

Sustaining Aimhigher – a partnership approach

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Introduction

Partnership working has been promoted across the public sector in the UK and other western countries (Cardini, 2006; Lumby and Morrison, 2006; Ramsden et al., 2004) as a means of achieving challenging policy goals (Cardini, 2006). The rationale for partnership working is that service delivery is more coherent and effective (Balloch and Taylor, 2001), and that it adds value and creates synergies (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Dhillon, 2009). Within this there is an underlying assumption that there is an overarching common interest between the partners, which underestimates the challenges in bringing together partners with different traditions, missions and interests. As Cardini (2006) notes the discourse of local participation not only obscures the role of government in defining partnership arrangements and policy agendas, but also effectively devolves responsibility for failing outcomes. Despite the widespread promotion and practice of partnership working it remains relatively under-researched in terms of sustainability (Dhillon, 2009).

In this chapter we report on Aimhigher practitioners' views of partnership working, drawing on findings from a recent evaluation and sustainability study of the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Aimhigher partnership in the south-east of England (Hudson and Storan, 2010). In the first section we set out the background and context for the research; in the second section we outline our methodological approach in general and interviews with practitioners in particular. In the third section we discuss findings from interviews with practitioners, focussing on their perception of the value and impact of partnership work. In the final concluding section we offer some tentative thoughts on sustaining partnership working in a changing policy and reduced funding environment.

Background and contexts

Aimhigher

Aimhigher is a nationally funded programme targeted at young people (aged 9 to 19) primarily from lower socio-economic groups, with the aim of raising aspiration, improving attainment and increasing participation in higher education. The programme has developed over a number of years but can trace its origins to two progenitor programmes: Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression. The Excellence Challenge was established by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001 and was subsequently integrated with Partnerships for Progression, a joint Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Learning and Skills Council funded initiative, in 2004 to become a unified programme – Aimhigher – operating across England.

From its inception there have been a number of changes to the organisational, management and funding arrangements for the programme. Since 2008 it has operated through 42 area partnerships, which are made up of representatives from a variety of stakeholders including: local authorities, higher education institutions (HEIs), further education colleges (FECs), schools and other organisations such as Educational Business Partnerships (EBPs).

From the beginning of the programme, the funders have encouraged partnerships to devolve decisions about the use of Aimhigher funding to partners so that there would be a high degree of localised decision making, with partners devising working arrangements and provision supporting localised needs and reflecting capabilities. The principle of local autonomy for partnerships working within a national framework was reiterated in guidance for subsequent funding rounds (HEFCE, 2006, 2008a). In addition, HEFCE issued guidelines for targeting higher education outreach (HEFCE, 2007) and, most recently in 2008, for summer schools (HEFCE, 2008b). In each instance there was an expectation on the part of the funders that the Aimhigher partnership should secure the agreement of all partners prior to the submission and subsequent implementation of plans.

Partnership structure

Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight is a partnership of schools, 21 FECs, 4 HEIs, local authorities, 14-19 Consortia, EBPs, and National Health Service and other partners. On a day to day basis the work of the partnership is managed by a director and a central executive team, based at the 'lead' HEI which acts as banker with specific responsibilities to ensure accountability for funding. The director is responsible to the Area Partnership Committee (APC) whose role it is to: ensure effective partnership relations and partnership working; agree annual strategic and operational plans; monitor finances and evaluate activities; ensure resources are targeted in accordance with HEFCE targeting guidelines; and secure partners' agreement on allocation of funding (HEFCE, 2008a).

Political and socio-economic context

This research study was undertaken against a backdrop of political uncertainty and change, significant public sector spending cuts, and a rapidly changing and developing policy framework for HE funding and student fees. Political uncertainty in the period leading up to the General Election in May 2010 led to political change when the incumbent majority Labour Government was replaced by a Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. Secondly, the impact of the cuts (£6.2 billion of net savings) in public spending (in response to the predicted budget deficit of £163 billion) announced in the Coalition Government's first budget are only now being implemented as government departments work through the details. The impending Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) announcement is likely to bring further reductions in spending, the details of which are unlikely to be advised until late November or early December 2010. Thirdly, the Coalition Government has announced a number of significant changes to the education system, specifically aimed at the school sector, and has an ambitious implementation timetable. The higher education sector is not

immune to these changes and is currently awaiting the findings and recommendations from the Browne enquiry into higher education funding and student fees, which is likely to have a significant impact on the sector.

Despite the structural deficit and challenging fiscal environment the Coalition Government has maintained its commitment to widening participation and fair access, in what some have described as a second wave of social mobility. The current environment provides an opportunity to plan for a sustainable future for Aimhigher type activities, albeit one characterised by a high degree of uncertainty.

Methodology

In this section we set out the methodological approach adopted for the study in general and the data collection techniques used to gather data from practitioners in particular. As with all such studies our methodological approach was informed by the aims and objectives of the research and tempered by the resources available. To gain an understanding from the respondents' perspective we adopted a qualitative approach using a variety of methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal conversations. In addition, workshop activity at the partnership's annual conference also generated data.

Sampling strategy

As Kemper et al. (2003: 273) have noted, 'Sampling issues are inherently practical' and whilst theoretical concerns may in part drive scholarly decisions, the realities of time and resources are often the key drivers in terms of sampling decisions and strategies. Given the nature of the research, the funder recognised the importance of engaging and consulting with as many practitioners as possible, subject to availability and resources. Consequently, most practitioners with responsibility for delivering Aimhigher activities based in the four partner HEIs were selected for interview, together with practitioners from three FECs and five schools.

Respondents were selected on the basis that they could contribute to the research based on their role within their respective institution or organisation. A total of 56 practitioners were interviewed: 32 from the 4 partner HEIs; 10 from partner FECs; 6 from partner schools; 4 from EBPs; 1 from Basingstoke 14-19 Consortium; the consultant with responsibility for the healthcare strand; a representative from the Young Chamber (Isle of Wight); and a representative from the local authority (Isle of Wight). The partnership's annual conference provided an opportunity to engage with and gather further data from a wider range of practitioners and staff, including colleagues based in schools and colleges who were not selected for interview.

Data collection – semi-structured interviews

In qualitative interviewing we can distinguish between two approaches: firstly, the unstructured interview and, secondly, the semi-structured interview. In unstructured interviews the

researcher has a set of prompts, used as an aide mémoire, to guide them through a range of topics. This form of interviewing is similar in many respects to a conversation, with the interviewer responding to the interviewee on points of interest (Burgess, 1984). In semi-structured interviews the researcher has a list of questions or specific topics to be covered but the respondent or interviewee has freedom as to how they respond. The question order may vary from interview to interview and the researcher may ask additional questions based on the interviewee's responses. Generally, all of the topics, where relevant, will be covered and all of the questions will be asked in the same way using the same form of words.

Given that the funder had already identified the specific topics to be addressed it was decided to adopt a semi-structured approach. In addition with the imperative of being inclusive it was agreed that the duration of each interview would be 35-45 minutes, although some did continue for up to 60 minutes. It should not be assumed that shorter interviews were inferior in terms of quality of data. At the request of the funder interviews were not audio recorded. This decision was taken primarily on the basis of available resources and the time required, usually four to six hours, to transcribe an hour of audio recording; and secondly on the funder's concern that recording equipment or the thought of being recorded may discourage respondents from being as open as they might otherwise be. We recognised the potential reliability and validity threats of this approach and word processed hand written notes made during the interview as soon as practicable after the event. One consequence of this is that verbatim quotes are limited both in number and length.

Ethical considerations and informed consent

Ethical considerations should inform every aspect of the research process from design through to dissemination and publication of findings. In advance of the interview respondents were given a briefing sheet with details about the purpose of the research and how their contribution would be used. This was reiterated by the interviewer prior to each interview, emphasising that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymised. All respondents signed the consent forms provided to confirm that they had been informed of the nature and purpose of the research, and how their contribution would be used and reported.

Practitioners' perceptions of partnership working

In this section we discuss the findings from the study, focussing on practitioners' perceptions and views of partnership working. The HEFCE commissioned EKOS Consulting (2007) evaluation of Aimhigher provided a simple typology for describing models of partnership, with partnerships placed along a continuum ranging from highly centralised at one end, to highly decentralised at the other. Centralised models retain high levels of funding with a central team negotiating and purchasing provision from HE or other providers such as FE and EBPs, and then making this available to school and college learners. A decentralised

model devolves funding to schools and colleges with the expectation that they will design, deliver or purchase activity in line with the aims of Aimhigher.

The proponents of a more decentralised approach claim that there is a greater feeling of ownership by partners since all are beneficiaries of the resource and are empowered to operate the Aimhigher programme in ways deemed most appropriate to the needs of learners. The proponents of a more centralised approach claim that it is easier to coordinate the programme and provide quality assured activity that is more readily aligned with partnership objectives, and that there could be economies of scale from a centralised management approach.

In practice, examples of these two extremes are rare but there are partnership models that are characterised by more centralised arrangements and others that tend towards decentralisation. To a large extent it would appear that such differences of organisational forms within Aimhigher are as much about historical relations between partners in a region as they are about policy interventions.

In analysing the data on partnership working we found it helpful to draw on the five principles guiding partnership working identified by Billett et al. (2007): firstly, shared purpose and goals; secondly, relations with partners; thirdly, capacities for partnership work; fourthly, partnership governance and leadership; and finally, trust and trustworthiness. We discuss findings from interviews with practitioners in relation to each of these principles as follows.

Shared purpose and goals

When talking about partnership working most practitioners commented that having shared vision, aims and values is what binds the partnership – both individuals and institutions – together. As one HE practitioner commented, ‘We’re all going to the same goal’. A number of practitioners also commented that these shared values are what would sustain the partnership in a changing and challenging financial environment. Having a shared vision and goals can translate into practical benefits for the partners in terms of cost, quality, impact and innovation. Practitioners cited a number of practical benefits of partnership working ranging from joint training events to common or shared marketing materials, and from evaluation and monitoring to innovative activities, such as slots on a local radio station.

Training was often the first benefit that came to mind when practitioners were asked to think about the practical benefits of partnership working. Initial responses focussed on formal learning and specific training events delivered across the partnership, such as on child protection. In other instances practitioners responsible for a specific activity, such as mentoring, welcomed not only the support to undertake formal qualifications (NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) level three) but also the valuable staff development they had gained from establishing a practitioner forum, supported by the partnership. After

reflecting or being asked a supplementary question about informal learning, a number of practitioners noted that they had also gained invaluable staff development through attending and participating in a variety of partnership meetings, events and activities.

Some practitioners were critical of what they perceived as burdensome monitoring and reporting but the majority recognised the importance and value of evaluation in contributing to the evidence base and developing their practice in order to benefit learners.

Reporting requirements are burdensome...but things are becoming more streamlined.... (EBP practitioner)

The Aimhigher partnership brings huge added value, especially in terms of evaluation [and] working long-term. (EBP practitioner)

The innovative work with a local radio station, one respondent noted, would not have happened without the partnership. Another respondent noted that:

Aimhigher [Hampshire & Isle of Wight] was the body that led to innovation - but many of these innovative developments have not yet had time to put down roots. (FE practitioner)

Practitioners, particularly those based in HE, noted the institutional benefits that partnership working brought in terms of brokerage, enabling their institution to build better relationships with existing school and college partners as well as extending their reach beyond what they could achieve alone.

The partnership acts as a broker with schools. (HE practitioner)

Our institution has benefitted from Aimhigher in its relationships with schools and colleges. (HE practitioner)

Aimhigher has given us a wider reach. No one university can manage on their own. (HE practitioner)

Relations with partners

It would be unusual if some conflict and tension was absent from a partnership. The sign of a successful and mature partnership is that conflicts and tensions are recognised and that there are mechanisms to manage and ameliorate them. These conflicts and tensions are played out at both an individual and organisational or institutional level.

Priorities may be different...and loyalties can be divided. (HE practitioner)

Of the reported conflicts and tensions the most common was the perceived conflict between the interest of the institution and Aimhigher.

...who are you promoting, Aimhigher or the institution? (HE practitioner)

A number of practitioners, both in FE and HE, used the phrase ‘recruitment with integrity’ - putting the needs and interests of the learner above institutional interests. Practitioners with experience of partnership working prior to Aimhigher and the current partnership arrangements noted that:

...in the past institutions and individuals were less willing to share. (HE practitioner)

Throughout our interviews, practitioners based in HE, FE and schools were at pains to point out that Aimhigher had removed the negative aspects of competition between institutions, which consequently benefitted the learner.

Aimhigher has been invaluable because it is generic – rather than recruiting to a particular HEI. Aimhigher removes this competition element. (Practitioner, Isle of Wight)

HEIs work in a competitive way but Aimhigher breaks this down. (Practitioner, Isle of Wight)

Partnership governance and leadership

In common with other Aimhigher partnerships the Hampshire & Isle of Wight partnership also has a central team, which provides a management and support function, including training, reporting and monitoring, acting as an information resource and providing a single point of contact. In addition to its vital role as a source of support and advice, the central team undertakes a facilitating role between partner organisations.

Whilst acknowledging the value of and need for the functions undertaken by the central team, some respondents believed that it could be ‘leaner’ and more focussed. In raising concerns about reporting and monitoring a number of respondents, particularly those with longer service, recognised that these concerns had been taken on board and that processes had been streamlined where possible. This observation may indicate the quality and robustness of partnership relationships that have been formed. Generally members of the central team are highly regarded as practitioners and for their role in supporting and managing the partnership. The majority of practitioners described the central team as efficient, effective and supportive, and variously as:

Fantastic. (FE practitioner)

Central team provide massive support - would not have a clue without them. (FE practitioner)

Always very approachable, willing to listen and change.... (HE practitioner)

Ideas are welcomed at team meetings.... (HE practitioner)

They [central team] give us solutions to problems.... Targeting was a problem in a particular school...it's improved now.... (FE practitioner)

Respondents noted the positive attitude of the central team, described by a number of respondents as a 'can do attitude', an attitude and approach that appears to be prevalent across the partnership. Flexibility and being open to try different approaches were also cited as a strength and benefit by respondents.

There was also concern that without a central management and support function institutional priorities and preoccupations may become less coordinated and actually detract value from the institutions themselves.

In the absence of a central team it is likely that partnership working would continue – but diminish over time. There would be no reason to cooperate – we'd have other people to answer to. (HE practitioner)

There is a need and added value in having a central team providing coordination across the partnership. (EBP respondent)

Capacities for partnership working

Widening participation practitioners share a passion and often an emotional commitment to their work, and practitioners in the Hampshire & Isle of Wight partnership are no exception to this. In general turnover of staff in HE is low which provides a stable and experienced staff base. Whilst there is staff turnover in the partnership and widening participation teams within partner institutions, more often than not this is due to career progression. New members of staff are supported by the partnership and are welcomed for bringing new ideas and fresh thinking to existing practice.

A number of managers raised concerns about retention of staff as the end of the current funding period draws closer. Their concerns were twofold: firstly, a concern for their colleagues in securing continued or alternative employment; and secondly, if colleagues found alternative employment before the end of their contract, managers were concerned as to how activities that the institution had contracted to undertake would be delivered and *in extremis* the consequences of not being able to deliver.

Trust and trustworthiness

Whilst we did not specifically ask respondents about trust and trustworthiness it was evident from their responses that there is a high degree of trust amongst practitioners. This is supported by a number of other reports and evaluations; for example, in a recent report to the partnership Taylor (2009: 9) stated that ‘...a high level of trust is apparent amongst partners’.

As a mature partnership, Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight has well established processes that engage and inform as well as encourage cooperation and collaboration between partners. This involves focusing on partners’ needs and expectations, ensuring that differing needs are recognised and addressed.

Conclusions

Some of the uncertainties faced by the partnership during the period in which our fieldwork and initial analysis was undertaken have now been clarified, e.g. funding for Aimhigher will cease in July 2011, but others have not. Whilst the Coalition Government has accepted the recommendations of Lord Browne’s review of HE funding and fees, the sector awaits details of how these recommendations are to be operationalised and implemented.

In exploring partnership working within Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight, our research revealed multiple layers of collaboration and overlaps between individuals, institutions and organisations, and other overlapping partnerships such as the 14-19 Consortia. In part, this is a result of partnership working that predated Aimhigher.

From this focussed study we draw a number of conclusions about practitioners’ perceptions of partnership working. Most practitioners were positive about partnership working and articulated this in terms of ‘synergy’ and ‘added value’. The practical advantages of partnership working were seen as delivering effective and efficient services, and knowledge exchange. Practitioners recognised the tensions that can and do arise from cross-sector partnership working given institutions’ different traditions, missions and strategic objectives, but that they were subordinate to an overarching set of shared values and goals.

As an established partnership, links between both individuals and institutions have been forged over a period of time. Many practitioners commented on the strength of these links – a form of social capital - and how they contributed to the partnership’s resilience. It is this social capital, Dhillon (2009) argues, that will contribute to the sustainability of such educational partnerships in the absence of funding. Other commentators (Crawshaw and Simpson, 2002; Huxham, 1993) are less sanguine, drawing on evidence from a number of policy domains to suggest that resources and infrastructure are necessary to sustain such cross-sector partnerships.

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