

# Building a culture of participation: interviews with the former directors of the national Aimhigher programme

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**Assessing Impact and Measuring Success (AIMS) project**  
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## 1. Executive Summary

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1. Telephone interviews were held between September 2014 and January 2015 with all nine former regional directors and one former national director of the Aimhigher programme, which ran from 2004 to 2011.
2. The participants identified several key successes that Aimhigher had been able to contribute to broader policy efforts around widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE), including:
  - a. Forging new cross-university, cross-sector and multi-level partnerships including organisations without a history of collaboration – partnerships that were felt to be dissolving since the end of Aimhigher;
  - b. Getting universities, colleges and schools to think about WP in terms of younger age groups – initially by focusing on older secondary pupils rather than the adult learners who had traditionally been the focus of access initiatives, and latterly in terms of lower secondary and primary pupils;
  - c. Developing the current orthodoxy that a portfolio of engagement with young people needed to be maintained over a period of time and that one-off activities were unlikely to be successful;
  - d. Championing the use of student ambassadors and summer schools, which were universally felt to be successful in terms of demystifying and raising demand for HE among disadvantaged young people;
  - e. Devising novel approaches to engage with communities that had previously been largely ignored by WP and recruitment efforts, including areas of extreme urban deprivation and rural/coastal areas where deprivation is often ‘hidden’;
  - f. Establishing linkages to other partnerships and funding streams with compatible goals around educational disadvantage or social justice in order to increase the collective value of the resources available;
  - g. Embedding WP into the fabric of HE and individual institutions, such that it became unquestionable within the wider social and political discourse of society at large.
3. However, these successes were tempered. There was a general sense from the participants that too many activities were about ‘box ticking’ numbers without sufficient critical thought about the desired outcomes; the national ‘HE roadshow’ was particularly poorly regarded. One particular weakness was seen to be the distribution of monies to schools, where it generally evaded scrutiny and often disappeared “*like water on sand*”, not always being focused on WP objectives or wider social justice aims.
4. It was also noted that agreed statistical markers for targeting activities were late emerging and required forms of data were hard to acquire and/or unreliable. The professionalisation of this element of Aimhigher’s work was felt to have improved over the course of the programme, but the issues were exacerbated by insufficient evaluative expertise within the WP sector. Participants also noted that funding was reduced (in 2008) just at the point when

methodologies for assessing success were bedding down and gaining currency and traction within the sector.

5. The development or appropriation of geo-demographic markers like POLAR and IMD was seen to be a successful approach for targeting schools and communities given the perceived paucity of information available about young people's backgrounds. However, several participants warned against their mechanistic or uncritical use, as well as noting that schools were not always able and/or willing to target individuals to Aimhigher's satisfaction, leading to issues of 'deadweight' and 'leakage'.
6. One important shift in emphasis during Aimhigher's life was a narrowing of activity towards schools and away from prospective mature students and vocational routes into HE; this caused some organisations to drift away as their interests were no longer represented. This narrowing of focus to schools required new approaches. There was strong diversity of practice in this regard, with some regions aiming to work with all schools, while others targeted ruthlessly or developed 'partnerships of least resistance' with those schools that shared a commitment to WP and the onward progression of young people.
7. The participants expressed divergent views about the nature and interconnection of aspirations and attainment. One interesting insight was a distinction drawn between aspirations, as individually constructed by the young person, and expectations that were socially constructed by parents and teachers; the suggestion was that Aimhigher's role in shifting the latter was vital, but often overlooked.
8. There was a consensus that the evaluation of the success of WP activities was complex due to local circumstances and diversity of delivery even within activity types. There was also a general understanding that the "*lightbulb moment*" for different young people was likely to be sparked by different experiences and at different ages, where even the individual themselves may be unable to identify a precise moment of attitudinal or behavioural change. The closeness of the partnership between Aimhigher and some schools made the identification of specific 'Aimhigher effect' problematic, especially over the long time spans involved.
9. Those participants still working in and around the WP sector felt that there has recently been a change in political focus from the early work of Aimhigher. This manifested itself in a shift from seeing progression to HE as the priority to one that privileges the recruitment of particular students to specific institutions within a competitive (rather than collaborative) environment. This was felt to be a negative and retrograde development from the perspective of young people, with many likely to be missed. However, this mirrors broader changes in the public discourse from a social justice agenda to a social mobility one, where people are constructed as being primarily responsible for plotting and navigating their own life courses.

## 2. Historical context

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Aimhigher was the government's national WP programme and was the result of a collaboration arrangement between the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It sought a unified approach to WP, bringing together the work of schools, colleges, universities, training partners and the Connexions careers service. While the name had been used previously, the main programme ran from 2004 to 2011, when it was abolished as a result of government cost-cutting; there had been an earlier reduction in budget in 2008. It was not the genesis of WP efforts within the HE sector, but it did mark a step change in terms of scale, ambition and co-ordination between organisations.

At its inception, Aimhigher acted as an umbrella organisation, bringing together two major pre-existing national initiatives (*Excellence Challenge* and *Partnerships 4 Progression*) to adopt a more co-ordinated approach to the work of getting more 'non-traditional' students into higher education. It was organised on a three-tier basis, with national, regional and sub-regional ('area partnership') manifestations. While the sub-regional focus was on the delivery of specific WP activities, the regional tier was largely concerned with allocating funds, coordinating, monitoring, evaluating and analysing.

There were nine regions covering the whole of England, and they were typically led by a part-time chair (a senior academic) and a full-time director (an academic or experienced practitioner). The regional tier was largely removed in 2008, although some continued in a skeleton form, as determined by local context and priorities. Nationally, Aimhigher was led through a senior manager and a small team based within HEFCE.

This project aimed to capture the knowledge and wisdom of the individuals charged with leading Aimhigher and so national efforts around WP through the mid to late 2000s. To put this activity in context, around £1 billion of government funds were spent and dispersed by Aimhigher across this period, with every one of England's HE institutions (HEIs) engaged to some degree.

## 3. Method

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Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with all of the nine former regional directors of Aimhigher and one former national director. The interviews generally lasted between approximately 60 and 90 minutes, and were conducted by two members of the research team (RW and NH) between October 2014 and January 2015. They were recorded using a telephone recording device. The recordings were not transcribed, but played back and notes were made, including the quotes employed within this report. This process was repeated so that each recording was listened to by two members of the research team. A thematic analysis of the data was then undertaken.

The interviews were structured around an initial topic guide, but the researchers allowed the conversations to develop freely, especially as the participants were keen to share their experiences and reflections. The principal focus of the interviews was on the perceived successes across the Aimhigher period (both at a macro and micro level), as well as how concepts of success were developed and measured. This inevitably also included activities that were less successful and concepts of value-for-money for the resources invested, leading to discussions around ‘lessons learnt’ – and those remaining to be learnt. Other topics included targeting, changes in focus across the lifetime of Aimhigher and some biographical background on the participants themselves. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity, no attempt was made to differentiate between the ten participants with respect to the quotes used herein.

## **4. Results**

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### **4.1 Participants’ life histories**

Nearly all those interviewed had worked in WP in one guise or another for some time prior to working for Aimhigher. The majority had been university academics who felt strongly that it was part of their role to be inclusive and encouraging of people of all backgrounds to attend HE. Others had worked within the further education (FE) sector or within other parts of the public or ‘third’ sectors. Many suggested they had been ‘non-traditional’ students themselves, and most expressed an explicitly political motivation towards WP work, referring to the importance of social justice within their own values.

Most of the participants had retired immediately or soon after their role with Aimhigher had expired, although a minority were still working within the HE sector and generally with some relationship to WP or related topics around social justice. Many of those who had retired were also still engaged on the periphery (e.g. through research or consultancy projects or advisory positions) or, at least, continued to take an active ‘amateur’ interest in WP policy and practice. As such, most of the participants were able to provide additional insights about the post-Aimhigher landscape, as well as providing a degree of comparison between the Aimhigher period and what came both before and after. (Note that the data were collected prior to the creation of the new generation of outreach networks in early 2015, which mimic elements of the Aimhigher area partnerships.)

### **4.2 The successes of Aimhigher**

There was a consensus amongst all participants that Aimhigher had indeed been successful, and the areas of success were several, though different participants highlighted and prioritised different successes.

#### 4.2.1 Encouraging collaboration within the sector

For some participants, the greatest success of Aimhigher was not necessarily seen in particular programmes or interventions but in being able to pull together the various sectors across education; HE, FE, schools and local authorities as well as other networks and partnerships, to all work together with the goal of increasing participation in HE from disadvantaged groups. This allowed for debate and sharing across the sector in an environment that fostered collaboration rather than competition between institutions. Several cited this as being the key legacy of the Aimhigher period. One participant particularly highlighted the size of the financial commitment behind Aimhigher, and the impact it had had on the practice of widening participation:

*“The real strength of Aimhigher was that money was dedicated to it and consequently people responded to that. It’s crude, but effective.”*

Crude though the financial imperative might have been, participants felt that Aimhigher was able use this leverage to develop new philosophical approaches and working practices within the organisations with which it worked, both horizontally (i.e. between HEIs) and vertically (e.g. between HEIs and schools/colleges). Information and expertise was readily shared, with common understandings developing over time, although some HEIs were keen to protect their “*monogamous relationships*” with schools:

*“The whole was about learning: [...] learning about other institutions and learning about how institutions could work together across and to cross boundaries.”*

*“Aimhigher was able to professionalise the WP agenda and share expertise and raise the idea of collaboration in recruitment between HEIs and a coordinated approach to outreach.”*

Links that Aimhigher established, particularly those between HEIs and schools were felt to have been a more enduring legacy. However, Aimhigher had also established links between local authorities and with FE colleges, while two participants also discussed how their regions has been able to establish common cause with other funded policy initiatives that were designed to address ingrained deprivation and/or educational underachievement. This enabled a degree of joined-up working that they believed added value to the Aimhigher work, by linking it explicitly to school improvement or support for progression into the labour market, although one of the two felt that there was scope for this partnership to have been stronger still.

Several participants talked of the approach Aimhigher adopted of doing things *with*, rather than *to* schools and colleges – that it was a genuine partnership and that decisions were made inclusively, through consultation and agreement rather than through diktat. One participant outlined how much work this had involved:

*“We realised from the very start that schools often didn’t have a very good dialogue with parents about their children’s futures and there were a lot of parents who really didn’t understand the workings of the A Level and higher education systems. So we did a lot of work persuading schools with our support to talk to parents – to have parents’ evenings, if you like, especially dedicated to Aimhigher. And then to get people to sign their children into one of the cohorts of children that we were working with.”*

However, a number of participants noted that the spirit of collaboration and learning was quick to dissolve with Aimhigher’s subsequent loss of funding in 2011. This showed how tentative these partnerships were, as with no coordination or funding these networks have largely broken down:

*“For me it was getting all the institutions to come together and work together across what were very real boundaries. I think those ties have broken now since they have stopped the funding that glued them all together and I think the relationships are likely to break down further as time goes on and people move on and others aren’t aware of how good they were or could be.”*

Whilst Aimhigher worked to embed the understanding that working together to encourage progression into HE in general would benefit all, these “*very real boundaries*” between HEIs were felt to have been quick to re-establish themselves, especially in an increasingly competitive market. For one participant, Aimhigher was about finding ways of working around historic competition – sharing best practice and collaborating with an altruistic approach; it was characterised as having moved beyond traditional ‘outreach’ approaches to recruitment. Participants suggested that the individual targets that HEIs are required to set through their Access Agreements lead to a competition even for the limited numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, which militates against co-operating for the greatest social good. The notion of institutional Access Agreements was felt to reinforce this retreat from collaboration by prioritising individual institutional targets. However, running counter to this approach is the notion suggested by several participants that widening participation activity is now very much part and parcel of what institutions *do*, which it was not prior to Aimhigher:

*“We can’t just expect people to assimilate, and make other people change, we have to examine our own practice and make sure that what we’re delivering is appropriate and inclusive.”*

One participant highlighted how the capacity for longer term and more ambitious programmes is limited without Aimhigher’s co-ordinating role, and how the costs of such activities cannot be easily shared under the current system. They talked fondly of how

*“...the whole competitive nature of higher education was ‘put on hold’ in relation to Aimhigher, and people cooperated to develop a constituency that was inspired to go into HE who would not otherwise have gone to HE, and it didn’t actually matter who did the inspiring and where they actually went in the final analysis.”*

Furthermore, Aimhigher allowed for the geographically 'hard to reach' communities like those in rural and coastal areas, where relatively advantaged and disadvantaged families are found together in close proximity, to be targeted. Previously individual HEIs did not generally have the geographical reach or resources to target these remote communities, but Aimhigher allowed a pooling of resources which made this more achievable. Some of the participants felt that HEIs have since focused on getting the easiest successes, as one put it, following "*the path of least resistance*", and where "*there are easy gains*", and on putting their efforts into schools where they can "*get big gain for little pain*". Such activity was felt by that participant to be a more superficial approach to the issues of WP than what had been happening under Aimhigher.

The sense of regret over the loss of Aimhigher, and perceived governmental failure to realise how useful and effective it was, occurred through most of the accounts. No participant suggested that Aimhigher had run its course and the decision to wind it up in 2011 was an appropriate one. Indeed, the prevailing view was that Aimhigher had recently reached the point where it was performing well shortly before it was ended.

#### *4.2.2 A wider social and political shift in attitudes*

Participants generally felt that Aimhigher had played a key role in shifting attitudes and shining a light on existing practices within the HE sector. In particular, the very idea of WP had become embedded in the national consciousness through the grassroots efforts and high profile of Aimhigher, with no indication that the WP agenda has yet run its course; rather participants felt that there had been a distinct move away from the view that 'HE isn't for the likes of us/them'. One participant highlighted how Aimhigher's work had ensured that widening participation could no longer be ignored by HEIs, and that widening participation practice is now as much about what goes on inside an institution as it is outside it, in terms of programme design and the support provided to students.

Perhaps most importantly, there was a feeling that politicians from all parties are now in agreement that the WP agenda is 'a good thing', although their specific priorities may differ, such that one participant suggested that

*"...I think now it is very hard for any politician to say they are against widening participation."*

Conversely, one interviewee still working in the WP field talked about a shift in language since the end of Aimhigher, which usefully demonstrates a change in policy emphasis, and not simply a linguistic turn; we shall return to this theme later:

*"Some of what Aimhigher stood for, or spoke about, has been kind of 'painted over' in other language, and we've done our best to accommodate ourselves to that and exploit it. So the*



*language of social mobility rather than of widening participation or deprivation [has come to dominate].”*

In particular, it was felt that following the collaborative environment generated by Aimhigher, the Russell Group and other more selective universities now had to “*justify their elitism*” more carefully than in the past. It had also helped to define separate missions for different types of institution by separating out the particular challenges that they needed to address in order to meet national policy objectives:

*“The elite universities focus on what they call ‘fair access’ and the rest of the universities and the new universities focus on what they call ‘wider access’.”*

*They also suggested that*

*“...the Russell Group line is that ‘of course we want to take everybody from any type of background’, but actually what that effectively means is that they want to poach the best working class students from new universities or middle-ranking universities and get them to go to the Russell Group.”*

This statement emphasises the difference between what can be seen as ‘selecting’ and ‘recruiting’ institutions; characterisations which might need to be refined as we move fully towards a system of uncapped student numbers.

In a broader sense, Aimhigher was taken to have changed the WP landscape as, prior to Aimhigher, the HE access agenda had largely been focused on adults returning to education. One participant claimed that Aimhigher changed the whole perception of widening participation activity; indeed of the role of HE in the broader effort to increase social justice and opportunity:

*“Instead of being ‘second chance’ it became ‘trying to encourage these people to have a first chance [...] which they didn’t have before.”*

More specifically an impact on teachers and other school staff of working with Aimhigher was asserted by several participants, especially in terms of changing *expectations*, and not just of children themselves, but wider families and other school staff. In other words, alongside the foreground aim to raise aspirations, Aimhigher was positively influencing the thinking of the adults surrounding the young people and breaking down stereotypes and prejudices around what pathways were achievable or respectable.

#### *4.2.3 Success against national policy*

The fundamental policy objective at which Aimhigher was directed was to meet the Labour Government’s aim of seeing 50 percent of young people experience HE by the age of 30. It was

asserted that the majority of any expansion would have to be drawn from lower socio-economic and minority ethnic groups as this is where participation tended to be historically lowest; indeed, it was effectively already at saturation point amongst the highest socio-economic groups when the policy was launched. This policy was also aimed to address the stark issues of social inequality in HE participation laid out within the 1997 Dearing Report. The WP agenda, as developed through and by Aimhigher, therefore sought both to expand demand for the sector, but to direct this expansion towards historically under-represented groups.

While participants felt that the policy objectives were clear – nearly all cited the 50 percent target figure in some form – the stepping stones towards this and the measures of success were more obscure. At the outset, there were felt to be multiple and overlapping definitions of the target group(s), and no agreed means of measuring progress over time. This was only seen to be resolved through the development of the POLAR methodology (from 2005 onwards) and the publication of prescriptive targeting guidance and a national performance indicator (both in 2007).

In this context, the participants were guarded in their claims to measurable success for Aimhigher. One participant talked about how they felt it was not until the introduction of a national evaluation strategy in 2008 that there were any clear descriptors as to who was classed as a ‘WP student’ that it was possible to measure any success:

*“I think we could demonstrate that, by the end of Aimhigher, there was a demonstrable narrowing of the gap. Aimhigher could be said to be associated with that increase, the problem was you could never really prove that Aimhigher was responsible for that increase. I don’t think we ever were able to demonstrate a strong link with Aimhigher. I think the best we got to was ‘a strong association’.”*

This account supported similar statement from all the other participants: they had a strong sense that Aimhigher was successful at increasing and widening the intake into HE, both nationally and within their own region, but that it was difficult to demonstrate, never mind ‘prove’ this quantitatively. One particular issue was that its closure came soon after the point at which the participants felt that it had gotten fully organised and statistical monitoring was starting happen effectively:

*“It takes a while for people to accept new initiatives and so like all of these, Aimhigher was just beginning to have an impact and being embedded in peoples’ psyche when the funding was withdrawn.”*

One early realisation (often constructed as a conceptual success) among the participants was that engagement at or after GCSE was too late to effectively influence attitudes and behaviours, so there was a strong value in engaging with younger age groups, particularly within early secondary and late primary phases. It was argued that the seed of the idea of HE as being an option to be needed to be sown earlier, such that children grew up with the expectation that HE could be an option for them; it was also seen as important to engage with families across this period. One

participant saw this early intervention working in practice, although they were hesitant about attributing all the effect to Aimhigher alone:

*“I think this approach was working when I first went into primary schools and you asked questions about higher education and who wanted to go to university I would estimate that about 30% would put their hands up. Towards the end I would go in and I would say it was about 70%. I’m not saying it was only as a result of Aimhigher, but Aimhigher was very instrumental in getting primary schools to encourage talk of university progression.”*

#### 4.2.4 Successful initiatives

Generally speaking, the regional tier of Aimhigher was not engaged in the delivery of activities, which was more usually the responsibility of the area partnerships. The participants were nevertheless asked to reflect on which initiatives they felt had been most successful in meeting Aimhigher’s mission, based on their knowledge of activities organised by the areas within their region and those that they did deliver at the regional level.

In terms of particular initiatives, summer schools emerged as the most highly regarded due to the total immersion of young people within the HE environment; attending lectures, living in student accommodation and meeting student ambassadors from backgrounds similar to their own. Participants felt that summer schools (which were managed at the regional level) were effective in influencing young people to feel that HE was something to which they could aspire.

As with the preference for starting outreach activities early in a young person’s life course discussed above, there was a positive consensus amongst the participants around the use of student ambassadors and tutoring/mentoring programmes within schools. They were felt to have helped young people to appreciate that HE was a viable goal as they could relate to people that were from a similar background to them and were close enough in age that they could picture themselves in their shoes, aside from any academic gains that the tutors/mentors might provide.

Similarly, whilst the value of campus visits and aspirational trips (e.g. to museums) was disputed by some of the participants, there was a feeling that the value and impact of any such was enhanced if there was an opportunity for the schoolchildren to meet an HE student to whom they could relate. As one interviewee asserted that this would be someone *“who spoke their language, someone who was a role model as well”* and that this was the most effective Aimhigher activity: *“they’re close enough for you to aspire to be like that.”*

One interviewee drew particular attention to a scheme in their region whereby Aimhigher would organise careers information days in local schools which they felt were very successful in raising pupils’ awareness of a whole range of available jobs, while another described work with primary schools to illustrate the range of jobs available in what were considered to be traditionally working class workplaces (e.g. in construction or healthcare):

*“They would try and get the kids talking and thinking about, you know, jobs that adults did and one that they might be interested in doing later on.”*

However, several participants demurred from offering specific examples of successful activities. Some felt that the qualities of the underpinning partnership or school environment were often more important than the activity itself:

*“Some things go down well because they fit in better with the school timetable and ethos and that makes them popular, rather than because they are necessarily effective.”*

Others felt that it was only an accumulation of activities that provided success, reflecting on the difficulty of evaluating success when data about who progressed to HE was often unavailable:

*“How do you measure that light bulb moment that ultimately led to that person going to university when you don’t actually know who did decide to go on to university?”*

Finally, there was general agreement that targeting fewer young people over a longer period of time and supporting them through phases of their education was more effective than one-off interventions; a position that has largely now become axiomatic. This was resource-intensive and required a level of data gathering and record keeping that Aimhigher was not really set up to provide, at least in the first instance. However, the development of the ‘learner progression framework’ was seen as a major innovation in terms of structuring appropriate interventions over a long-term engagement from upper primary or lower secondary onwards.

#### *4.2.5 What worked less well?*

As suggested above, it was felt that HEI ‘taster days’ needed to be part of a much bigger set of experiences to be even marginally effective. There was a consensus that bringing a group of young people to a university for the day to be shown around was likely to prove of limited value – one participant called them *“pointless”* – unless they were part of a larger suite of activities. Another interviewee suggested that open days and campus visits needed to fit into a programme of activities so that it was only once young people had an indication of what HE actually was and what went on there, that a campus visit became beneficial. It was felt that

*“...for many HEIs [providing taster days] was a box ticking exercise – it was a very easy way of saying they had engaged with the WP community and the numbers reached could be shown to be large quite quickly – and it was relatively cheap!”*

Another participant was equally sceptical over the motivations underpinning taster days and their operationalisation:

*“It often became more of a recruitment activity with universities trying to prove why it was better to come to them than the one down the road.”*

As well as it being seen as a potential ‘quick win’ by HEIs, many participants talked about the relative lack of focused targeting of this approach:

*“It spread the jam too thin. We were targeting too many people in too many institutions [schools and colleges] many of whom we didn’t need to – shouldn’t have been – targeting anyway.”*

This type of activity was therefore seen as being easily measurable and evidence of doing something ostensibly worthwhile in reaching out to large numbers of potential students. However, it was also equated by some participants (as in the quote above) as both constituting ‘deadweight’ within, and ‘leakage’ of, scarce resources, with the beneficiaries of such actions often being either disadvantaged young people *en route* to going to HE anyway or the already advantaged. Similarly, several participants mentioned that the ‘national roadshow’ (a travelling set of resources and activities visiting schools) was ineffective since it was just seen as time out of lessons for the young people, without being specifically targeted.

One participant highlighted a further issue regarding which activities were undertaken – the preferences and values of the staff concerned:

*“What was good value was pretty well known by 2006. It didn’t influence behaviour terribly because you’ve always got enthusiasts who want to do the sorts of activities that they enjoy.”*

Some inefficiency in terms of activities therefore had to be accepted in order to allow staff to do the activities they found rewarding and motivating, which would then sustain the momentum within the Aimhigher movement; this values-led component of the WP agenda is likely to remain a live issue.

Two interviewees focused on vocational routes into HE and said that they felt that this area of work had not been as successful as it might have been, despite its strong alignment with the social justice agenda due to the relative status of vocational routes with respect to traditional academic ones; notably the ‘gold standard’ of A Levels. As one participant suggested,

*“...vocational education was a class issue since the middle classes wouldn’t consider it for their own children.”*

There were various reasons suggested for the lack of progress in this area, including that the work Aimhigher was doing on the vocational routes into HE overlapped with the pre-existing Lifelong Learning Networks and that there was some organisational tension there. The participants concerned felt the agenda for Aimhigher was not sufficiently clear in relation to this, and it was

suggested there was little money available for such activities, particularly after the Learning and Skills Council withdrew its funding. Also, the level of activity regarding vocational routes into HE varied significantly between the Aimhigher regions, and there were usually specialisms for particular career pathways within a given region (e.g. building, engineering or healthcare). Whilst this gave some autonomy and a regional flavour to Aimhigher's work, it would inevitably mean that only a relatively small number of vocational pathways could be supported.

### 4.3 Aspirations, expectations and attainment

In keeping with Aimhigher's founding policy documents, the participants generally conceptualised their work as being primarily around raising aspirations, although there were also voices that saw this as only being one side of the coin:

*"If they don't get the qualifications to get into university then it doesn't matter how much they want to get there, it's not going to happen."*

Indeed, this was perhaps the section of our interviews which gave the broadest range of responses, with little consensus. For example, one interviewee asserted that raising aspirations and raising attainment inevitably went hand-in-hand, conceptualising the former as Aimhigher's role while the latter was primarily the responsibility of the school. However, others differed, with one, for instance, suggesting that both aspiration-raising and attainment-raising were always seen together as part of Aimhigher's mission. Another interviewee distinguished between the objectives of individual schools, driven by examination results and, increasingly, league tables, and Aimhigher, whose focus was more upon national policy aims around having a well-educated and socially-mobile populace – this was not felt to have been helped by the separation in the government departments with responsibilities for schools, colleges and universities. Indeed, one participant highlighted that the schools had generally been keen to claim responsibility for improved academic results within their cohort:

*"The problem is, of course, it's much more difficult to justify what you've done, as schools – and headteachers in particular – will never want to give you the credit for raising attainment in their school as they want the credit for themselves. So it's even harder to measure."*

Notably, one participant talked about how, for their region, raising attainment was considered the main focus from the outset, so many of their activities were focused on improving qualification outcomes or improving careers guidance. They argued that high-quality careers guidance was important to a young person, as if did not make the right decisions at Year 9 they may struggle to reach their aspiration to study a particular course. As such, it was attainment *in particular subjects* (or qualification types) that was felt to be particularly 'powerful' for HE entry. Others identified something of a shift in emphasis over time, with aspiration-raising giving way to more of a focus on attainment.

The overarching conceptualisation, however, was that there was a reinforcing relationship between aspiration and attainment, with the former providing not only challenging stereotypes about higher education, but also providing a motivational stimulus that was likely to see targeted students improving their performance. However, several participants were keen to recast the idea of aspiration-raising as being as much, if not, more about the expectations of parents and teachers. The involvement of parents within the Aimhigher approach was mentioned earlier, but teachers were also positioned by some participants as key influencers, whose own preconceptions about what was possible, desirable or realistic for young people needed to be in tune with Aimhigher's ethos:

*"Teachers changed markedly over the life course of Aimhigher – at the start they would often shrug their shoulders and say, 'What do you expect from kids from round here?', to actually being quite excited by what they children had been able to do."*

It was argued that this shift in teachers' attitudes had a direct role in improving outcomes for the young people by dispelling the historically low expectations of the school/area.

#### **4.4 The practicalities of positive impact**

##### *4.4.1 Value-for-money and efficiency*

In general terms the participants felt that Aimhigher's funding was well-spent, but several put caveats on this position. The estimated £1 billion spent was felt to be relatively modest over the timeframe and compared to the broader context of other government spending, so given the broad perceptions of success outlined above, it was generally considered that Aimhigher offered good value-for-money. However, many participants were particularly exercised by the element of WP funding that was routed directly to schools. Unlike other funds, there was limited accountability on the school as to how they spent this money, and participants reflected on how the term 'widening participation' was inappropriately interpreted by some schools who used it for making (often trivial) improvements to the school environment or to subsidise pre-existing school trips:

*"I can't say it was badly spent - we just couldn't find out what it was spent on!"*

*"It was like [pouring] water onto sand. There was no way of knowing whether the money had been spent effectively with many schools and local authorities not reporting back at all on what the money had been spent on."*

As discussed above, a lack of monitoring and evaluation at the start of the Aimhigher initiative also led many to comment that whilst they could not necessarily be sure that the money was spent on programmes that were effective, they felt that the money was meant to be there to give people the opportunity to try things that had not been done before. This experimentation was seen as

being about learning what worked (and what did not) at the outset of Aimhigher so that directors knew what to put more funds into in the future. This was reflected in the messages from central government:

*“Although we had to operate with the various frameworks of the [government] departments the funding came through, at no point was there a focus on value-for-money.”*

In terms of the monies that *were* spent on appropriate activities, there was a concern about the ‘right’ people getting access to them and a desire to resist the demands of relatively advantaged ‘wrong’ young people and their families:

*“As ever, middle class parents who saw something good happening wanted to get in on the act and people [i.e. policy makers] were finding this very difficult.”*

We were also told of a pupil on a summer school, from a family whereby we might assume progression to HE was highly likely – an example of the ‘leakage’ to middle class families described in the previous quote:

*“One of the young ladies on it [a summer school] was the daughter of two professors. It was a fantastic summer school, but I’m not sure it would have resulted in that person going to university as I suspected that they were going to go anyway – it was pointless.”*

There was also some element of ‘deadweight’ described by the participants, in terms of young people being targeted for Aimhigher activities who were already likely to progress to HE, despite coming from historically under-represented groups, by dint of their high achievement. For example, one described “*extension tasks for the top sets*” which had been aimed at securing GCSE A or A\* grades when the pupils were already felt likely to be secure in their chances to get the threshold grade of C which would place them on a pathway towards post-compulsory education and, ultimately, HE. Of course, such activities might influence the institutional choice envelope for the individual young person and allow them access to high-status universities. However, in terms of headline participation figures, this type of activity is unlikely to have a positive impact.

More broadly, the participants reported tensions about which schools they wanted to, and found themselves, targeting. One interviewee suggested they would have liked to have excluded working class pupils in high achieving schools in affluent areas since they would be benefitting already from a “*pull factor*” from the school and their peers. Another discussed working primarily with schools with an embedded ethos of progression for their pupils, regardless of the relative disadvantage of the location. A third identified a tension between the Local Authority who wanted Aimhigher to work with every school, whilst the Aimhigher and HEI staff preferred to focus their activities on a smaller number of deeper and more effective partnerships. As a result, the on-the-ground targeting practices differed substantially between the regions, although it was unclear what impact this had, if any.



#### 4.4.2 Targeting schools and individuals

In terms of being able to target appropriate groups this was one area where there was no consensus other than that it was very difficult to measure. There was no agreement on what markers could or should be used to make sure Aimhigher's activities were impacting on the groups that were being targeted, with different participants advocating the use of POLAR, the Index of Multiple Deprivation and Free School Meals alone or in various combinations. There was a broad consensus that POLAR was a major step forwards, while NS-SEC was not useful due to difficulties in obtaining reliable data:

*"POLAR was developed with a clear philosophy in mind and they wanted something that would be reliable – though there are questions about validity, but as long as it is used carefully and not mechanically, it is effective. It still stands that it is important to target people in low participation areas."*

However, there were concerns about its ability to identify the 'right' individuals within an area and/or school, especially in rural/coastal areas where communities tended to be more mixed, as well as the ability and willingness of schools to implement targeting strategies at the micro level. Similarly, eligibility for Free School Meals was seen by some participants as a useful tool for identifying economic disadvantage, albeit that not all families chose to pursue eligibility. One suggested working with low attaining schools was probably better than low participation areas, though they highlighted the concern around Aimhigher not having the necessary data on schools to do this reliably. This meant relying heavily on schools themselves to nominate appropriate individuals, which added more opportunities for leakage:

*"Then you've got the problem of teacher judgement, which everybody agrees is a great thing. But, of course, teacher judgment always tends to include more people who shouldn't be there."*

Indeed, there was a broad consensus that there was no metric that covered all needs in terms of identifying worthwhile recipients of Aimhigher's efforts. One person for instance suggested *"you're always searching for the metric that's going to work, and it never does"*, whilst another had misgivings about *"one size fits all"*, and a third said there was *"no perfect method"*.

#### 4.4.3 Monitoring, evaluation and success

There was consensus amongst the interviewees that evaluation was generally not done very well – one referred to it as *"patchy"* and *"problematic"*, whilst another suggested *"it wasn't tight enough"*. Some referred to there being insufficient guidance provided by HEFCE in terms of potentially worthwhile activities and how to evaluate them. One participant for instance suggested that HEFCE had *"procrastinated"*, however some noted that the blame for the lack of directives in the area was not down to HEFCE, rather *"their political masters"*. Another suggested

that Aimhigher was subject to a great deal of “*political intervention*”, that their goalposts were often moved, and also that the regions felt like they were never allowed to “*just get on with the job*”.

For instance, one interviewee suggested that “*there was ‘a false start’ to monitoring and evaluation*”, but progress was made once Aimhigher “*got its act together*” locally and nationally, and a difference was noted in terms of who was applying to HE and who was successful in getting in. They also suggested that

*“...we probably realised too late that we were going to have to develop something around monitoring and evaluation ourselves, and it was quite hard to do that retrospectively [...] Nobody had asked us, ‘What difference does this make?’ and the lesson that was learned is that we have got to establish, at the outset, how we’re going to monitor the impact of what we do. Our approach to that changed.”*

Some participants talked about earmarking funding for initiatives that had been proposed and agreed, but that actually never came to fruition – and the money was not returned either because there was not a mechanism for doing so. Participants also reported that there had been a lapse in time before a formal monitoring and evaluation process was initiated by HEFCE in response to government demands, and that it was by then too late to undertake the steps needed. This was also hampered in turn by the characteristics and motivations of the staff involved in Aimhigher initiatives:

*“Part of the issue was that they were practitioners, not evaluators, and they weren’t trained in evaluation and didn’t want to be doing that, they wanted to be practicing. So the evaluation side of things was messy.”*

On similar lines, another participant suggested that

*“...people working in Aimhigher were practitioners and they kept being pushed to evaluate, and firstly they weren’t trained to do that, and secondly, whilst they understood the need for it, they didn’t really want to do it, because what they wanted to do was concentrate on the outreach activities.”*

The following quote summarises the situation regarding evaluation, and the sentiments expressed were echoed by many of the participants:

*“[The regions] could have been more supportive to those that were trying out new initiatives and could have done more to professionalise the sector. But this was difficult because effectively it was a regionally run local programme and HEFCE should have pushed harder for better organisation and tracking all along.”*

Other participants cited a shift from ‘monitoring’ (i.e. often just counting numbers of participants and their backgrounds) to ‘evaluation’ (i.e. actually assessing the impact of the intervention), with the latter generally being seen as more valuable. However, it was noteworthy that some of the participants used the terms interchangeably, which may speak for a lack of clarity as to their separate purposes and epistemological foundations. One participant saw the regional structure of Aimhigher itself as a hindrance to effective monitoring since the gathering of relevant data was atomised.

However, there is a key epistemological problem regarding exactly how the effectiveness of Aimhigher initiatives could be assessed when they occur over such a long period, making the precise assessment of cause-and-effect is highly problematic. As a consequence of this, some participants had noted a tendency to focus upon activities that were readily measurable, what one called a “reductionist” process:

*“You don’t get social change or educational change in a short span of time. The thing has to really mature, you know, and to get Aimhigher properly embedded you had to accept that it wasn’t going to be done overnight or in five years or even in ten years.”*

It was also generally felt that it was very difficult to measure the impact of Aimhigher at a national level as the networks all ran different programmes and even those that had similar titles were devised and run to meet anticipated local needs:

*“A master class in Lancaster would not be the same as a master class in Plymouth, for argument’s sake. There are so many influencing factors that that impact on the young people. Unless you are making a comparison of individual master classes it is very difficult to determine the impact in general just looking at, by just conflating, evaluations of master classes.”*

As such, making valid inference about the relative success of one activity or approach was particularly problematic. There was no guarantee that, for example, summer schools were conceived or delivered in the same way; indeed, the interviews revealed subtle differences in participants’ conceptualisation of the key elements of a summer school. Similarly, several participants made the point that the close partnership between Aimhigher and schools meant that it was difficult to isolate and evaluate individual elements within this closely-shared agenda:

*“One of the ambitions of Aimhigher was to develop integrated programmes [...] Staff got inspired, kids got inspired and the curriculum was articulated with Aimhigher in various ways. Consequently it was absolutely impossible to disaggregate the Aimhigher contribution to that from the whole school contribution to that [...] The more successfully Aimhigher got integrated into school programmes, the more difficult it was to disaggregate any discrete Aimhigher effect.”*

In particular, the focus on younger age groups noted above caused difficulties around demonstrating success. Given the long lead-time between participation in an Aimhigher activity and decision to apply to HE, mixed with uncertainty about which individuals should be considered as targets, participants reflected on the difficulties of proving a direct (or even indirect) causal impact. The passage of time made it progressively harder to track individuals and their pathway towards HE, especially when the period could amount to eight years or more. Indeed, it is worth noting that older primary school children engaged by Aimhigher towards the end of its life will still not be entering HE for another three years yet.

The participants therefore expressed a dilemma faced by Aimhigher in respect of being able to prove the effectiveness of any particular activity or, for that matter, the whole suite of initiatives and activities; this notion of proving cause-and-effect is an epistemological challenge inevitably faced in assessing the impact of long-term and transformative initiatives such as Aimhigher.

#### **4.5 Changes in focus over time**

Participants generally described that, in the early days, Aimhigher engaged all aspects of the community in terms of those not traditionally associated with attending HE, including low paid workers and others considering a return to education, but, by the end, it was targeted almost solely at school children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One interviewee talked about how representatives of the Open University would attend their early partnership meetings, but, as the focus changed, their involvement waned, while another articulated how they felt that across the duration of Aimhigher's existence, the emphasis of its work altered from giving primacy to what they themselves offered to actually understanding the impact and effectiveness of the work for those in the target groups:

*“It was felt that at the start the focus was on the activities and the programmes and by the end it was all about the learner and learner outcomes.”*

Others talked about the increasing requirement to monitor and evaluate across the duration of Aimhigher changing the focus of activities. For example, regions were initially provided with significant autonomy, establishing plans that were particular to the context of their area of the country and integrating the experimentation discussed above. However, when regions were increasingly asked to measure impact across a breadth of activities, they became more prescriptive about what activities were commissioned; the requirement to evaluate was thus a limiting factor in terms of the type and scope of activities offered:

*“Then HEFCE finally indicated how impact should be measured and it went on and on and the diversity of the types of activities went down and down as people just started trying to meet the targets or only do things that could easily be measured.”*

*“It was the constant tinkering that influenced the partnerships and the partnership meetings. There was a definite drop-off in attendance as time and the tinkering went on and people realised there was not going to be so much it in for them.”*

There was significant scepticism from some participants that the reduced portfolio of activities that this approach generated was the most effective in terms of the overarching policy aims.

Several participants discussed a change in approach across the duration of Aimhigher with respect to the targeting of activities. For instance, one talked of a shift *“about halfway through Aimhigher’s life”* from the *“blanket targeting”* of specific groups (e.g. working class boys) to a more focused approach to ensure best use of limited resources. Another suggested a progressive move towards using the NS-SEC measure of parental occupational status, despite widespread misgivings, and the growing importance of disabled students in Aimhigher’s interventions.

#### **4.6 Lessons for contemporary WP practice**

It was felt that the lessons from Aimhigher are difficult to carry across into the current HE context due to shifts in government policy and within the HE sector (e.g. the removal of student number controls). However, several widely shared perspectives did emerge. The first was that outreach activity should not just concentrate on recruitment, but rather be sustained throughout the whole education journey; what one called *“a progressive framework”* beginning at the primary school age so that the possibility of progression to HE is not *“a shock to pupils when they take their GCSEs”*. One spoke of the need for early, consistent and collaborative outreach over time becoming more apparent across the lifetime of Aimhigher, whilst another suggested that

*“...it’s all down to divesting the learner with the baggage they travel with from their family backgrounds that gives them the mind-set that they are not going to fit in.”*

All bar one of the participants emphasised the need to work with younger pupils, and to continue to do so in a sustained and cumulative manner:

*“It wasn’t even good enough to go and work with some 13-plus kids – a lot of these things that you’re dealing with are so deeply embedded that you need to be doing things from the very earliest years in primary school and maybe even before that.”*

Our participants noted the need to embed WP work within the life of organisations. One spoke, for instance, of integrating Aimhigher into *“the flow of activities in a school or college”*, and the need for everybody to be *“delivering a similar message so that it’s reinforced”*. Others talked of the vital accumulation of activities over time:

*“You’ve got to work with them continuously: drip, drip, drip.”*

*“We needed to put together a whole series [...] of different activities which had progression built into them and which went across institutions and which offered different things for kids at different stages right the way from primary to the transition into higher education.”*

*“You’ve got to know what you’re doing to that individual over a number of years [...] The whole thing about the Progression Framework [was] whether single activities were better placed or whether you need to work with a smaller number of learners over a period of time to bring about that change.”*

The increased effectiveness of collaboration between all stakeholders rather than individual organisations acting on their own were apparent within all the accounts. It was broadly agreed that the replacement of financial and policy incentives to collaborate by incentives to compete (through institutional targets in Access Agreements) means that whilst a few particularly successful institutions might achieve well in terms of widening participation, this may not impact on overall inequalities with respect to HE, leading to a continuing legacy of untapped potential:

*“This notion that just giving money to universities and letting them get on with it isn’t going to work. They are either going to be all trying to work with the same schools or [pause] the ones that need it most are just going to be missed out.”*

Several participants suggested that the Coalition Government was coming to realise the folly of abolishing Aimhigher, in that it could generally do things cheaper and more effectively than single institutions could through their ability to co-ordinate and target more effectively. However, in terms of the regional structure and character of Aimhigher, lessons could usefully be learned. One of our interviewees referred to Aimhigher as *“a nationally co-ordinated, regionally run programme”*, or even *“a regionally coordinated local programme”*, and whilst that was appropriate for the first few years, with hindsight it should have been organised in a more coherent manner. Indeed, several participants talked of the need to co-ordinate better across the regions, whilst others emphasised the need to differentiate activities across the region to account for local social and labour market conditions.

More than one spoke of the challenges of working with the more isolated rural communities, not least in terms of time and cost as far as their ability to access events goes. This issue has become increasingly challenging following the demise of Aimhigher, since it seems increasingly unlikely that any given HEI will travel far to work with isolated communities when there are others closer to their campuses; several participants noted that there was always a tendency to work with schools closer to the high population centres where HEIs are based. Isolated communities were now seen to be more likely to fall between the cracks and to be the recipients of any HE-based outreach work:

*“Hard as it was [...] the fact of the Aimhigher funding and the fact of the commitment to Aimhigher was that many people did seriously go and bang on doors in those places – I’m not sure anyone is now.”*

Overall, there was a strong sense from the participants that some of the wisdom from the Aimhigher period was being lost within the philosophical and policy upheaval since 2011.

## 5. Conclusion

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The participants were (perhaps understandably) very positive about the progress accumulated through the Aimhigher programme. Foremost among these was the blueprint for inter-university and cross-sector working that provided for a more coherent approach to challenging ingrained differences in young people's trajectories towards HE. The loss of this collaborative ethos since 2011 was mourned, with concomitant fears about the geographical reach of individual institutions' WP operations, with rural/coastal communities and deeply deprived urban areas identified as likely losers as the cost of reaching-out is likely to be significantly more than the short-term benefits in recruitment and progress towards institutional Access Agreement targets. Work with primary and lower secondary school pupils was also felt to be in regrettable decline for much the same reason, while efforts to engage with work-based routes into HE had declined during the Aimhigher period – and have continued to do so.

While all the participants conceptualised Aimhigher as primarily focused on aspiration-raising, as per the policy guidance provided by government, a number reflected on a wider role in challenging the expectations of the adults surrounding the young people – mainly parents and teachers. This is a useful distinction between the individually-situated aspirations held by a young person and the socially-constructed expectations of the adult milieu through which they are passing. While the task of making HE appear relevant and achievable for young people had primacy, there was an important secondary task of dispelling the expectations that created negative 'self-fulfilling prophecies' about the potential of those involved.

Finally, the participants felt that the evaluation of Aimhigher, and WP activities more generally, was 'unfinished business'. While all were confident in the success of Aimhigher in influencing patterns of demand for HE, none felt that they could offer compelling evidence of the same. Three highly-plausible explanations were offered for this. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it was observed that the more successful that Aimhigher was in forging close positive partnerships with schools, the harder it was to disentangle a discrete contribution. Secondly, it was held that it was the accumulation of interventions with young people rather than single events, while it was impossible to assert the effectiveness of types of WP activity (e.g. summer schools) in the round, as these varied significantly in terms of their aims and operationalisation. Thirdly, the passage of time over which activities took place, and the temporal distance from these to the point of an individual's HE application (up to ten years), made establishing causality particularly problematic, especially when an individual's 'lightbulb moment' is sparked at different times and by different stimuli.

This study therefore paints a conflicted portrait of the Aimhigher period. On the one hand, those intimately involved were confident of its success in demystifying and raising aspirations for HE and

challenging prevailing expectations, which was inferred to impact on attainment and participation. On the other hand, they were unable, for ostensibly sound epistemological reasons, to evidence that success. This has ramifications for concepts of 'success' and 'proof' in WP activity in the future.

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