

Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Experiences of Ten Partnerships

Michelle Judkins, Sarah Golden, Eleanor Ireland
and Marian Morris
National Foundation for Educational Research

Research Report
No 646

Evaluation of Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge

*Implementing Aimhigher:
Excellence Challenge
The Experiences of Ten Partnerships*

*Michelle Judkins, Sarah Golden, Eleanor Ireland
and Marian Morris*

National Foundation for Educational Research

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

© NFER, LSE and IFS Aimhigher:Excellence Challenge Evaluation Consortium 2005
ISBN 1 84478 506 8

Contents

	page
Acknowledgements	i
Executive Summary	iii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Aims and objectives	3
1.3 Research methods	4
2. Working in partnership to deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge	9
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and other widening participation initiatives	11
2.3 Partnership structure and approach	13
2.4 The role of Connexions in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships	19
2.5 The role of Local Learning and Skills Councils in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships	22
2.6 Links with other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships	24
2.7 The role of businesses in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships	25
2.8 Factors that facilitate partnership working	25
2.9 Factors that inhibit partnership working	29
2.10 Summary	32
3. Young people's aspirations and views on barriers to progression	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 Young people's educational aspirations	36
3.3 Perceived influences and encouragement to aspire to higher education	40
3.4 Perceived barriers to progression	44
3.5 Overcoming barriers to progression	45
3.6 The Partnership perspective	46
3.7 Summary	51
4. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities – views on 'what works'	53
4.1 Introduction	54
4.2 Range of activities	55
4.3 Visits, residentials and summer schools at higher education institutions	57
4.4 Masterclasses and study activities	63
4.5 Mentoring and other support from individuals	65
4.6 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow	69
4.7 Study support	71
4.8 Modules contributing to entry	71
4.9 Practical support for progression	72
4.10 Events for parents	73
4.11 Finance-related activities	77
4.12 Activities targeted at specific groups of young people	78
4.13 Effectiveness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities	80

5. Wider outcomes from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge	83
5.1 Introduction	83
5.2 Wider impact on participating institutions	84
5.3 Personal and professional development	86
5.4 Impact on parents and the wider community	87
5.5 Branding through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge	88
6. Conclusion	91
6.1 Introduction	91
6.2 Effective activities	91
6.3 Effective partnerships	93
6.4 Approaches in the case study areas	94
6.5 Further research	95
6.6 Policy implications	96
6.7 In summary	97
Appendix A	99
Summaries of the areas visited	
Appendix B	119
Breakdown of interviews conducted	

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their thanks to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for sponsoring this research. We would especially like to thank Stella Mascarenhas-Keyes, David Thompson and all other members of the steering group for their support and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report and their guidance throughout the evaluation.

In addition, the authors gratefully acknowledge the support of colleagues at the NFER and at the LSE for their contribution to this report. Particular thanks are extended to Elizabeth Cleaver, Sarah Aiston, Susan Merrilees, Sue McMeeking and Chris Savory at the NFER and to Eleanor Stokes, Rosalyn Xavier and Annette Braun at the LSE for carrying out some of the case-study visits over the last three years. Particular thanks are due to Hazel Pennell for conducting interviews and for her comments on, and contributions to this report. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the LSE and IFS as the wider research consortium for their help and guidance throughout the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge evaluation.

Special thanks also extend to Julia Rose for her consistently high level of administrative support.

Finally, the authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the partnership coordinators and to all the staff and young people at the schools, colleges and higher education institutions and other partner organisations who also generously gave their time to share their experiences and contributed to the evidence and insights on which this report is based.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was launched by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001. The policy, which aims to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who apply for and subsequently enter higher education, was implemented in schools and colleges in deprived (and primarily urban) areas. At the outset, these areas included those involved in Phase 1 and 2 of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) programme and those in non-EiC Education Action Zones (EAZs).

The initiative comprised four main strands which aimed to:

- ♦ develop partnerships between schools, colleges and higher education institutions to raise aspirations of pupils
- ♦ increase funding for higher education institutions to further develop outreach programmes
- ♦ provide clearer information and better marketing of the route to higher education for young people
- ♦ pilot new forms of extra financial help through 26,000 Opportunity Bursaries to young people.

Since its inception, the initiative has been both extended and expanded. Following the publication of the Government's White Paper, *'The Future of Higher Education'* (DfES, 2003), funding was guaranteed up to 2006 and new areas (Phase 3 EiC areas and those Excellence Clusters that were still outwith the policy) were incorporated. This expansion was accompanied by re-branding to the label Aimhigher. Furthermore, the Aimhigher logo was also to be used to brand all Partnership for Progression activities (P4P), under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

Subsequently, these two initiatives (Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression) were integrated into one coherent outreach programme (Aimhigher) from August 2004.

Key findings

- ♦ This report presents findings from in-depth studies of ten Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. These were not selected to be representative of all partnerships nationally but to represent a range of sizes and backgrounds. Each 'case study' involved an in-depth exploration of a collection of perspectives and included interviews with a range of individuals involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme including pupils and students from both the widening

participation and gifted and talented cohorts who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.

- ◆ In these ten areas, it appeared that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships had added value to the working relationships between institutions within and across educational sectors, by enhancing coherence of practice, and networks of practitioners.
- ◆ Partnerships were most effective where they had the involvement and commitment of senior managers within the institutions, clear aims and strategies which were agreed at the outset, effective communication which was based in productive working relationships and a central coordinator with enthusiasm, relevant skills and experience.
- ◆ Where the Connexions service was actively involved, they made a valuable contribution to supporting young people in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort. Involvement of Connexions varied between areas and there is scope for further development.
- ◆ The partnerships had developed and adapted their activities in light of experience and understanding of what works. Rather than identifying any one successful or unsuccessful activity, the main elements of effective provision were visits to higher education institutions, discussions with undergraduates and providing tailored activities that were participatory and interactive.
- ◆ The interviewed young people generally aspired to undertaking courses in higher education but were concerned about the financial implications, as were their parents. Partnerships had implemented activities to address this including using partner agencies, such as LEAs and higher education institutions. Talking to undergraduates or to parents about their financial concerns of undertaking a higher education qualification, had helped reduce some interviewees' anxieties about debt. These strategies were best used near to the time of decision-making.

Working in partnership to deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (Chapter 2)

In most partnerships, higher education institutions had existing activities to widen participation prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and the programme was seen as contributing a further element to their overall strategy. In some areas, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership acted as a conduit between higher education institutions and schools to coordinate activities and had facilitated and enhanced the relationships between the organisations. In some areas, relationships between higher education institutions had become more collaborative and this was attributed to involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. (Section 2.2)

Partnerships were structured in relation to their local context and history. Three approaches were identified which were characterised as a devolved approach, specialist team approach and a clustered approach. A partnership could use more than one approach and there were benefits and challenges to each. Where funding and responsibility for delivery was devolved to schools

and colleges, close monitoring and senior management in the school or college were needed in order to assure accountability. A specialist team approach benefited from the specialist knowledge and experience of the team members in relation to an education sector, or a curriculum area. Where schools were organised into clusters to work together, practice could be shared easily, but required ownership on the part of school staff. (Section 2.3)

Central to effective partnership working, in the view of interviewees in various areas and types of institution, was good communication which was based on productive working relationships. In order to achieve this, agreeing shared aims and the structural arrangements at the outset and having a central coordinator with enthusiasm, skills and networks were central to success. It emerged that it was important to gain the support of senior managers within the partner institutions and it worked well when the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge fitted closely with the aims and objectives of the partner organisation. The factors which had inhibited partnership working included the workload and consequent time involved for delivering the programme and the conflicting priorities for staff. Issues related to monitoring delivery and ensuring accountability issues were also said to inhibit partnership working. (Sections 2.8 and 2.9)

Young people's aspirations and views on barriers to progression

(Chapter 3)

The majority of the young people who were interviewed, both pre-16 and post-16, aspired to pursue courses in further and higher education. They believed that gaining a higher education qualification would enable them to have greater choice in terms of potential careers. However, they also perceived the benefits of becoming more independent and developing socially through participating in university life. The pupils were influenced by their families, in terms of encouragement and support to continue in education, and by their teachers who were respected by young people for their greater understanding of the pupil's abilities. (Sections 3.2 and 3.3)

Although pupils recognised the rewards of continuing education, many of those interviewed had yet to commit to a decision to embark on a degree.¹ While this was partly due to the stage in their educational career, as some were aged less than 16, it was evident that the financial implications of pursuing a higher education course, and the associated fear of the debt that would be incurred, was a preoccupation. Their understanding of the length of a degree course, which they considered to be too long, and concerns over whether gaining a degree would yield the financial and career-related rewards were further considerations that influenced their decision-making. Young people's observations about further learning suggested that there was scope for further

¹ It should be noted, that when discussing higher education courses, young people largely referred to degree qualifications rather than other qualifications such as Foundation degrees and diplomas. Although interviewees were not prompted about their knowledge of higher education qualifications other than degrees, there was the perception from the interviews that young people were not considering the breadth of higher education courses available, for example foundation degrees and diploma certificates. Therefore, the findings in this report largely relate to degree courses.

information and guidance about the detail of pursuing a higher education course. However, careful consideration needed to be given to providing this at an appropriate time when it will seem most relevant to pupils and students. (Sections 3.4 and 3.5)

From the broader perspectives of staff in the partnerships, including teaching staff and coordinators, it appeared that the main barriers to progression included students' self-perceptions which lead them to believe that they were not the type of person to undertake a degree. Pupils were also reported as having concerns about leaving home or leaving the local area. The lack of family and community experience of higher education, and family pressures to work together with the availability of local employment at age 18 were further barriers to progression in learning identified in these areas. (Section 3.6)

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities: views on what works (Chapter 4)

The partnerships had implemented a range of activities over the two years of the evaluation in order to help young people who wished to progress into further learning and to overcome some of the barriers they encountered.

Reflecting on their experience of delivering activities, there was a consensus amongst interviewees that providing the opportunity for young people to meet with current undergraduates and to visit higher education institutions and engage in participatory activities were the most effective aspects of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme. Visits to higher education institutions led pupils to consider that higher education was a possibility for them and challenged their preconceptions about the people and study that would be involved in pursuing a degree course. The students benefited from experiencing an alternative environment, including both the social and educational aspects of higher education, and from participating in activities that were appropriate in content and delivery. (Section 4.3)

Contact with undergraduates was widely used in the partnerships visited. Such contact could be an activity in itself, as in the case of mentoring, or as part of another activity such as a masterclass or a visit to a higher education institution. The distinctive contribution which these interventions provided included the individually-focused support, as evident though mentoring, and the different perspective undergraduates provide. Students and pupils respected the honest information provided by undergraduates whose genuine recent experience of higher education gave them credibility. In some areas, it was noted that where undergraduates were from a similar background to the younger students and pupils, this could help students to relate to the undergraduates and consider that higher education was an option for people of a similar background to them. (Section 4.5)

Masterclasses were delivered in the partnerships with varied levels of success. They worked best when they were delivered in an appropriate and accessible way for students and pupils and were clearly related to a subject they were studying or an area of interest. Liaising closely with schools appeared to be a key factor which contributed to success in achieving this. (Section 4.4)

The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow had visited all of the partnerships that participated in the research. It appeared to have worked well with pre-16 pupils and when the style of delivery was carefully targeted at the right level for the audience. Some staff said that the Roadshow was most effective when used in conjunction with a wider programme of careers activities including, for example, the Aimhigher website. (Section 4.6)

Although it was acknowledged by staff, students and pupils that parents were a notable influence on their children, the experience of the case-study partnerships was that it had proved challenging to engage with them directly through the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. As parents were noted to be preoccupied with the financial implications of further learning, events were offered which focused on providing accurate information and advice relating to this issue. In doing so, partnerships engaged a range of other agencies, such as LEAs and higher education specialists and included valuable contributions from undergraduates who provided a realistic perspective. (Sections 4.10 and 4.11)

Overall, although not one activity emerged across the partnerships as the most or least successful, the use of undergraduates, and care in tailoring interventions to meet the needs and learning styles of the target group emerged as critical to success. Ensuring that activities were interactive and were thoroughly planned, and based on knowledge of the young people participating, were further influential factors. (Section 4.13)

Wider outcomes from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (Chapter 5)

The visits revealed some wider effects of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge other than on the cohort of participating pupils. Some effects on participating institutions were observed, such as communication between institutions in different sectors being eased and networks being developed which could usefully contribute to the integrated programme in the future. Staff in institutions gained in knowledge and understanding of each other and there were some indications of an increase in collaborative working where relationships had previously been competitive. (Section 5.2)

Within schools, involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was said to have impacted on the peers of pupils in the cohort as they learned from their friends about the potential opportunities for further study. Undergraduates who had been involved in supporting the programme, for example as student ambassadors, identified benefits to themselves including increased confidence and developing skills which would contribute to their future careers. Indeed, some had been influenced by their experience to embark on a career in teaching. (Section 5.3)

There were some indications that parents' awareness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, and the opportunities for further learning for their children was increasing. Parents were increasingly being proactive in contacting Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators and seeking access to opportunities for their children. This may develop further as Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge becomes increasingly established and recognised.

Indeed, the ‘Aimhigher’ brand was instrumental in developing this recognition as it was said to provide a more coherent image for a range of activities across institutions. (Section 5.4)

Conclusion (Chapter 6)

Staff in these ten partnerships had developed and refined their activities as they had matured but did not identify any one activity which was uniquely successful, nor did they reject any activity entirely. While the detail of the activities offered varied across partnerships in scope and number, there was consensus that providing young people with the opportunity to visit higher education institutions and to meet with current undergraduates and discuss higher education, were among the most effective ways of raising the aspirations of young people and helping them to believe that higher education might be an achievable option for them. In addition, ensuring that activities were participatory and delivered at an appropriate time in pupils’ educational career, were central to success. (Section 6.2)

The partnerships which underpinned the delivery of effective activities worked best where they had the involvement of senior managers from partner institutions who were committed to the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Where operational management was undertaken by a less senior member of staff, senior management support was vital. Having a central coordinator who was enthusiastic and had the relevant skills and experience, such as prior senior management experience within education, contributed to the success of the partnership. Ensuring that effective communication occurred within the partnership, including agreeing clear aims and strategies from the outset, were further factor which contribute to success. (Section 6.3)

The implications for policy which emerge from this element of the evaluation include the need to ensure that the activities of the partnerships are supported by the timely provision of information, advice and guidance to young people. It is also important that the challenges associated with working across education sectors to deliver a programme in terms of the time needed and the adaptations to teaching styles, are not under-estimated. With regard to the integrated programme in the future, there would be value in building on the experience of partnerships in delivering activities and working in partnership to do so. This could include implementing a clear system for monitoring expenditure of funding, especially where this is devolved. (Section 6.6)

Research methods

In order to achieve the aims of this aspect of the evaluation a programme of visits to ten case study partnerships was undertaken between 2002 and 2004. The ten areas included those in EiC phase 1 and phase 2 areas and EAZs.

Each partnership was visited once during the research and semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of partner institutions and with pre-16 pupils, post-16 students and undergraduates. A total of 361 interviews were conducted with:

- ◆ Partnership coordinators
- ◆ coordinators in schools, colleges
- ◆ other staff in schools, colleges who had been involved in delivering activities and supporting participants
- ◆ pre-16 pupils and post-16 students who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.
- ◆ senior managers in higher education institutions
- ◆ widening participation coordinators or officers in higher education institutions
- ◆ undergraduates who had been involved as student ambassadors or in similar roles
- ◆ Representatives of LLSCs and the Connexions service
- ◆ other individuals who had a role in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in local areas; these included learning mentors.

These partnership studies form one element of a wider evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge which comprises analyses of extensive longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys of pupils, surveys of schools and colleges and interviews with partnership coordinators.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was launched by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001. The policy, which aims to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who apply for and subsequently enter higher education, was implemented in schools and colleges in deprived (and primarily urban) areas. At the outset, these areas included those involved in Phase 1 and 2 of the Excellence in Cities² (EiC) programme and those in non-EiC Education Action Zones (EAZs).³ Two cohorts of young people were specifically targeted through the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. Young people aged 13 to 19 who had the potential to progress onto a higher education course, but had no family history of higher education were identified by members of partnerships (schools) and named the ‘widening participation cohort’. A ‘gifted and talented’ cohort of young people pre-16 were identified, as part of the EiC programme, and post-16 as part of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The gifted and talented cohort represented between five and ten per cent of the institution’s population who were achieving, or had the potential to achieve, above the average for their year group. Young people who were ‘gifted’ included those who had a particular academic ability while those who were ‘talented’ had an aptitude in arts or sports. Young people who met both criteria were defined as ‘all rounders’. The gifted and talented cohort in an institution included young people who have potential to achieve but are underachieving. It is worth noting that a young person could meet the criteria for inclusion in both the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts.

The four key strands of the original Excellence Challenge programme were:

- ♦ to develop partnerships between schools, colleges and higher education institutions in order to raise aspirations and attainment in Excellence in Cities (EiC) areas and Education Action Zones (EAZs) and so encourage greater progression to higher education (Strand 1)

² Launched in September 1999, Excellence in Cities is one of the Government’s key policy initiatives for redressing educational disadvantage and under-performance in schools located within the most deprived urban areas of England. It has adopted a multi-strand approach to raising standards and performance and emphasises the use of locally-based partnership approaches and targeted provision. While some of the policy strands (such as Excellence Action Zones, City Learning Centres, Beacon Schools and Specialist Schools) operate at either area or whole school level, others (the Gifted and Talented Strand, Learning Support Units, and Learning Mentors) are specifically targeted at the individual student.

³ Education Action Zones are in the process of being transformed to Excellence Clusters.

- ♦ to increase funding to higher education institutions to reach out to more young people (Strand 2)
- ♦ to provide clearer information and better marketing of the route to higher education for young people (Strand 3)
- ♦ to pilot new forms of extra financial help through 26,000 Opportunity Bursaries to young people, worth £2000 per student over three years (Strand 4).⁴

A fifth strand, the comprehensive evaluation of the programme (**Strand 5**), was commissioned by the DfES in 2001, and is being conducted by a consortium comprising the National Foundation for Educational Research, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. More recently, a sixth strand was added to the programme. **Strand 6** provides payments to undergraduates, through the Student Associates pilot programme, to support their work in schools and further education colleges. The aim of this strand is to provide role models for the young people and, through the interventions of the student associates, help them to learn more about higher education.

Since its inception, the initiative has been both extended and expanded. Following the publication of the Government's White Paper, '*The Future of Higher Education*' (DfES, 2003)⁵, funding was guaranteed up to 2006 and new areas (Phase 3 EiC areas and those Excellence Clusters that were still outwith the policy) were incorporated. This expansion was accompanied by re-branding, with all new areas using the label Aimhigher⁶ from September 2003 and existing areas replacing the Excellence Challenge logo with the Aimhigher logo by September 2004. Furthermore, the Aimhigher logo was also to be used to brand all Partnership for Progression activities (P4P),⁷ under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)⁸ and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

This branding presaged the subsequent integration of the two initiatives (Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression) into one coherent

⁴ DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (2003a). *Aimhigher web site 2003*. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/aimhigherprogramme/index.cfm?i_pageId=1&s_pageType=level2 (Accessed 21 December 2004).

⁵ GREAT BRITAIN. PARLIAMENT. HOUSE OF COMMONS (2003). *The Future of Higher Education* (Cm. 5735). London: The Stationery Office. As a result of this expansion, 86 new local partnerships would be involved in implementing the Excellence Challenge (now Aimhigher) initiative.

⁶ Aimhigher was the brand name initially adopted by the marketing strand of the Excellence Challenge policy.

⁷ Partnerships for Progression was a jointly funded initiative run, on a regional basis, by the HEFCE and the LSC to increase and widen participation in higher education.

⁸ In 2003, HEFCE announced changes to the way in which it funded universities for widening participation activities, replacing the postcode premium with the widening participation allocation (see XAVIER, R. and WEST, A. (2003). Excellence Challenge Funding and Widening Participation. Unpublished report).

outreach programme (Aimhigher) from August 2004.⁹ This unified Aimhigher Programme was the fulfilment of the 2003 HE White Paper commitment to create a coherent national outreach programme, but one which operated most intensely in areas of disadvantage.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The evaluation involves a range of integrated quantitative and qualitative studies. The central aim of the evaluation is to explore the effectiveness of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme. To what extent has it raised aspirations and achievement amongst targeted 13-19 year olds? How, and in what ways, has it contributed to increasing and widening participation in higher education? The methods that have been deployed to address these questions include:

- ◆ Large-scale surveys of students and tutors in schools and further education sector institutions. These have been implemented in order to provide information about such factors as the activities that have been undertaken as part of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme and students' attitudes towards education. The information obtained from these surveys (combined with administrative data sources and the National Pupil Database – NPD) will also be used to examine the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on attainment and progression.
- ◆ Surveys of higher education providers, to collate information about activities aimed at widening participation and policies and practices in relation to access to higher education. The information from these surveys will also be used to assess the perceived effectiveness of such policies and practices.
- ◆ Surveys of young people eligible for Opportunity Bursaries, to ascertain their characteristics, financial circumstances and experiences.
- ◆ Annual interviews with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators in partnerships. These interviews have sought to monitor the development of the initiative in the partnership areas and to gather perceptions about the effectiveness of the range and type of widening participation activities that have been implemented.
- ◆ Area-based studies of specific partnerships and higher education institutions to explore policy and practice at a local level and to contribute to an assessment of the perceived effectiveness of the first four strands of the programme.

⁹ This integration was originally planned for April 2004.

1.3 Research methods

This report presents the findings from the in-depth studies of ten Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. The partnerships were not selected to be representative of all partnerships nationally but were selected to include a range of different types of sizes of partnership and to reflect different local priorities and strategies based on information gleaned from annual reports and, in some cases, partnership interviews. While their individual experiences may not always reflect a wider experience, many common themes and issues emerged across the areas and their experience of implementing the programme in a range of circumstances provides some indication of effective approaches to working in partnership and delivering appropriate activities. The partnerships visited included those in the North East and North West of England (five partnerships), East and West Midlands (two partnerships) and South East and South West England and London (three partnerships). Three partnerships were EIC Phase 1 areas, four were in Phase 2 EIC areas and three were EAZs (now Excellence Clusters). Summaries of the ten areas are provided in Appendix A.

In each ‘case study’ area, interviews were conducted with a range of individuals who volunteered to participate and who represented the main organisations that were involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme, as well as with pupils and students who had participated in the programme. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of a range of perspectives on the experience of implementing and experiencing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and afforded a comparison of the views of those in different education sectors. Some interviewees in each partnership were identified in negotiation with the partnership coordinator and reflected the structure of that partnership and the availability of staff, others were recruited through institutions. Consequently, the range of interviewees interviewed was different in each partnership. A detailed breakdown of the 361 interviews that were conducted across the ten areas is provided in Appendix B.

Across the ten areas, interviews were conducted with 253 individuals in schools, colleges and sixth form colleges. These comprised:

- ◆ fourteen partnership coordinators
- ◆ thirty coordinators in schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges who had responsibility for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge within their institutions
- ◆ forty-two other staff in schools, colleges and sixth form colleges, including senior managers and teachers or tutors in schools and colleges, who had been involved to some degree in delivering activities and supporting participants
- ◆ one hundred and twelve pre-16 pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and were

identified either as part of the widening participation or gifted and talented cohorts¹⁰

- ♦ fifty-five post-16 students in Years 12 and 13 who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.

Young people to be interviewed were identified by staff members as those in the gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts who had participated in at least one activity through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Students from each of the target year groups (Years 9 to 13) were interviewed. The young people who participated in the interviews had experienced a range of activities and had a variety of plans for their future education, employment and training; not all intended to continue into higher education. One implication of school and college staff selecting the young people who should participate in interviews could be that they may have selected young people with a positive perspective of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, which might be unrepresentative of all young people in the institution. This, however, did not appear to be borne out in the interviews. The interviewees expressed a wide range of views, both positive and critical, and their perceptions in many cases corresponded with those of staff interviewees who were commenting on the wider cohort of students.

At least one local higher education institution in each of the ten case study areas was visited as part of the case study. The institutions were identified by the partnership coordinators and were actively involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, including delivering activities. In five areas, more in-depth higher education studies were conducted. In total, 67 individuals were interviewed in 12 higher education institutions (of which five were pre-1992 universities), as follows:

- ♦ twelve senior managers, including pro-vice chancellors in the in-depth study areas
- ♦ twenty widening participation coordinators or officers who had responsibility for coordinating Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge within the institution¹¹ or for the delivery of particular Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities
- ♦ twelve members of academic staff involved in the delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities
- ♦ three student support workers

¹⁰ Throughout the report the term ‘pupil’ is used to refer to a pre-16 pupil and ‘student’ is used to refer to a post-16 student. Undergraduate students in higher education institutions are referred to as ‘undergraduates’. ‘Young people’ refers to young people pre-16 and post-16 where a distinction is not necessary.

¹¹ Widening participation officers responsible for coordinating Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities within higher education institutions are not necessarily funded by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

- ♦ twenty undergraduates who had been involved as student ambassadors or in similar roles in the institutions visited.

Interviews were sought with representatives of LLSCs and Connexions Services in each partnership, but the level of active participation by such bodies varied considerably across the ten areas and it was not always possible to identify an appropriate member of staff to interview. Representatives of the Connexions Services were interviewed in eight of the ten areas.¹² In total, ten Personal Advisors were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with one representative from the Local Learning and Skills Council in five of the ten areas.¹³ These interviewees were identified by the partnership coordinators and had themselves varying levels of active involvement in implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Therefore, the experiences reported herein reflect the relationship between LLSCs and partnerships **where this was said to be an active relationship**. A total of 26 interviews were conducted with other individuals who had a role in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in local areas; these included learning mentors, representatives of partner agencies such as education business partnerships.

The research team aimed to conduct interviews with the parents of young people who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In order to identify parents in this target group, the help of partnership coordinators and of partner institutions was sought and parent events were identified. However, reflecting the challenge of engaging parents in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, (which will be discussed in Chapter 4 of the report) coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges found great difficulty in identifying parents to take part in the study. The research team attended a few parents' evenings and events but were not given permission by school staff to conduct any formal interviews. Nevertheless, the interviewees who had worked with parents through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in their role of coordinating the initiative provided their perspectives on the views and experiences of parents. These are presented in Chapter 4. The young people who were interviewed also spoke about their parents' attitudes and experiences and provided an insight into parental perceptions. These are discussed in Chapter 3.

Each case study partnership was visited at least once between December 2002 and June 2004 with the majority of visits taking place in 2003. During each visit, interviews were conducted in the participating institutions in the partnership. This enabled the evaluation to explore core issues and the development of partnerships at various phases of their evolution. However, it

¹² Within the remaining two areas, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator explained that the Connexions Service had little involvement with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and since no relevant personnel could be identified interviews were not carried out.

¹³ Within the remaining five areas, LSC involvement was less prominent and therefore interviews were not conducted with LSC representatives in these areas.

should be noted that, as a consequence, interviewees were reflecting their experience at that point in time and contemporary developments in the area, and in national policy, will have influenced their primary concerns and priorities at the time of the interview. Any differences which emerged, such as different perspectives on the integrated programme, are reported as appropriate.

On the whole, interviews were conducted face-to-face, either individually or in small groups of up to six individuals, as appropriate. A semi-structured schedule of questions was used during the interviews. This contained a core of questions but also allowed for flexibility in order to respond to local issues and developments in national policy relevant to the programme. Broadly, the interviews with staff focused on:

- ♦ the local context of the area and the main issues and priorities which they sought to address through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge
- ♦ the working relationships between partners and approaches to partnership working
- ♦ the operational delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and the challenges and outcomes associated with the activities
- ♦ the wider outcomes of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

Interviews with pre-16 pupils and post-16 students explored:

- ♦ their attitudes towards further and higher education and their perceptions of the barriers to progression
- ♦ their experiences of participating in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and their perspectives on the value of the activities in which they had engaged
- ♦ their plans for progression following their current education.

The outcomes of involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge for young people, in terms of their aspirations, attainment and educational destinations, are being evaluated in detail through the large scale longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys which form a major part of the wider evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The area studies, which are the focus of this report, aim to supplement the wider evaluation by providing an insight into the processes, structures and practices which were established with the aim of achieving these outcomes for young people. Through examining the perspectives of the range of individuals who were involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in coordinating the programme, delivering the activities and, in the case of the young people interviewed, participating in and engaging with the programme, this report seeks to present an insight into the activities and practices that appeared to have been most effective in delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in the first three years, and the key elements

which appear to be required to contribute to its future development through the integrated programme.

2. Working in partnership to deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

Key findings

- ◆ Higher education institutions in most of the partnerships had existing activities to widen participation, including compact schemes and outreach programmes. In some cases, they had worked in partnership with other higher education institutions in relation to widening participation.
- ◆ On the whole, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was regarded in the higher education institutions as one element of their overall widening participation policy. In some instances, it was regarded as forming one part of the jigsaw and had contributed to extending the range of activities provided. In the view of widening participation officers, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was less effective where there was a less coherent approach, and where a number of disparate initiatives co-existed rather than an integrated programme.
- ◆ Widening participation coordinators felt that, to be most effective, widening participation activities needed to take place at appropriate times across a pupils' school or college career ('their student life cycle'). They needed to be timely, targeted, and participatory and involve university undergraduates. Individual activities that took place over a prolonged period, such as residentials and summer schools, were also felt to be effective.
- ◆ The approaches to structuring the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships in these ten areas could be characterised into three types which are not exclusive: devolved, specialist and clustered.
- ◆ In some partnerships a devolved approach, whereby a central coordinator worked closely with institutional coordinators, was adopted. Funds could be devolved to schools, which supported flexibility to meet the needs of individual schools and their pupils, or a small amount could be held centrally and a menu of activities offered. The former approach requires senior management involvement in the schools and close monitoring of activities, while the second requires more staff at the centre to be available to organise the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.
- ◆ Some partnerships adopted a team approach where individual staff specialised in one aspect. Examples included pre-16 and post-16 specialists, higher education and pre-18 specialists and curriculum specialists. This approach was regarded as beneficial, as each individual contributed their skills, experience and networks to the overall partnership.
- ◆ Through the clustered approach, groups of schools worked together. This was not widely used but was said to be effective for sharing practice and issues but involved some devolution of funds which raised accountability issues.

- ◆ Some higher education institutions perceived the partnership coordinator as a conduit for links with schools. They valued the contribution that the involvement with the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership had made in facilitating and enhancing their relationships with schools. Partnership coordinators were also seen in some areas as having operated as a catalyst facilitating relationships between higher education institutions and schools, which subsequently operated independently.
- ◆ Relationships between higher education institutions in some instances were collaborative. Collaborative relationships appeared to be strongest between institutions where the courses that were offered were complementary and so the institutions were not in direct competition. Competition remained an issue in some instances.
- ◆ Three partnerships had close relationships with the Connexions Service and very much valued the contribution they made in providing information and advice to pupils and students in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort. Where relationships were less well-developed, this tended to occur where the Connexions service was at an early stage of development at the time of the interview, or were seen by interviewees to have other priorities, or where their involvement was limited to attendance at steering groups. In one of the ten partnerships, however, a member of Connexions staff was appointed with specific responsibility for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.
- ◆ The role of Local Learning and Skills Councils in these ten partnerships was largely strategic. They took responsibility for funding, providing monitoring data and bringing a wider perspective and coherence to the wider area through their overview of initiatives across their region.
- ◆ Central to effective partnership working, in the view of interviewees, was good communication. This could be achieved through establishing good working relationships, which were based on shared aims and cooperation, and through regular meetings. A central coordinator with enthusiasm, experience and appropriate skills and relevant contacts and networks was a further factor which was said to facilitate partnership working. It was important to gain support from senior management within institutions and partnerships were said to work well where the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge clearly fitted in with the aims and objectives of partner institutions. Clarity in the strategy and structure and the structural arrangements that were in place, were the final factors identified as being beneficial to partnership working.
- ◆ Factors which were found to have inhibited partnership working included monitoring and accountability issues where funding was devolved. Time and workload issues for staff in the institutions and the conflicting priorities of partner institutions could inhibit the work of the partnership, as could lack of communication. Finally, where practical difficulties were encountered, the commitment and goodwill of staff could be negatively affected.

2.1 Introduction

The delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge within the local area necessitated the formation of partnerships between Local Education Authorities (LEAs), schools, colleges and sixth form colleges, higher education institutions and other educational agencies. This chapter examines the nature of the partnerships in the ten case study areas. It outlines the relationship between the widening participation activities which were in place in higher education institutions prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. It then explores the roles of the various agencies within the partnership from the perspectives of the partnership coordinators, higher education staff, and representatives of the Connexions services and Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs). It concludes by presenting a range of perspectives on the factors which had facilitated and inhibited partnership working in these partnerships.

2.2 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and other widening participation initiatives

This section examines the views of various staff in higher education institutions, who were involved in the coordination and delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge across the ten areas on how Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge fitted in with other widening participation initiatives. Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge all higher education institutions received funding for widening participation activities. However, in two of the ten areas, higher education staff stated that they were not aware of any widening participation activities with young people that existed prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In these areas, the higher education institutions (both of which were post-1992 institutions) historically had a widening participation remit, which was integral to their approach but which focused primarily on mature students. In the other eight areas, it was clear that there was great variation in the types of widening participation provision prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The most common form of widening participation initiative identified by higher education staff were programmes such as compact schemes, whereby a higher education institution worked with particular students from schools, colleges or geographical areas with which it had an agreement. Through such schemes, the higher education institutions give special consideration to the applications of students to the institution from the partner school, college or area.

Some higher education institutions were already working in partnership to widen participation, with other higher education providers in their area prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge whilst in other areas higher education institutions worked individually with local schools or colleges. Higher education institutions also had a wide range of outreach programs, although

these often had a dual purpose of increasing recruitment to the individual institution, as well as widening participation into higher education more broadly.

For most higher education interviewees, therefore, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was seen as one element of their institution's overall existing policy on widening participation, and existed alongside other schemes, funded from a variety of sources such as HEFCE (including through the postcode premium and aspiration premium), the European Social Fund and Partnerships for Progression.¹⁴ From higher education staff's responses, it appeared that, in some areas, there was **synergy** between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and other widening participation initiatives, though this was not apparent in all areas. A widening participation officer at an institution in one area, where such synergy was identified, viewed Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as '*a small amount of money that helps to add to the whole jigsaw puzzle*' and saw it as '*the icing on the cake*' in terms of widening participation in the area. She went on to explain how the funding had enabled the institution to expand their previous activities to include more students, roll out new activities and work with another higher education institution. A similar experience was reported by a higher education interviewee in another area, who had been involved in a widening participation scheme that had been running for several years prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. This had many similar objectives and worked with the same local schools as the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative. S/he welcomed partnership with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as it allowed the two initiatives to '*join forces*' and commented that their efforts would be cumulative: '*It is good that more than one person in the community is working towards the same goal, as it means we can dovetail the work and can build foundations year on year.*' In a third area (Area 2 below), a higher education interviewee also viewed Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as building on previous widening participation work and felt that it fitted in well with the other schemes in which they were involved with.

Area 2 – Coherent widening participation experiences

Area 2 was well served by universities with five higher education institutions in the immediate locale. When Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was implemented in the area there were already two well established widening participation schemes in existence: a Compact style scheme and an outreach program aimed at younger students. These were funded by HEFCE through the postcode premium. There was also collaboration between local higher education institutions. Respondents in this area were keen to emphasise that they worked hard to ensure that the different widening participation initiatives in their area did not duplicate activities, but rather linked together to give students a coherent widening participation experience: '*It is important to make connections [between WP initiatives] so that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge is not just an add-on or yet another initiative*'. Higher education staff in this

¹⁴ Partnerships for Progression was identified prior to integration into the unified Aimhigher programme.

area also commented that ensuring that there was coherence in widening participation, meant that the system was also cost-effective and that they were able to '*get the most out of the money as [sic] they could*'.

In two other areas it appeared that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge did not fit so well with pre-existing widening participation initiatives. In one of these a widening participation officer indicated that there was some duplication of roles, in terms of the different initiatives, and that schools in the local area had appointed both Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators and coordinators for the institution's own compact scheme. A widening participation officer in the second area felt that the sheer number of widening participation initiatives in the locality militated against widening participation. This respondent believed that the number of initiatives was a '*major problem*,' because it meant that the institution's resources were '*spread very thinly*' as there were a large number of programmes with a relatively small amount of money. Overall, these reflections suggest that a more effective approach to delivering widening participation activities was through a coordinated approach, one that was found in most of the partnerships visited.

2.3 Partnership structure and approach

2.3.1 The views of partnership coordinators

This section outlines some of the different ways in which the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships in the ten areas were organised from the perspectives of the partnership coordinators. Three different types of approach are outlined, which could be described as a **devolved approach**, a **specialist team approach** and a **clustered approach**. The different strategies are not mutually exclusive, exhaustive or hierarchical, but are intended to demonstrate the range of ways of partnership working, to highlight some of the reasons why partnerships chose these approaches and to illustrate some of the issues affecting effective partnership working.

Across the ten areas, the partnerships operated with varying levels of devolvement of funding and of devolvement of responsibility for organising activities. Half of the partnerships appeared to have adopted a **devolved approach**, whereby the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator worked directly with coordinators from the schools and colleges involved in the partnership. In these areas, a large proportion of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge budget was devolved to the schools and colleges and only a small proportion was held by the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator to organise activities centrally. **Funds devolved to schools and colleges** were often spent, for example, on study support, employing mentors, salary points for the institution coordinator and supply cover for the coordinator to attend activities. Allocation of the budget in the schools was, in most cases, agreed with the partnership coordinator and

outlined in the institutions Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge plan. An institution coordinator applauded the flexibility of this system in his area, describing how the broad aims and focus were agreed in principle, centrally, with each partner then interpreting the agreement to suit the needs of their pupils and students. He saw this approach as *'very coherent and offer[ing] tremendous support'*. In some cases the institution coordinator was responsible for managing the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge budget, whilst in other cases budget responsibility lay with other, more senior, members of staff, and the institution coordinator took a more operational role. The partnership coordinator in one such area felt that devolving funds to schools in this way was manageable and accountable:

I monitor the schools allocation, I inspect development plans and I wouldn't say I have a rigid monitoring process, but the expectation is that schools have plans and the money is spent appropriately and I feel that, [it] is relatively secure.

By contrast the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator in one area did not feel that this system of devolvement worked so well, because she could not account for the schools' spending and whether funds were spent appropriately:

Devolved money isn't always spent appropriately in some schools. Schools won't do itemised reports and the school coordinator, appointed by the head, tends to be too junior to have much clout. They can't get the money released for Aimhigher activities and they can't do anything about it.

Monitoring spend in colleges was subject to similar accountability issues. While one coordinator in an area of devolved funding explained that s/he monitored the colleges' expenditure in *'exactly the same way: [as schools] very open, very transparent'*.

A project worker in one area, responsible for organising Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities for the college, explained that college funds *can 'get lost in the system'* and that was often difficult to monitor how Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funds were spent. Such monitoring was said to be easier now that s/he was a recognised signatory on payments for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and, was therefore, in a better position to monitor the budget expenditure.

These experiences suggest that in order to implement Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge effectively, a balance needs to be found between a need for accountability and the flexibility of budget allocations within institutions. If partnership coordinators are required to provide cost-effective activities, or wish to monitor the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness of activities) sufficient measures may need to be in place to ensure that they are able to

effectively monitor spending whilst also allowing institution coordinators flexibility to meet the needs of their pupils and students as they see fit. The interviews suggest that this balance is best achieved through frequent and open communication between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership and institutional coordinators.

The **money held centrally** by the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was often used to pay for the partnership coordinator's salary and some centrally organised activities such as visits to higher education institutions and Masterclasses. The centrally organised activities were often offered to schools and colleges through a programme or menu put together by the partnership coordinators, whereby institutions could sign up to those activities they felt suited their needs. School coordinators from several areas where such a menu system was used felt that this approach was effective. One school coordinator commented that *'It makes my job really easy ... it is working really well.'* A partnership coordinator in one area was less positive about the menu system, however, as she felt that the coordinators in the institutions were too busy to be able to give full consideration to the activities offered to them by the central coordinator and did not always make best use of the available opportunities.

In only two of the partnerships (both small EAZ areas), funds were not devolved to schools but were held centrally by the partnership. In both areas the reason given was that the partnership coordinator assumed that this was necessary in order to ensure that the money for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was being spent appropriately. One coordinator explained:

If we gave the devolved budgets directly to the schools, it would just disappear into their general budgets. It's absolutely essential that I hold that budget as an Aimhigher budget.

Partnership coordinators in these areas did not suggest that they had experienced funds being subsumed in this way, but felt that this was the most effective way of managing their budgets. It did not appear that any of the larger partnerships took this approach. This may have been due to the higher numbers of schools and colleges involved and the size of the budget, which might make holding all funds centrally unmanageable without additional staffing. Indeed in the areas where funds were held centrally, it was found necessary to employ such staff to support work of the partnership coordinator.

Another organisational approach used in half of the partnerships visited was to have a **specialist team** in charge of the operational side of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. For example, in two areas, which were both relatively small EAZs, much of the operational work was originally undertaken by the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator. However the workload was found to be unmanageable, so additional staff were employed.

The strategies used to staff Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge varied. In one area the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator in the local further education college became more involved in the partnership after the first year of the initiative so that he could take responsibility for the budget, activities and support for post-16 students, whilst the partnership coordinator maintained responsibility for the pre-16 students. A similar division of labour took place in another partnership where a specialist project worker for schools and a specialist project worker for colleges were employed to support the partnership coordinator in the operational side of the initiative. In this partnership it was found that employing project workers not only eased the workload for the partnership coordinator, but also relieved the administrative burden from the link teachers in the schools involved, as the project workers were able to take over much of the paperwork for the activities, such as risk assessment and letters to parents. A further, much larger, EiC partnership also bought in extra help to support the operational running of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In this area the management of some activities, such as summer schools and Masterclasses, was contracted out to a local provider. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator in this area carefully monitored the provision of such activities and felt that it was an effective way of managing the initiative.

Another large partnership, located in an EiC area, had employed two part-time staff in addition to the full-time Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator. One of the people was based at the local higher education provider and was mainly involved with organising many of the higher education activities. The other person was based in the Connexions service and was involved, for half of her time, in liaising with the schools and colleges on behalf of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Within this partnership it was generally felt that the involvement of these different people worked very well as they all brought different skills and contacts to the partnership. A further large EiC partnership used a team of four coordinators, each with different curriculum specialisms, to liaise with schools, colleges and higher education institutions and to manage and deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities associated with these particular curriculum areas, such as subject-related Masterclasses and specialist higher education institution visits. One of the curriculum coordinators in this area noted the benefits of this. He could draw on his subject background and, having worked with higher education institutions in previous posts, could bring these developed relationships to the partnership. These were then exploited for the benefit of students who were interested in the subject areas.

Another organisational approach was to group the **schools into clusters** based on their geographical proximity. This approach was used in two areas, one of which had a large number of schools. Following the system which was established through EiC, the schools were divided into smaller groups or clusters. Each smaller group had a lead school that would take responsibility

for attending Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships meetings and disseminating the outcomes to the other schools in the cluster. Schools in a cluster also worked collaboratively to deliver some activities, as one school coordinator described:

We were organising revision classes and last year organised them in cluster groups so [our school] and [Town High School] got together and organised the revision classes. Some of them took place here and some of them took place at [Town High School], but all of our pupils were invited.

In this area it was generally felt that the cluster system worked well and enabled sharing of practice and issues, as illustrated in the comment of one school coordinator who said:

We met once a week for about three months and varied the school that we met at and that was really useful. Not just for organising but to discuss other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge ...issues.

Views on the value of a cluster approach were not all as positive, however. In another large partnership, where schools were also clustered as part of EiC, they had decided against following this grouping for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The partnership coordinator explained that they had decided instead to work with schools individually, to encourage each school to take ownership of the initiative, rather than just leaving it to the cluster lead. In addition, they were concerned that working in clusters meant that the funding was less accountable than working on a one-to-one basis with schools.

2.3.2 The higher education perspective

The role of higher education institutions within Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships varied across the ten areas, and between individual institutions within the areas. This section looks first at the higher education institutions' views of their role in delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, then goes on to describe the relationships between the different higher education institutions within the partnerships.¹⁵

Many of the higher education staff interviewed saw the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator as a conduit for links with schools and further education colleges, whereby the partnership coordinator would broker the relationship between the different partners. However, the extent to which higher education staff also had direct links to schools and colleges varied: some higher education staff preferred that all links with schools and colleges

¹⁵ It should be noted that, throughout the report the term partnership refers to groups of schools, further education colleges and partnership coordinators funded by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Strand 1. Within these partnerships although higher education institutions were not funded by Strand 1 of the programme (funds were available through Strand 2), they acted as providers of activities and were members of the steering group.

went **via the partnership coordinator**, whereas other staff had, or wanted to have, **direct links with schools and colleges**.

Higher education staff in one area were very positive about the **role of the coordinator as a broker** of their relationships with schools and in fact preferred schools involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to contact them via the partnership coordinator because it enabled more effective coordination. The brokerage role was largely viewed as instrumental in the success of the initiative. Higher education interviewees in this area described the partnership coordinator as the '*activator*' and someone who is able to '*tap into relationships ... and make the relationships work*'. They added that, through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, they were able to have a very successful relationship with schools, '*We are working in tandem with schools in a way we couldn't do before*'.

The brokerage role was not welcomed universally. Higher education staff from an institution in another area, where it had been agreed that all contact should go through the partnership coordinator, felt that using the partnership coordinator as a broker limited the relationships that the institution was able to establish directly with schools. One widening participation officer from a university described links between schools and higher education institutions as '*too arms length*', while other respondents said that the university would like to be able to contact schools directly and be able maintain links with schools that were already established.

In a further area the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership did not operate as a conduit between higher education institutions and schools, but rather acted as a **catalyst** in initiating a closer relationship between them, which could operate independently or in tandem with the partnership coordinator. A higher education member of the partnership explained that he had gained direct links to schools through the partnership and that his role in the partnership was now to '*work the schools*', in order to build up good relationships with the careers officers and Head of Years in the schools.

The relationship between individual higher education institutions within Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships varied across the ten areas. Although not all interviewees were able to comment on the relationship it was possible to characterise the inter-higher education institution relationships into three types: collaborative, competitive and independent. **Collaborative** relationships usually involved two or more institutions in a partnership, with at least one pre-1992 and one post-1992 institution involved. In one area, a representative from a post-1992 institution commented that the two higher education institutions with the main involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in that area complemented each other well as they offered different types of courses and were not trying to recruit the same students. In another area, staff commented that the higher education institutions involved in the

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership ‘*get on well*’ as they were all ‘*student focused*’ and ‘*they are passionate about what students want*’. In some areas this collaborative relationship was not necessarily a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, as links had already existed as part of regional cooperation for widening participation or had arisen from previous professional links.

In a further area, staff from a pre-1992 higher education institution commented that the universities involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were ‘*not used to working together*’ and that they were in fact **competing** with another pre-1992 institution in the partnership for the same students. They were concerned that they would, potentially, lose the best students to this institution if they worked together to raise aspirations. The respondent explained ‘*We want the best...students to come to us*’. In two other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas, the relationship between the higher education institutions involved was neither collaborative nor competitive. Although there were links with a range of higher education institutions, the areas were characterised by a particularly strong relationship between **one local higher education institution** and the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership. In both cases, these were post-1992 higher education institutions, had a history of widening participation and, as such, already had well established links with the local area.

There was no evidence of a relationship between the approach to partnership working (devolved, specialist team and clustered) and the roles of the higher education institutions in the ten areas (collaborative, competitive and independent). For example, one area that had a devolved approach to partnership working had higher education institutions who worked collaboratively, while another area with a devolved approach had higher education institutions that were competitive. Moreover, there was no evidence of a relationship between the approaches adopted by partnerships and their size, EIC phase or EAZ status. Overall, it appears that the approaches taken by partnerships to working with their partner institutions were related to each area’s unique combination of local issues and context and personnel as well as to history, and were not caused by any one particular factor or common feature.

2.4 The role of Connexions in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships

2.4.1 The views of partnership coordinators

Three of the ten areas visited appeared to have built very good relationships with Connexions. In two of these areas, the representative from Connexions attended steering group meetings for the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership but the main involvement was at school and college level, where

the Connexions Personal Advisors worked with the students from the widening participation cohorts. In both areas, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators within schools and the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators were able to refer students to the Personal Advisors if they thought they would benefit from their advice and support in relation to careers education and guidance. A college coordinator in one area explained that the Connexions Personal Advisor at the college helped students involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge with UCAS applications forms. In the second area the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator commented that '*Connexions are brilliant*' and, as well as offering careers education and guidance to students involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, Personal Advisors in this area were able to attend Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities if they needed additional adult support. The coordinator also commented that working closely with Connexions was useful as they all got to know the same students and were able to ensure that they all were putting across the same message. She noted that: '*It's important that the students see us all striving for the same thing*'.

In the third area where there were very good links with Connexions, there was a structural relationship which is described below.

Area 6 – Relationships between Connexions and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, the schools and colleges within area 6 had collaborated with higher education institutions to some extent. However such links varied from school to school and were not coordinated. A key member of the new partnership was employed for half her time by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and also worked part-time as a Development Manager for Connexions. Her role for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was to work with schools and colleges in organising Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. When Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was first set up in the area the partnership coordinator felt that it would be beneficial for the partnership to have close links to the careers service, as they felt that their aims were intricately linked: '*the whole idea of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge is to incorporate careers and ideas so it made sense to incorporate [Connexions] in at an early stage*'. The relationship between Connexions and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was felt to work very well in this area as they were able to exploit the links that the Development Manager had made through her work with Connexions. Many of her colleagues supported her Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge work through, for example, helping with workshops. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge/Connexions coordinator felt that this close relationship was something that would work well in other areas and commented '*I don't know why Connexions hasn't been involved in other areas, as it works so well.*'

In seven of the partnerships visited, working relationships with Connexions were less well-developed. At the time of the visits the Connexions service was not yet operational in two of these six areas, or had only been running for

a short period of time. The partnership coordinator in one of these areas commented that the relationship between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and Connexions, inevitably, was *'a difficult relationship: they are still finding their feet'*. In a third area, Connexions was operational but there were no links between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and Connexions because the Connexions service was perceived as working only with disaffected students and, as such, it was felt that there was little overlap between the students targeted by Connexions and those targeted by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The partnership coordinator in this area did not feel that the lack of involvement from Connexions was a problem, as they worked closely with mentors from the National Mentoring Pilot and felt that the mentors were able to carry out the same functions as Connexions Personal Advisers. In three further areas Connexions was involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership but did not play an active role. A partnership coordinator in one of these areas commented: *'The contribution of Connexions worries me, although I can get people to meetings, I can't get them to switch on to do anything active'*. In another area the partnership coordinator felt that *'Connexions has been a problem'* as they would only attend steering meetings infrequently and would not supply information on students quickly enough and commented *'They don't seem to understand that the DfES has deadlines'*. In the sixth area, some links were identified with Connexions, but the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator did not feel they were well established.

2.4.2 The Connexions perspective

Interviews with a representative from Connexions were carried out in all three areas where there were very good relations with Connexions, and in four areas where links with Connexions were not so well developed. Comparison of the perspectives from the core partnership and from the Connexions representatives reveals some differences about how they viewed Connexions relationships with the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership, with some indications that views on the operation and effectiveness of links are not shared by all partners. In one of the areas, for example, where partnership level and school and college level coordinators appeared very positive about the role that Connexions played in the partnership, there was rather less clarity among Connexions interviewees about the links between the service and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Whilst one Connexions Personal Advisor had been involved with some Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and events in this area, another, working in a different institution, did not feel that there was any linkage and commented: *'we have no contact with it [Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge]; it makes no difference to our work'*. Conversely, in another area where Connexions was not seen by schools and other partners as contributing a great deal to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership, interviews with Connexions staff revealed that they were trying to improve this relationship. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator felt that the relationship with the new

Connexions service was difficult and that *'their priorities are different'*. However, as the Connexions interviewee (who had recently been employed as the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Advisor within the local Connexions service) explained, hers was a new role: *'there is lots of widening participation going on but it wasn't linked into Connexions and Connexions didn't know about it'*. This suggests that links between the service and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge may improve as the interviewee becomes more established in her role.

In other areas, the views of partnership coordinators about the contribution Connexions were making to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were more closely reflected in interviews with Connexions staff. In an area where the core partnership felt there were very good links between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and Connexions, the Connexions interviewee was keen to emphasise the shared aims of the two initiatives:

There is a clear overlap between what Connexions is set up to tackle and what Excellence Challenge in [this area] is trying to progress as well i.e. [to] increase the numbers in learning, career participation as well as ... raising aspirations.

In an area where links with Connexions were seen as less well developed by the partnership coordinator, a Connexions regional manager revealed that, although Connexions Personal Advisors had similar objectives to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (such as encouraging progression to further and higher education), there were no actual links made between the Connexions service and the initiative on the ground.

2.5 The role of Local Learning and Skills Councils in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships

2.5.1 The views of partnership coordinators

The role played by the Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) in partnerships also varied across the ten areas, but was generally seen as strategic. In three areas, partnership coordinators were fairly positive about the contribution made by the LLSC and one coordinator commented that the LLSC was a valuable resource for the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership, whilst a coordinator in another area felt that the LLSC was willing to help and to be supportive, but did not have the staff available to take a more active role. Similarly, in another area, the partnership coordinator felt that the LLSC were happy to attend steering group meetings and to listen to what the partnership had been doing, but were unwilling to take a more active role despite his efforts to involve them more. In two areas, partnership coordinators mentioned that they worked with the LLSC to transfer post-16 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funding from the LLSC to the central

partnership or directly to the post-16 education providers involved in the partnership. In two other areas partnership coordinators mentioned that the LLSC were members of the partnership steering group but gave no further information. Partnership coordinators in three further areas said that they had very little contact with the LLSC and one commented that she was unsure about how the LLSC should be involved in the partnership: *'I don't know how much they should be involved to be honest. Other than attending steering group meetings, I really don't know what their role is'*.

2.5.2 The Local Learning and Skills Council perspective

In five of the ten areas, representatives from the LLSCs were interviewed. It should be noted that, in all areas, efforts were made to contact the LLSC to gain their views on Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, but, in some cases, no member of staff was identified as the link with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Indeed, while the five interviewees said that they attended or had attended steering group meetings, one respondent explained that it was no longer possible to send a representative to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge steering group meetings, due to lack of staff. In three of the other areas staff at the LLSC attended meetings, but had also been involved strategically in writing the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge bid and setting the objectives for the partnership locally, particularly in relation to the post-16 issues.

Interviews with staff at the LLSC provided further insights into the different roles played by the LLSC in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. As well as being involved strategically, there were three main other ways in which the LLSC were involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. These related to post-16 funding, monitoring data and bringing a wider perspective to the partnership. In some areas, funding for post-16 activities was given straight to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership and the LLSC played no role in the allocation of funds. In other areas the LLSC took a much more active role in post-16 funding and was responsible for approving payments and allocating funding for post-16 activities and support. In terms of monitoring data, an LLSC representative in one area, described the role that the LLSC play in providing data on pupils and students in the area to support the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership in monitoring and evaluating the initiative. The interviewee said that managing the pupil and student data was very difficult as there was no overall coherent strategy across institutions on how the data should be recorded

It causes a big headache data, all the time... it's extremely difficult because schools, colleges, work based learning providers all have different ways of collecting data – it's incredibly difficult to ... track between institutions.

The third way in which LLSC felt that they were able to contribute to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships was through bringing a **wider perspective** to the partnership. In one area the LLSC representative also worked with other local Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships and so felt that he was able to share good practice between areas. In a second partnership the LLSC representative was involved in several other initiatives and was also involved in an audit of 14-19 provision locally. Through the audit the LLSC were aiming to bring coherence to 14-19 activities to try to ensure that there was no overlap or duplication of funding. Through this cross-initiative involvement the LLSC interviewee felt that she was able to work towards ensuring that different initiatives complemented each other across the area.

What we are trying to do is not see these things as separate contained strands – to try and see how Excellence Challenge can increase flexibility ... [I am] part of the Excellence Challenge [sic] steering group and the Increased Flexibilities steering group, so I can see how initiatives feed into one another and get the best out of what we are doing.

As well as bringing coherence to 14-19 initiatives in this area, the LLSC was also able to supplement Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funding and had, for example provided additional funding for a theatre group to visit local schools and carry out Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge-related activities.

2.6 Links with other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships

Partnership coordinators in five of the ten partnerships visited indicated that they had active links with other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships. It should be noted that many of these areas were visited in a fairly early stage of the initiative and, as noted in Morris *et al.*,¹⁶ many of the partnerships established and developed links with other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships in preparation for the integration of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression. Therefore, in these areas links with other partnerships may have developed after the visits took place.¹⁷ Four of the partnerships that had links with other partnerships were in large EiC areas and these links had been established through EiC networks already in existence. In one of these areas, in particular, the partnership coordinator was enthusiastic about the relationships they had

¹⁶ MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S. IRELAND, E., and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). Report on Interviews with Partnership Coordinators 2004.

¹⁷ Of these five areas, one was visited in 2002 and two in 2003 and, as such, the partnerships may not yet have considered working with other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnerships to plan for the integration of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression. In one area, which was visited in summer 2004, the partnership coordinator did not know what would be happening to the partnership in the immediate future, and as such had made no plans or links in preparation for integration. In the fifth area, the partnership coordinator did not discuss this issue.

with other partnership coordinators. In this area, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships worked together regionally to share good practice and delivered some activities together. All of the partnerships in the area had links with the same two higher education institutions located in the region, so activities, such as Masterclasses, were developed and run on a regional basis. The partnership coordinator felt the regional links were very positive and commented: *'I think that a whole regional group has a great deal of strength'*. The fourth partnership was in an EAZ and the only links that they had with other partnerships was through an annual training event. The partnership coordinator appreciated the opportunity this event provided and said: *'If it hadn't been for this group that meet once a year then it would be quite lonely'*.

2.7 The role of businesses in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships

Only four partnership coordinators explicitly stated that they had links with local businesses. In one area, a large local employer had hosted Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge events. In a second area, a large utility supplier ran a management training programme which aimed to educate young people about the world of work and to raise their aspirations. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funded coaches for pupils to visit this event. In this area another local business contributed to the partnership by *'showcasing'* employees who had gained degrees through work-based learning. In the third area, the partnership had links with a regional business consortium that helped to support Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. In this area the partnership coordinator was also in the process of developing links with the local education business partnership at the time of the visit, and hoped to develop a Masterclass for AVCE IT students with the support of local businesses.

2.8 Factors that facilitate partnership working

2.8.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators at partnership and school and college level, identified several factors that they believed facilitated partnership working. One key factor was **communication** between partnership members. A school coordinator felt that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership in her area worked well, as the partnership coordinator made an effort to keep the schools well informed and communicated with them on a regular basis. The partnership coordinator in this area also placed a high value on communication and particularly on personal contact with coordinators in schools, as it enabled the partnership coordinator to better understand the schools' needs. As she stated, *'As you get*

to know them, you know what they want and can look into certain activities for them'. A coordinator in a college in another area also felt that communication was important and felt that ensuring that the correct people were involved in the partnership resulted in good communication. This was seen as useful as it ensured that all partners would be fully informed about what the other partners were doing. An area and a school coordinator from two different partnerships both cited the importance of regular meetings between the schools, colleges and the partnership coordinator as they facilitated good communication between partners.

Another key factor in facilitating partnership working was **central coordination at partnership level**. As noted in Section 2.3.1 above, in many partnerships, the central coordinator brokered the relationships and this was valued by the partner institutions. One partnership coordinator highlighted the need for a central coordinator in order to broker the relationship between schools, colleges and higher education institutions. In another area, the partnership coordinator felt central coordination was the key to successful partnership working, and was particularly concerned that there would not be enough money to fund a central coordinator once the EAZ became an Excellence Cluster. A college coordinator felt that effective central administration of the partnership was necessary, so that all partnership members knew what role they needed to fulfil in the partnership. A further partnership coordinator area felt that, as well as central coordination, there needed to be a coordinator based in each school as she felt that *'Heads of Year can't cope with extra tasks'*. Nevertheless, one school coordinator commented that she thought that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge worked well in her partnership as the partnership coordinator was able to take on most of the work and deliver the programme to the schools as a package.

The **enthusiasm of the partnership coordinator** was cited in one area as a key factor for partnership working. A school coordinator felt that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was driven forwards by the enthusiasm of the central coordinator. School and partnership coordinators in other areas also cited the benefit for partnership working of the **partnership coordinators' past experience**. In both areas, the coordinators' previous experience in a senior management role in schools not only gave them credibility in the eyes of the schools involved in the partnership, but also enabled them to better understand schools' perspectives.

One partnership coordinator thought that it was very important that there was **good support from management**. She felt that, in her area, the executive group for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were very engaged in the initiative and also very supportive of her. She said that, from her experience of working with other partnership coordinators regionally, she knew that this was not always the case. A second partnership coordinator, thought that the way that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was integrated into the EiC

partnership worked well as it meant that she had the **support of colleagues** carrying out similar roles within EiC.

School, college and partnership coordinators cited the importance of having the **right contacts, links and networks** with people in schools, colleges and higher education institutions in order to achieve successful partnership working. One college coordinator felt that knowing what the institutions involved in the partnership were like, and knowing where to turn for help, was very beneficial for partnership working. A school coordinator commented that having the right contacts with people in higher education institutions allowed them to arrange additional activities with the higher education representatives and said that, *'knowing these people helps a lot'*. An area coordinator in another area commented that links, contacts and networks are built up over time, but that it was a *'who you know, not what you know scenario'*.

Another factor facilitating partnership working which emerged was the structural arrangements in the partnership. Although it was not apparent that any one partnership approach: **clustered, specialist team** or **devolved** was the most effective, it appeared that each of the different approaches had particular strengths. For example, both school and partnership coordinators in those areas where schools were **organised into clusters**, (see Section 2.3.1) considered that this was beneficial for partnership working. A partnership coordinator in one area commented that, by working in clusters, the schools and colleges were beginning to become less dependent on the partnership coordinator to organise activities for them and were beginning to pool their funds to organise joint activities. Moreover, the partnership coordinator in another area believed that coordinators in the schools and colleges took more ownership of the initiative as a consequence of the cluster approach, which required active involvement of institutional coordinators. In one partnership a **specialist team approach to partnership working** had been beneficial. In this area where there was a full-time Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator, a part-time coordinator was also employed by Connexions together with a part-time coordinator who worked at the local higher education institution. This approach was felt to be very effective as the two part time coordinators were able to bring different perspectives to the initiative *'they were two people working in different camps'*. The coordinator also felt that the three coordinators worked very well together and that this was considered essential to the success of the initiative. A **devolved approach to partnership working** was seen as beneficial since it offered flexibility for the institutions in the partnership to meet the needs of their pupils as they saw fit, as long as the partnership coordinators were able to monitor and account for spending.

2.8.2 The higher education perspective

The higher education staff interviewed identified a range of factors that facilitated working in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership.

Reflecting the views of partnerships and institutional coordinators, the most frequently mentioned factor was the **involvement of key personnel**, particularly in terms of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator, but also in terms of the other members of the partnership. Staff interviewed in one area felt that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator needed to be *‘a well organised and proactive person at the centre who is prepared to negotiate and be flexible’*. Credibility, and communication skills and seniority were all identified as important. Higher education staff felt that it was important that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator was credible with the schools, with staff in one area suggesting that the partnership coordinator’s previous role as a headteacher was valuable. A further interviewee felt that the central organiser in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge needed to have *‘boundary crossing skills’* in order to be able to communicate with, and organise, both schools and higher education institutions. Other interviewees mentioned particular key people that needed to be involved in order to facilitate successful partnership working. One staff member of a higher education institution felt that it was necessary for there to be trust between administrative staff in organisations involved in the partnership. Another interviewee commented that within the higher education institutions there needed to be a sufficient number of senior staff who believed in the principle of widening participation in order to ensure that the institution was committed to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

It was generally agreed by higher education interviewees that there needed to be **cooperation and shared aims** amongst the other members of the partnership. For example, one respondent said that partnership working was facilitated by *‘trust in your colleagues, shared aims, objectives and values.’* For a widening participation officer in another area, this meant that there was not competition between the institutions in the partnership: *‘I think the partnership has worked brilliantly ... because the people who are part of the partnership, believe in it and don’t see it as anything to do with institutional competition. It is about de-institutionalising this’*.

Another factor identified by higher education staff across the ten areas, was the extent to which **the objectives of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge fitted in with the higher education institution’s own aims and objectives**. One interviewee emphasised the fact that there needed to be a sufficient number of senior academic staff within the higher education institution who believed in the principles behind widening participation in higher education to ensure that the institution was committed to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Where this was the case, having a senior member of staff within the higher education institution working with the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership enabled them to get other staff on board and bring about change. Having shared aims in this way had an impact on the extent to which the higher education institutions engaged with the initiative. A higher education senior manager in one area explained the way in which, for many higher

education institutions, the objectives of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge sometimes did not fit well with the institution's wider aims such as the Research Assessment Exercise requirements. He stated that '*it was necessary to get a balance between good research and widening participation ... they do not go well together*'. This higher education respondent felt, however, that this balance had been achieved in his institution due to the Vice Chancellor's own belief in the value of widening participation and his view was that it was as important to the institution as teaching excellence, research excellence and external income.

A further factor underlying successful partnership working was identified as a **clear strategy and structure**. Higher education interviewees felt that there should be a central plan with clear aims and objectives for the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership, and thorough consultation at the beginning of the initiative. Other interviewees said that there needed to be a central body within the partnership in order to administer the initiative, to direct the development of the initiative and to ensure that it happened. Higher education staff also mentioned that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership needed to have a stable structure in order to be able to maintain widening participation efforts over a sustained period of time, as it was a slow process.

A **good relationship with schools** was another factor identified by higher education staff as underlying successful partnership working. For two higher education respondents this meant building up strong relationships with a small number of schools, rather than having a weaker link to a larger number of schools. One respondent felt that it was important that the interests of the schools in the partnership were taken into account and that the best way to do this, was to make sure that enough school partners were present at steering group meetings.

Several higher education partners from one area also mentioned the importance of having a **coherent approach** to widening participation. One interviewee felt that it was important to have '*coordination and coherence*' amongst the partnership, whilst another felt that a '*cohesive, holistic approach*' was key. Other key factors mentioned included **funding** (several interviewees felt that partnership working would not be possible without access to funding) and **good links with other higher education institutions**.

2.9 Factors that inhibit partnership working

2.9.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, school and colleges

Interviewees who were coordinating Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge across the partnership and within institutions identified fewer factors that had inhibited partnership working in their areas than those factors that had

facilitated it. Their perspectives on the lessons they had learned are outlined below.

In one area, a school coordinator felt that there were a **lack of links** with other schools outside the partnership and, whilst they benefited from links with local schools, they felt that links with other schools less locally would also be beneficial to the partnership as it would give them an opportunity to learn from and share good practice with institutional coordinators with a wider range of experience.

A partnership coordinator in one area felt that **devolved funding** to schools and colleges was problematic for partnership working, as it meant that it was hard to ensure that the initiative had an impact in all schools. However, the coordinator considered that devolving funding was the correct approach to take as long as all schools agreed common objectives and priorities in terms of widening participation, as the schools then took ownership over the initiative. Through achieving this, it would be possible to ensure that funds were spent appropriately.

The **lack of seniority of institution coordinators** was seen as another factor inhibiting partnership working. A partnership coordinator in one area commented that sometimes the institution coordinators in her area were in their first year of teaching and as such did not have sufficient knowledge and experience to bring about change. In another area a partnership coordinator felt that the institution coordinators in her partnership should have more status within the school and commented that *'They don't always have access to the senior management team'*. This view was supported by the experiences of a coordinator in another area who found that an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator in one school was not being listened to by the senior management of the school and consequently, the pupils were missing out on some activities. This situation was resolved when the partnership coordinator talked to the senior management in the school and arranged for the school coordinator to work in the future with one of the deputy headteachers.

The **different priorities of school and colleges** were cited as a factor that inhibited partnership working. One partnership coordinator felt that sometimes successful partnership working was obstructed when the schools and colleges involved in the initiative had to balance the requirements of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge with the demands of other initiatives and the pressure of maintaining examination results. A coordinator in another area also recognised this problem and found that the teachers in some schools were very reluctant to let the pupils miss any lessons to attend Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and she felt that some schools would rather the partnership coordinator gave them the money to spend in a way they felt was fit, as reflected in her comment that:

The Beacon School is hopeless: they don't see what they're going to get out of it. They want us to give them the money and then they can bump up their own programme with it

Another partnership coordinator had this same difficulty with a college in her area and found that the colleges' lack of interest in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge meant that there was often very low participation rates in events, as tutors were unwilling to release students from classes.

Communication problems between schools and higher education institutions were cited by one coordinator as being problematic. The coordinator felt that sometimes the higher education representatives used language that school staff found difficult to engage with, which sometimes meant that the school coordinators felt alienated. As one way round this the coordinator produced a jargon buster for the teachers involved.

In some areas, **staff turnover** had inhibited the development of partnership working. If key individuals in institutions either left the organisation or were promoted, there was a need to re-establish a working relationship with a new member of staff management. One partnership coordinator commented that *'the Aimhigher post is good for professional development and helps them get promoted'*. Balancing this indirect benefit of professional development for staff, with the impact on maintaining communication and continuity was one of the ongoing challenges which partnerships appeared to have experienced.

2.9.2 The higher education perspective

Higher education staff outlined several factors that inhibited partnership working. The three main factors identified were **time and workload pressures for higher education institutions, time and workload pressures for schools** and **practical difficulties** with the organisation of activities.

In one area in particular the **time and workload requirements** of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge were cited as having been problematic as one respondent commented: *'the additional pressures were terrifying at first'*. Another respondent in this area said that higher education institutions did not always have the capacity to respond to the demands from schools. Schools in this area were enthusiastic about the activities provided by the higher education institutions and, as a result, contacted the institutions to ask for more activities to be provided. In responding to additional requests for activities, higher education staff had to take into consideration their resources and the potential outcomes for their institutions as well as for schools and participating students. Higher education staff in this area also described how they were able to manage the time and workload pressures by ensuring that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was integrated with other widening participation activities already in place. However, one respondent said that they still did not

have enough time or resources to be as involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as they would like to be.

Higher education staff in two areas felt that the **time and workload pressures on schools** were factors that inhibited partnership working. A respondent in one area noted that the schools that were most in need of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, were those that were least able to take full advantage of the initiative because the teachers at the schools were under pressure. This respondent also commented that he would like to be able to develop a stronger relationship with these schools and also to get some feedback on the activities the higher education institutions provided, but was aware that the schools would not have time for such communication. Higher education staff in another area identified the problem as: *'actually getting staff in secondary schools to manage to see things through – they are completely swamped'* and highlighted the fact that staff in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership were not always aware of *'how Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge money is used at school level'* and felt that this was a *'big problem'*. Respondents in this area explained how, in some schools, teachers were given time for their involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, whilst in others they were not. They thought that the best way to overcome this difficulty would be to ensure that schools had sufficient protected funding for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

A third factor identified as inhibiting partnership working was the **practical problems** associated with organising activities. In two areas, respondents cited problems with the central organisation, at partnership level, of activities provided by the higher education institutions. Respondents in both these areas felt that the central booking system used in the area for schools to sign up to activities provided by the institutions did not work effectively as places were not always filled. The respondents explained that they were able to overcome this by contacting schools directly to invite them send students on the courses. One member of staff from a higher education institution felt that the booking system negatively affected the attitudes of staff within the higher education institution who were involved in the activities as they were less enthusiastic about the activities when there was a low attendance. Another respondent said that they had had problems with the timetabling of activities and travel arrangements for the students attending. A further respondent also said that the time taken from submitting the plan to it being accepted was problematic as it delayed the start of many activities.

2.10 Summary

The development of coherent Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships, in which the role and responsibilities of the various partners was clear and

accepted and in which effective practice was shared and built upon, appeared to be facilitated by:

- ♦ Active management support within each of the partner institutions, be they higher education institutions, schools, colleges, LLSCs or Connexions services.
- ♦ Agreed and shared aims and objectives that clarified (or helped to clarify) the potential contribution of each partner within a flexible framework.
- ♦ Clear and agreed communication pathways. Communications could be directed through a central conduit, such as the partnership coordinator, or directly between institutions, but a key to successful operation appeared to be the establishment of appropriate pathways for the form of interaction needed.

The lack of these supporting structures, while not preventing the implementation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, reduced the extent to which it operated effectively at a local level and the extent to which the partnership could add value to the widening participation activities that were already in place in many institutions.

3. Young people's aspirations and views on barriers to progression

Key Findings

- ◆ The majority of young people interviewed (in both gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts) across the ten areas aspired to higher education. Interviewees identified the advantages of a university qualification, including the element of choice in terms of careers, as well as the opportunity to become independent and develop social skills through the experience of university.
- ◆ The main educational influences for young people were the family, predominantly mothers, and teachers. Young people also acknowledged the support from learning mentors and Connexions Personal Advisors. Friends were less of an influence.
- ◆ While young people recognised the rewards of higher education, many were uncertain whether to attend higher education, partly because it was too early for pre-16 pupils to commit to such a decision at this stage in their educational career. Many young people perceived a number of barriers to progression, including a fear of debt, the length of degree courses and a concern over the 'hype' of a degree.
- ◆ Some of these concerns were due to a lack of understanding regarding the actual costs of university as well as alternative career pathways. Despite young peoples' suggestions for how to overcome the financial constraints associated with a degree, an apparent general lack of clear information and guidance was evident.
- ◆ Core members of the ten Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships also identified various practical barriers to young peoples' progression to higher education including, students' self perceptions that they were not the type of person who normally goes to university, concerns about leaving home, negative views of education and a lack of family and community experience of higher education. They also identified cultural barriers to progression such as fear of debt, family pressures to work, and the availability of work at 18.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore young people's perspectives on further and higher education across the ten areas and consider the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnerships' view of the issues and challenges that young people face in terms of progression. First, the chapter looks at the educational aspirations of young people and explores the factors that appear to encourage and influence their decisions as well as the perceived influence of family,

friends and school on these decisions. The second part of the chapter examines young peoples' perceived barriers to progression and the extent to which young people try and overcome these obstacles. In the final section, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnerships' views of the barriers to young peoples progression to higher education are considered.

The findings within this chapter are based on 167 interviews with young people, both pre-16 pupils, (in Years 9, 10 and 11) and post-16 students, (in Years 12 and 13). Two-thirds of the interviewees (67 per cent) were from pre-16 year groups. Interviewees were selected by institutional Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators as young people who were either part of the gifted and talented or widening participation cohort, although the majority of interviewees were part of the latter cohort. All interviewees were considered to have the potential to gain at least 5 A*-C GCSEs, and over half had parents who had experienced higher education. Interviewees had differing experiences of the number and type of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities they had participated in. However, they had all participated in at least one visit to a higher education institution, and many had also taken part in Masterclasses, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow and summer schools. Interviews were face-to-face and took place in groups of between two and six interviewees.

It should also be noted that, although young people were not prompted about their knowledge of the range of higher education qualifications on offer at university including foundation degrees and diploma courses, young people interviewed commonly referred solely to degree courses when referring to higher education. It appeared that young people may have been unaware of the breadth of higher education courses available.

3.2 Young people's educational aspirations

This section will explore the educational aspirations of pupils (pre-16 interviewees aged 13 to 16 years) and students (post-16 interviewees aged 16-18 years), their perceptions of further and higher education and the extent to which they have decided to progress onto further study after their GCSEs.

As described within the summaries of the areas in Appendix A, the ten areas studied varied in size, ethnic mix and socio-economic characteristics. In spite of this, the young people across the case-study areas had very similar opinions on the benefits of higher qualifications and higher education. The aspirations of pre-16 pupils are discussed in 3.2.1 and post-16 students will be discussed in Section 3.2.2 below.

3.2.1 Pre-16 pupils' aspirations to progress to higher education

One of the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge is to encourage young people from as early as Year 9 to think about further and higher education. Despite being some time away from the decision to embark on a university course, pre-16 pupils within the ten areas who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities were able to reflect on their plans after their GCSEs, although they were more certain about their immediate post-16 plans than their longer term education post-18. The majority of pupils explained that **they wanted to continue into the sixth form or go on to a further education college** and commonly described the benefits of additional qualifications as the increased opportunity for a better paid job, the requirement of such qualifications to progress on to university and ultimately, as a means to fulfil their career ambitions.

Where the option of sixth form was available within their school, the majority felt that they would remain there as they believed it was perceived to be a 'good school' and they felt familiar with the teachers and the surroundings. As one pupil said, *'if you stay on here, then you know the teachers and they know your potential'*. For those pupils who were keen not to attend their sixth form, in contrast, the opportunity for a 'fresh start', and a wide variety of subject choice, were attractive characteristics of a local further education college.

Whilst the majority of pre-16 pupils had the intention to continue on to further education, only a few pupils were as definite about continuing on to higher education. There was a degree of uncertainty and a general apprehension to commit to such a decision at this stage in their educational career. Despite this uncertainty, pupils reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of local and more distant higher education institutions. At this age, a number deliberated over moving away from their family and the emotional and financial support it provided. For example, one pupil observed that, *'if you are local you can always call your mum and ask for help, but if you're in trouble and you're away, what can you do then?'* Others saw the opportunity for a 'new experience' and the desire to become more independent. This was illustrated in the comment by one pupil who said, *'thinking about university, you're thinking about different things like getting away from home...it's not really about education, but it's about experiencing being independent'*.

Typically, pupils from the ten areas raised very similar issues concerning local higher education institutions and there did not appear to be any tendency for pupils from smaller EAZs to be more apprehensive about moving away from home than pupils from the city. However, it is worth noting that the age of these pupils (13-16 years), may have led them to be more apprehensive than they would be at the age of 18 or 19. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, there was some evidence to suggest that those who were keen on moving away had been on Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge residentials which had enabled

them to feel more comfortable about staying away from home. The value of providing such experiences was illustrated in the comment of one pupil who explained that, due to his unfamiliarity with areas around the country, at present, his preference was towards local higher education institutions. He said:

That's a decision I would make in the future, but at the moment I really like this area because I know it. I don't travel much so I wouldn't have the gall to visit the rest of England. You hear stuff, but you don't have the personal experience of what the rest of England is like.

While most pre-16 pupils were considering higher education, a few believed that getting a job after finishing college was the most appropriate option. Their reasons for this choice can be summarised as follows:

- ♦ they were **keen to start earning a wage**
- ♦ they were apprehensive about the **length of a degree course**
- ♦ the **cost of higher education** and the fear of debt had deterred them from continued study.

Pupils' perspectives on the barriers to progression are discussed further in Section 3.5 below.

Overall, amongst the pre-16 pupils interviewed, most aspired to higher education but, at this stage, were focused on GCSEs and initial transition to further education at 16. The views of students who had made the transition at 16 are presented in Section 3.2.2 below.

3.2.2 Post-16 students' aspirations to progress to higher education

Overall, the majority of post-16 students were considering higher education and welcomed the perceived immediate and long-term benefits of undertaking higher education qualifications.

The main advantages of a degree were cited by post-16 students as:

- ♦ the **academic** rewards in terms of opportunities and career progression
- ♦ the **social** rewards of meeting new people and gaining confidence and independence.

Firstly, a degree was said to provide the element of **'choice' in terms of careers and opportunities in life**. As one student expressed it:

It's a whole other stepping-stone to work and the career of your choice. Through going to uni you have a whole lot more chances than

people who don't go and have to work their way up...you can cut out so many parts of the ladder that way.

Typically, students who had a career in mind, and specified a profession, referred to the opportunity of achieving higher qualifications and, subsequently, entering their preferred career choice. A number added that their career ambitions could not be fulfilled without higher qualifications. However, some reflected a simplistic notion of career opportunities and reflected on their future with no degree. For example, many perceived extremes in terms of the career opportunities without a university degree: *'It's definitely the career...otherwise I know if I don't [go to university] I'll end up working in Sainsbury's or something'*.

As well as the increased career opportunities and academic rewards, students also valued the development of their **independence and social skills**. A degree was often described as an *'opening into the wider world'*, meeting new people and their first opportunity *'to be self-reliant'*.

The value of independence was also appreciated in terms of making **personal subject choices**. For example, one student said:

the educational system right now is based on set topics that you might not be interested in, but at university you can go and do something you actually want to do rather than do what the government or school is telling you to do.

It appears therefore, that students considering higher education perceived attending university as about much more than simply the perceived academic rewards, but involved a holistic experience including the academic and social rewards of a university degree. However, the element of choice in terms of careers and opportunities in life appeared to be the key driver.

Unlike pre-16 interviewees, post-16 students were at the point of considering specific higher education institutions. These choices appeared to be guided by:

- ◆ family recommendations
- ◆ Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities (for example, if they had been on a higher education institution visit)
- ◆ an institution's reputation in a particular subject area
- ◆ the geographical locality of the institution and the distance from their home town.

Despite the majority of those interviewed identifying the benefits of higher qualifications, some students were not yet ready to commit to university education. Reasons for this decision included:

- ♦ a **lack of a clear idea of what to study** and, therefore, the pressure of choosing a subject area to specialise in at degree level was daunting
- ♦ uncertainty as to whether it was better for them to **go to university later on in life**. However, on the whole, it was perceived to be advantageous to remain in the education system without interruption as the chances of returning to study after experiencing paid work were considered slim
- ♦ a **desire to enter employment** after college and the feeling that *'I don't think it's [university] for me'*, as one said, as well as an inclination to *'gain a few years experience in the working world'*
- ♦ concern over the **'hype'** and worth of a university degree. The perceived benefits of a higher qualification were sometimes felt to be *'overrated'* and that achieving higher qualifications would not guarantee a *'good'* job afterwards. This was illustrated in the comment by one post-16 student who said: *'everyone says that you won't get a job if you don't go to uni, which is not always the case...there's people working in Burger King who have degrees. Having a degree doesn't mean you'll get a good job'*.

Students who did not express a desire to go to university held alternative aspirations. Overall, young people were aware of alternative training programmes for certain careers, such as work placements, apprenticeships and *'working your way up from the bottom'*. Yet, despite the general understanding of such opportunities, the majority of interviewees still preferred the anticipated rewards of a university education. On the whole, this was a significant decision in young people's lives. There appeared to be various influences and messages regarding higher education and the need for clear, specific and honest guidance in terms of progression, was apparent.

The next section discusses the main influences on young people's educational decisions to progress to higher education.

3.3 Perceived influences and encouragement to aspire to higher education

As discussed above, overall, young people across the ten areas were generally positive towards higher education. In addition to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities they had experienced, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, interviewees reflected on the individuals that had motivated and encouraged them to aspire to their educational ambitions.

Family had the most positive influence on young peoples' motivation towards university. Older siblings and cousins' experience of higher education had influenced a few interviewees in their decision to think about university. As one post-16 student commented, *'just listening to them talk about it...makes you kind of feel that you can't wait'*. Grandparents and other relatives were also mentioned by a few interviewees as being influential in their aspiration to

attend higher education. However, parents, and particularly mothers, emerged as the main educational influence amongst interviewees. Young people believed that their parents wanted them to *'aim high'* and to *'at least think about it [university]'*. One pupil, for example, said that his parents would be *'dead proud'*, while another stated that *'my mum says it would make all her dreams come true'*. Parents repeatedly stressed the value of a degree in the current job market and contrasted the benefits of a higher education with their own experiences and accomplishments. For example, some parents had regretted not having gone further with their own education and that they did not want them to make the same mistake. Comments such as *'she wants better for us than what she had'* and *'my parents say "don't end up on the dole or pregnant: stay in school"'*, were common.

Although both pre- and post-16 students expressed similar views regarding the influence of their parents, it emerged that the parents of the post-16 students were more interested in their children's imminent choices. While they said that going to university was not necessarily mentioned explicitly by their parents, some post-16 interviewees felt it was *'expected'* of them and a few felt that *'encouragement can feel like pressure'*. In some cases, the combination of family and religious pressures had presented itself as an issue. This is illustrated in the vignette below.

Area 1 Minority ethnic families and pressure to progress to higher education

Young people across the ten areas often perceived there to be a degree of pressure to go on to university, sometimes instigated through their family's religious beliefs.

Area 1 is a multi-cultural area with a wide ethnic mix with high proportions of pupils with Indian and Pakistani backgrounds. The majority of young people interviewed in the area were from such minority ethnic backgrounds and there appeared to be pressure from parents to aspire to higher education. Many explained that parents often, *'put you under a lot of pressure; too much pressure'* to do well at school and continue on to university. Both males and females in the group discussions perceived that their parents had clear plans for their future. For example, one female pre-16 pupil commented that her parents either *'want me to become a doctor or get married to one'*, while a male pre-16 interviewee remarked that, *'they have your life planned out for you before you were born...[they say] "you WILL go to university"'*.

The pressure of choosing the correct subject at university was also sometimes described as being guided by religious conviction. Studying science for example, was said to be *'counter to their religious beliefs'*, while another pupil described how her parents had cautioned her against studying law as it would involve *'mixing with criminals and aiding divorce'* and would be against their religious principles. Evidently, there was a degree of overlap between young people's aspirations and their religion that had encouraged

them to aspire to higher education, but that had also led to particular tensions.¹⁸

Whilst there was, generally, an apparent acceptance amongst post-16 students that they would continue on to higher education, there was also a feeling that *'as long as I had a sensible alternative option'*, or *'something with a future'*, their parents would support them in their educational decisions. Evidence from a minority of students suggested that their parents were not that concerned about them obtaining higher qualifications. For these interviewees, it was commonly the case that there was little to no family history of participation in higher education. However, there appeared to be some parental pressure to obtain some recognised qualification and *'as long as I get my GCSEs, they don't care'*. In fact, one student explained how her mother had encouraged her otherwise. She explained that, *'she doesn't want me to go to college now, let alone university. She wants me to get a job and start earning money.'* This particular student on the other hand, still aspired to higher education and explained that *'I want a career and to go to work everyday...it's kind of a dream, so that's what I'm going to do'*.

Equally valued was the **support of teachers** which appeared to complement the support of parents. Comparisons were made between the perceived influence of parents, compared to teachers with the distinction being that, *'our parents encourage us, but the school shows us how to do it'*. The majority of pupils welcomed the support from their tutors and felt that school staff had a greater understanding of their academic capabilities and would be able to guide them more appropriately. It was the perception of a few students who explained that, *'parents don't see you in school so they don't know what you can do'*. Teachers were said to be honest in their assessment of their abilities and *'if they think we aren't right for a subject, they will say'*. On the other hand, some students explained that there was sometimes too much pressure from teachers and less consideration as to whether university would be the most appropriate course of action for them: *'We have information about university, but not really into jobs or training'*. These particular interviewees wanted more clarity regarding alternative routes within education and, as stated previously, the need for clearer guidance and advice in terms of career choices was apparent.

Young people also acknowledged the support from **learning mentors and Connexions Personal Advisors** who were described as *'formal friends'* and *'someone to confide in'*. Pupils, who had experience of a learning mentor,

¹⁸ Due to the difficulties in accessing parents to interview for this research, we are unable to draw any parallels between the perceptions of the young people interviewed in this area and parental attitudes towards higher education. Whilst young people from a minority ethnic group in Area One perceived parental pressure to progress on to higher education, it should be noted that this was the perception of the young people interviewed. Further research into the attitudes of parents from different minority ethnic group is required to corroborate these findings further.

explained how their support had helped them to restore their faith in themselves when they felt inadequate. One interviewee, for example, stated that her advisor *'gave me belief that I could do it and boosted my confidence. She pushes me that little bit further all the time'*. A Connexions Personal Advisor in one area, for example, helped a student find voluntary work which helped support her UCAS application. Another student explained how a Connexions Personal Advisor had helped her decide on her subject area after GCSEs. This particular student explained that, *'I was studying the wrong subjects last year as I chose the wrong things. They [careers service] told me what careers I could do with those subjects as I didn't know that at the time. They gave me an idea of where I wanted to be'*.

Friends appeared to have had less of an influence over young peoples' educational aspirations than parents or school staff. Nevertheless, older friends with experience of university were of more influence than those of a similar age. One interviewee, for example, explained how the university experiences of her older friends had encouraged her even more. She explained that, *'I've a lot of older friends and seeing my friends who have gone to uni, it just makes you want to go'*. For a minority, the fear of moving away from the local area and losing the social support of school friends was daunting, while for others this was less of an issue and they expressed the opinion that *'we'll make new friends wherever we go'*. For younger interviewees (pre-16 pupils), friends had more of an influence than post-16 students. However, the degree of influence was still relatively low. For example, the youngest interviewees from the ten areas (all in Year 9), explained that they rarely spoke about university with their friends as it was *'too far away'* [in time]. *'I don't know anyone who wants to go...they've never said they want to go'*.

In addition, to the influences from family, friends and teachers, pupils also considered how the **Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities** had influenced and encouraged them to aspire to university. Further detail regarding the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities on changing the attitudes and perceptions which pupils and students had of higher education, is discussed in Chapter 4.

Overall, young people had generally positive attitudes towards higher education and identified a variety of short and long term benefits to achieving higher qualifications. The support from family, school staff and often friends, had encouraged them to focus on achieving higher qualifications and aspiring to university. However, it was clear that young people within the ten areas needed further encouragement, support and clarification of certain issues in order to commit to such a decision. A number of interviewees were not in a position to commit wholly to higher education and, for them, there were clearly some perceived drawbacks of participation. The next section discusses the perceived barriers and concerns that young people took into consideration when deciding their plans for their future education.

3.4 Perceived barriers to progression

The main barrier to a university education was the perceived **fear of debt**. Young people across the ten areas had heard about the costs of higher education through the media and their families as well as via certain Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. There was a perception that university fees were currently expensive and they envisaged that the costs of a university education would increase even more when they embarked on a course in the future. While the majority of interviewees were generally aware of student loans, the concept of owing large sums of money was a notable concern and this had made them think twice about their educational aspirations. For several post-16 students on the other hand, it was perceived to be inevitable that they would have to take out a loan to fund their study.

Young people were weighing up the value of a degree alongside the prospect of owing a relatively large amount of money after graduation. One student for example, explained his worries about the ‘worth’ of a degree and commented that:

I think it [costs] puts off a lot of people. You go to university to get degrees ...but what's really in the back of your mind is, if I'm going to come out with this huge debt ... I'm going to have to pay it off anyway.

This perceived fear of debt also extended to parents. One student, for example, said that his parents were fully supportive of him applying to university to achieve a higher qualification but they were apprehensive about the costs involved. He explained that, ‘*my mum didn't go to uni...so she doesn't understand about it all, so I get frustrated trying to tell them. They are supporting me and backing me in everything that I am doing, though, which is nice*’.

Much of the concern regarding the cost of higher education appeared to be based on some misconceptions and a **lack of understanding**. While there was an apparent acceptance that higher education was ‘*expensive*’, or ‘*extortionate*’, general awareness of the actual costs involved were limited. Across all interviewees, there was an overall lack of clarity regarding actual loan amounts and conditions of repayment. Some interviewees, especially those from the younger year groups, explained that they had yet to receive ‘*specific*’ financial information on the costs of university. One post-16 student, for example, felt that she did not qualify for a student loan and said, ‘*I don't know how to find out how to get one*’. The confusion about finance which was apparent amongst a number of young people interviewed, was reflected in the comment of one students who said that the ‘*information is confusing*’. However, interviewees, in particular the youngest interviewees, were happy to receive such ‘*general*’ information until the time came for them to require more specific ‘*nitty gritty advice*’ regarding the costs involved. As

one pupil explained, *'if we got told all about it now, it would all have changed again by the time we're ready to start'*. Interviewees stated that support and advice on the costs involved was available from certain teachers if they wanted.

In addition to the perceived financial costs of attending university, some young people were wary of the **length of a degree course** as well as the concern that they may be **over-qualified** as a result. A few pre-16 pupils believed a course would take between four and seven years and this had put them off. One pre-16 pupil, for example, explained that he *'would want to go to uni if the courses didn't take as long'* and stated the preference of getting a job and *'getting money sooner'*. Another pupil, for example, felt that he *'would've had enough of education after college. By the time you've actually been to university you are probably bored with what you want to do in the first place because you've been studying it for so long'*. Other students raised concerns that they might be overqualified for certain jobs and that it might be hard to gain for practical skills that they believed employers required, on a degree course. In these instances, there was apprehension as to whether a university education was the most appropriate option, yet it appears that these young people were lacking the details which appropriate advice and guidance would have provided.

3.5 Overcoming barriers to progression

The majority of young people, and particularly the post-16 students who were interviewed, appreciated that if they went to university that they would come out with debts. Despite such concerns, this did not deter a number of interviewees and indeed, some felt that *'it doesn't look as scary as we thought'*. Some students had recognised that the benefits of higher education would out-weigh the short-term financial pressures.

Interviewees described how they would take out student loans, find part-time jobs or try for scholarships to overcome some of the financial constraints. A few students were keen to look into the option available to them through the military, or through saving the money from an EMA, in the case of one student. They aimed to reduce the burden on themselves and their parents and commented that, *'it wouldn't be fair to our families to put all the costs on them'*. Teachers and older friends and siblings who had attended university were also said to be *'more than willing to answer questions about managing the cost'* of higher education and offer advice on how to manage their finances. In addition, young people frequently stated how they felt that their parents would do *'all they could to support us in our decision.'* Those young people who were not as concerned about debt from a student loan had either spoken to undergraduates about their experiences of managing their finances or had spoken to their parents about their concerns. For example, one pupil

was not concerned about taking out a student loan and stated that, *'it's a fact of life isn't it. My dad got a loan to buy a car and he says a degree will be a lot better than that!'*

Studying at a local higher education institution was perceived as another way in which to reduce the costs of higher education. Despite the reputation of local higher education institutions, and students' desire to move away in order to become independent, as described earlier, for some areas, studying at a local university was considered a way in which to reduce some of the domestic costs if they lived at home and studied locally. Apart from one EAZ, the majority of areas had at least one local higher education institution and therefore, the option of studying at an institution close to home was a possibility.

3.6 The Partnership perspective

Young people from both gifted and talented and widening participation groups across the ten areas viewed the main barriers to higher education in terms of practical issues that would affect their own higher education experiences such as finance, the length of degree course and concerns over the value of higher qualifications. In addition to such practical issues, core members of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnerships such as coordinators and institution coordinators in schools and colleges, were able to take a broader perspective and identified wider social influences on all young peoples' progression. The first group of barriers discussed in this section are **cultural barriers**, such as students' self perceptions that they were not the type of person who normally goes to university, concerns about leaving home, negative views of education and a lack of family and community experience of higher education. The second group of barriers identified relate to more **practical issues**, such as fear of debt, family pressures to work, and the availability of work at 18. These are described in turn below.

There were a range of different **cultural barriers** mentioned by the interviewees who coordinated Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in partnerships and individual institutions. One of the main issues was that many **young people in their area felt that they were not suited to higher education**. One partnership coordinator considered that young people in her area predominantly felt that they were *'not the kind of person who goes to university'*. In some areas, these attitudes were specifically linked to attending a particular school or college. One institution coordinator believed that this was an attitude widely held in her school and illustrated this with an example of a typical response from a student when discussing higher education *'one student said: "University Miss? We're from [Any Town High]"'* In addition, partnership members from two different areas, commented that young people in their locality considered themselves unable to go onto higher education

because they attended schools or colleges that were widely seen as not academic. In one area, this was linked to the selective school system and the partnership coordinator said that failing to get into a grammar school encouraged many students in comprehensive schools to believe that they did not have the potential to go on to higher education. In another area, a partnership coordinator said that some students at a particular further education college had a similar lack of belief in themselves because the college was widely perceived as non-academic. Area coordinators also commented that some young people were concerned that they would not fit in with other students at university, and in a further area another school coordinator commented that this was one of the factors that deterred students at his school from applying to higher status higher education institutions.

Only a minority of young people interviewed were considering career paths that did not involve university, and concern over not being suited to higher education was not identified as one of the main barriers to progression by the young people who were interviewed. An explanation of this discrepancy between the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership staff's perceptions and the young people's views may be that all of the young people that were interviewed across the ten areas had been involved in some Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, which may have dispelled some of their fears over not fitting in.

A second key cultural barrier to higher education, identified by core partnership members, was a general **unwillingness to leave their home town**. As discussed in Section 3.2.1, young people from both larger EiC areas and smaller areas expressed concern about leaving home and this was reflected in the respondents' perspective at partnership level. In some cases this was due to unfamiliarity with travelling, for example, one partnership coordinator described how students rarely left their local area and were not used to travelling even short distances. Another school coordinator felt that the idea of leaving the local area to go to higher education, was '*alien*' and some students said that '*I don't think a lot of them would even think about going off to universities in other towns*'. In addition to unfamiliarity with travelling, fear of leaving their families and communities were cited as key barriers to progression to higher education. One school coordinator commented that in her area '*Family units are strong; even if the parents are divorced people tend to stay in the area and stay in close contact with their children. There is a strong fear factor when the thought of going away to study is being discussed within families*'. A school coordinator in another area had come across similar issues, and explained that students at the school were '*knit into their families and the families are part of a community: they want to keep those ties*'. As discussed earlier, for many students a possible solution to this problem was to attend a local higher education institution and many partnership members in both EiC and EAZ areas saw the option that students in their area had of being able to attend a local higher education institution, an advantage.

The third cultural barrier identified by core partnership members, was a **negative attitude towards education and academic achievement**. In two areas this was identified as a community-wide issue, with one college coordinator commenting that education was viewed very negatively in her area, whilst a school coordinator in another area felt that there was an “*anti-learning culture*’ locally. One school coordinator believed that a lack of belief in education was embedded in the community, as many parents had attended the same school as their children and as the school was widely seen as non-academic, parents had passed their negative experiences and views of education on to their children. A further school coordinator in a different area, felt that this anti-learning culture was endemic within her school and that bad behaviour was often rewarded. She observed that:

this is a school where having a reputation for being ‘naughty’ is the only thing that gets you popularity. These kids are the hardest to reach. You make yourself popular by being disruptive and rejecting learning.

Given this context in the school, she particularly valued the opportunity which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge presented for some students and stated that: ‘*There are no rewards if you’re not bad except for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. It is the only thing we do for kids who aren’t problems*’. This culture was not identified as a barrier to higher education by the young people interviewed, however it is reasonable to suggest that some young people in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas may have grown up surrounded by an ‘*anti-learning culture*’ and have not experienced many alternative attitudes towards education. As such, it is only the wider experience of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership members that allows them to identify such a barrier.

A fourth cultural barrier to progression identified by core partnership members, was that many young people had **no family or community experience** of higher education, and it was, therefore, not something that they had considered. One institution coordinator described the background of many students who had experienced Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, as follows: “*sometimes [higher education] is something that is new to the family; nobody has been to university and because they are first generation, don’t know about the university system, don’t know they have the potential to apply*”. One area, typical of other partnerships visited, was characterised by a lack of experience of higher education, not only amongst the family members of the widening participation students, but among the community more generally. This is illustrated in the vignette below.

Area 4 Family and community experience of higher education

Area 4 is a post-industrial area of high unemployment. The armed forces are one of the largest local employers and many young people choose to leave education at 16 to join the forces.

An 11-16 school in the area had few links to post-16 education. Teachers at the school believed that there was parental pressure for young people to leave school and go to work at 16, as the area had a history of links with the armed forces, in which many parents had themselves been employed. Given this situation, higher education was a concept very rarely considered by young people or their parents. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge school coordinator described how actually attending university, and gaining a degree, was almost unheard of in the local area:

even local people will say, "my boy went to Hillside University" and you think they meant university and they meant summer school or sports camp or something like that.

Education post-16 was considered an option by some students however, as the school coordinator indicated:

Now a lot of the students will want to stay on and go to college, a lot of the boys will either want to join the army, or go off to a building site or do nothing. A lot of the girls will want to do beauty or hairdressing or kindergarten.

Taking a more academic route at 16 was less common: *'you don't hear a lot of them going off to sixth form or anything like that – there is a lot of vocational courses'*. As such the main focus of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in this area, has been to introduce the concept of higher education to young people through, for example, introducing them to the environment of these institutions, and to try to encourage students to consider joining the forces after further or higher education, rather than at 16.

The second group of barriers to students' progression to further and higher education identified by core partnership members were **practical barriers**. As highlighted by pupils and students earlier in this chapter, one of the key inhibitors to higher education identified by coordinators was **fear of debt**. One school coordinator said that many young people in the area came from deprived backgrounds where they had grown-up with a fear of debt. Another school coordinator in the same area also felt that fear of debt was a problem and believed that, for many students, the amount of debt they would accrue as a result of attending higher education, would be extremely daunting. A school coordinator from another area was also familiar with this issue, and felt that a culture of debt avoidance amongst many families in her area discouraged young people from applying to higher education. In addition, a partnership coordinator from a third area also recognised the concern of many students, outlined in Section 3.4, that gaining a degree would not guarantee a well-paid job, and as such getting in to significant debt by attending higher education,

was a considerable risk: *‘They say to me, “some people don’t get a job out of it, so why should we”’.*

A second financial barrier identified by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnerships, was **family pressure to work** rather than attend further or higher education. Section 3.3 outlined the important role that the family plays in influencing young people’s decisions on progression and this was recognised by the partnership members. A coordinator in one school believed that many parents in her area expected their children to find a job, or at least learn a trade, instead of going on to higher education. Respondents in three other areas recognised the problems this posed for both young people and those involved in outlining the benefits of participating in higher education. One coordinator felt that for some young people who received little support from their families, encouraging them to apply to higher education, put them in a difficult position as they would be in conflict with their parents. A partnership coordinator in another area felt that this issue was relevant for some students in her area also and commented: *‘it’s a case of them speaking out against their parents which can be difficult for them’*. A school coordinator also recognised that this was a problem for students in his area and also for him in his role as an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator:

That is probably one of the hardest things of my job. It is one thing working with the pupils and trying to raise their aspirations but then they go home and they have parents or they are from families where nobody has even been to university or HE and certainly [parents say] ‘you need [to get] yourself into a trade, you need to do this, you need to start earning money’

The **availability of work at 18**, for sometimes low skilled employment opportunities, was also a factor identified by coordinators as discouraging students from progressing to higher education. In two areas, the possibility of employment in the armed forces was a factor that tempted some young people to finish formal education at 16 or 18, and in one area a school coordinator felt it encouraged students not to work hard at school.

They think: ‘don’t have to work, really, as I can go off and join the navy, they don’t see really that they need to do well and that it will affect their career in the Navy.’

A college coordinator in another area felt that the high employment rate for low skilled work locally encouraged young people to leave education and to work at 18. A school coordinator in another area concurred and described how low skilled employment was available to some young people in his school at 18 through their families or through jobs that they already had:

Sometimes it’s family pressures, where they have to go to work immediately or work for the family in a business set-up, and sometimes

the students will have a part-time job, a huge number of the students in this area, have part-time jobs in the city and will be seduced by the money they can get if they go on full-time. So rather than continue education they will work in Sainsburys or Tescos or whatever.

It appeared that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership members had a slightly different view of why young people chose to go into low skilled employment at 18, rather than on to higher education than the young people who were interviewed. It seemed that partnership members believed that fear of debt, family pressures and the availability of work at 18, would mean that some young people with the potential to go on to higher education, would have to go into work instead. Only a minority of the young people interviewed intended to go into work at 18. While the views of some young people who did not plan to progress to higher education reflected the perceptions of the partnership members, there appeared to be some discrepancy between their views and those held by young people. This may be because the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership members were reflecting the attitudes of a broader cohort of young people than those interviewed. However, attitudes of the young people who were interviewed may have been informed by their experience of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.

3.7 Summary

Overall, it emerged that young people from the gifted and talented cohorts and widening participation aspired to higher education. They were influenced by family, teachers, mentors but less by their friends. However, young people and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership members perceived certain practical and cultural barriers to progression. The main concern amongst all interviewees was a general fear of debt associated with a higher education qualification. This appeared to be due, in some cases, to a lack of understanding of the actual costs involved. Evidently, further intervention through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities was necessary to overcome some of the barriers to progression and to encourage young people further to aspire to higher education.

4. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities – views on ‘what works’

Key findings

- ◆ There was a consensus across interviewees that providing the opportunity for young people pre- and post-16 to meet with current undergraduates, and to visit higher education institutions and engage in participatory activities, were the most effective aspects of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Programme.
- ◆ Visits to higher education institutions had led pupils and students to consider that higher education was a possibility for them and had challenged their perceptions and addressed some misconceptions about the nature of the people and work involved in higher education.
- ◆ Students who participated in visits to higher education institutions benefited from experiencing a different environment, including both the educational and social aspects of higher education, and from participating in activities which involved them and were appropriate in content and delivery.
- ◆ Mentoring and other contact with undergraduates was widely used in the partnerships visited, either separately or as part of one of the other activities such as Masterclasses. The individually-focused support which a mentor could provide, and the different perspective they brought were two of the distinctive factors which appeared to have led to their success. Students and pupils respected the undergraduates whose genuine recent experience of higher education gave them credibility.
- ◆ Using undergraduates who were from a similar background or experience as the pupils and students was said to help young people to see that higher education was an option for people ‘like me’. This was helpful with particular target groups of young people.
- ◆ There had been varied levels of success in implementing Masterclasses in the partnerships. In the view of interviewees, they worked best when they were subject-specific and clearly linked to an area of interest to the pupils and students or a subject they were studying. Delivering the Masterclasses in an appropriate and accessible way, and liaising closely with schools, were further factors which affected their success.
- ◆ The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow had visited all the partnerships. It appeared to work well with pre-16 pupils and when the style of delivery was targeted at the right level. The Roadshow staff were commended for their approach. Staff recommended that it should be used in conjunction with a wider programme of careers activities.
- ◆ Other approaches which had been adopted, and had proved successful, included study support programmes delivered at a higher education institution, modules of study which could contribute to entry to a higher education institution, and practical support with applications.

- ♦ It had proved challenging to engage directly with parents to promote further and higher education and provide information. Parents were said to be pre-occupied with the financial implications of pursuing a higher education course and many activities were focused on providing accurate information and advice. Partnerships engaged a range of agencies, including LEAs and higher education staff in these events. Valuable contributions were made by undergraduates who were able to bring a realistic perspective to the events.
- ♦ Although no one Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activity emerged as the most or least successful, the use of undergraduates and care in tailoring interventions to meet the needs and learning styles of the target group emerged as critical to success. Ensuring the activities were interactive and were thoroughly planned and based on knowledge of the young people participating were further influential factors on success.

4.1 Introduction

In the ten case-study areas, a wide range of activities had been developed in response to the barriers to progression into further and higher education, and the consequent need to raise pupils' aspirations and achievement, outlined in Chapter 3. Partnership coordinators, institutional coordinators in schools and colleges, tutors and teachers and higher education institution staff had developed their experience of implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and delivering relevant and appropriate activities. Although they rarely reported rejecting any single approach entirely, they had refined the activities in the light of experience and in order to meet local needs. This chapter presents interviewees' reflections on the activities they had adopted and their perceptions of the main factors which contributed to, or inhibited, the success of the activities. The extent to which they had been successful, in the views of the students who participated, is discussed.

This chapter presents the perspectives of each type of interviewee in each of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities they had implemented. The views of the **partnership coordinators and coordinators in schools and colleges** in the ten areas are presented first in each section. The coordinators had been responsible for a wide range of activities and many subtle differences at a local level within these activities were apparent. The chapter does not seek to provide a detailed account of every activity but rather focuses on the broad nature of the activities undertaken and coordinators' perspectives on what appeared to have been the most effective in their experience.

The views of the **staff in higher education institutions** in the ten case study areas who had responsibility for coordinating Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, and tutors who had been involved in delivering some of the activities, are presented in each section. These interviewees provided their perspectives on the activities and approaches which appeared to have been

most effective in raising the aspirations and achievement of the young people who participated. In discussing these, interviewees mentioned a variety of activities which contributed to the widening participation strategies in their institutions. It is worth noting that in so doing they did not always clearly identify, or were not always aware of, the precise source of funding for the activity and may have included activities that were not funded, or only partially funded, through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In addition, they included activities which had existed prior to Aimhigher or Excellence Challenge which may have been continued due, in part, to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funding or other funding for widening participation.

Finally, each section presents the observations of **pre-16 pupils and post-16 students** about their experiences of participating in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.¹⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3, the students who were interviewed were all representatives of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts. Although they had all experienced Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, the extent and nature of the activities in which they had participated varied, and this is reflected in their comments.

4.2 Range of activities

The broad context of the nature of provision of activities through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge is reflected in the national surveys of schools, colleges and higher education institutions undertaken in 2004. These revealed that a range of activities were offered through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to young people. For example, among the 85 **schools** surveyed in 2004, the main activities promoted or provided to raise awareness of higher education were:

- ♦ taster days or visits to higher education institutions (99 per cent)
- ♦ summer schools (92 per cent – 36 per cent of schools said that these were introduced directly as a result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge)
- ♦ use of the Aimhigher Roadshow and resources (86 per cent)
- ♦ residential visits to higher education institutions (81 per cent – 31 per cent of schools said that these were introduced as a direct result of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge).

Among the 75 **FE colleges** surveyed in 2004, the main activities in use to promote higher education included:

- ♦ Invited speakers from higher education institutions (91 per cent)

¹⁹ As indicated in Chapter 1, the term ‘pupil’ is used to refer to a pre-16 pupil and ‘student’ is used to refer to a post-16 student. Undergraduate students in higher education institutions are referred to as ‘undergraduates’. ‘Young people’ refers to young people pre-16 and post-16 where a distinction is not necessary.

- ◆ The Aimhigher Roadshow (85 per cent)
- ◆ Externally produced promotional materials (72 per cent)
- ◆ Activities run by or with Connexions (61 per cent)
- ◆ Use of undergraduate mentors (60 per cent)
- ◆ Promoting or providing summer schools (60 per cent)

The majority of **higher education institutions** also reported that in 2003 to 2004 they offered, or planned to offer, summer schools (99 per cent), presentations to schools (97 per cent), mentoring by undergraduates (69 per cent) and student ambassador schemes (85 per cent).

An examination of the annual reports submitted by the ten area study areas relating to one year provides some indication of the volume of activities which these ten areas were providing. It was not always possible to obtain an accurate account of participant numbers. For instance for many activities, such as teaching and learning activities within the timetable, out of hours study, activity across schools to support transition and use of the Aimhigher Roadshow, the number of students who experienced the activities was not specified and was said to vary between institutions, or that the activity was offered to all students in a year group. For other activities more data was available although coverage was not comprehensive. For instance, between 30 and 2,481 young people were said to have participated in Masterclasses. In addition, across the ten areas, the annual reports indicated that the number of students in a partnership who participated in visits to higher education institutions, including summer schools, ranged from 46 to 6,900. The size of the partnership would have influenced these numbers and the larger figure was in a partnership with a large number of schools. It appeared that a more typical experience was for around 400 and 500 students to participate, as was the case in four of the areas.

The analysis of the surveys of young people conducted as part of the wider evaluation revealed that participation in activities such as summer schools, visits to higher education institutions and having discussions with undergraduates and higher education staff were associated with young people attaining higher than expected outcomes at key stage 3 and 4. Moreover, there was a relationship between a young person being designated as part of the widening participation or gifted and talented cohorts, through which they might access Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, and higher than expected attainment. It emerged that longer term involvement in these cohorts was more effective than short-term or ad hoc exposure. The remainder of this section explores the use of these activities in the ten case study areas.

4.3 Visits, residentials and summer schools at higher education institutions

4.3.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

As discussed in Chapter 3, many pupils in these areas were said to be apprehensive about moving away from their familiar local area and were hesitant to travel far. Even where there were higher education institutions in the locality, it was reported that some young people had rarely visited these institutions. Enabling pupils to gain direct experience of a higher education institution through a visit was widely acknowledged as one of the most effective ways of raising pupils’ awareness and aspirations. Evidence from the surveys of schools reveals that such activities were promoted and provided in the majority of schools. For example, in 2003 to 2004 99 per cent of schools provided visits to higher education institutions, 81 per cent promoted residential visits and 92 per cent promoted summer schools. This section discusses some of the main approaches to undertaking activities at a higher education institution, and interviewees’ reflections on ensuring that the experience was beneficial.

All of the partnerships had facilitated visits to higher education institutions for young people of various ages. These included one-off activities based at a higher education institution, summer schools (and winter and Easter schools) and other residential events.²⁰ Visiting a higher education institution, either for a one-off visit or a summer school or residential, was said to ‘*open the eyes*’ of pupils and lead them to consider higher education as a possibility where they had not done so before or were uncertain whether higher education was the appropriate route for them. Pupils were said by school staff to return ‘*enthusiastic*’ and ‘*buzzy*’ and with the view that ‘*that’s where I want to go*’. One teacher explained that a visit to a higher education institution was the ‘*single most beneficial thing*’, particularly where pupils were ‘*very parochial*’, and another observed that ‘*any kind of higher education institution visit or campus visit is an eye opener. It makes them [pupils] think that they can do it and allows them to see that it’s not actually as scary as they may think*’. While this was echoed by a third teacher who said that ‘*any exposure to higher education is good*’, it was possible to identify some factors which contributed to a successful experience.

Pupils were said to benefit from experiencing a **different environment**, including sitting in the lecture halls and seeing specialist equipment. The contrast with facilities at school was noted by pupils and, in some cases, was said to have inspired them. In addition, pupils experienced the undergraduates’ social and recreational facilities on the campus. For example,

²⁰ The terms summer schools and residentials were used interchangeably by interviewees to refer to a learning event involving an overnight stay.

one partnership coordinator noted that the social aspect of student life was sometimes overlooked but found that pupils had benefited from a visit to the student union arranged by undergraduates during a residential. Although they had been initially apprehensive it had been valuable because it had given them an experience of *'part of student life, and quite an intimidating part'*. This exposure to higher education institutions was said to remove the *'mistique'* of higher education, thereby making it appear more accessible to a wider range of young people.

Area 7 Strategies used to engage students with visits to higher education institutions

In this area, the population tended to be settled into self-contained communities and, in some instances, these communities had little or no contact with higher education. As a result, partnership staff had noted a poor response to invitations for Year 10 students from specific schools and had consequently established pre-visit sessions. These short sessions consisted of a brief introduction to higher education and a quiz. Pupils also discussed their expectations of the forthcoming visit, such as what they expected to learn and who they expected to meet.

Following the visit, a post-visit session was held at the school to reinforce the impact of the visit. During the session, pupils worked in small groups to produce posters about their activities and learning experiences during the visit which were then displayed in school foyers and at parents' evenings. This was said to help disseminate information about higher education and to maintain a higher education presence in schools.

Meeting undergraduate students was a further valuable element in many of the activities organised through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (this will be discussed further in Section 4.5) including the residentials and visits. The evidence from the surveys suggests that this opportunity was increasingly used as 31 per cent of Year 11 students in 2004 said that they had discussed life at university with an undergraduate compared with 25 per cent in 2002. In addition to exposing young people to the wider aspects of student life, as noted above, the opportunity for pupils to discuss being an undergraduate, and raise any concerns or issues they might have, had been found to be effective. As one school coordinator expressed it *'talking with students really sells university in a way old cronies like me can't'*. In particular, some interviewees noted the value of pupils meeting with *'atypical'* higher education students to whom they could relate. Examples included undergraduates from particular minority ethnic groups, or students at higher education institutions away from the local area who originated from similar areas of the country as the visiting pupils.

The need for careful **planning of the content and approach** by the host higher education institution, prior to any visit, summer school or residential, was evident in the comments of partnership coordinators, school and college

staff. A generic tour of a higher education institution, which was not supported by participatory activities or tailored to the needs and interests of the visitors, was not sufficient to engage and inspire the pupils. As a college coordinator expressed it *‘when a university doesn’t really know what to do with our students, they take them on yet another tour’*. The need to adopt an approach to which pupils would respond was emphasised by one partnership coordinator who observed that, if the day was too structured, students would *‘opt out’*. Instead, ensuring an element of choice, by for example offering a variety of seminars from which they could select any of interest, had proved successful.

Often, the visit included some *‘taster sessions’* through which pupils could experience some sample lectures in specific subjects. This provided an *‘opportunity to test it out without committing themselves’*, as a partnership coordinator explained. Offering subjects which were more unusual, and may be different from those which pre-16 pupils undertook at school (such as philosophy, psychology and sociology) contributed to broadening pupils’ perceptions of higher education. Ensuring that the sessions were delivered at an *‘appropriate’* level, however, was a challenge with which higher education institution staff had to engage. Some interviewees remarked that sample lectures had been at too high a level for students, while others reported that they were at too low a level and were *‘patronising’*. In the view of one college coordinator, higher education institution staff should use *‘carefully selected undergraduate lectures’* and not *‘dumbed down’* lectures created specifically for the activity.

Overall, in the view of partnership, school and college coordinators, higher education institution visits, residentials and summer schools which were carefully planned and appropriately delivered, were regarded as one of the most successful of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. The comments of some interviewees that there was demand for more places than they could provide, may reflect the value of these experiences. The evident positive outcomes for students outlined above, observed by staff, outweighed the challenges associated with administration and negotiating time away from school for pupils in the view of one school coordinator who said *‘it is difficult to take them out on trips, because in these days of multiple risk assessments, it is a lot of work, but it pays off, it’s worth it’*.

4.3.2 The higher education institution perspective

As noted by partnership coordinators and school coordinators, activities which enabled young people to visit a higher education institution and gain first-hand experience of the environment, such as taster days and ACE days, were widely regarded as beneficial by interviewees in higher education institutions. As one interviewee said: *‘being on campus was most effective’* as the students left *‘energised’* and more aware of the *‘real community’* that existed in a higher education institution. Reflecting on their experience of organising and

facilitating such events, interviewees noted that they had experienced success when the event included practical activities and was *'interactive'* and as *'highly participatory'* as possible and appropriate to the age group of students attending. This is exemplified in the example below.

Area 3 The value of participatory activities

Area 3 has a history of high unemployment and the typical low-skilled work available within the area has meant that higher qualifications are not required for such employment. Therefore, the level of aspiration for higher education is low. There are no higher education institutions in the local area and young people were said to be reluctant to travel outside of the EAZ for opportunities in higher education. Consequently, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators were keen to organise all-day visits to higher education institutions.

In area 3, day visits to higher education institutions involved post-16 students touring the campus and meeting with undergraduates before selecting a lecture to attend. Lecturers delivered first year undergraduate lectures and, after lunch, students participated in an activity-based seminar in groups of around 15 which culminated in a presentation of their findings to the whole group. The higher education institution coordinator organising the activity highlighted the importance of the presentation element of the day, which he felt students rarely had the opportunity for at school.

This activity was said to have proved successful in raising students' expectations of themselves as they learned that they were able to successfully engage with first year undergraduate work. Moreover, lecturers were said to be impressed by the quality of the presentations and the determination and interest of the students. Students received a conditional offer at the end of the day and information about the higher education institution and other institutions and UCAS.

Some higher education institution staff who were interviewed considered that subject-specific summer schools and residential through which students were also taken *'out of their own context'* were among the most effective activities. For example, one interviewee had noticed that, towards the end of the residential, students' *'attitude changes – they are really different people'* and were considering a wider range of choices of course as a consequence of the experience. In some instances, higher education institutions reported success where they had targeted their summer schools or residential at specific target groups, such as Black Caribbean male students, as described in the example below. In addition, some were increasingly developing subject-specific events in light of their experience and one reported successfully including industrial visits as part of the programme of activities.

Area 8 The value of ongoing contact and working with specific minority ethnic groups

Area 8 is a large city with broad range of minority ethnic groups. Underperformance of young people from these groups (in terms of 5 A*-C GCSE grades) was well below the national average.

One higher education institution in the area had run a successful summer school for Asian girls. A coordinator in a school made contact with the higher education institution having identified a need for a similar programme focusing on Black Caribbean boys. The higher education institution coordinator had also been *‘trying to attract’* boys of Black Caribbean background and so, in partnership, the school and higher education institution held a day event. From those who attended, they identified a smaller group of Year 10 pupils to attend a summer school. After the five day summer school, which was well-attended, the higher education institution coordinator realised that there was a need to continue contact with these pupils rather than *‘say “bye, hope you come to university in two or three year’s time”*. Consequently, a *‘project day’* was held in October where the pupils worked on a project with undergraduates and a programme of twilight revision sessions was established which lasted for ten weeks commencing in February was established. Finally, a second summer school was offered to the pupils. The programme was *‘resource intensive’* but said to be very successful and all of the participating pupils progressed into further education at 16.

4.3.3 Views of pupils and students who participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities

Many of the students who were interviewed had participated in visits to higher education institutions, either as one day events such as ACE days and taster days, or for a longer period such as through a summer school, a residential experience or through an ongoing programme of visits to the same institution. Often, the young people who were interviewed had visited more than one institution. This reflects the findings from the surveys which revealed that 16 per cent of Year 11 pupils in 2004 said that they had visited more than one higher education institution in the previous academic year. It was evident from their comments that these students had largely benefited from the insight into life at a university which these visits had provided. Their observations, which broadly reflected the views of coordinators and higher education institution staff outlined previously, indicated that the visits had been successful in the following ways:

- ♦ **Challenging their perception that university was not for them.** The visits enabled the pupils and students to place themselves in a different environment and, in so doing, helped it to seem achievable. This is illustrated in the comment of one student who said: *‘now, when I think about me going to university, I can imagine it, and it seems real because I have been there and seen it’* while a second pupil commented that *‘it really helps to see a place – you feel so much more confident about it’*.

- ♦ **Addressing their misconceptions that university was ‘full of snobs’** and that they would not be considered for entry due to their family background or the school or college they attended. A number of students said that they were surprised that people at university *‘weren’t snobby’*. Consequently, consideration of embarking on a higher education course was less daunting for some young people such as the pupil who said: *‘you were expecting them to be really posh, but it is not always like that and...we just got the wrong idea...it’s not impossible to get into’*.
- ♦ **Providing an opportunity to see the type of work that would be expected** of them and so contributing to them being able to make an informed choice. Students and pupils who were interviewed reported their surprise at the realisation of the extent to which undergraduates take responsibility for their own learning, such as the pupil who said university was *‘really different, I mean, we get chased up for homework and that, but there, it’s completely on your own’* while a second also contrasted what he had learned with his school experience and said *‘if you don’t want to do it, you don’t do it. At school you get pushed’*. A third pupil re-evaluated her perceptions when she commented that *‘I thought it would be duller and having to work all the time...you get quite a lot of spare time’*

Overall, it was evident that the experience these students had of visiting higher education institutions was positive. For some, it had been one of the important contributory factors in the complex process of decision-making about future choices, as in the case of one student who said the experience had influenced him *‘a little, but [it is] not the main influence...I try and get all the information in and then weigh up the pros and cons’*.

The observations of a number of the students and pupils who had participated in these events, provide further support for the views expressed by coordinators and higher education institution staff that, in order to meet the needs of the young people, the events should entail more than a tour of the campus, involve active participation and be delivered in a way that was appropriate for the age group. For example, one pupil who had attended a few higher education institution-based events stated that: *‘Every university visit has been the same as well. Most of them gave us a talk on finances, then just took us on a tour. We didn’t do many activities’*. It was apparent that students desired activities that related to their curriculum, subjects or to broader areas of learning, rather than to more generic activities such as team building exercises, as illustrated in the comments of two pupils one of whom said: *‘we didn’t do no learning, [sic] just looked round the university. We had some group thing that helped you bond with the group, but nothing that would make you think “Oh, this is what university is like”’* while a second said he would have preferred it *‘if they’d set assignments, rather than wasting time on team building’*.

In summary, successful higher education institution visits tended to include an element of joint planning, were subject-specific and/or participatory and

included contact with current undergraduates. Planning for a longer-term follow-up was also recommended. This approach facilitated more appropriate targeting of activities, enabled young people to engage with university life and challenged their preconceptions.

4.4 Masterclasses and study activities

4.4.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

Masterclasses were used in 40 per cent of the further education colleges surveyed in 2004 and in 14 per cent of schools. They had been used in all of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas visited across the year groups (Year 9 to Year 13) and, although these were most frequently targeted at students in the gifted and talented cohort, there were instances of students in the widening participation cohort accessing Masterclasses. The partnerships experienced varied levels of success with Masterclasses. Young people were said by partnership coordinators and school and college coordinators to have benefited from experiencing a different perspective on a subject than that of their school or college teachers, and the Masterclasses helped to ‘*push them*’ academically. However, it emerged that, in order to be effective, Masterclasses needed to be clearly linked with specific aspects of the pupils’ curriculum, such as the A level subject they were interested in, and delivered at a level that was appropriate and accessible for pupils. Some of the key elements of success were summarised in the comments of one teacher, whose students had benefited from a masterclass, who observed that the materials and the higher education institution staff delivering the class had been good and that the teaching was at the right level. In order to achieve this ‘*the main ingredient of success was effective liaison with schools*’, as one partnership coordinator explained. This helped to ensure that these requirements were met and that the classes offered were in appropriate subjects required by the school. Close liaison with subject tutors, who were therefore able to see the value of the masterclass, was felt to contribute to their success in part through ensuring that subject staff ‘*buy-in*’ to their value, especially where pupils were released from lessons. Indeed, in three of the areas visited, Masterclasses were delivered on the school site in order to minimise the disruption to other lessons and to help ensure that they were of value to the students.

4.4.2 The higher education institution perspective

As noted earlier, partnerships reported a mixed experience when delivering Masterclasses for students. For example, poor attendance at Masterclasses was reported in three case study areas. The views of some interviewees in higher education institutions reflected those of partnership coordinators and school and college staff in so far as the style of delivery and ‘*pitching*’ of the classes by higher education institution staff had not always been appropriate to

the needs of students who were not yet undergraduates. As one higher education institution coordinator explained, *'there is no chance to generate a rapport...if you just talk, their eyes glaze over, also, they don't tend to ask questions'*. In addition to the delivery approach adopted, which higher education staff could control and adapt, the success of the class was also apparently influenced by the response of the participating students. For example, an interviewee in the one area, where Masterclasses were noted as a success, attributed this in part to *'group psychology'* in which, when it worked well, students were interested and willing to ask questions. In response, as with the taster days noted above, interviewees noted the benefit of using activities to generate interest and discussion in order to engage the young people. Ensuring that the content was relevant to the students and the subjects they were studying, was also mentioned. However, the challenge for specialist higher education staff in achieving this when they were unaware of the detail of the A Level syllabuses was noted in one area. Some higher education institutions had made use of undergraduate students to support the classes as it was recognised that pupils and students were more able to relate to, and engage with, undergraduates, as will be discussed further below.

Practical challenges were also said to have inhibited the delivery of Masterclasses. In one area, a tutor in the higher education institution commented that there had been *'multiple logistical issues'* such as organising the booking and funding of places and arranging an appropriate time whilst an interviewee in a second area noted that transport difficulties had inhibited attendance.

4.4.3 Views of pupils and students who participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities

Some of the students and pupils who were interviewed mentioned that they had participated in Masterclasses, revision workshops, critical thinking workshops and subject-specific modules of study. In contrast to the comments noted above of some partnership coordinators, institutional coordinators and higher education institution staff, these students appeared to have found these events helpful, although one student's comment, that the tutor *'talked too much...people have different ways of learning'* again highlights the need for an appropriate style of delivery. Nevertheless, one post-16 student found an English Masterclass *'really, really good'* because it *'gives you an insight into what you will really be studying and what they expect of you...it wasn't something that we would see in a GCSE or an A level syllabus'*. A second pupil, who was in Year 11 and taking a GNVQ, also appreciated the introduction to an alternative style of learning and commented that it was *'good to do that because at A Level, it's...more academic and working on your own, you will have to make your own notes and everything'*. In addition, the experience which students had through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities influenced their wider learning in school. For example, one pre-16 pupil commented that a session on critical thinking had made a difference to

how he structured his essays and a second had applied the skills learned in a revision skills workshop to his school work to great effect. As he explained: *‘I did a PE test...I used that revision skill and I got 70 per cent, second highest in the class. So I have gone up one grade’.*

In summary, Masterclasses appeared to work best when they were linked to curriculum areas but gave young people an insight that they would not have encountered in school. They also appeared to be most effective when they were delivered in a way that was appropriate to the young people but still provided a challenge for them.

4.5 Mentoring and other support from individuals

4.5.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

As noted earlier, facilitating contact between young people aged under 18 and undergraduate students during visits to higher education institutions had proved valuable and was widely used among the partnerships visited. In addition, partnerships used mentoring with a range of individuals, including involvement in the National Mentoring Pilot Programme. This was widely regarded as an effective method of engaging with pupils in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort and raising their awareness, aspirations and, in some cases, achievement. For example, three interviewees identified a positive effect on pupils’ attainment and GCSE outcomes which they attributed to the use of mentors. The range of mentoring adopted in these partnerships included:

- ◆ mentoring of pre-16 pupils and 16-18 year olds by undergraduate students, including PGCE students, and the use of e-mentoring
- ◆ mentoring of pre-16 pupils by post-16 college students
- ◆ occupation-specific mentoring by local business people
- ◆ support from Learning Mentors for identified students which was focused on progression to HE, and by paid staff fulfilling a similar role
- ◆ student ambassador programme, which was mentioned in four areas, where undergraduate students interacted with young people through visits to schools and colleges, supporting Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities and hosting visits to higher education institutions.

The distinctive contribution which any of these forms of mentoring made to the overall Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge strategy in these partnerships included the individually-focused support which they could provide and which teaching staff often found difficult because of the constraints on their time, as illustrated in the example below. In addition, the mentors could provide a different perspective from that of the pupils’ parents and teachers.

Consequently, pupils were reportedly more willing to listen to these individuals. Moreover, in some cases, they felt more comfortable talking to their mentors and found them more approachable. Indeed, where student mentors were used, the small age difference between pupil and mentor was said to assist the establishment of relationships and the credibility of the mentor. In some cases, partnerships had made use of mentors from a similar geographical area, ethnic group or gender as the pupil. This was said to be valuable in helping students see that *'people like themselves can actually move on'*. This was particularly noted by a coordinator in a school that did not have a sixth form that could function as a group of role models for younger pupils.

Area 2 Student support workers

Young people in area 2 were said not to aspire to higher education after college or sixth form and low levels of self-confidence were a general issue across the area.

The area 2 partnership had introduced paid individuals who undertook a role where they supported identified individual students. These mentors were recent graduates with similar backgrounds to the widening participation cohort. They focused on supporting the pupils' progression to higher education through, for example, providing support with their studies and with completing UCAS applications. In addition, they accompanied pupils on visits to higher education institutions which relieved teaching staff of this task.

This role had been very well-received by the staff in schools and colleges who were interviewed, who felt that it was *'a major service we did not offer in the past'*. These mentors provided *'another pair of hands'* and relieved the pressure on the head of sixth form and tutors. The students were said to benefit from the support from individuals in school who were more accessible than teaching staff who had a timetable of teaching commitments.

Interviewees had encountered some issues in using mentoring as part of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Although, on the whole, mentoring was a one-to-one relationship between a pupil and mentor, there were instances of 'mentors' working with groups of pupils. One school coordinator mentioned that one-to-one mentoring could be *'too intense'* for pupils and preferred to use group sessions. Furthermore, one partnership coordinator highlighted the importance of ensuring that student mentors were appropriately trained to minimise the risk that the messages they conveyed to pupils were in conflict with those of the pupil or the institution. A school coordinator similarly commented that there was a need for pupils to be prepared for the experience of seeing a mentor as they otherwise did not know what to expect and could be *'scared'*. Overall, the comment of one school coordinator may reflect a wider view that a partnership should have a range of activities of which mentoring was one because it *'it works fantastically well with some students, with others it won't....it's very much down to the quality of the mentor and the attitude of the student'*.

4.5.2 The higher education institution perspective: using undergraduate students

Undergraduate students, such as student ambassadors, were used by higher education institutions across the partnerships to support Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and were considered to make an invaluable contribution to the provision by higher education institution staff, reflecting the views of partnership coordinators and school and college staff which were reported earlier. Although the use of undergraduates to support the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme took into consideration that they were a ‘*cheap resource*’, as one coordinator said, and in order to minimise the pressure on busy lecturers, interviewees also identified a range of distinctive benefits from using undergraduates. One coordinator in a higher education institution observed that ‘*anything that involves interaction with students, works*’ while a tutor in a second higher education institution said that ‘*all events use student ambassadors, as that is what young people respond to*’. Interviewees explained that young people who had yet to embark on a higher education course responded well to undergraduates as they could ‘*relate to them*’ more easily than academic staff and felt reassured that undergraduates had ‘*no agenda*’. In addition, the younger students benefited from seeing a role model about whom they could think ‘*that could be me*’ and ‘*it can be done*’. In order to achieve this success with the use of undergraduates, one tutor explained that thorough planning and preparation was required and commented that ‘*student ambassadors need to be properly briefed – like a job – they need to be prompt and have appropriate behaviour*’.

The student ambassadors who were interviewed had contributed to a range of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities including attending summer schools, residentials, parents events, taster days and subject-specific sessions or sessions related to study skills. These interviewees endorsed the value of providing young people with the opportunity to meet with current undergraduates and informally discuss any concerns and questions they had. Although visits to a university campus were felt to be valuable because, as one ambassador said ‘*no-one has a picture of the university before coming, and everyone takes that away with them*’, they were said to be more effective if they were supplemented by discussions with undergraduates. They suggested that they were able to provide an insight for the school-age pupils which was particularly valuable where pupils’ parents had not been to university and in order to inform them about the ‘*social side*’ of university. In their experience, the activities were most effective when there was adequate preparation from all parties involved. They highlighted the need for academic staff to consider ‘*who the clients are*’ and ‘*pitch*’ their talks accordingly and for pupils to be prepared by their schools. The need for student ambassadors to receive training was noted, although the extent and content of the training they received varied. Overall, the ambassadors who were interviewed had generally found the training they had received was useful. Indeed one ambassador commented that, although the case study scenarios presented in

the training seemed *'extreme'* at the time, he experienced similar situations early in his role as an ambassador. A second ambassador in another area appreciated being *'paired'* with an experienced student when participating in an activity for the first time.

In addition to the need for preparation, the student ambassadors emphasised the need for activities with young people to be participatory and not passive and that *'everything is developed with their [pupils'] participation and not just dumped on them'*. Engaging with the young people was central to the role of the student ambassadors and they indicated that being able to *'relate'* to the younger students was a critical skill. However, while some found that their own experience, was useful in this context when they recalled, for example thinking *'I can't do this'* when they were younger, others noted that it was not essential for ambassadors to have come from a similar background to the pupils. They suggested that one reason why visits to higher education institutions, and discussions with student ambassadors, were influential was because they could challenge pupils' preconceptions. However, as one interviewee explained, in some instances *'kids think university is full of rich, snobby people and [then they] come to university and just see rich, snobby people'*. Therefore, it was felt there was a need to ensure that the younger students received guidance to assist them to become aware of their own preconceptions.

4.5.3 Views of students and pupils who participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities

Although a few students and pupils commented that they had seen a learning mentor, Connexions Personal Adviser, or an individual in a similar role, as part of their Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge experience, the most frequently mentioned form of one-to-one support was through meeting with an undergraduate student. The young people who commented about the individual support they had received, were positive and appeared to appreciate, particularly, the difference in talking with a person such as a learning mentor or undergraduate, who was not a teacher or a university academic. For example, one student said that *'they aren't teachers, they are easy to talk to'* and went on to say that *'if I hadn't had a learning mentor to talk to, I might have quit before now'* and a second pupil observed that *'we'd rather talk to students than professors'*. The undergraduates with whom the students and pupils had contact were respected by the younger people and had credibility with them which was based, in part, on their genuine recent experience. This is illustrated in the comment of one pupil who had valued the opportunity to talk to undergraduates who were:

people that have actually stayed on that are only a few years older than us...when people tell you [about university] they are doing it so that you will go and [they are], like, advertising it. But people who have actually been, they then know what it is like, so they can tell you.

The undergraduates’ honesty in responding to questions from younger pupils and students was also appreciated. For example, one pupil said that an undergraduate had explained to them *‘how she is going to pay off her debts. She wasn’t meant to tell us she had bad points, but she did anyway, and that helped.’*

In addition to providing an insight into life as an undergraduate or in further education, older students were reported to have performed a role supporting students with their organisation and study. One post-16 student had valued the help her mentor had provided with reducing the *‘burden’* of her coursework by supporting her in *‘getting it all organised’*. A second pupil said of her mentor that *‘if I am struggling, she can explain it for me’*. Although a few students said that their student mentors did not have enough time, were distracted by their own study, or gave incorrect information, on the whole, their role was appreciated by students. It appeared to contribute to addressing some misconceptions about higher education and undergraduates. As one said the *‘students are more down to earth than I expected’*.

In summary, the evidence suggests that enabling young people to access tailored information advice and guidance provided by individuals who can present a different perspective to that which they have received previously had value in raising awareness and aspirations. Although such an intervention could be provided by an informed adult such as Learning Mentor it emerged that the role of undergraduates was particularly valued because of its more direct link to young people. This appeared to be most effective where the undergraduates had been properly briefed while still being able to respond to young people’s concerns honestly. In turn, some preparation for the young people who were meeting with the mentor was important in order for both mentor and mentee to gain fully from the experience.

4.6 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow

4.6.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

Evidence from the surveys indicates that 86 per cent of schools and 85 per cent of colleges had offered access to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow in 2004. The Roadshow had visited each of the ten partnerships and coordinators’ perceptions of its value and usefulness varied. In general, the school staff who commented on the Roadshow considered it to have made a valuable contribution to their work to raise aspirations among young people. The comments of staff who felt it had been successful suggest that this was due to the style of delivery, which was described as *‘short and snappy’*, the appropriateness of the content which was *‘targeted at the right interest level’* and the Roadshow staff who were *‘young and vibrant’*. Indeed, one school teacher said that the Roadshow had been successful in *‘switching even*

disaffected kids on'. Although the school staff had generally valued the Roadshow, some observed that, in order to make most effective use of the resources, it should not be used in isolation but rather in conjunction with a wider programme of careers-focused activities and with the Aimhigher website.

Among the minority of interviewees who were less satisfied with the Roadshow, were those based in post-16 institutions who were concerned primarily with the level of presentation and considered that it was more appropriate for younger students. As one partnership coordinator, who had hosted a visit in 2003, explained: *'it is good for younger kids in school but it hasn't been changed enough for sixth formers'*. In one instance, a school teacher felt that the focus on higher education was inappropriate for younger pupils for whom the focus needed to be on progression to further education.

4.6.2 Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow: Views of students who participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities

The comments of the young people who had experienced the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow also reflected a mixed experience. Some had found it very useful and said that it had *'made me sure I wanted to go'* or *'persuaded me more'*. They had found the videos and access to information on computers useful and had appreciated the opportunity to talk with undergraduates. However, others made observations which related to the timing and delivery of the Roadshow. Some students reported having experienced the Roadshow in Year 7 or 9 and found it hard to recall any detail when they were interviewed in Year 10 or 11. Indeed, one student commented that participating in the Roadshow when in Year 9 was too early and commented *'do you think we care at that age?'*. Consequently he was unable to remember the details about further and higher education when he needed to later in his school career. In contrast, a pupil in another area who had experienced the Roadshow in Year 10 said *'we used to think "university, miles off" and when you think of it, it's not really that far away'*. In terms of delivery, some students felt that the Roadshow was *'too short and rushed'* or *'a bit much too fast'* and that they did not have enough time to make best use of the experience.

Overall, it appeared that the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Roadshow was well-received where it was targeted at an appropriate age group and consideration was given to ensuring that factual information, which might change, was not provided to younger students who might not remember it when they were nearing the transition to higher education.

4.7 Study support

4.7.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators in schools, and other school staff, noted the value of revision classes and other forms of study support such as ‘*booster classes*’ and sessions focusing on study skills and examination techniques. These sessions were generally delivered in school by school staff. However, in one area, classes relating to problem solving and communication had been held at the local higher education institution while a second had held sessions on critical thinking at a higher education institution. Sessions were sometimes out of school hours (for example on a Saturday), or during school holidays and one school teacher felt that students had benefited from a more relaxed atmosphere when they could wear their own clothes and listen to music while gaining support with their revision.

An approach in one area which had proved particularly successful and ‘*has a big impact on [pupils’] views and motivation,*’ in the view of the partnership and school coordinators, entailed pupils attending a ‘*grown-up homework club*’ after school at the local higher education institution. The students travelled to the higher education institution after school in an arranged bus and undertook an hour of homework, with the support of undergraduate mentors, an hour of sport and then had an evening meal in the undergraduate’s dining area. This approach combined the benefits of familiarisation with a higher education environment and meetings and discussions with undergraduates, which could contribute to raising aspirations, and completing homework and coursework with support which could contribute to raising attainment.

It should be noted, however, that young people did not generally comment on these activities, nor indicate whether or not they valued them.

4.8 Modules contributing to entry

4.8.1 The higher education institution perspective

Interviewees in higher education institutions in five of the case study areas described programmes through which students who were identified as part of the widening participation cohort could undertake a module of study and receive a reduced offer for admission to the higher education institution, although the grades required were still generally high. These programmes were of two types: the first consisted of a study skills element taught in-house by the university concerned and included an assessed subject-specific project that students were required to take mainly in their own time. Satisfactory completion of the programme was usually said to equate to two grades at A Level (e.g. BBC rather than ABB) although this depended on the course of

study. In several cases the entry requirement reduction was three grades whereas, in the case of one course with a very high entry requirement, the reduction was just one grade. The second type of programme consisted of a study skills module that was taught away from the higher education institution and was said to equate to 30 points on the UCAS tariff.

There appeared to be considerable commitment across institutions where in-house schemes had been adopted and they also appeared to have become popular with the schools and colleges involved. The assessed module was felt to be important for the success of such a programme and one coordinator highlighted the need for the offer to have such '*strings attached*' through which students could prove their commitment, reliability and ability to undertake their own project and see it through. In addition, the same interviewee outlined the value of the relationship between the higher education institution and the schools and the need for commitment on both sides and for it to avoid being a '*shotgun*' partnership. Those involved in the external model were addressing issues related to low take-up and low completion.

Interviewees in the higher education institutions where study skills modules were offered were conscious of the care that was required in order to ensure that the reduced A Level grades required of students would still enable students to undertake study at the level required of a degree course. One higher education institution, with a long-established programme, had tracked students' progress and retention and refined their reduced offers to a slightly higher level in light of some evidence that students with lower grades at entry found the course too challenging and discontinued. Nevertheless, the in-house schemes appeared to be working well and were viewed positively by the senior academics, widening participation coordinators and admissions tutors who were interviewed.

4.9 Practical support for progression

4.9.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

Partnerships in some instances highlighted the provision they had established for providing information, advice and guidance and practical support to help young people to progress. Careers days, or UCAS application days, and mock higher education entrant interviews had proved successful in the view of some partnership coordinators and school and college staff. In one partnership, representatives from higher education institutions had contributed to the UCAS day and in two other partnerships professionals and business people had given talks about their careers to students. Although interviewees considered that the input from local business people was valuable and influential on pupils' perceptions, they mentioned the challenge of establishing links with businesses. Moreover, in one instance, the coordinator commented

that the professionals had not targeted their talk adequately for the year groups of students involved. It appears, therefore, that in order to make best use of the resource of professionals discussing their careers, there would be value in ensuring that participants are provided with sufficient guidance about their audience in advance of any involvement.

Area 6 Helping students make realistic choices

The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership in area 6 found that a successful approach to enabling Year 9 pupils to imagine the effects of their choices on their future, was through using the careers package ‘The Real Game’ as part of a visit to a higher education institution. Through the package, students ‘*dream*’ a lifestyle and are then allocated a job with details of the salary and holidays and the qualifications required to attain this job. They then reflect on whether they could achieve the lifestyle to which they aspire if they had the job they were allocated and find that earnings and qualifications achieved are related.

4.10 Events for parents

4.10.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

In recognition of the influence of parents on their children’s decision, as discussed in Chapter 3, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinators, and those in schools and colleges considered that engaging with, and involving, parents in supporting their children’s aspirations and future progression was central to ensuring successful outcomes for young people. As one area coordinator said: *‘the more parents are involved, the better, because...if you leave parents out of the equation, they are going to become a negative influence. You can turn parents into a positive or neutral influence by key involvements’*. However, some coordinators based in post-16 institutions noted that some of their students did not want the college to make contact with parents and viewed their choices as *‘our decision’*. Overall, although all ten partnerships had provided events which were specifically targeted at parents, engaging with parents had proved challenging for many and interviewees often expressed an intention to enhance and increase their activities to engage with parents in the future. The view of one institutional coordinator reflected a wider perception when he said *‘I haven’t got the answer but the challenge is to actually bring parents on board using alternative strategies to the presentations, the meetings and the letters. I think that’s a debate yet to be answered’*. The response of one partnership is provided in the example below.

Area 8 Engaging parents '*creatively*'

Area 8 is an area of high unemployment and the city ranks low for applications and acceptances for higher education qualifications. Many families had little experience of higher education and, therefore, knowledge about university was limited amongst both young people and their families.

A widening participation officer responsible for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in a higher education institution had identified that parents who attended events '*are often the converted*' and that, for other parents, '*how you reach them is a big issue*'. Engaging with younger students was also identified as a need. Consequently, the partnership organised for student ambassadors from three higher education institutions to visit local schools during their Year 9 options evenings. The higher education institution representatives worked together and '*no universities used logos at the events – just the Aimhigher banner – so there was no competition*'. Feedback had been positive and an additional benefit was providing information to parents about study for themselves and other children in the family.

A second successful method that was used to reach parents successfully in this partnership entailed a buffet evening for Year 11 students where a requirement for entry to the event was that pupils should be accompanied by their parent. At the event, the coordinator spoke of her unconventional route into higher education and student ambassadors facilitated workshops about life as a student which were very positively received, according to the partnership's evaluation.

It was evident that engaging with parents had proved to be one of the more challenging aspects of implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge for partnerships. Although it was not possible to conduct interviews with parents for the research, the reflections of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges on their experience of involving parents in supporting the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge provide some insights into effective approaches. The parent-focused activities in these ten partnerships tended to relate to providing information, and providing the opportunity to access information, which this group of parents might not otherwise access. The partnership coordinators and school and college coordinators generally wrote to parents providing information about the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge policy and explaining that their child was included in the relevant cohort. In some instances, they specified that the young person was in the gifted and talented cohort or widening participation cohort and stressed the need for sensitivity in composing a letter because, as one explained, '*if it is because they are in a certain social group, or the financial side of it, it is more difficult to say*'. In addition, they provided details, and gained parental permission for individual activities and in some cases, provided leaflets or termly newsletters for parents.

Partnerships also engaged more directly with parents through parents' evenings and events, including events for parents across a number of schools. In many cases, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was represented at existing

parents’ evenings in schools such as Year 9 options evenings. Such representation often entailed an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge stand which could be staffed by representatives from school, college or higher education institutions including student ambassadors where parents could talk informally about further and higher education opportunities for their child. It was noted by some interviewees that the success of these evenings depended to some extent on the relationship that the school had with parents and, in some circumstances, the timing of the event. For example, coordinators in two areas commented that events should be held during the day as parents were less inclined to attend evening events as *‘that’s when they relax’*.

Interviewees in most partnerships mentioned other events for parents which they had introduced. Most frequently these included events which focused on providing parents with details about the financial implications of pursuing a higher education course. As will be discussed further in Section 4.11, this issue was widely highlighted as a primary concern among parents, for example one partnership coordinator had found through surveys of parents that *‘parents are obviously very concerned about finances...it is number one of everybody’s list of their concerns’*. Furthermore, coordinators were conscious that reports in the media of new developments relating to higher education funding, could cause concern among parents and timed events to *‘provide the facts’* and to *‘calm them down a bit’*. Often these events would bring together school staff, representatives of the LEA with responsibility for grants and higher education and personnel from student services in higher education institutions. In addition, undergraduate students made a useful contribution by discussing the reality of finance, budgeting, working and studying as a student in higher education.

In addition to providing information through meetings and events, a few partnerships had sought to raise the aspirations of parents for their children, and to increase the familiarity of parents with higher education institutions for parents. The main mechanism for achieving this was by providing the opportunity for parents to accompany their children on visits to higher education institutions, as in the example below, and by using the higher education institutions as the location of events and meetings. Examples of the latter included holding awards ceremonies at the higher education institution which would otherwise be held at school, and holding events, such as the finance events noted above, at a higher education institution. This approach was considered to be effective in the view of some interviewees because it had the dual benefit of the delivering both the content for parents as well as enabling them to become familiar with the higher education institution. However, the need for care in introducing parents to a higher education institution may be reflected in the view of a few other interviewees who observed that parents could find the environment off-putting.

Area 7 Engaging with parents regarding higher education institution visits

Area 7 is a city in which certain localities experience unemployment levels higher than the national average; this higher unemployment is particularly marked amongst minority ethnic groups. Cultural attitudes towards higher education differed amongst minority ethnic groups but, overall, there were low levels of aspiration towards higher education in the area.

Parents in area 7 were involved in HE tasters and summer schools. Parents accompanied their children in Years 7 and 8 on HE visits with the aim of *'experiencing something new together'*. The feedback gained by partnership staff from parents of pupils across a range of year groups who had experienced summer schools, revealed the wider effect of the experience on the family where it was described as *'the learning event in the home'*. By interviewing parents after pupils had participated in a summer school, partnership staff felt that they were able to help parents to *'recognise [that] my child has grown through this event'*. They suggested that, without such discussion, through which parents could reflect on the experience, *'the effect [of the event] is short-lived'*.

Although the meetings, events and visits outlined above had generated some interest among parents, it appeared that partnerships continued to seek more effective ways of engaging with parents of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort. In one area, where staff were employed and funded through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to work with individual young people, in a role which was similar to a Learning Mentor, this role included liaising directly with parents. For example, when a letter was sent to parents explaining an opportunity for their child through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and requesting permission for their attendance, the 'mentor' was able to follow this up with *'a courtesy call...and created what you would call a comfort zone'* which led to a high turn out of parents at the event. A college in a second partnership employed a home liaison officer to fulfill a similar role, including undertaking home visits.

A number of interviewees reported that attendance of parents at events and meetings had been disappointing. To address this, interviewees had held joint events where parents from a number of schools were invited so that there was a group of a sufficient size. Another approach had been to arrange an event which students could only attend if they brought a parent. The location of an event was also noted as influencing the response of parents, although interviewees held varying perspectives. While some felt that holding an event away from school might encourage attendance because *'in a lot of cases, they [parents] don't come to school for parents' evening because they got disengaged themselves'*, others felt that parents would feel more comfortable attending a location such as the school with which they were familiar.

Where interviewees were able to comment, parents were said to have been receptive and responsive to the events and to the opportunities which their

children experienced through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. For example, in one area a parent had written that *‘I think this is a brilliant opportunity and I would like to thank you for giving her this chance’*. Indeed, once partnership staff had established contact with parents, they would often maintain the contact and were said to be keen to *‘seek information on how well their child is doing’*.

In summary, it appeared that the key challenges in relation to engaging with parents in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships visited were to raise aspirations and confidence in the notion of higher education as a realistic possibility and to confront the fear of debt by providing accurate and clear information about the costs which would be incurred and the possible additional sources of funding. This was most effectively achieved through face-to-face events and meetings with parents where information was presented in an appropriate and sensitive manner. Careful consideration also needs to be made of the most appropriate location for any event taking into account the nature of the parents and the existing relationships between schools or colleges and parents.

4.11 Finance-related activities

4.11.1 The views of coordinators in partnerships, schools and colleges

As noted in Chapter 3, and in Section 4.10 above, the financial implications of pursuing a higher education course were a primary concern for pupils, students and their parents. Moreover, there appeared to be a lack of awareness and knowledge of the actual costs and the possible options for funding in order to continue in education post-18. In recognition of this, providing information about finance was a focus of the activities of the partnerships, as one coordinator said *‘we need to dispel myths’*. Furthermore, one coordinator noted the increasing importance of discussing finance and ensuring that young people were informed and prepared and observed that *‘these students will need to work while they study’*.

The approaches included providing leaflets and booklets about finance and holding informal discussions at parents’ evenings and other events with young people. The most frequently mentioned approach was through holding events which were dedicated to the issue of finance. These events generally included contributions from higher education institution staff, LEA staff with responsibility for higher education funding for students, and undergraduate students and, in some instances, representatives from banks. The contribution from undergraduates emerged as of particular value as they could provide real examples of managing finances as an undergraduate. For example, one coordinator explained how one university student *‘had made a bit of a mess of himself, as [far as] finances were concerned, and gave some very clear advice*

of not doing what I have done'. Providing clear, practical information and advice appeared to be a favoured approach. For example, one coordinator said that the presentation focused on *'literally pounds and pence – this is what you do and this is how you do it and this is when you get your money'*.

4.12 Activities targeted at specific groups of young people

4.12.1 Activities for young people in the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts

In discussing the activities which they had provided through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, interviewees often did not make a distinction between the two cohorts of young people or identify any differences in the activities that they provided to each type of target group. This appeared to be due, though only in part, to the overlap between the two cohorts in many cases. In other words, as was found in the national surveys of students participating in the programme, a proportion of young people met the criteria for inclusion in both the widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts (21 per cent of Year 11 students and 18 per cent of Year 9 students were in both cohorts). As one school coordinator explained, *'in some schools, the widening participation cohort is the gifted and talented cohort, whereas in other schools they might be completely distinct groups'* while a second stated that they found that their cohorts included *'some quite able young people who actually should be on a widening participation cohort...so we merged these two things together'*. In addition, some school staff reported that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities were not confined to the identified cohorts but accessible to all young people. As one coordinator said *'some of the activities we put on for widening participation are actually for all students'*. An examination of the annual reports provided by each area further indicated that each type of activity was offered to both widening participation and gifted and talented cohorts.

Nevertheless, the interviews indicated that there were some themes in the types of activities in which young people in either the gifted and talented or widening participation cohorts were engaged. Although it should be noted that, for the reasons outlined above, these activities were not exclusively undertaken only by young people in one cohort, it emerged that:

- ♦ Young people in the **gifted and talented** cohort tended to be offered residential activities including summer schools, and subject specific teaching and learning activities, such as Masterclasses.
- ♦ Young people in the **widening participation** cohort tended to be offered activities which raised awareness of further and higher education, and provided support with the transition to these phases to education (for example, study skills sessions and ongoing mentoring support).

4.12.2 Activities for young people from different backgrounds

Interviewees in the areas had identified specific groups of young people for whom there was a particular need to raise awareness and aspirations in relation to further and higher education. As noted in the report of the interviews with partnership coordinators²¹ the main groups were those from minority ethnic backgrounds and those described as white working class. While the interviewees outlined the particular issues which these specific groups presented, no common approaches to addressing these issues emerged across the areas. In other words, they independently adopted strategies to meet their context and there was no evidence of a common approach that was used in all circumstances.

The main issues identified in relation to these groups of students included the tendency for young people from working class communities to favour a work-based route post-16 or post-18, rather than full-time further or higher education. Coordinators in some areas had identified under-achievement in Black Caribbean males and, in a few cases, among young people from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, and consequent under-representation in higher education. However, it is worth noting that young people from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities were under-represented in the national gifted and talented and widening participation cohorts. In addition, parents of young people from some Asian communities were said to have high expectations for their children and coordinators noted the need to be sensitive to the concerns of parents in relation to young females from some communities participating in activities.

The approaches adopted by some partnerships to support these specific groups of young people included the following:

- ♦ Targeting schools with a high representation of young people from **working class** backgrounds
- ♦ Promoting the vocational route into higher education to students from **working class** backgrounds
- ♦ Linking young people from **minority ethnic communities** with mentors from the same minority ethnic groups as the young people
- ♦ Saturday schools and residentials exclusively for **Black Caribbean males**
- ♦ An event focusing on developing core skills, confidence and personal development exclusively for **Black Caribbean males**
- ♦ Using a reward points scheme for positive attitude, behaviour and work, which culminated in a play station, was said to work well with **Bangladeshi males**.

²¹ MORRIS, M., GOLDEN, S., IRELAND, E. and JUDKINS, M. (forthcoming). Evaluation of Aimhigher. Excellence Challenge: the Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004.

4.13 Effectiveness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities

As discussed in the previous sections, the coordinators in partnerships and higher education institutions had identified some positive outcomes of particular Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. Moreover, they had reflected on their practice and adapted and augmented activities in light of their experience. As one coordinator explained *‘we find so much is growing in a natural sense and some experiments succeed and some fail, I think it is hands on, try it and see’*. It did not appear that the professionals who were engaged in delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities had rejected any activities wholesale, nor were they able to identify any one activity which was more successful than any other. Overall, it appeared that a range of activities were required to meet the various aims of raising aspirations, raising attainment and providing information and guidance to young people. A coordinator in a higher education institution described it as a *‘multi-faceted problem requiring multi-faceted solutions. It is not so much about doing activities, we want to move towards doing less, but doing more of the activities that are most effective’*. One of the challenges associated with identifying the most effective activities was the time delay between pupils and students participating in activities, and the translation of this into a transition into further or higher education. This is reflected in the view of one coordinator who said that *‘it is too early to shout...we are sowing seeds’*. Nevertheless, the coordinators were positive about the effect of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities as a whole for some young people, such as the individuals who observed that *‘AH makes a difference to some individuals, I don’t know how much more we can say than that’* and that *‘I know it makes a difference to individual students but I can’t prove it’*. Overall, two key elements emerged as contributing to the success of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, regardless of the specific nature of activity. These are summarised below.

Using undergraduates to convey information – there was a consensus among interviewees from the different institutions involved in delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, that including opportunities for students to meet with undergraduates was very valuable and one of the most effective ways of informing younger students about higher education. In addition, they functioned as role models who enabled younger students to see themselves as future undergraduates. This was reflected in the views of the participating students. It emerged that undergraduates had credibility with young people who respected their advice which was learned through real experience. Although some partnerships had aimed to use undergraduates of similar backgrounds or experience to the young people, there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that this was more effective than meeting undergraduates of different backgrounds. Overall, incorporating some opportunities to meet with undergraduates either as the main activity, or as an element of a wider

activity such as a summer school, emerged as one of the key success factors in engaging with students and pupils and raising their aspirations.

Tailored interventions – across the coordinators and young people who were interviewed it was apparent that a key consideration in ensuring the success of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities was to tailor them to the particular needs of the young people participating. This included considering the style in which any activities were delivered and ensuring it was appropriate both in style and content and included active participation by the students and pupils. The timing of any intervention was also important so that it focused on an issue which was pertinent to the age group at that time was a further consideration. For example, providing detailed information about financing study in further and higher education to Year 11 students or those post-16 where it would be more immediately relevant. Moreover, in light of their earlier experience, it appeared that partnerships were increasingly providing subject-specific activities which had direct relevance to students’ current study or intended future study.

Overall, in terms of delivering activities to meet the needs of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships, schools, colleges and young people, the observations of interviewees suggested that activities worked more effectively when:

- ♦ the programme of activities was well thought out and planned and based on a thorough knowledge of the year group of pupils concerned
- ♦ the activities were ‘*interactive and fun*’, with a large amount of participation and a content that was clearly relevant to the young people and their school subject, where relevant
- ♦ any event or activity was well-organised, professional and reliable so that students and staff attended as planned
- ♦ visits to higher education institutions included an opportunity to visit the social areas of the higher education institution, for example exploring student union facilities and having lunch in the refectory
- ♦ there was an opportunity for pupils to meet with undergraduate students, including using student ambassadors, and to ensure that there were sufficient numbers of undergraduates to engage with the pupils.

In discussing widening participation, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and the activities which they had delivered in support of these aims, the interviewees raised some general issues concerning how best to address the aims. Firstly, interviewees noted the need to **start working with pre-16 students earlier** than Year 9. As one commented, ‘*transitional work in Year 10 and 11 is too late*’. It was felt that, as young people’s attitudes and self-expectations could become established at an early age, enabling them to access opportunities which may influence their attitudes at the earliest stage possible

would be desirable. Secondly, providing students with a **continued programme** of activities, rather than one-off events, was felt by many interviewees to build on the experience for young people over time. For example, in one area, the coordinator in a higher education institution considered that there was a need to '*bring [activities] together*' and explained that '*if there was no further contact, impetus could die away*'. Thirdly, some interviewees emphasised the essential underpinning principle of **raising pupils' attainment** at school so that the need for programmes which culminated in a reduced offer were no longer needed as pupils would achieve the required grades.

Logistical and organisational challenges had been encountered in the experience of some staff who were interviewed. In relation to working with schools, one coordinator mentioned that the '*window*' when it was possible to engage with school pupils was very small and a second noted the difficulties of finding appropriate space in schools, of the limitations on school teachers' time and of the variability in the extent to which school coordinators had '*real time*'. It appears that there is a need for sensitivity among coordinators when arranging activities to fit in with the priorities of the schools and their pupils. Within the higher education institutions, some coordinators noted the challenge of engaging academic staff and gaining their active participation, in some instances. They noted the tension between widening participation activities and other aspects of academic staff's workload, particularly the Research Assessment Exercise and the need to depend on the goodwill of colleagues. In one partnership, the coordinator said that, in light of this challenge, it was important to be able to demonstrate that there was a demand and that there was a strategy in place. A second interviewee in a different area mentioned using an '*academic champion*' to engage with the academic staff.

Overall, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was said to have contributed positively towards the organisation of activities in some areas as it had allowed for coordination while balancing this with opportunities for more spontaneous activities to respond to local needs and interests.

This chapter has revealed that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, where they are delivered in an appropriate way, and include a contribution from undergraduates, can make a positive contribution to raising young people's awareness of the educational opportunities which are available to them and help to raise their aspirations. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative appeared to have a wider effect over and above the young people who participated in the programme, in some respects, and this will be discussed in the next chapter.

5. Wider outcomes from Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

Key findings

- ◆ Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had a wider impact on some of the participating institutions. There were indications that involvement in the partnership had eased communication between institutions, for example between schools and higher education institutions, and had facilitated networks which could be further built on for the integrated Aimhigher programme in the future.
- ◆ In some cases, institutions in different education sectors had gained in their knowledge and understanding of each other. There were examples where the competition between institutions in the same sector had reduced and collaborative working increased.
- ◆ Within some schools, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was said to have impacted on the peers of pupils in the cohort as they learned from their friends about the potential opportunities for further study. In two areas, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships had developed materials for the PSHE curriculum which could be used in the wider school.
- ◆ Undergraduates who had been involved in supporting young people through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities gained in their confidence, in developing skills and in terms of their future career opportunities. Some had been influenced by their participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to embark on a career in teaching.
- ◆ There were some indications that parents' awareness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and the opportunities for further learning for their children was increasing. For example, parents were becoming proactive in making contact with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators. This may develop as Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge becomes increasingly established and recognised.
- ◆ The 'Aimhigher' brand was said to be instrumental in developing this recognition. It was said to provide a more coherent image for the range of activities relating to widening participation which existed across institutions.

5.1 Introduction

In addition to the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on the young people who participated in the activities, outlined in Chapter 4, there was some evidence of a wider effect on the participating institutions and the wider community. Although, in some cases, these effects were not widely noted, or were only beginning to emerge at the time of the interviews and so were mentioned tentatively by interviewees, they indicate some of the ways in

which Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge interventions have affected, and may continue to affect, those beyond the target group. This chapter outlines the emerging effects of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on participating institutions, the personal and professional development of those involved and the wider community, including parents. It concludes with an exploration of the impact of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as a brand.

5.2 Wider impact on participating institutions

As discussed in Chapter 2, the partnerships that had formed to deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in local areas had developed as the initiative had progressed. One of the positive outcomes of participating in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge noted by interviewees was the development in **working in partnership** between institutions in an area.

Some interviewees revealed that the central coordination facilitated by having an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership had eased communication; for example, one coordinator explained that *'it is simpler too, now we don't have to negotiate separately with each school'*. Moreover, it had simplified delivery and, in one area, was said to have led to a more coherent approach to widening participation, compared to the previous situation where there had been coordinators for many similar initiatives. The partnership approach was said to have added value through maximising resources and through establishing and facilitating networks. Through such networks coordinators were able to share experience and practice and avoid a situation described by one coordinator as *'discouraging and exhausting working in isolation, this way we stay enthused'*. One further outcome of the establishment of positive working partnerships was that, in future, it was felt that these would facilitate working together through the integrated Aimhigher and P4P programmes. Indeed, one coordinator who was interviewed in the summer term of 2004 noted that the individuals in the area who had worked on Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had been able to build on their knowledge and experience as they developed their plans for the integrated programme.

In addition, there were indications that institutions within the same education sector were now more inclined to work in partnership and that the different education sectors that were involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had gained in their understanding of each other through their involvement. It was noted that, although the relationship between higher education institutions remained competitive, in some instances this had become less marked, particularly in relation to working with younger students. In some instances, indeed, relationships between further education providers were reported to have improved as a consequence of their Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge involvement. For example, as a senior manager in a sixth form college explained:

Excellence Challenge [sic] is the first time where college and schools have really come together and worked together and I won't say things have been fully open, but things have been an awful lot more open than they were in the past...there's been a definite barrier that's been moved now.

Although, as discussed in Chapter 2, higher education institutions were often already involved in working with schools in relation to widening participation, some interviewees reported that these existing relationships had been enhanced by Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Examples of this effect included the increased involvement of higher education institutions with school pupils in the younger age groups, such as Year 10 and 11, where previously activities had been focused on sixth form students. In addition, in one area, the direct relationship that had been established between higher education institutions and schools was perceived as a benefit as outlined by one coordinator who said that *'I think the best thing about EC is that it gives each school a very direct and a very immediate relationship with someone from a university'*. Overall, it appeared that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had, in some instances, enabled institutions of each type to gain in their understanding of each other: *'it has enabled schools and colleges to understand more about what HE does, and for HE to understand what schools and colleges do'*.

In addition to the impact on institutions working in partnership, there were some indications of an effect within the institutions in the ten case study areas. In a few **schools**, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was said to have influenced the peers of pupils who were in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort and who had experienced Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. While this *'ripple'* effect was not widely noted, it is possible that the experience of one school coordinator, who made the following observation, may be more widely evident.

I think Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has had an effect on the school in general and it tends to move out to other pupils that are out of the cohort...because they are changing their attitudes, hanging around with a group of people changes their attitudes. It rubs off on people.

Further indications of this wider effect emerged in the comments of some teaching staff and pupils that there was a high level of interest and demand to participate in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities both from pupils who were not included in the cohort and, in some instances, their parents. Indeed, in one area where an after school study club was held as part of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge at a local higher education institution, the demand to take part in it from students who were not in the targeted cohort indicated to teaching staff that it was viewed as *'cool'*. In at least two areas, the partnership coordinators had actively sought to influence pupils outside the

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort by developing booklets and lesson plans that could be used as part of the PSHE curriculum within schools. Although this approach was not universal across the ten areas, it suggests that some were seeking mechanisms for embedding the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in the curriculum so that they could be experienced by a wider range of pupils in future.

Within the **higher education institutions** in the ten partnerships, it emerged that some had further developed their support strategies for first year undergraduates in response to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and other initiatives to widen participation. On the whole, higher education institutions provided study support or tutorial support for all undergraduates. Those who were known to be part of the widening participation cohort (for example, where they had participated in a widening participation scheme and had received a slightly reduced offer) were able to access this support and were known to the tutors and staff members involved. In addition, some staff recognised the possibility that students from the widening participation cohort might make greater use of the study and financial support services than their peers. However, it is worth noting that interviewees in higher education institutions highlighted the need for sensitivity in providing any support; as one explained '*students don't like to be identified from the cohort as WP*', while another said that '*once here, WP students were just students*'.

In summary, although it was not a universal experience, there were some indications of a wider effect of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on the participating institutions. This was particularly noted in terms of their relationships with partner institutions, with enhanced collaboration and reduced competition. It was also noted in relation to extending the impact of widening participation strategies to pupils other than those who were actively involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Moreover, there were suggestions of increased support for students within higher education institutions that had grown out of the recognition that students who were identified as part of the widening participation cohort might require additional structures in order to benefit fully from the higher education experience.

5.3 Personal and professional development

Individuals who had supported the delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, such as school staff, higher education staff and students ambassadors, appeared to benefit personally and in terms of their professional development. Through their involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, some teaching staff in schools were reported to have increased their awareness and understanding of the contemporary higher education sector and the range of opportunities, including vocational opportunities, which it presented for their pupils. Moreover, some higher education staff

who had supported the delivery of participatory activities had been impressed by the commitment, interest and ability of the school pupils, suggesting that their preconceptions could have been challenged through the experience.

Involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge also presented valuable opportunities for student ambassadors in relation to their personal development and their future careers and professional development. A coordinator in a higher education institution commented that:

actually giving employment to those undergraduates who need money...it will be on their CV and it will look fantastic...they are gaining so much because we are training them up, they are going through CRB [Criminal Records Bureau checks] and the activities we're training them up on is [sic] all about personal development as well

This perception of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge as a development opportunity for undergraduates as well as young people in schools was reflected in the experiences of some of the student ambassadors who were interviewed who commented that their experience as a student ambassador had been 'very rewarding'. In some cases, they noted that their confidence had increased and that they had developed transferable skills which could contribute to their curriculum vitae in future. It appeared that, for some individuals, participation in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge provided an opportunity to embark on a career within the education sector; three²² student ambassadors amongst the interviewees noted that, as a consequence of their experience of working with young people, sometimes in large groups, were actively considering teaching as a career.

5.4 Impact on parents and the wider community

Engaging with the wider community had not been a primary focus of the activities of the ten partnerships visited. Nevertheless, some partnership and institutional coordinators perceived an effect of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge on parents and the wider community. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 4, many were actively seeking to effect such a change. For example, one higher education institution coordinator perceived Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge's role as 'helping families change' in an area where traditional employment had declined and where parents were said to be unaware of the detail of higher education and, in some cases, were 'scared' of it. The observations of some interviewees suggested that parents' awareness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and higher education may be increasing in their areas. For example, parents would make contact with Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators and school staff to ascertain whether their

²² None of these three students were part of the student associates scheme

child was in, or could be included in, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort. It may be that, as the initiative continues to become a familiar and established part of provision for young people in these areas, parents will become increasingly proactive in seeking opportunities for their children. In addition, a few higher education institution staff indicated that involvement in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had led to an increase in the amount of direct contact they had with parents of potential recruits to their institution.

Awareness had also been promoted by a local media focus on the achievements of individual young people who had participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities, for example where they had gained a place at a prestigious higher education institution. One of the outcomes of this wider promotion was said to be to raise the aspirations of the community as a whole through highlighting the possibilities and potential among the young people in the area. Indeed, a further outcome of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge for parents was that awareness of the opportunities in further and higher education for their children, gained through visits to higher education institutions or representation from higher education institutions at parents' evening, had led them to consider future education options for themselves. Again, it may be that the awareness of higher education which may have been established in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge areas by the partnerships has the potential to contribute to lifelong learning including through, for example, family learning events.

5.5 Branding through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the individual activities which were delivered through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge had been successful in engaging with young people and enabling them to gain an insight into possible future education opportunities and an understanding of what this would entail. Moreover, through Masterclasses, summer schools and study support activities, students were provided with additional means to achieve their potential. However, in addition to the value of the individual activities, 'Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge' as a recognised 'brand' emerged as a wider benefit in the view of some interviewees. It was suggested that the name enabled the presentation of a more coherent image which was recognisable across institutions and which allowed the promotion of higher education as a whole, rather than of individual higher education institutions. The value of this was illustrated in one area, as noted in Chapter 4, where representatives from three higher education institutions attended a parents' event together under the '*banner of Aimhigher*'. One interviewee suggested that, in the longer term, parents, pupils and teaching staff would seek out the 'Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator' as the appropriate individual to respond to any queries they had in relation to higher education.

In summary, it appears that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in these ten areas has had a wider effect than on participating pupils and students in certain key respects. There are some indications that, at this stage in the evolution of the programme, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge has led to the establishment of good local working relationships and a reputation or image of higher education in the area which could contribute to its further development through the integrated programme.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The area studies were carried out in stages over a period of two years, with some partnerships being visited at early stages in their development and others being visited when activities were well underway. The stories that have been brought together in this report, however, indicated the emergence of some consistencies in terms of both perceptions of the activities that appear to be most effective in raising aspirations and the factors that appear to be central to effective partnership working. This chapter summarises the key findings to emerge and highlights both the wider policy implications and the main messages for the integrated Aimhigher programme.

6.2 Effective activities

The partnerships visited had implemented a range of activities and adopted a variety of approaches to structuring their partnerships, in order to meet the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Partnerships were visited at different times over the two years of the research, during which time there were several policy developments which impacted directly and indirectly on the scope and focus of the initiative. Although staff involved with the partnerships took cognisance of such developments, the overall strategic approach and experience for pupils and students who participated, remained largely stable.

The experience coordinators had of delivering Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge indicated that it would work most effectively when activities were developed which were based on a thorough understanding of the issues and concerns facing young people in the area that may present barriers to progression into further learning. In order to support students and pupils in making informed decisions about their future careers and education, there is value in enabling them to access a range of experiences and opportunities which could challenge some of their preconceptions and broaden their horizons. The evidence suggests that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships had experienced a degree of success in achieving this.

The visits to these ten partnerships have revealed that Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships had developed and refined their activities as they developed. However, they did not identify any one activity which was uniquely successful, nor did they reject any activity entirely. The detail of the content and focus of activities, the approach adopted to delivering them and

the number of activities of each type, varied across the individual partnerships, as might be expected given the local flexibility and discretion allowed for by the policy. However, there was considerable consensus across interviewees from different sectors in all partnerships that enabling pupils and students to meet with current undergraduates and discuss higher education was one of the most effective ways of raising aspirations among pupils and students in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort and helping them to believe that such further learning might be an achievable option for them. This view was supported by the evidence from many of the pupils and students who had valued the experience of meeting with an undergraduate and respected the honest information and advice which was given by current students in higher education based on their genuine experience. Whether this positive perception translates into pupils' aspirations, attainment and progression is one of the focuses of the statistical analyses undertaken as part of the evaluation.

There was also a general agreement that any activity should be delivered in such a way as to engage the young people participating in it. It emerged that participatory, interactive activities were more engaging for young people than more lecture-based approaches. Moreover, it was accepted that the content should be of relevance to the young people which, in the view of some young people, meant the content being directly related to their education and a subject they were studying. It was evident that it was a challenge to ensure that the content of activities was appropriate, in particular when the sessions were delivered by higher education staff. Where the content was not perceived to be relevant, for example in some Masterclasses, the event was generally perceived to be less successful. While it appeared that some young people had found the level too difficult, in other cases it was said to be patronising. It may be that close liaison with school staff who are more familiar with teaching the age group would assist in developing an appropriate content and delivery approach. However, there would also be value in ensuring that the content was distinct from normal school study as one of the positive effects for young people of participating in an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activity was learning about the nature and approach to study post-16 and post-18 which was more self-directed.

A further key consideration, which emerged in ensuring that activities were effective, was the timing and phasing of activities to meet the needs of different age groups at different times. It appeared that, although coordinators in some institutions in each education sector perceived a benefit in engaging with pupils at an early age, in order to provide them with a focus and something to work for in their school career, this needed to be balanced with the limited interest that younger students appeared to have, in some cases, with a decision that seemed to them to be still distant. This also highlights the difference between activities which affect the attitudes and values of young people and, through them, their families, such as the visits to higher education institutions to raise aspirations, and inputs which had a more practical focus,

such as providing details of financial implications of pursuing a higher education course. While the latter has value when provided at an appropriate time, it was evident that the aspiration-raising activities were influential in engendering an interest which might later be translated into a need to find out more detailed information about embarking on a higher education course. Some students were apparently unclear about some facts related to further learning, such as the length of a higher education course. This suggests that there is a need to ensure that activities to raise aspirations are supported by accurate and helpful information, advice and guidance about the details at an appropriate time.

6.3 Effective partnerships

The visited partnerships had adopted different approaches to structuring their partnership, often in light of their size and the history of initiatives such as EiC in the area. However, across the partnerships, it emerged that they worked more effectively where senior managers from each partner institution were involved who were committed to the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, who could see a relationship between these aims and those of their institution, and who had the power to make decisions within their organisation and access funding. Although senior management involvement was identified as critical to success, another staff member could have responsibility for operational management as long as the individual had access to, and active support from, their senior manager. The research suggests that effective partnerships are comprised of effective individuals. While central coordination was generally regarded as making a significant contribution to the partnership's success, in turn this was dependent on the central coordinator's enthusiasm, skills and experience. This included the credibility they established with partners, where prior experience in a senior education management role was said to be valuable.

One feature of effective partnership working, which could be facilitated by the central coordinator, was good communication. Communication was based on positive working relationships, where all the individuals were committed to the aims of the programme and the strategy adopted to meet those aims. There were indications that the partnership coordinators had been successful in establishing links that did not previously exist between organisations and that involvement in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership had enhanced collaborative working in some respects, all of which then facilitated the effective communication required to maintain the partnership.

The partnerships appeared to have added value to existing widening participation activities in the areas in some respects. They achieved this by presenting a coherent 'brand' to partner organisations, students and pupils and their parents. In addition, in some cases, the partnerships helped to establish

central coordination of activities and to reduce the competition and enhance collaboration between institutions. There were indications in some partnerships, which may be more widespread, that the partnership structures, networks and relationships which had been established to deliver Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, would form a valuable basis for the future development of the integrated Aimhigher P4P initiative.

6.4 Approaches in the case study areas

The ten case study areas had all experienced some successes and challenges in implementing the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge programme in their various contexts. Comparisons across the areas revealed more similarities than differences, with interviewees in each area identifying similar factors which contributed to the success of working in partnership, and similar features of activities which had proved to be effective in raising the aspirations and awareness of further and higher education among young people. The findings suggest that the central elements of the programme can be translated to a variety of regions and contexts and adapted in light of local priorities and sensitivities.

The evidence gathered through the area studies did not indicate that any one approach was any more or less effective in meeting the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. This suggests that adopting any approach which takes into account the local context, history and priorities can be effective within a partnership and that a common model could not be adopted across all areas. For example, while all of the ten areas were committed to the aims and implementation of the programme, and had experienced success, six of the areas appeared to have engaged more proactively with the programme than the remaining four. These ‘proactive’ partnerships, which included both large and small partnerships and covered EIC areas and EAZs, appeared to have sought to maximise what they could achieve with the resource available. Some had identified key issues for their area and sought to overcome them, some had formed active relationships with their local higher education institutions who were active participants in the partnership, some had engaged with other agencies such as Connexions in order to add value to the activities they could offer and some appeared to have adopted creative and innovative approaches to implementing the programme. In contrast, the areas which appeared to be less proactive had a more instrumental approach where they continued to meet the aims of the programme but appeared to have adopted few innovative approaches.

6.5 Further research

A number of areas which could warrant further research emerged in the course of the area studies. Areas for future investigation could include the following.

Parents emerged as a significant influence on young people's decision-making process about their future education, employment and training. However, to date, there is limited evidence of the views of higher education of parents of young people in the target groups. Exploration of their views of the value of higher education, and whether they consider it for their child, would provide a valuable insight into the social and cultural barriers in different communities. Such research would also enable an investigation of the forms of outreach that would address these barriers most effectively including the content, location and timing of higher education-related activities that targeted parents. This would facilitate the provision of information on higher education which would meet parents' needs and enable activities to target parents so that they and their children could make an informed choice. A key consideration in undertaking such research would be identifying the parents of young people who had the ability, but were not yet considering undertaking a higher education qualification. The identification of appropriate parents as the focus of the research might be most effectively facilitated by local coordinators and education staff. In addition, drawing on the expertise and experience of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators, and their partners in educational institutions, could usefully inform practice in engaging parents in research.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships did not appear to have systematically gathered and analysed data relating to the **costs, and 'cost effectiveness'** of the range of activities they offered. Nevertheless, they may have made judgements about which activities to offer, and the number of students to participate, on the basis of some consideration of the costs involved. The further development of the programme under the integrated programme could be usefully informed by an investigation of the costs and cost-effectiveness of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In addition to a financial analysis of the costs of provision, such an investigation could seek to incorporate gaining an understanding of the subtleties in decision-making, whereby a coordinator may choose to offer an activity that does not appear to be 'cost effective'. One approach to achieving this could be through analysis of clear and consistent management information, supplemented by detailed interviews with those responsible for funding.

The evidence from these area studies suggest that there may be a tendency among students and among staff in schools and colleges to conceive of higher education courses and qualifications in terms of degree courses, and to lack awareness of the breadth of higher education courses, such as foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas. Further research into teachers',

tutors' and students' **understanding of the higher education sector**, and the range of opportunities it could provide, could explore how to ensure that individuals who are influencing decisions, and the young people making decisions, can be best supported in making an informed choice.

6.6 Policy implications

The examination of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in these ten areas has indicated a need for the activities which raise the awareness of further and higher education among young people, and their aspirations to pursue further learning to benefit further from the provision of more detailed information, advice and guidance at an appropriate time. Where partnerships had established links with the Connexions Service which entailed active involvement of Personal Advisers, these had been well-received. However, there were indications of some lack of clarity about the role of Connexions, and the contribution the service could make to supporting young people in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge cohort. There may be value in clarifying the potential contribution of the Connexions Service and further exploring how these links could be facilitated through, for example, case-study examples of good practice.

The partnerships that were established to implement Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in these areas had developed considerable experience in delivering activities and working in partnership to do so. There was evidence that, through the partnerships, pre-existing relationships had been enhanced and new relationships between institutions had been established where they had not existed previously. It was noted that staff turnover can be problematic within a partnership because of the need to re-establish the relationship and the loss of knowledge and experience. It would appear, therefore, that there is a need to ensure that a similar situation does not affect the transition to the integrated programme by ensuring that the experience developed in these partnerships is retained and can be built on further through the transition.

The evidence suggests that there are clear benefits to delivering activities for young people in locations other than their usual place of study, as it enables them to experience a different environment and challenges their preconceptions and expectations. However, such **cross-sectoral** working presents some issues relating to ensuring the style of delivery and content is appropriate to the students' needs and overcoming some practical challenges. The time required for staff (who have a range of other priorities), to liaise with partners, develop understanding and plan appropriate activities should not be underestimated.

Where **funds** were devolved from the central partnership to the partner organisations, the need for a system of monitoring how these funds were spent

was apparent. While such a system need not be burdensome, it needs to be sufficiently clear that recipients of funding were fully aware of the recording requirements, so that funding can be tracked. Implementing such a clear system from the inception of the programme might be worthy of consideration for the integrated programme.

6.7 In summary

The key findings from the research undertaken over the two years across the ten partnership areas provide both an indication of the necessary structures and strategies that appear to be important in promoting effective widening participation partnerships (commitment to the aims and objectives of widening participation, coherence of approach, good communication strategies and networks, management support within and between institutions and an appropriate level of central coordination) and an insight into the type of activities that are perceived as effective in encouraging young people to consider progression to higher education (contact with undergraduates, carefully timed challenging, participatory, interactive activities that are tailored to young people's needs and levels of understanding). These latter perceptions, voiced by interviewees at all levels in higher education institutions, schools, colleges and other Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partners are supported, in part by the findings, to date, from on-going statistical analyses. Clear statistical evidence is emerging, for example, of the importance of discussions with undergraduate mentors, teachers and other staff about higher education, the opportunity to visit higher education institutions and the opportunity to take part in summer schools, in raising aspirations to higher education (Morris, Rutt and Yeshanew, forthcoming). Evidence is also available of the value of contact with Connexions Personal Advisers. The findings from the research, therefore, have some immediate implications for the unified Aimhigher programme, particularly in relation to maintaining and enhancing existing relationships between higher education institutions, schools and colleges, further developing relationships with Connexions services and encouraging an integrated partnership approach to the provision and delivery of activities for young people.

Appendix A

Summaries of the areas visited

This appendix provides a summary of each of the ten areas that were visited for the research. Drawing on the areas' original bids, annual reports to DFES and interviews conducted for the research, the summaries seek to provide details of the context in which each of the areas was implementing Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. It is worth noting that the summaries reflect the situation and activity in each area at the time of the research, and that the partnerships will have subsequently continued to develop and amend their approaches to the programme. Furthermore, the summaries do not seek to provide a comprehensive overview of the context and provision in each area, but rather to provide some examples of the nature of the implementation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in these ten areas.

Area summary 1

Area visited in autumn term 2002. An EAZ in a town area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The EAZ was situated in a relatively affluent commuter locale but was characterised by economic and social deprivation. The area was economically diverse with employment largely in the service sector such as IT and transport. Average incomes were well above the national average, but tended to be earned by those commuting into the local area rather than by local inhabitants. Unemployment rates were below the national average due to the relatively high availability of skilled and unskilled service sector jobs.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

The EAZ was a multi-cultural area with a wide ethnic mix with high proportions of students with Indian and Pakistani backgrounds. There were high numbers of students with English as an additional language in the EAZ as well as a large proportion of asylum seekers and refugees settling within the area.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Cultural attitudes towards higher education differed across ethnic groups. There was a strong emphasis on higher education amongst the Asian population and was deemed important for some of the Asian young people, particularly women, to be able to attend a local higher education institution and remain living at home. Attitudes towards higher education amongst the white working class population were less apparent and the need to raise aspirations was evident.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

At the time of the case-study visit, over three quarters of students progressed into further education post-16. Progression to higher education was lower than the national average. The high availability of low skilled jobs in the service sector was said to influence post-16 choices of young people from less well off backgrounds.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

The area operated a selective system and all of the schools in the medium-sized EAZ were participating in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative. Half of the schools were 11-16 and half were 11-18 schools which were part of a sixth form consortium. The EAZ included schools that were formerly in special measures. There was one further education college.

- ◆ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

Two local higher education institutions were actively involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership at the time of the visit. One pre-1992 and one post-1992 institution. At the time of the case-study visit, collaboration with a

higher education institution outside the local area was in its infancy. The EAZ planned to involve five further higher education institutions in the following year.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

There was limited collaboration prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Where collaborative links existed between the schools and the college, this related to recruitment rather than widening participation.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In response to the particular structure of the education sector in the EAZ, a partnership comprising an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator, coordinators from individual schools and the further education college, as well representatives from the two local higher education institutions, and the EBP, was formed. At the time of the visit, there was said to be limited contact with the LSC and Connexions due to staff turnover.

The partnership was led by an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator who held overall management of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative. However, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator was only funded to work for one day a week on Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In response to this, certain key aspects of the strategic management, and a large amount of the day-to day operational management of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was shared out amongst the EAZ; the two local partner higher education institutions and the main local further education provider.

There was no evidence of widening participation activities prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, although some study support approaches to accelerate learning were occurring in some schools as part of their work with the EAZ. A limited amount of outreach work to schools and the community was carried out by the further education college and one of the local higher education institutions. However, this was with the aim of recruitment and did not specifically target the widening participation cohort.

The partnership had engaged in a range of activities to support the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. A range of study support activities, including evening study support classes at the local library was said to help raise attainment. In addition, visits to colleges and higher education institutions were said to encourage young people to consider higher education, as was working with undergraduate mentors. The gifted and talented programme was seen as very successful in addressing issues about viewing pupils who do not get into selective schools as ‘failures’.

Area summary 2

Area visited in spring and summer terms 2003. An EiC Phase 2 city area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The area was a large metropolitan district with high levels of long-term unemployment. The need for basic skills was said to be higher than the national average.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

The area was predominately white with a small proportion of people from Asian backgrounds particularly the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Aspirations to progress to higher education were said to be a general issue, and were not attributed to any particular ethnic group.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Traditionally people in the area were said to not aspire to higher education after college or sixth form. Low aspirations, low confidence levels and a lack of family experience of higher education were a general issue across the area. All five universities were said to be interested in raising the aspirations of students and offered a number of different courses and different types of institutions.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Amongst young people who had gained sufficient qualifications to access level 3 courses at 16, progression to further education was average compared to levels nationally. Progression to higher education was a greater issue in this area, with one of the lowest participation rates in higher education (when compared nationally).

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

All of the schools in this EiC Phase 2 city that were involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership had sixth forms. There was one further education college that participated.

- ◆ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

The region was well served by higher education institutions; there were five in the region. Two of these were actively involved in the partnership (one of which was a post-1992 institution). There was involvement with a second pre-1992 higher education institution outside of the local area.

- ◆ **Collaborative history:**

There was a history of competition between the schools and the local further education college prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Higher education institutions had worked in partnership to support widening participation prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

The structure of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership mirrored the structure of the local EiC consortium. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership consisted of an executive group which took a strategic lead and included a partnership coordinator, four representative headteachers, the LSC, two local higher education institutions, Connexions and representatives from the local 14-19 group.

While the LEA held a small central budget, the majority of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge funds were devolved to each of the schools. Institutional coordinators within each of the schools coordinated Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. The partnership coordinator met the institutional coordinators regularly to monitor their plans and budget allocations.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge there was said to be competition between the local higher education institutions. There was limited collaboration between schools and the further education college prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

The partnership had engaged in a range of activities to support the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Residential visits to higher education institutions were said to be particularly successful in raising young peoples' aspirations. There was an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge mentoring programme in place and mentors were employed within each school to work with post-16 students on transition from Key Stage 4 to 5, with the aim of increasing higher education entry. Many of the pre-16 activities were integrated into EiC gifted and talented activities.

Area summary 3

Area visited in summer term 2003. A rural/coastal EAZ area.

Context

♦ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The EAZ had a history of high unemployment and pockets of deprivation. The low-skilled work available locally had meant that higher qualifications were not required for such employment and, therefore, aspirations towards higher education were low.

♦ **Ethnicity:**

The area was predominantly white with very little evidence of ethnic diversity.

♦ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

The geographical location of the area was the main issue in the context of the area. Due to the lack of higher education institutions within the immediate locality, young people, particularly those amongst sectors of the community in which there was no tradition of access to higher education, needed to travel for opportunities in higher education. This, alongside the ready availability of low-skilled work, was said to have created a culture in which educational aspirations were low.

♦ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Performance of young people at Key Stages 3 and 4 was significantly lower in the EAZ than the national average. Progression to further education used to be very low but was gradually increasing at the time of the visit.

♦ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth forms colleges:**

This was a small EAZ comprising 11-16 schools and the local further education colleges. There were no 11-18 schools in the area.

♦ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were no higher education institutions within the immediate locality. The nearest higher education institution was some distance away. However, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership collaborated mostly not with this institution but with a post-1992 higher education institution which was slightly more distant. At the time in which the interviews took place, there was some vocationally-related higher education provision in one of the local further education colleges.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, the EAZ had widening participation links with two higher education institutions. To a lesser extent the EAZ collaborated with the LSC, although this liaison was driven by the universities.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In response to the local context, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was established, comprising a part-time central Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator responsible for the overall management of the initiative for the EAZ, two supplementary operational coordinators to support the partnership coordinator in the management and delivery of activities within the institutions, representatives from Connexions, the LSC and two higher education institutions. The role of the two operational coordinators had meant that there were no institutional Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinators but that each institution had an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge contact. However, most coordination was undertaken by the central coordinators.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there were a number of widening participation activities organised. These included, for example, work-related learning initiatives and study support activities in all of the schools and within the colleges. In addition, there was some collaboration between the schools and the colleges, including transitional activities to support progression.

In order to meet the aims of the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative, the partnership had organised a number of activities to complement the widening participation activities that existed previously. In particular, university visits and activities that allowed students freedom and independence were said to be the most successful activities as they had broadened young people's horizons and provided them with experiences outside of the local area.

Area summary 4

Area visited in autumn term 2003. A rural/coastal EAZ area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The EAZ was a post-industrial area of high unemployment, characterised as the 'bad area' in a more affluent city and one of the most deprived areas in the country. The armed forces were one of the largest local employers, with whole families working for the military. Many young people chose to leave school at 16 to join the forces.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

The EAZ was predominantly white with a very low minority ethnic population.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Families within the EAZ were said to have little aspiration to higher education. Due to the military influence on the area, many young people aspired to military careers at 16.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

There were noticeably low numbers of young people progressing to higher education within the immediate area, and very few applications to higher education prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. There was some progression of young people to further education, mainly for vocational courses. However, the proportion of young people who progressed to higher education was below the national average.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

The EAZ was small with and comprised both 11-16 and 11-18 schools and a further education college which participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. Many of the schools in the area were selective and, therefore, many of the most academically able of the students attended the selective schools, whilst those who had not passed the selective tests attended the comprehensive institutions.

- ◆ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were three post-1992 higher education institutions local to the EAZ. Links were mainly with these institutions.

- ◆ **Collaborative history:**

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there were limited links between the schools and the higher education institutions with the aim of increasing recruitment, rather than a specific focus on widening participation.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In this small EAZ, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was small comprising an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership coordinator, the institutional coordinators from the schools and the further education college, as well as representatives from the higher education institutions. The LSC and Connexions were not actively involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership.

The partnership had engaged in a range of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities to encourage young people to aspire to higher education. Raising student attainment was a high priority in the EAZ and a number of study support activities were developed to help improve motivation and change attitudes towards higher education. These included study centres at the schools, an after-school study club at one of the higher education institutions and undergraduate mentors working with pre- and post-16 students. Visits to higher education institutions for young people and parents, as well as residential activities, were also said to be successful. On the whole, the general opinion was that it was the layering of many different activities, rather than one particular event, that had the most impact.

Area summary 5

Area visited in autumn term 2003. An EIC Phase 1 city area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The city had a mixed economy but a decline in unskilled jobs and increase in technical and professional occupations was anticipated over the medium term. Unemployment was higher than average among some sectors of society, notably among males.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

The city had a wide range of minority ethnic groups among its population. Although underperformance affected a range of young people, the attainment of boys, and particularly those of Black Caribbean heritage, was noted as particularly low in terms of progression to higher education.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Students in the city had a positive attitude towards their local higher education institutions but were said to be more likely to consider that the post-1992 institutions were appropriate for them. There was a preference for local higher education institutions so that students could live at home for cost or cultural reasons.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Progression-rates to higher education differed across the city but overall were lower than average nationally.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

In this large EIC Phase 1 area, around half of the schools in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnerships were 11-16 and half were 11-18 and had sixth forms. Sixth-form colleges and colleges of further education also participated.

- ◆ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

Five higher education institutions were identified as actively involved in the partnership. These included three pre-1992 universities, one post-1992 university and the Open University. All but one of the universities were within the local area.

- ◆ **Collaborative history:**

With a significant number of schools in the city, networks between schools existed prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge that were instituted by EIC.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In response to the particular structure of the education sector in this area, a strategic forum comprising an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator, coordinators from individual schools and colleges, the LSC, EBP, Connexions Service, LEAs and a representative from an existing partnership of schools was established to manage Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. A strategic group took operational responsibility and reported to the EIC and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership committee. The central coordination of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was linked to the EIC partnership structure.

A central coordinator worked with institutional coordinators and although the LEA kept a small proportion of the funding, the majority was devolved to schools and colleges and was allocated according to numbers of students and levels of deprivation. In addition to the schools, sixth forms and further education colleges and higher education institutions, the LSC and Connexions Services had provided data and were represented on management boards.

As an EIC phase 1 partnership, work existed with the gifted and talented cohort which included work to raise aspirations, prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Collaboration between post-16 colleges and higher education institutions, and between schools and colleges and higher education institutions already existed in the city before Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. This included a programme whereby students from lower social classes or with no history of higher education in the family could receive a lower offer and take an additional module in their first year at higher education.

The partnership had engaged in a range of activities to support the aims of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Holiday schools, and providing extra classes and revision classes, were said to have contributed to increases in attainment. Visits to colleges and higher education institutions had led students to consider continuing in education in these institutions. Effective targeting of activities at particular target groups or specific subjects, together with addressing the practical concern of financing remaining in education, were said to be necessary for success.

Area summary 6

Area visited in autumn term 2003. An EiC Phase 1 city area.

Context

♦ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The area was amongst the most deprived in the city and had high levels of poverty and deprivation. Unemployment was higher than the national average among some sectors. Few adults were said to have qualifications and local employment opportunities were generally for low-skilled work. A large proportion of young people in the city qualified for free school meals.

♦ **Ethnicity:**

The area had a large diverse ethnic minority population, the largest proportion being from Asian communities.

♦ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

There was some resistance to the idea of higher education across a range of young people, and the aspirations of white working class males were said to be particularly low.

♦ **Progression to further and higher education:**

The numbers of young people progressing to further education from local schools were slightly lower than the national average. Similarly, there was little progression to higher education and aspirations were said to be relatively low, particularly amongst white males.

♦ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

Half of the schools in this medium sized EiC Phase 1 partnership were 11-16 schools, the remaining schools were 11-18. There was one further education college in the area.

♦ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were four pre-1992 higher education institutions and two post-1992 institutions in the local area actively involved in the partnership. One of the local higher education institutions hosted a large number of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, schools had collaborated with higher education institutions to some extent. However, these links were not coordinated and varied from school to school. Some outreach activities such as summer schools were taking place prior to the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative, but again, there was little coordination for it to impact on every school in the area.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

Building on the existing links with higher education institutions and the work carried out under the gifted and talented strand of EiC, an Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership led by a central Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Partnership coordinator was established. The organisation and delivery of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities was carried out by a Connexions Personal Advisor and a widening participation officer from the local higher education institution who shared the role of organisational coordinators. As a result, the coordinators worked together as a team to meet their common widening participation targets. Both positions were partly funded by Connexions and HEFCE as well through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

Institutional coordinators were also represented on the strategic group. The schools had a common programme but were able to spend their allocation of the money according to their individual needs. The higher education focus for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge in this area was wider than the traditional arts and sciences subjects, with a focus on more creative and vocational subjects.

As a result of the local context, Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities set out to raise aspirations towards higher education and to broaden the horizons of young people. Residential summer schools were said to have had an impact on changing young peoples' attitudes towards university. Due to the representation of minority ethnic groups in the area, certain marketing strategies were used to communicate information to parents, for example leaflets had been translated into various languages.

Area summary 7

Area visited in autumn term 2003. An EIC Phase 2 city area

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The city was amongst the most deprived local authority areas. Unemployment in areas of the city was above the national average and was particularly marked among minority ethnic groups. Although the majority of employees worked in the service sector, the proportion was lower than nationally and a higher proportion worked in the manufacturing and construction industries than nationally.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

This was a multi-cultural area with a wide ethnic mix, particularly Gujarati Indian, but including a small proportion of people of Black Caribbean heritage and a white working class community.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Cultural attitudes towards higher education differed among ethnic groups. Members of the Gujarati Indian community had high aspirations but focused on a narrow band of traditional professions. Among the white working class population there were reportedly low aspirations.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Around three-quarters of students progressed into further education post-16 but, in a number of schools, the proportion that did so was noticeably lower than the average for the city. White students were particularly under-represented among those engaged in post-16 learning. The proportion of students achieving qualifications at A/AS level and GNVQ was below the national average.

The proportion of students who progressed to higher education was slightly below the national average but progression to further education was a greater issue in this area than progression to higher education. Students who were white were less likely to progress and low income was said to be a significant barrier to progression to higher education.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

Around a quarter of schools in this EIC Phase 2 area had sixth forms, while the remainder were comprehensive to 16. The schools were polarised with some achieving well and others less well. Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities were particularly focused on a small number of schools with a more noticeable level of need. Achievement at Key Stage 4 was below the national average and was particularly low in some schools. Similarly, attendance was lower than would be expected and especially so in some schools. Special schools were also represented in the partnership and were able to take up Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge opportunities but rarely did so.

There were four colleges of further education in the area and their level of interest in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was influenced by the fact that the majority of students, who pursued post-16 courses, did so at colleges rather than at the small school sixth forms.

♦ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were three higher education institutions geographically close to schools in the area, including one pre-1992 institution. Links were mainly with these higher education institutions but there had been activities with those further afield, including both pre and post-1992 higher education institutions.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

There was a tradition of schools, colleges and higher education institutions working together to support access to higher education, including collaborative activity relating to widening participation through HEFCE.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In response to the local context, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was established which constituted an overall Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge Board on which all relevant partners are represented including higher education senior managers, school heads and LSC. There were smaller strategic steering groups for different strands of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge with representatives from schools, colleges, LSC, Connexions and the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator. These linked into other groups, such as the 14-19 advisory groups, as appropriate.

The approach was characterised as a ‘team approach’. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge coordinator also fulfilled the role of gifted and talented coordinator for the EIC partnership. In addition to the schools, colleges and higher education institutions, the Connexions service had become increasingly involved in the partnership over the three years.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, as an EIC Phase 2 area, there were some activities for gifted and talented students which could be extended to post-16 students for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. In addition, a partnership between some schools, FE and HE institutions already existed and there were HEFCE-funded activities.

Through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, a range of activities were offered in this area and the coordinators had particularly sought to involve parents. Overall, the partnership was developing activities with younger students and one specific focus was on establishing links between Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and the Increased Flexibility Programme which provides vocational learning opportunities for pupils in Years 10 and 11.

Area summary 8

Area visited in spring term 2004. An EIC Phase 1 city area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The city had a growing status as a business centre in England. However, there were still substantial pockets of deprivation in and around the city. The improved transport links within the city had meant that it had recently developed into more of a commuter area.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

Minority ethnic groups, including mainly the Black Caribbean, other Black ethnicities, Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, constituted a notable proportion of the student population in schools across the city. Two thirds of students from minority ethnic groups were concentrated in a small number of primary and secondary schools in the urban areas of the city.

There was evidence of underperformance of young people from minority ethnic groups in terms of achievements of five A*-C GCSE grades.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

The main higher education institution in the city was said to be seen as an '*ivory tower*' by members of the community and this had impacted on the aspirations of young people on progressing towards higher qualifications. Many families had little experience of higher education and therefore, knowledge about university was limited amongst young people and their families.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Although a quarter of the population in the city was under the age of 18, the city ranked low for applications and acceptances for higher education courses.

In previous years, there had been limited choice for post-16 provision in many inner city secondary schools, but this had slowly changed due to the increased availability of vocational options post-16 and the decrease in employment opportunities for students leaving education with a Level 3 qualification.

Progression of students from colleges to higher education was more of an issue in this area than progression of students from local sixth forms. Achievement at both Key Stage 3 and 4 was below the national average.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

In this large EIC Phase 1 city, the majority of schools were 11-18 and a minority 11-16. A number of further education colleges were involved in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge initiative.

♦ **Participation of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were a number of higher education institutions locally. This suited many students as they tended to prefer to remain in their local area. This enabled young people who found Level 2 and 3 courses challenging to continue to access a local support network from family and friends.

Two higher education institutions were identified as being actively engaged in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership. One was a pre-1992 higher education institution but most of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge collaboration was with the post-1992 higher education institution. Both were within the local area. There were a number of other higher education institutions a short distance from the city. However, their involvement in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was less prominent.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

General collaboration between schools and colleges prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge was limited. There was some previous interaction between higher education institutions, schools and colleges and the community. However, these contacts were generally to attract adult and part-time students for further and higher education courses.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

In response to the local context, the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership was established which comprised a full-time area partnership coordinator responsible for the overall management of the initiative in the city, curriculum coordinators, responsible for providing enrichment and extension activities in their curriculum areas, institutional coordinators, representatives from two local higher education institutions, the LSC and Connexions. In addition partners included, local businesses (through the mentoring programme), voluntary group representatives and City Learning Centre representatives.

Due to the large size of the city, the area was divided into smaller clusters and schools within each of these often collaborated within Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge to deliver joint activities selected from a central Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge menu.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, there was little interaction between schools, further education colleges, higher education institutions and the local community. There were a few widening participation initiatives, for example, an initiative to promote and administer work-related learning provision, often for pupils for whom the National Curriculum was disappplied, but also for gifted and talented students through further education colleges. The majority of the widening participation activities were initiated by the higher education institutions in conjunction with the LEA, e.g. Masterclasses and summer schools.

Through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge, a large variety of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities were offered in the city. Higher education summer schools and visits were said to be critical. The partnership developed a large mentoring programme to increase students' motivation including a mentoring programme with business volunteers, higher education student mentoring, peer mentoring, e-mentoring and subject-specific mentoring.

Area Summary 9

Area visited in summer term 2004. An EIC Phase 2 town area.

Context

- ◆ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The area is mixed in terms of socio-economic deprivation, with some more affluent areas, where progression to higher education was higher than in less affluent areas. Most employment was in the public sector and in small and medium sized companies.

- ◆ **Ethnicity:**

The area was predominantly white with a small proportion of people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

- ◆ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

There was a positive attitude to further education, but fewer young people aspired to higher education. This was said to be mainly due to the financial constraints.

- ◆ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Progression to further education was relatively high. Although some schools had a strong staying-on culture, especially if they had a sixth form, in some areas of the borough sixth forms were threatened because of poor recruitment. In other areas, a higher proportion of young people progressed on to higher education. Those who did leave education at 16 usually embarked on some form of training including work-based training which was not at Level 3. Many 16 year olds were employed in the public sector.

- ◆ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth-form colleges:**

All schools in the area were involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. Half of the schools were 11-16 schools and half were 11-18. Two further education colleges and one sixth form college participated. There were said to be some differences in the nature of post-16 providers in the area with the sixth form attracting the more academically able students. One of the colleges offered more vocational opportunities, while the other offered a wider variety of academic and vocational courses and also attracted students from outside the borough.

- ◆ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were three local higher education institutions in relatively close proximity to the area. One of these was an old, pre-1992 university; two were post-1992 universities. Additionally, two of the further education colleges offered higher education courses.

- ◆ **Collaborative history:**

There were links with all the local higher education institutions prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge through local widening participation initiatives.

Informal links existed between schools and further education colleges and higher education institutions. The area had excellent links with a neighbouring Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership area and there was often activity overlap and sharing of resources.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

The partnership comprised active involvement from all Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge schools and colleges as well as the local higher education institutions. The partnership coordinator for a neighbouring borough attended steering group meetings and there was some limited contact with Connexions at the time of the visit.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge a local widening participation programme existed. Some schools had taken part in Oxbridge outreach programmes with Oxford and Cambridge Universities, summer schools, UCAS preparation and a number of revision courses and exam preparation activities. However there was little structured institutional collaboration.

A range of activities were offered through Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The partnership had developed gender specific activities such as motivational days for female students with the aim of addressing gender-specific attitudes towards particular professions. In addition, they had used subject-specific trips abroad and Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge achievers awards ceremonies. It was reported that activities that allow young people the opportunity to access new experiences were effective in inspiring and informing them.

Area Summary 10

Area visited in summer term 2004. An EIC Phase 2, town area.

Context

- ♦ **Socio-economic characteristics:**

The area had a traditional secondary industry-base in the past and continued to have a number of manufacturing industries. The decline of the traditional industry, and other loss of jobs from the manufacturing industries over the last two decades had led to efforts to regenerate employment, but unemployment remained relatively high. Youth unemployment was a significant problem in the area. The average wage in the area was lower than the national average and more workers commuted out of the area for work than workers commuted into the area.

- ♦ **Ethnicity:**

The area was predominantly white with a small proportion of people from minority ethnic communities.

- ♦ **Local attitudes to higher education:**

Attitudes towards local higher education institutions were positive and students often remained in the local area. However, the main issue within the area was said to be the financial constraints regarding higher education and some young people were said to prefer to pursue the work-based route.

- ♦ **Progression to further education and higher education:**

Just over two-thirds of young people progressed to further education and this proportion was reasonably constant. There was a strong tradition in the area for people continuing education post-16. Of those taking A levels, the majority progressed to university. This proportion had declined slightly in more recent times, which was attributed to the increase in opportunities for young people with A levels to gain employment in the area. Overall, around two-fifth of young people attended local universities.

- ♦ **Involvement of schools, colleges and sixth form colleges:**

All of the secondary schools in the area participated in the Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership in addition to the local sixth form college and two further education colleges. Half of the schools were 11 to 16 schools and half were 11 to 18 schools. The 11 to 18 schools offered advanced courses including some vocational A Levels. One sixth form offered a wide range of vocational and adult education courses but not A Level and AS Levels. Both colleges offered foundation courses for young people with additional learning needs

- ♦ **Involvement of higher education institutions in the local area:**

There were two main higher education institutions near to the area which participated in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. One was a pre-1992 university

and the other was a post-1992 institution. In addition, one further education college was an associate college of the ‘old’ university.

♦ **Collaborative history:**

Some schools had curriculum links with local higher education institutions prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge. The area had a strong tradition of school-college links which had contributed to the high rates of participation in post-16 learning. They also had good links with the neighbouring LEA who were also involved in Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge.

Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge approach

The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge partnership comprised a part-time partnership coordinator with responsibility for the overall management of the initiative in the area. The coordinator also worked part-time as a Connexions Personal Advisor. All schools and colleges had institutional coordinators who were responsible for Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge and decision-making and funds were devolved to individual schools. The Connexions Service and the local higher education institutions were represented on the steering group. There were good links with other partnership areas.

Prior to Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge there was a tradition of promoting widening participation across schools in the area including through university summer schools, careers education guidance programmes from Year 9 onwards, Aiming for a College Education (ACE) days funded by the careers service, and some activity overlap and district wide opportunities for the area.

The partnership had implemented the range of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities. Partnership staff were conscious that the work-based route was more appropriate for some pupils and said that care should be taken when activities undertaken to raise aspirations were appropriate. The Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge activities that had most impact were said to be those where pupils had contact with undergraduates with whom they could identify. Activities needed to be active and engaging for the pupils and a subtle introduction to higher education from an early age was thought to be effective.

Appendix B

Breakdown of interviews conducted

	Higher education institutions				Area Coordinators	Institutional Coordinators	School and college staff	Pre-16 students	Post-16 students	Connexion:	LSC	Other	Total interviews in the area
	Senior Managers	WP coordinators, officers and academics	Student support staff	Undergrads									
Area 1 - EAZ Autumn 2002	0	1	0	0	1	2	2	30	0	1	1	1	39
Area 2 - Phase 2 Spring 2003	2	4	0	2	1	6	8	14	4	1	1	9	52
Area 3 - EAZ Summer 2003	0	1	0	0	3	2	4	8	8	2	1	0	29
Area 4 - EAZ Autumn 2003	0	1	0	0	1	3	1	9	0	1	0	0	16
Area 5 - Phase 1 Autumn 2003	1	5	1	1	1	3	4	6	13	0	1	0	36
Area 6 - Phase 1 Autumn 2003	2	2	1	4	2	3	2	11	6	1	0	0	34
Area 7 - Phase 2 Autumn 2003	4	8	1	7	1	3	7	7	9	1	1	1	50
Area 8 - Phase 1 Spring 2004	3	8	0	6	1	3	13	9	3	0	0	4	50
Area 9 - Phase 2 Summer 2004	0	1	0	0	1	3	1	10	6	2	0	2	26
Area 10 - Phase 2 Summer 2004	0	1	0	0	2	2	0	8	6	1	0	9	29
Total	12	32	3	20	14	30	42	112	55	10	5	26	361

Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

DfES Publications
P.O. Box 5050
Sherwood Park
Annesley
Nottingham
NG15 0DJ

Tel: 0845 60 222 60
Fax: 0845 60 333 60
Minicom: 0845 60 555 60
Online: www.dfespublications.gov.uk

© NFER, LSE and IFS Aimhgher:Excellence Challenge Evaluation Consortium 2005

Produced by the Department for Education and Skills

ISBN 1 84478 506 8
Ref No: RR646
www.dfes.go.uk/research