project, "Reach Your Goal", has a steering group and objectives to increase the number of young people in care going to university and to support them in completing their courses successfully. Most recently, Aimhigher in conjunction with Luton Borough Council held a three night residential for 17 young people in care and ran a 20 week mentoring project for Year 10 and 11 young people in care using undergraduate students at the University and focusing on academic achievement through giving advice about coursework or homework.
- 9.2.4 A further example of work with marginalised learners has been Aimhigher's engagement with young people on the verges of criminality. A summer school was held in 2008 for this group and subsequent activity in this area indicates that further collaboration with Pupil Referral Units and Youth Offending Teams could develop into an initiative with significant benefit to local communities.
- 9.2.5 This broadening of partnership is also occurring in some schools. A head teacher talked about a trust consortium in which the University is closely involved: "*The Trust is hoping to pilot a local Children's Trust. Partners in the Trust include the University of Bedfordshire, Bedford College, the Harpur Trust, the Police, Fire Service and Health Care. It is hoped to offer the opportunity for trainee teachers to work with trainee police and for the Trust to provide placements for trainee social workers. As the new National Standards for teacher training require the development of skills and experience outside of the classroom, the University is looking for placement opportunities that can provide a broader range of experiences across different phases within the same Trust*".

9.3 Engaging the Children's Workforce (Development Project 3)

- 9.3.1 The final proposed development project places the child and young person in the context of educational and welfare services. The proposal is to bring together more coherently the strands of linkage between the University and the Children's Trusts and the workforce of services for children and young people. There is already a considerable engagement with this workforce through research, consultancy and the delivery of:
- The teacher training and development of the School of Education;
 - The degree courses in Social Work, Youth and Community Work and Child and Adolescent Studies (also a FD), a Masters in Applied Public Policy: Children's and Young People's Services and a Professional Doctorate in Youth Justice offered by the Department of Applied Social Studies;

- Qualifying and postgraduate courses in Nursing of children and young people from the Department of Midwifery and Child Health.

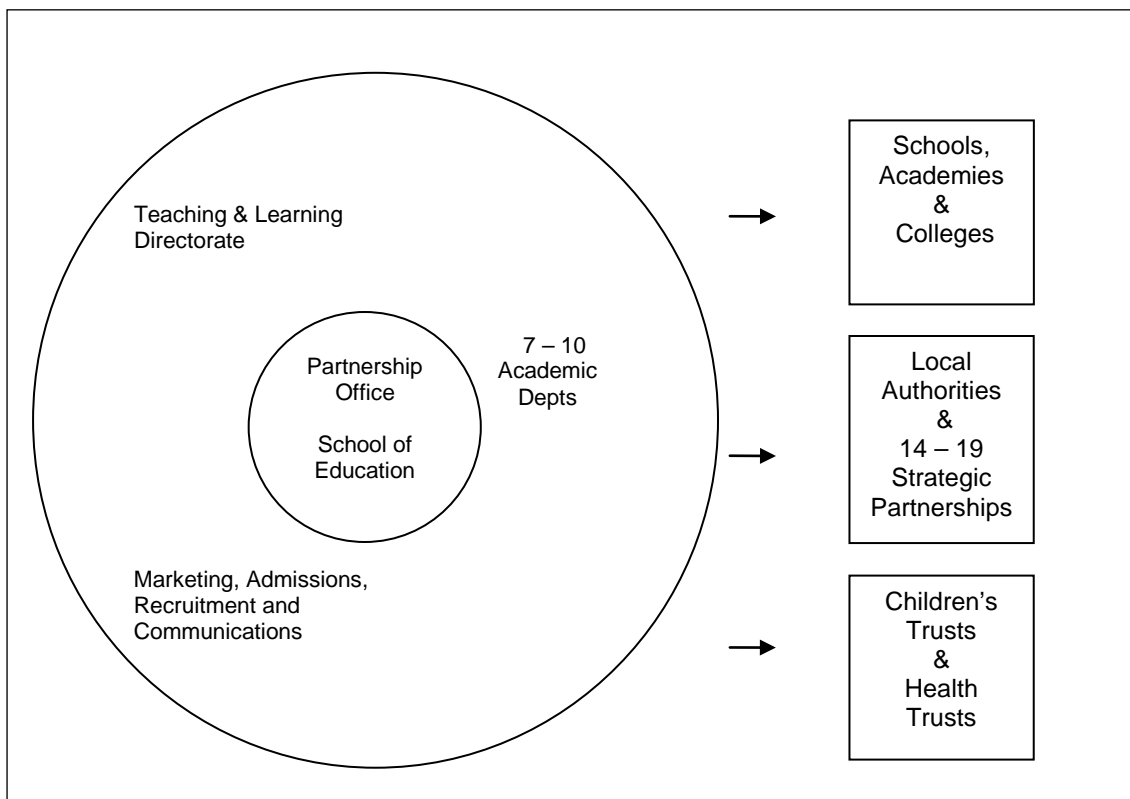
9.3.2 However, currently the engagement is not as strategically coherent as it could be, and does not take advantage of probable opportunities for synergies and more effective working through, for example, sharing of information. Bringing the three relevant departments together with the Partnership Office to develop a strategic engagement with the Children's Workforces in the area would foster better communication within the University bringing greater simplification and increasing capacity for collaboration.

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Weaving the Tapestry

10.1.1 The indicative development plans together involve a number of central units in the University and a significant proportion of academic departments as well as a range of institutions and agencies in the external environment, as illustrated in Figure 3. The implication here is that it is through greater internal collaboration between units and departments that the process of collaboration can be simplified and the capacity of the organisation to engage in partnership can become more effective.

FIGURE 3. Greater internal collaboration = More effective external partnerships



10.1.2 The survey of current collaborative working by the University of Bedfordshire with schools and colleges and discussions on future developments indicate that the weaving of the tapestry of partnership is well underway. Further progress will be achieved through taking a

broad perspective on how the University should operate in improving the life chances of all the children and young people in its locality. Thus, whilst the University will directly work with children and young people through Aimhigher and other outreach activity, it can have a significant impact on their lives by improving the quality of teaching in schools and colleges through ITT and CPD opportunities offered by the School of Education and, less directly, through its strategy of community engagement and through collaboration with local Children's Trusts and other services to develop the skills of the Children's Workforce. As such, the University is an agent of social transformation.

- 10.1.3 The proposed projects are designed to respond to identified needs in the environment of the University and to tackle the requirements to simplify the collaborative process and to enhance capacity for partnership working. It is hoped that the pursuit of these can lead the way to the next stage of partnership working by the University of Bedfordshire and finally deliver a tapestry of productive partnerships across the county and beyond.

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ANNEX 2: ABBREVIATIONS

APC	Area Partnership Committee
ASN	Additional Student Numbers
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
FD	Foundation Degree
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
FEHE	Further Education/Higher Education
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPO	Higher Education Progression Officer
HERL	Higher Education Related Framework
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
HND	Higher National Diploma
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
MOVE	East of England Lifelong Learning Network
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
WPSA	Widening Participation Strategic Assessment

ANNEX 3: PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS AND AGENCIES

The research was carried out through interviews, focus groups and the Feedback Seminar with managers from the following institutions and agencies:

All Saints Academy, Dunstable, Bedfordshire
Arnold Middle School, Barton-Le-Clay, Bedfordshire
Barnfield College, Luton, Bedfordshire
Barnfield South Academy, Luton, Bedfordshire
Bedford Borough Council, 14 – 19 Directorate
Bedford College, Bedfordshire
Castle College Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
Daubeney Middle School, Kempston, Bedfordshire
Dunstable College, Bedfordshire
Grantham College, Lincolnshire
Harpur Trust, Bedford, Bedfordshire
Hastingsbury Upper School, Kempston, Bedfordshire
Leicester College, Leicestershire
Luton Borough Council, 14 – 19 Directorate
Luton Sixth Form College, Luton, Bedfordshire
Mark Rutherford Upper School, Bedford, Bedfordshire
Milton Keynes College, Buckinghamshire
Oxford & Cherwell Valley College, Oxfordshire
Tresham Institute, Kettering, Northants
University Centre Milton Keynes
University of Bedfordshire

ANNEX 4: INDICATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT ACTION PLANS

DEVELOPMENT PROJECT 1A: Listening to the Voice of Learners

Action	Completed	Responsible agency	Success criteria
Review methods of capturing learners' view used elsewhere and the Student/Pupil voice initiatives	Dec 2009	Partnership Office/ Aimhigher	A practical methodology is identified for use
Undertake survey of the views of learners about their educational experience and how they think they learn about future options	Apr 2010	Partnership Office/ Aimhigher	Findings that can influence the design of future initiatives and the IAG campaign (see action plan on IAG)

DEVELOPMENT PROJECT 1B: Coherent IAG on FE and HE

Action	Completed	Responsible agency	Success criteria
Identify relevant expertise in central units and in the Business School	Dec 2009	Partnership Office	A group of, at least, five staff with expertise willing to contribute to improving IAG locally are identified
Consult with local authorities, 14 – 19 Partnerships and FECs about forming a planning group for a coherent IAG strategy	Jan 2010	Partnership Office	Agreement by most of those consulted to form a planning group
Establish IAG Planning Group	Mar 2010	Partnership Office	Initial meeting held to consider report of survey
Framework for IAG produced to guide coherence between agencies' campaigns and activities	Dec 2010	Planning Group	Framework accepted by participating agencies

DEVELOPMENT PROJECT 2: Teacher Exchange Scheme

Action	Completed	Responsible agency	Success criteria
Determine existing engagement of academic departments with schools	Nov 2009	Partnership Office	All current involvement recorded
Finalise choice of academic departments to take part in pilot	Dec 2009	Partnership Office and SMT	At least five departments positive about the task
Identify schools and obtain their agreement to scheme	Dec 2009	Partnership Office with School of Education	At least 20 schools and colleges in scheme
Participating departments to have had 40% of staff visiting schools at least twice	July 2010	Departments	Schools are positive about value of contact
Evaluate the first stage of operation	Oct 2010	Partnership Office	Interim report on positive and negative perceptions
Participating departments to have had 70% of staff visiting a school once a term	July 2011	Departments	Schools and departments are positive about value of contact
Final evaluation of scheme	Nov 2011	Partnership Office	Final report on the lessons to draw from scheme, including whether and how to roll it out across the University

DEVELOPMENT PROJECT 3: Engaging with the Children's Workforce

Action	Completed	Responsible agency	Success criteria
Continue to consult with relevant departments within the University on a coherent approach to the development of the children's workforce	Dec 2009	Partnership Office	Agreement about the task among departments
Organise a half-day conference bringing together local and health authorities, 14 – 19 Partnership members and colleges with relevant academic departments	May 2010	Partnership Office, with specialist advice from academic departments	Conference well attended and resulting in agreement to establish overall steering group for workforce development
Organise quarterly steering group meetings to oversee development of CPD offers, niche programmes for the children's workforce and research and consultancy initiatives	July 2011	Partnership Office	To have held four meetings and overseen the planning and implementation of at least three new CPD offers