



Evaluation & Sustainability Study

Aimhigher - Hampshire & Isle of Wight



**Continuum, University of East London
July 2010**

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

The fieldwork for this study was undertaken at a time of financial and political uncertainty. Firstly, political uncertainty in that the General Election was scheduled for 10 May 2010. Whilst psephologists and political pundits alike may have predicted the demise of the incumbent majority Labour government they were less sure of the complexion of the incoming administration, whether there would be a minority, majority or 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 £163bn) announced in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat 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, the details of which are unlikely to be advised until late November or early December. Thirdly, the current coalition has announced a number of significant changes to the education system, specifically aimed at the school sector, and have an ambitious implementation timetable. The higher education sector is not immune to these changes and is currently awaiting the findings and proposals from the Browne enquiry into student fees which 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 significant uncertainty.

2. Aims & Objectives

The aims and objectives of the research are set out in more detail in section 2: Aims & Objectives.

The Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Area Partnership Committee (APC) commissioned Continuum to undertake an evaluation of the partnership focussing on partnership working and Aimhigher activities from the practitioners' perspective – the operational staff (including ambassadors, associates and mentors) delivering activities and programmes; the strategic views of managers and the commitment of senior managers.

The output from these interviews and conversations would provide the basis for the series of proposals and recommendations contained in this as well as more generally contributing to the partnership's evidence base and five-point plan for sustainability.

In terms of research for the sustainability study as noted above the focus was on:

- *Partnership working* - Exploring respondent's perceptions of who they view as key partners and what makes for effective partnership work.
- *Activities* - Getting respondents to reflect on the effectiveness (impact, targets, targeting, and use of resources) of the activities that they deliver or are responsible for and how working in partnership setting contributes to this.
- *Learners* – Engaging with learners who deliver and support Aimhigher activities.

2. Methodology

The methodological approach and details of data collection methods of the study are set out in section 3: Methodology. We adopted a qualitative approach conducting semi-structured interviews with partnership staff working in all four partner HEIs as well as a selection of staff working in FECs and EBPs and had conversations with a number of senior managers. In addition to interviewing staff at each of these locations we also conducted focus group meetings with learners who are working on Aimhigher activities as ambassadors, associates and mentors. Initial findings from the fieldwork were presented at the partnership's annual conference which also provided an opportunity to gather further data – but more importantly engage staff in the process and create readiness for change.

3. Summary findings

Findings from the study are reported in section 4: Partnership working; section 5: Activities; section 6: Conversations with senior managers and section 7: Learner focus groups.

Below we summarise the findings from our fieldwork.

- Respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of the partnership, clear about the benefits of partnership working and the added value of a central management and support function.
- In terms of activities, respondents were passionate about the activities they delivered or were responsible for but recognised that in a reduced funding environment the scope, extent and coverage of the programme would have to be reduced. They were clear about operational issues such as targeting and concerned that quantitative measures of evaluation should not be privileged over qualitative measures.

- Respondents acknowledged that one-off interventions or activities had little or no impact as opposed to a coherent and progressive programme of activities, which the learner progression journey provides.
- Senior managers were supportive of Aimhigher and recognised the added value and benefits that accrued to their institution by delivering activities through partnership working.
- Learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities as Aimhigher Ambassadors and mentors, many of whom had been “Aimhigher’ed” or benefitted from progenitor programmes were tangible proof of the impact and success of the programme. They clearly articulated the aims and objectives of the programme, evidencing the high quality training they received. Their ability to engage in focus group discussion about the impact of activities on beneficiaries and the benefit they derived in terms of personal development, enhanced employability and academic skills was itself evidence of the partnership’s success.

4. Proposals and next steps

Proposals and next steps are set out in more detail in section 8: Proposals and next steps for the partnership, which is prefaced by a proposed twin track approach to sustainability.

- **Approach to sustainability**

Based on our interviews with Aimhigher practitioners, conversations with senior managers and changing policy landscape we suggest that the partnership adopts a twin-track approach to sustainability. This twin-track approach can be characterised as:

- *Continuity funding*

In terms of continuity we suggest that the partnership continues to explore alternative and additional sources of funding for its current portfolio of activities and a potentially different and more diverse portfolio of activities in the future.

The speed at which the partnership moves to embedding and mainstreaming activities will depend firstly on the capacity and willingness of partners and secondly on whether there is a transitional phase with funding post July 2011 and thirdly success in generating or obtaining funds from new funding streams.

- *Embedding and Mainstreaming*

The partnership has been considering embedding and mainstreaming activities within institutions and has successfully embedded some activities in schools through PSHE sessions. Initially embedding, incorporating Aimhigher

activities within another activity, may be easier than mainstreaming which more often than not entails a change in working practices.

Mainstreaming activities is more challenging, particularly when working with academic schools and faculties in HE, since it entails a change in working practices and ultimately some cost, which could be met from the widening participation premium funding. Aimhigher type activities could be mainstreamed within academic departments (and some cases service departments) by giving recognition, in terms of workload, for undertaking such activities.

- **Proposals**

Proposals from the study are set out in more detail in section 8: Approach to sustainability and proposals. The proposals are grouped by theme or activity, rather than being addressed to specific partners, since some of them are partnership wide and many of them are cross cutting and will be relevant, in varying degrees, to different partners. Other than the first proposal, those that follow are not set out in order of importance.

- **Review APC's five point action plan in the light of restrictions on communication and dissemination activities**

The task group reporting to the APC will need to review the five point action plan in the light of the recent guidance issued by HEFCE restricting any new spend on communication and dissemination activities. The task group will also need to review the plan following the CSR announcement in October 2010.

- **Maintain contracted service levels**

As the partnership moves into the final year of current funding the task group should review its contingency plans to assess the partnerships' resilience in the event of Aimhigher staff leaving prior to the end of their employment contract.

- **Take the lead role identifying alternative funding streams and developing bids**

The partnership should take a lead role in identifying, coordinating and developing bids to local authorities and charitable organisations.

In terms of institutional funding, the partnership should explore the opportunity for institutions to support Aimhigher type activities from their HEFCE allocated widening participation premium. In addition to seeking funding from HEIs and FECs the partnership also needs to work with school partners to identify potential funding streams.

The school pupil premium may provide a source of funding for Aimhigher type activities for disadvantaged young people. As a first step the task group, through the central team, should liaise with target schools in the first instance to explore how the

partnership could support schools to ensure maximum benefit is derived from the premium to benefit disadvantaged learner.

- **Provide expertise in learner targeting to institutions and make use of Aimhigher infrastructure for delivery of institutional outreach activities**

The partnership should continue to support institutions in meeting their strategic objectives in widening participation and outreach through its expertise and well developed infrastructure.

- **Develop and offer expertise in widening participation at postgraduate level**

The partnership could develop and offer support in terms of enhancing and delivering widening participation at postgraduate level.

- **Maintain effective channels of communication with partners and continue engaging with staff**

In the final year of current funding and beyond the partnership needs to maintain effective channels of communication with all partners and staff. In particular the APC task group should continue the conversations with senior managers, engaging them at appropriate times to ensure that institutional commitment is translated into institutional support and funding for Aimhigher type activities

- **Promote shared staff development and explore other opportunities to collaborate and share services between partners**

The partnership has demonstrated that it has the capacity to deliver a range of shared services which provide added value and benefits to institutional partners. The partnership should explore further opportunities for collaboration and cooperation and how its expertise and infrastructure could be used to share other services.

- **Provide monitoring and evaluation to HE and FE partners**

The partnership has a wealth of experience and expertise in monitoring and evaluating Aimhigher activities and programmes. This experience and expertise could be used to supplement existing institutional resources with a view to improving monitoring and enhancing evaluation of institutional outreach activities

This expertise and experience could also be deployed beyond traditional outreach work to linked areas such as admissions where monitoring and evaluation could identify tensions or anomalies between pre-entry advice and guidance and fair admissions procedures, as well as providing contextual data to support admission decision making.

- **Informing and aligning institution's strategic objectives**

The partnership should support HE and FE partners, where appropriate, to ensure that the full range of Aimhigher activities are reported in each partner institution's WPSA; demonstrating their commitment to embed widening participation.

- **Embedding Aimhigher in local education strategies and developing closer links with local education authorities**

The partnership needs to articulate to local authorities how the learner progression journey supports whole school improvement as well as individual learner achievement. The partnership has a strong evidence base supported by research and evaluation to assure local authorities of the impact of Aimhigher aspiration and attainment raising activities on learners.

- **Embedding Aimhigher activities in the curriculum**

The partnership should continue to work with partners to embed Aimhigher activities into the curriculum at all levels.

- **Brand value, leveraging funding and the multiplier effect**

The partnership should continue to maximise Aimhigher's brand value, using it to leverage funding.

- **Sustaining Health & Social Care**

The partnership should continue to support the work of the healthcare strand coordinator who is engaging with senior managers and Chief Executive Officers of NHS Trust in order to demonstrate how Aimhigher type activities align with their strategic aims in terms of workforce development.

- **Lobbying**

The partnership needs to continue political lobbying activity, which commenced prior to the General Election in May 2010, building on the support and recognition achieved to date.

- **More focussed targeting**

Recognising the changing funding environment and the increasingly likelihood of reduced funding post 2011 the partnership need to begin reviewing how Aimhigher type activities will be targeted in the future. Following the CSR announcement in October 2010, the partnership will be better placed to review the operational impact of any financial settlements.

- **Use of technology and blended widening participation activity**

The partnership should build on its successful experience of using ICT to further develop and deliver blended widening participation activities.

- **Reporting and recording value of Aimhigher activities for schools and colleges**

The partnership should ensure that impact of Aimhigher activities are reported and recorded by partners at local level in statutory returns such as the school SEFs and SIPs as well as captured in external monitoring reports such as OFSTED.

- **Further research**

The partnership should continue to undertake research to evaluate its activities and contribute to the evidence base as well as informing practice and decision making. Given the potential of the pupil premium as a funding stream for Aimhigher type activities the partnership should consider undertaking a focussed research study across partnership to ascertain the views of head teachers and senior management teams in how the partnership could best support them on the shared agenda raising the aspiration and attainment of disadvantaged learners.

1.0 Introduction - Background & Context

In this section we present the background and context to the research.

Firstly, we set out the demographics of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight, focusing on location, governance, population, education, deprivation and rural isolation and their impact on the activities delivered by the Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight Partnership. Secondly, we briefly set out the background to the Aimhigher programme, highlighting the consequences of the uncertainty of future funding and the impact of the moratorium on communication and dissemination activities as a result of government cuts. Thirdly, we describe the broader political and policy context, noting the changes resulting from the recent general election, recent reports and current reviews which may influence government policy, and finally the uncertainty of the coalition government's developing education policies across both higher, further and secondary education.

1.1 Hampshire and Isle of Wight

"Its rural image, rich wildlife and varied landscape belie many of the realities of its numerous urban and rural communities." (Hampshire County Council, 2008:9)

1.1.1 Location

The geographical area of Hampshire (including the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton) is situated in the south of England, approximately mid-way between the east and west ends of the South Coast. It is bordered to the north by Berkshire, to the east by Surrey and West Sussex, and to the west by Dorset and Wiltshire. The Isle of Wight is located in the English Channel, some 3-5 miles off the south coast of Hampshire, separated from the mainland by the Solent strait.

Whilst most of the county of Hampshire is within 1-2 hours reach of London by main-line railway and motorway links, the Isle of Wight does not enjoy the same communication links. As noted in the South East Plan (SEERA, 2006) the Isle of Wight is reliant on efficient and well managed cross-Solent links to the mainland, the importance of improving the transport infrastructure has been recognised in the Regional Transport Strategy.

1.1.2 Governance

With the exception of the three unitary authorities: Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton, local government responsibilities are divided between Hampshire County Council, based in Winchester, and eleven district/borough councils: Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, East Hampshire District Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Fareham Borough Council, Gosport Borough Council, Hart District Council, Havant Borough Council, New Forest District Council, Rushmoor Borough Council, Test Valley Borough Council and Winchester City Council.

1.1.3 Population

The geographical area of Hampshire (including the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton) has a population of 1.7 million which is forecast to increase by 55,000 people (0.9%) between 2009 and 2016. During this period the population of Hampshire is forecast to age, with more people in the older age groups and fewer children and young people. These changes are the result of low mortality and fertility rates. Consequently there will be a small decline in the working age population and school age population over the period (Hampshire County Council, 2010).

The Isle of Wight has a population of 133,000 (Census 2001) and also has a larger percentage of people aged over 65 (22.4%) compared with the national average (16%) for England and Wales.

1.1.4 Education & Qualifications

Provision

Hampshire County Council

There are 267 Local Education Authority (LEA) maintained schools in Hampshire: 196 primary schools, 71 secondary schools (seven of whom have a sixth form); and 23 FE colleges (Hampshire County Council, 2010a). Hampshire is also served by four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Southampton Solent University, University of Portsmouth, University of Southampton, and University of Winchester.

Southampton

There are 73 Local Education Authority (LEA) maintained schools in Southampton: 61 primary schools, 10 secondary schools, 2 academies and 4 FE Colleges.

Portsmouth

There are 63 Local Education Authority (LEA) maintained schools in Portsmouth: 53 primary schools, 10 secondary schools and 4 FE Colleges.

Isle of Wight

There are sixty-nine LEA maintained schools on the Isle of Wight: 46 primary schools, 15 middle schools and five high schools. There is one college, the Isle of Wight College, which is located outside Newport. (Eduwight, 2010). There are no HEIs on the Isle of Wight. Because the island is a rural community many of the existing schools are small, with lower average numbers of pupils in comparison to more urban areas.

School reorganisation on the Isle of Wight

School reorganisation is one of the local authority's seven key priorities set out in the *Corporate Plan 2009 – 2013* (Isle of Wight, 2009a). The local authority's vision for regeneration and education, which detailed in *The Island's education vision* (Isle of Wight, 2009b), is to raise educational attainment and opportunity for learners. To achieve this, a strategic decision was taken to move from a three tier school system (primary, middle and high), to a two tier school system (primary and secondary).

The aspiration and achievement raising work of Aimhigher is noted a number of the proposals which have been submitted to run the new secondary schools. One example is Innovative Schools who are bidding to run three of the five new schools: Carisbrook Academy, Ryde Academy and Sandown Academy. In their proposals they highlight the important work undertaken by Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight Partnership citing a range of examples such as: A generic statement in all three proposals, confirm that they will: “...support the Aimhigher programme which can encourage all students to be aware of the benefits that higher education can bring, whatever their background.” (Innovate 2009a:10, 2009b:10 and 2009c:10)

As a respondent, based on the Isle of Wight, noted: “This will be a difficult transition to manage.” The reorganisation of schools on the Isle of Wight provides an invaluable opportunity for Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight, to work with the local authority and newly establish schools, supporting them in raising learner aspiration and attainment and embedding Aimhigher activities in the curriculum.

Achievement and attainment

Hampshire

As noted in the Quality of Life Report (Hampshire County Council 2008) Hampshire is amongst the top performing counties at both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, and at GCSE level, attainment is amongst the highest of the shire counties.

The tables below derived from Department for Education (DfE) achievement and attainment tables illustrate achievement and attainment in Hampshire schools and colleges at GCSE (Level 2) and equivalent (Table 1), and General and Applied A/AS (Level 3) and equivalent compared to the average for England (Table 2.)

2009	Level 2 (5+ A*-C) including English and maths GCSEs	English and maths skills at Level 2
Hampshire Local Authority Average	55.4%	58.6%
England (maintained schools only)	50.7%	55.4%
Southampton	43.1%	48%
Portsmouth	39.5%	42.2%

Table 1: GCSE (Level 2) and equivalent 2009

Source: Department for Education

2009	General and Applied A/AS or Equivalent Achievement	
	Average point score per student	Average point score per examination entry
Hampshire Local Authority Average	786.1	213.4
England Average (excluding independent schools)	721.3	208.3
Southampton	657.9	198.9
Portsmouth	697.2	207.0

Table 2: General and Applied A/AS or Equivalent Achievement 2009

Source: Department for Education

Whilst the tables above show that the local authority average is higher than the rest of England these overall figures mask significant variations between areas and individual schools in Hampshire. Whilst 26 schools are in the top quartile for Level 2 (5+ A*-C) including English and maths GCSEs, 15 schools are in the lowest quartile.

Isle of Wight

The tables below derived from Department for Education (DfE) achievement and attainment tables illustrate attainment in the Isle of Wight schools and college at GCSE (Level 2) and equivalent (Table 1), and General and Applied A/AS (Level 3) and equivalent compared to the average for England (Table 2.)

2009	Level 2 (5+ A*-C) including English and maths GCSEs	English and maths skills at Level 2
Local Authority Average	41.6%	47.4%
England (maintained schools only)	50.7%	55.4%

Table 3: Isle of Wight Local Authority – GCSE (Level 2) and equivalent 2009

Source: Department for Education

2009	General and Applied A/AS or Equivalent Achievement	
	Average point score per student	Average point score per examination entry
Local Authority Average	646.4	206.1
England Average (excluding independent schools)	721.3	208.3

Table 4: Isle of Wight Local Authority - General and Applied A/AS or Equivalent Achievement 2009

Source: Department for Education

The levels of achievement on the Isle of Wight are significantly lower than the rest of England and consequently Hampshire and as stated above the overall figures mask variations between individual schools.

The Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight Partnership has focussed on developing partnerships with school with less than 25% attainment at GCSE (Level 2) or equivalent. Pleasingly there has been a year on year increase in the number of learners achieving 5+A*-C grades at GCSE (Level 2) and equivalent with an increase of 7.3% among Aimhigher priority schools. The partnership also has attainment raising programmes in mathematics and English which are also showing positive results. In the first year of operation (2006/7) the mathematics attainment raising programme saw the proportion of learners attaining A*-C grades in the targeted area rise from 37% to 42% (Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight, 2009)

Qualifications, skills levels and employment

Analysis by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) of the qualifications and skills in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight shows that whilst qualification levels are broadly similar to national levels there is a concentration in the middle range, as illustrated in the table overleaf.

Qualification Level	Hampshire & Isle of Wight	England
No qualifications	24.4%	29%
NVQ1	17.9%	17%
NVQ2	21.2%	19%
Trade apprenticeships	8.4%	7.9%
NVQ3	9.4%	8%
NVQ4+	19.8%	20%
Other qualifications	7.2%	7%

Table 5: Qualification - All people aged 16 -74

Source: Census 2001

Analysis by SEEDA notes that a significant minority of young people and adults are not equipped with work ready skills. Since most newly created jobs will be in the knowledge-based sector employers will require staff with higher-level academic and vocational qualifications, particularly graduates. There is a clear priority for the public sector, further and higher education, employers and other agencies to work to enhance the qualifications levels within the area.

1.1.5 Urban and rural deprivation

As noted above whilst the overall picture, on particular indicators such as educational attainment, may be one of excellence and achievement, these overall figures mask significant variations; in the case of education at school level; and on other indicators and measures, at neighbourhood level.

New measures of deprivation at neighbourhood level introduced with the Indices of Multiple Deprivation Index 2007 highlights these variations. For example, whilst Hart ranks as the least deprived district nationally, Havant and Gosport are in the upper half of the most deprived areas (Hampshire County Council, 2008). Living in rural and isolated areas means that residents have to travel significant distances to access amenities and services such as their general practitioner, supermarket or bank.

For learners travel to the mainland is prohibitively expensive since the adult fare (£19.00 return) applies to those aged sixteen and over. Using Aimhigher funding to cover travel expenses provides learners with invaluable off-island experiences as well as funding travel for learners delivering Aimhigher activities on the island.

1.2 Aimhigher

Aimhigher is a targeted programme for young people aged 9 to 19 in England. 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 (EC), was established by the then Department for Education & Skills (DfES) in 2001 and was subsequently integrated with Partnerships for Progression (P4P), a joint HEFCE and LSC funded initiative in 2004 to become a unified programme - Aimhigher, operating across England.

Since its inception there have been a number of changes to the organisational and management and funding arrangements for the programme. For example in 2008 the funding for regional activity was withdrawn and currently operates through 42 area partnerships. Partnerships are made up of representatives from: Local Authorities, HEIs, FECs, schools and other interested bodies such as EBPs. The key aims of the programme are threefold:

- Raise aspiration
- Raise attainment
- Increase participation

It achieves this through a range of activities designed to raise aspiration and attainment, provide appropriate information, advice and guidance – with the aim of increasing participation.

From inception the funders have encouraged partnerships to devolve decisions about the use of Aimhigher funding to the new partnerships so that there would be a high degree of localised decision making with partners devising working arrangements and provision which reflected localised needs and capabilities.

The principle of local autonomy for partnerships working within a national framework was reiterated in guidance for subsequent funding rounds (HEFCE 2006/02) and (HEFCE 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.

All Aimhigher partnerships responded positively to the challenges presented by the various sets of guidelines and this in itself is testimony to the degree of commitment within partnerships to work together. However, this report provides further detail on the degree of effectiveness of partnership working based on the perceptions of the partners themselves.

It is important to note that the Aimhigher is but one of a wider number of reforms and initiatives, such as reform of FE sector, student support etc. aimed at widening participation. Understanding Aimhigher as part of a larger policy package has had consequences for example for the national evaluation of Aimhigher as its impact may be contingent on reforms and developments in the school sector.

1.3 Policy context

“In the coming months and years we will need to engage with a newly evolving agenda, requiring us to aim wider, as well as higher.” (Ebdon, 2009)

The new coalition administration elected in May 2010 has announced a series of measures to address the current predicted budget deficit of £163bn. Universities face a cut in funding of more than 9% next year, although the recurrent grant for teaching and research has largely been protected. Some institutions will see their grant cut further subject to HEFCE imposing fines for over recruiting and exceeding the HEFCE cap. Of the 130 HEIs in England some 62 will see their grants increase in cash terms next year, however institutions which exceeded the HEFCE cap in terms of undergraduate recruitment may see their grant cut further if HEFCE impose fines. The 20,000 additional places proposed by the previous Labour administration have been reduced to 10,000 by the current Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition.

The coalition has also announced budget cuts across central government including Education 1.1% cut and Business 3.8% cut. Budget freezes and cuts on other public sector bodies will also impact on HE and FE providers. Examples include the cost saving of £1.65bn that Local Authorities are expected to make and the cuts, an average of 17% on Regional Development Authorities such as SEEDA. The detail of the cuts will be necessary to understand the impact on FE and HE and consequently the partnership.

Whilst the Chancellor delivered his budget announcement towards the later end of this study the implications for Aimhigher activities are only just starting to filter through. One example of this is the recent HEFCE guidance to Aimhigher partnerships on the marketing and advertising freeze (HEFCE, 2010). The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) settlement, which will also have implications for future Aimhigher funding, will not be announced until 20 October 2010 and the

detailed financial settlements are unlikely to be advised before the end of November or early December.

Yet despite the structural deficit and challenging fiscal environment prior to the election each of the three main political parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat) endorsed and supported the notion of social mobility, as articulated, for example in the Milburn Report (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). This support continues to be articulated post election by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition. Given the political will for what some have described as a second wave of social mobility – which has widening participation and fair access at the forefront - this environment provides an opportunity to plan for a sustainable future for Aimhigher type activities albeit one characterised by significant uncertainty.

1.4 Organisational sustainability

As Adelman and Taylor (2003:1) have commented:

“Too many promising innovations disappear when project funding ends. As a result, interest in the problem of sustainability has increased markedly in recent years”

In this sub-section we consider organisational sustainability in what we have previously described as a constantly changing policy landscape and a challenging economic environment. As Putnik (2009) has commented, since older “classic” strategies such as productivity, leanness, agility and intelligence are now considered ineffective in such environments; research, management and policymaking communities have embraced sustainability as a possible solution.

However, sustainability is a complex multi-dimensional phenomenon with different and contested definitions, according to the domain. Our focus is on the sustainability of organisations and institutions in uncertain or turbulent environments and what factors contribute to this and which are likely to militate against it.

1.4.1 Turbulent environments

Institutions and partnerships do not operate in isolation; they are subject to numerous interactions both within and across their boundaries. The Aimhigher partnership, drawing on the typology developed by Emery and Trist (1965), is now in a “turbulent field.” The turbulent field is one of high complexity and high dynamism where changes and variations in the external environment lead to significant organisational uncertainty. In some cases this turbulent external environment can become the impetus for more visionary organising and planning (Edwards, 2009).

Institutions and individuals working within them are faced with the challenge of retaining a coherent identity and stability whilst simultaneously embracing radical change and transforming in response to changes in the external environment (Emery, 2000).

1.4.2 Shared vision and values as a coping mechanism

Whilst individual institutions may find it challenging to maintain organisational stability and adapt through their own actions, the shared values that are embodied in the partnership may be viewed as a coping mechanism that make it possible to deal with uncertainty (Emery & Trist, 1965).

We develop the importance of shared vision and values in section 4: Partnership Working and draw in the more recent work of Dhillon (2009) who undertook a study of an educational partnership in the north of England.

2.0 Aims & Objectives

In this section we set out the aims and objectives of the research based on the brief provided by the funder.

Continuum was commissioned by the Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Area Partnership Committee to undertake an evaluation of the partnership focussing on partnership working and Aimhigher activities from the practitioners' perspective – the operational staff (including ambassadors, associates and mentors) delivering activities and programmes; the strategic views of managers and their commitment to Aimhigher activities.

The output from these interviews and conversations would provide the basis for the proposals contained in this report as well as more generally contributing to the partnership's evidence base and five point plan for sustainability.

The Area Partnership Committee (APC) has devised a concise five point plan for sustainability which includes:

1. Meeting (lobbying) local Members of Parliament
2. Increased media coverage
3. Establishing a task group reporting to APC
4. Communication and dissemination events
5. Research

In terms of research the focus for this study was on:

Partnership working - Exploring respondent's perceptions of who they view as key partners and what makes for effective partnership working – understanding the relationship not just between institutions and organisations but also internal relationships within organisations.

Activities - Getting respondents to think firstly, about the effectiveness (impact on learners, learner targeting, and use of resources) of the activities that they deliver or are responsible for. Secondly, how working in a partnership setting impacts on this. Thirdly, to consider how such activities could be delivered in a reduced funding environment.

Institution commitment – Through informal conversations with senior managers at partner HEIs, reinforcing the institutional benefits of Aimhigher activities, the added value of partnership working as well as exploring how institutions could sustain Aimhigher type activities in the future.

Learners – Last but not least engaging with learners as deliverers (ambassadors, associates, mentors,) and beneficiaries of Aimhigher activities.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this section we set out the methodological approach adopted for the research and the rationale for the sampling strategy and data collection methods based on the brief provided by the funder.

The research team adopted a qualitative approach in order to better understand the delivery and impact of Aimhigher activities from the perspective of practitioners. In terms of data collection a variety of interview methods were used including: semi-structured interviews with practitioners; focus groups with learners based in HE and FE working as Aimhigher Ambassadors, Associates and Mentors; and a series of informal conversations with senior managers. In addition, workshop activity at the partnership's annual conference also generated data from the broad range of practitioners and staff attending the event.

3.2 Sampling strategy

"Sampling issues are inherently practical" as Kemper, Stringfield & Teddlie, have noted (2003:273) 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.

A purposive or expert sampling strategy was utilised for all phases of the research. This strategy involves assembling a sample of people with known or demonstrable experience and expertise in a particular subject or area, in this case the Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight partnership, and the contribution that they could make to the evaluation and sustainability study. 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. In addition a number of practitioners from three FECs and schools were also selected.

In addition interviews were undertaken with staff from The Partnership Network, Portsmouth & South East Hampshire Education Business Partnership and Basingstoke 14-19 Consortium; the health and social care consultant; representatives from schools on the Isle of Wight, plus representatives from the local authority and Young Chamber, also on the Isle of Wight. Informal discussions were also held with senior managers (Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro-Vice Chancellor) at each of the four partner HEIs.

In terms of research sites the funder specified that interviews were to be undertaken at the four partner HEIs: The University of Southampton, Southampton Solent University, University of Portsmouth and The University of Winchester, plus three Further Education Colleges: Andover College, Queen Mary's College,

Basingstoke College of Technology and The Isle of Wight College. Respondents at each of the institutions were selected by the funder, whilst respondents for the learner focus groups were selected by the Aimhigher Coordinator (or equivalent) at individual institutions.

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.

We used the framework (a six point checklist) originally suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) and further developed by Curtis, Gesler, Smith and Washburn (2000) to assess and evaluate our purposive sampling strategy. The six-point checklist is as follows: Firstly, that the sampling strategy should be relevant to the conceptual framework and the research questions; secondly that the sample should generate rich information; thirdly, the sample should enhance generalisability of findings; fourthly, that the sample should provide believable descriptions and explanations; fifthly, the ethical nature of the strategy and finally, the feasibility of the sampling plan.

3.3 Ethical considerations and informed consent

Respondents were briefed in advance of the interviews and focus groups. For one-to-one and group interviews (there were several dyads and two triads) respondents received a briefing note from the Director of Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight together with a list of interview themes. For the focus groups, respondents received a briefing note which incorporated specific questions and themes to be addressed during the meeting.

In addition, at the beginning of the interview or focus group meeting all respondents were briefed by the interviewer or focus group moderator and were advised that their participation was voluntary, that they were entitled to refuse to answer particular questions and that they could withdraw from the interview or focus group at any time.

All respondents signed the consent forms provided to confirm that they had been informed of the nature and purpose of the research, how their data would be used and reported.

Briefing notes and a copy of the consent form are reproduced as Appendices 1-3.

3.4 Interviews

3.4.1 Number and selection

As noted previously 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 55 practitioners were interviewed: 32 from HEI partners; 10

from FECs; 6 from schools 4 from EBPs, the consultant with responsibility for the healthcare strand, a representative from the Young Chamber (IoW) and a representative from the local authority (IoW).

3.4.2 Rationale for method

In qualitative interviewing we can distinguish between two approaches: firstly, the unstructured interview and secondly, 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 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 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 for each hour of speech, to transcribe audio recordings and secondly, that recording equipment or the thought of being recorded can be off putting for some respondents. 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.

3.4.3 Ethical considerations and informed consent

In advance of the interview respondents were given full information about the purpose of the research and how their contribution would be used. In addition the researcher briefed respondents, in a group at the start of the day in some institutions, and individually in other institutions prior to commencing the interview. All respondents signed the consent forms provided to confirm that they had been informed of the nature and purpose of the research, how their data would be used and reported.

3.5 Focus Groups

3.5.1 Number and selection

A total of 42 learners at eight institutions: four HEIs and two FECs in Hampshire and one FEC and one sixth form on the Isle of Wight participated in focus group discussions. The largest focus group comprised nine learners, whilst the smallest was three. All but one of the groups was conducted over a buffet lunch in order to minimise impact on the learners' time.

Respondents were selected by Aimhigher staff at their respective institution and therefore the majority were currently involved in delivering Aimhigher activities as Aimhigher Associates, Mentors or Ambassadors; some had also been the beneficiaries of Aimhigher or progenitor programmes. A couple of respondents were not currently involved in delivery but had recent experience on which to draw and comment.

3.5.2 Rationale for method

The rationale for convening focus groups is that they enable the researcher to explore the degree of consensus on a particular topic (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993) and the interaction between respondents – listening and questioning – enables them to re-evaluate their own views and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). We wanted to find out not only what issues were salient to participants and why (Morgan, 1988) but also understand the gap between intention and action or between what people say and what they do (Lankshear, 1993).

This method can be empowering for participants who are given the chance to work collaboratively with the research team, contributing to and informing the decision making process. However, we recognise that this experience may not be empowering for all respondents who may be less articulate or uncomfortable expressing their views in a peer group setting. An experienced moderator can provide reassurance for such respondents and if appropriate consider other ways of ascertaining their views. This was the case at one of the focus group meetings where a learner found it difficult to express their views and encouragement may have only heightened this, the moderator took time after the group to listen to the respondents comments.

3.5.3 Ethical considerations and informed consent

As Homan (1991) has noted ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research. As noted in the section above on informed consent, respondents were given full information about the purpose of the research and how their contribution would be used. Whilst none of the issues to be discussed were considered sensitive, participants were advised that their contribution would be shared with the group, as well as the moderator, and asked to keep confidentially in respect of other participants' contributions.

3.6 Conversations with senior managers

3.6.1 Number and selection

A member of the research team and the Director of Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight met with the VC, DVC or PVC and the senior manager with responsibility for widening participation at each of the four partner HEIs.

3.6.2 Rationale for method

Since the purpose of meeting with senior managers was to open an on-going dialogue: reinforcing the institutional benefits of Aimhigher activities, the added value of partnership working as well as exploring how institutions could sustain Aimhigher type activities in the future, these meetings were presented and structured as a conversation between participants rather than an interview.

3.6.3 Ethical considerations and informed consent

The VC, DVC or PVC and the senior manager with responsibility for widening participation at each institution were briefed in advance on the purpose of the meeting and the importance of their contribution to the study. Their participation in the meeting or conversation was taken as informed consent. The respondents were not asked to sign an informed consent form since it was felt that this would detract from the conversational approach and rapport that the partnership has established with them.

3.7 Aimhigher Annual Conference – Workshop activities

The research team were asked to give a short presentation at the partnership's annual conference: *Renewing the commitment to social justice*, setting out early thoughts and findings from the fieldwork. Following the presentation delegates were asked to participate in a workshop activity – addressing as best they could – three specific issues:

- Models of partnership working
- Learners
- Activities

The feedback from this exercise was included in the deliberations of this report and we are grateful to conference attendees for their contributions.

A copy of the activity sheet, which included a number of prompt questions, is reproduced as Appendix 4.

3.8 *Documentary research*

In addition to fieldwork we have also drawn on a number of recent reports (Johnson, 2008, 2009; and Taylor, 2009) commissioned by the Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Partnership, as well as a range of academic articles and reports to support the findings from this study and inform the proposals and recommendations set out in this report.

4.0 Partnership working

4.1 Introduction

The HEFCE commissioned EKOS evaluation of Aimhigher (EKOS, 2007) 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 which is more readily aligned with partnership objectives and 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 which are characterised by more centralised arrangements and others which tend towards decentralisation. To a large extent it would appear that such differences of organisational forms in 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 identified by Billett, Ovens, Clemans and Seddon (2007) guiding partnership working:

- Shared purpose and goals
- Relations with partners
- Capacities for partnership work
- Partnership governance and leadership
- Trust and trustworthiness

4.2 Shared purpose and goals

"We're all going to the same goal."
(HE Practitioner)

The purpose of the partnership is to make an effective contribution to widening participation in higher education in the South East Region of England, supporting the national initiative to increase participation by those aged 18-30 by 2010. As noted previously, this shared vision, aims and values is what binds the partnership, both individuals and institutions, and will sustain it going forward.

One of the themes that arose during a number of interviews was impartiality particularly in the context of formal information advice and guidance (IAG), in the course of Aimhigher activities and student recruitment. In the context of IAG one practitioner noted the importance of impartiality in providing advice to learners which she summarised as:

"right course, right learner."
(HE Practitioner)

Another colleague noted that his college had a policy of *"recruitment with integrity."*
(FE Practitioner)

4.2.1 Practical benefits

Having a shared vision and goals translates 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.

Training and staff development

Training was often the first benefit that came to mind when practitioners were asked to think about the practical benefits of partnership working. Practitioners initially focused on formal learning and specific training events, such as child protection.

Other practitioners working on a specific mentoring activity noted the valuable staff development they had gained from establishing a forum, supported by the partnership. A number of these practitioners are also being supported by the partnership to undertake a NVQ Level 3.

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 partnership meetings.

Common or shared materials

The partnership produces a range of high quality resources both electronic and paper based for learners, parents and practitioners. The web site provides an accessible portal for practitioners and beneficiaries with links to a wide range of resources.

In terms of printed materials the partnership has produced a number of leaflets and guides such as: *“A Guide to Qualifications;”* booklets, such on sector specific progression and as well reports on activities such as: *“Celebrating success: examples of effective practice in raising aspirations and attainment,”* aimed at learners and teachers. Whilst the Aimhigher Coordinator’s Pack is one example of a comprehensive resource put together for practitioners.

“There is both value and economy to be gained from producing shared marketing materials”

(EBP Respondent)

Evaluation

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 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, working long-term.”

(EBP Practitioner)

From discussions with practitioners and reviewing evaluation reports the partnership’s work and practice continues to be developed and informed to the benefit of practitioners and learners.

Innovative activities

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

“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.” (Practitioner, Isle of Wight)

Extended and better relationships

Practitioners, particularly those based in HE noted the benefits that Aimhigher activities and partnership working brought in terms of enabling their institution to

build better relationship with existing school and college partners as well as extend their reach beyond what they could do alone.

“Aimhigher has given us a wider reach. No one university can manage on their own.”

(HE Practitioner)

“Our institution has benefitted from Aimhigher in its relationships with schools and colleges.”

(HE Practitioner)

“The partnership acts as a broker with schools.”

(HE Practitioner)

4.3 Relations with partners

4.3.1 Mature and successful partnership

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 organizational or institutional level.

“Priorities may be different and loyalties can be divided.”

(HE Practitioner)

This tension or differing emphasis was also raised in one of the HE Focus Groups where learners recognised through their multiple roles as Aimhigher Ambassadors and Ambassadors for their institution that there was the potential for conflict of interest. They saw it as:

“Different t-shirt, different event, different message.”

(HE Focus Group)

Of those who reported conflicts and tensions the most common was the perceived conflict between the interest of the institution and Aimhigher with promotion being cited as an example.

“..who are you promoting, Aimhigher or the institution?”

(HE Practitioner)

However, whilst recognising the potential for conflict of interest, were supportive of their institution’s policy of:

“...recruitment with integrity...”

(FE Focus Group)

both as a policy and a means of avoiding conflict of interest by putting the needs of the learner first.

A number of practitioners, with experience of partnership prior to Aimhigher and the current partnership arrangements noted that:

“...in the past institutions and individuals were less willing to share”
(HE Practitioner)

4.3.2 Collaboration is more productive than competition

Running throughout our interviews practitioners based in HE, FE and schools were at pains to point out that Aimhigher has 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)

4.3.3 Schools as partners

When talking about their school based partners a number of practitioners commented that whilst they had established good working relations with schools, communication of the Aimhigher offer and the benefit to the school in general and learners in particular could be better. This point was also noted in a previous study of six Southampton schools; engagement with Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Partnership (Johnson, 2008).

Practitioners also commented that they experienced difficulty contacting staff in schools with responsibility for Aimhigher activities. This they recognised was primarily due to the fact that Aimhigher activities were just one of the many activities for which such staff were responsible.

4.3.4 14-19 Consortia as partners

Background

The partnership has been working with the 14-19 Consortia in Hampshire & Isle of Wight since 2008 when a pilot programme was established with five of the nine Consortia. Fewer respondents, despite some of them being involved in the pilots, specifically mentioned the 14-19 Consortia as partners. This may in part be because they saw their primary relationship at an operational level to be with the schools and colleges rather than being mediated through the consortium managers.

Strategic benefits

As noted in the evaluation of the initial pilot programme (Taylor, 2009) the partnership recognises the shift towards a more collaborative model of learning in the school and college sector. This shift is the result of a number of drivers: firstly changes to the curriculum, in particular the new diplomas; secondly, schools and colleges seeking to achieve economies of scale and value for money through rationalisation of administration and finance and learner activities; and thirdly the opportunity to access a variety of funding streams which are brought together under the consortium.

Potential and pitfalls as a vehicle for Aimhigher type activities

Post 2011 the Consortia offer another vehicle or structure through which selected Aimhigher activities could be offered and be further embedded in the curriculum, in particular the new Diplomas. There are however a number of disadvantages which may come to the fore in a reduced funding environment. Firstly, in the absence of the Aimhigher central team, additional responsibilities for planning, logistics, monitoring and evaluation would have to be undertaken by staff working HEIs. Secondly, the potential tension between the broader and inclusive remit of the 14-19 Consortia and the focussed and targeted remit of Aimhigher. This may potentially lead to funds allocated for Aimhigher type activities being diluted and diverted to other existing or emerging priorities. However, as Taylor (2009) notes the Consortia are dynamic structures and at present it would be difficult to assess their durability or longevity.

4.3.5 Educational Business Partnerships (EBPs) as partners

The Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight partnership's work-related learning programmes and activities are delivered through an established network of Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) co-ordinated by Network Partnership.

Whilst fewer practitioners identified EBPs as partners, they were aware of the important role EBPs play in delivering relevant work-related activities and engaging with employers, which is a constant challenge for many HEIs. Respondents from the EBPs did not see any conflict or competition with HE and FE partners in their relationship with employers because they operate in different contexts. In reality the EBPs offer HEIs and FECs an additional conduit for employer engagement.

4.4 Partnership governance and leadership

In common with other Aimhigher partnerships the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Partnership also has a central team, which provides principally a management and support function. The responsibilities of each of team member are clearly set out on the partnership's web site (see Appendix 8). Whilst team members have clearly defined roles and responsibilities communication is an important element for each member of the team.

As a support function the central team undertake tasks that compliment the work of the partnership including, for example: undertaking training, reporting and monitoring; acting as an information resource and providing a single point of contact. In addition the central team are a vital source of support and advice as well as providing a facilitating role between partner organisations.

Whilst acknowledging the value 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 which have been formed.

Generally the central team are well regarded as practitioners and for their role in supporting and managing the partnership. Overall most respondents described the central team as: efficient, effective and supportive. Described variously as:

“Fantastic”

(FE Practitioner)

“Turn things around very quickly”

(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)

“Useful as a sounding board for ideas”

(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 which 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 that institutional priorities and preoccupations may become less co-ordinated 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 co-ordination across the partnership.”

(EBP Respondent)

“Given the multi-strand nature of the Aimhigher Programme the central team brings coherence.”

(EBP Respondent)

This viewpoint was recognised in the discussion with senior managers, which is explored in more detail in section 7.

4.5 Capacities for partnership working

“For me this is a dream job.”

(HE Practitioner)

Without exception staff working in widening participation share a passion and often emotional commitment to the work and the staff 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 turnover in the partnership and widening participation teams within partner institutions this is often due to progression within the institution or section. 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 the institution had contracted to undertake would be delivered and *in extremis* the consequences of not being able to deliver.

4.6 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 partners. 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 to both engage and inform partners. This has involved establishing processes that engage and inform partners, and that encourage cooperation and collaboration. Over time, it involves focusing on partners’ needs and expectations, and ensuring that differing needs are recognised and addressed. This approach is characterised by the inclusive approach adopted by the partnership for this study.

A number of respondents cited staff development and training not only as a benefit of the partnership but also the activity as a means of bringing colleagues together – maintaining and developing the relationship not just between individual institutions and the central team/locus of control but also between institutions and organisations within the partnership.

4.7 “Blended professionals” and “third space”

As a cross institutional project Aimhigher has created what Whitchurch (2008) describes as a “*third space*” occupied by “*blended professionals*” who work across both academic and professional domains and have developed a language appropriate to partnership working which “speaks” to both an academic and professional or administrative world. This third space has provided an environment or as Whitchurch comments: “a ‘*safe space*’ in which to experiment with new forms of activity and relationships” (Whitchurch, 2008: 387)

As “*blended professionals*” partnership staff are a valuable asset in being able to work not just across the boundaries of their own institution but are as Hudson (2011) argues, “boundary spanners” working across boundaries both within and between institutions and organisations.

4.8 Conclusions

In exploring partnership working our research revealed multiple layers of collaboration and overlaps between individuals, institutions, organisations and other overlapping partnerships such as the 14-19 Consortia. In part this is a result of partnership working which predated Aimhigher, but the strength and resilience of these ties is due to the partnership’s social capital. It is this social capital, Dhillon (2009), argues which will contribute to the sustainability of such educational partnerships.

4.8.1 Shared purpose and goals

Partners' shared vision – a commitment to widening participation and a commitment to partnership working as a way of achieving this goal has, as Dhillon (2009: 699) noted in a study of partnership working in the north of England, functioned as *"bonding social capital,"* which sustains the partnership in the face of competing organisational demands. Working in partnership provides added value in the form of practical benefits including: joint staff development, high quality materials and innovative activities. In addition institutions have been able to extend their reach forming new and stronger relationships through the partnership.

4.8.2 Relations with partners

Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight is a mature partnership whose partners recognise the benefits of collaboration over competition. The partnership is open to working with new partners, such as the 14-19 Consortia, in order to achieve its aims and objectives. Overall the partnership is highly regarded by its members and the wider local community.

4.8.3 Partnership governance / Trust and trustworthiness

The partnership's governance and management structure, which includes the central team, is also highly regarded by its member institutions, senior managers, staff and the wider local community. The partnership is also characterised as having a high degree of trust and trustworthiness which is essential in delivering multiple activities with wide range of partners in a variety of contexts and settings.

5.0 Activities

5.1 Introduction

In this section we report on respondents' perceptions of the activities they deliver or manage; their understanding of the operation and effectiveness of targeting, and how such activities could be financed in a different funding environment. This is supplemented by recent reports commissioned by the partnership to evaluate its activities. As expected there were a variety of opinions as to which activities should continue to be funded in a different or reduced funding environment. Not surprisingly practitioners working at an operational level were passionate about the activities and programmes which they deliver or are responsible for.

“Everything has been created to have an impact – we’ve tried desperately to create interventions that will build on knowledge. It feels as if something were to be taken out you’d lose something...Perhaps we should scale down activities and work differently. We could sustain in different ways...by reducing the number of nights [for summer schools] and using technology.”
(HE Respondent)

We have set out respondents' perceptions and our commentary as follows: firstly, on-campus activities such as summer schools and taster days; secondly off-campus activities, such as assemblies, workshops and parents evenings; thirdly, mentoring and fourthly work related learning. Subsequent sub-sections are devoted to activities with primary schools; the healthcare strand, before addressing issues of targeting and the use of technology.

5.2 On-campus activities

On-campus activities, particularly residential summer schools are seen as *“the jewel in the crown”* by practitioners, teachers and beneficiaries.

Extended Summer School and taster day programmes are held at all four partner HEIs. The programme is developmental and aims to ensure learners progress each year before successfully entering higher education. In addition learners in years 10, 11, 12 and FE may also participate in the South East Summer schools which covers five Aimhigher area partnerships: Berkshire; Hampshire & Isle of Wight; Kent & Medway, Milton Keynes, Oxon and Bucks; and Sussex. A list of South East Summer Schools is reproduced as Appendix 5 to illustrate the range of participating institutions and the diverse programmes on offer.

5.2.1 Summer Schools

Practitioners commented that summer schools have impact because they offer the opportunity to work with learners intensively over a period of two to three days outside of school and college.

“Residentials [summer schools] have impact because they offer learners a real experience of university life”
(HE Practitioner)

“Having experience of working with young people on summer schools – you can see a step change”
(HE Practitioner)

Another practitioner concluded with the views above but also added a rider about targeting:

“This [summer schools] has the most impact. The experience – being away makes a difference. As long as targeting is right then it is powerful”
(HE Practitioner)

5.2.2 Taster Days

Practitioners’ views on the operation and efficacy of taster days differed. Some commented on the benefits of working with younger age groups and the degree to which Primary and Year 7 groups engaged, whilst others had concerns about impact.

“Taster days should only be offered to older learners. They don’t have an impact on younger learners.”
(HE Practitioner)

For a remote and isolated area such as the Isle of Wight funding from Aimhigher has been crucial in getting young people to benefit from off-island experiences. As noted previously learners aged sixteen and above are charged the adult fare (£19.00 return) which makes travel to the mainland prohibitively expensive. In the absence of a HEI presence on the island Aimhigher was seen as a “*surrogate HEI*”.

There is a concern raised by practitioners both on the Isle of Wight and the mainland that if there was a reduction or loss of funding for Aimhigher type activities:

“...that HEIs may well pull out of the Isle of Wight and not consider it within their catchment area.”
(HE Practitioner)

And also that:

“After Aimhigher HEIs and other partners will only work with schools that are easy to work with.”
(Practitioner, Isle of Wight)

5.3 Off-campus activities

Off campus activities include: aspiration raising presentations by Education Liaison Officers based each of the partners HEIs; assemblies and workshops, including the star student game; and parents'/options evenings.

Whilst practitioners are passionate about their off campus activities, Aimhigher Ambassador were equally passionate and enthusiastic about the activities they delivered and supported and their impact as role models on the learners they worked with.

5.3.1 Assemblies and workshops

Education Liaison Officers based in the partner HEIs offer both assembly talks and interactive workshops which are often delivered during PSHE or Citizenship lessons. These workshops are designed to be complementary with a different topic for each year group to provide thorough understanding of all the issues surrounding successful progression into and through higher education.

These practitioners have established good working relationships with learners and teachers to the extent that one practitioner is now known as: *“The Aimhigher Lady”* However, practitioners did question the impact or rather the setting – assemblies – for some of their work, noting that they only had impact if followed up with smaller focused workshops

5.3.2 Parents' events

The partnership also seeks to increase awareness, knowledge and understanding the opportunities that further and higher education offers amongst parents. This most often takes the form of attending secondary school parents' evenings, or sessions delivered at secondary schools' GCSE options evenings. Practitioners have noted the importance of engaging with parents and in particular the benefits and opportunities of engaging with parents of primary school aged children.

5.4 Mentoring

FE Mentors

Interviews with academic staff based in FE revealed the value and benefits they believe such programmes offer. Firstly, academic staff recognised that whilst they were unable to devote as much time as they would like to individual learners whose confidence, attainment and aspiration is low, they believed that drop in sessions organised by mentors at one college provided a valuable substitute. Secondly, they asserted that mentors from the same subject area are, in some instances, better placed than Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to work with learners because of their subject knowledge.

Academic staff commented that the value of mentoring is reflected in improved: attendance, retention and grades. Students who have been mentored (mentees)

become more confident learners and actively participate in class. As one member of academic staff noted, commenting on one of their learners who is being mentored:

“Her work has zoomed forward.”
(FE Practitioner)

The respondent went on to say how mentees have become more independent and confident learners and make a greater contribution in class.

“All of which have changed the dynamics in classroom and as a consequence the whole class benefits.”
(FE Practitioner)

Respondents also recognised the benefits that learners derived from mentoring: firstly, in the own academic studies by gaining “deeper learning;” and secondly, an opportunity to build their curriculum vitae, including the supporting statement in their UCAS application as well as gain transferable skills.

“Anything that learner can have on CV that puts them above others is a good thing”
(FE Practitioner)

“It (being mentor) is a real strength to be able to maintain this – time pressures, resource management. It also shows strength of character.”
(FE Practitioner)

Reinforcing the comments of academic staff above, the wider benefits of the mentoring programme were acknowledged by an FE practitioner, who noted benefits to mentor and mentee, but also to the college itself has seen an improvement in recruitment, retention and results.

Learning Mentors

Practitioners based in FE working as learning mentors were clear about the impact of their work with learners, which improved retention, raised attainment and enabled the young people to make a successful transition from school to further or higher education. They also recognised that:

“[Mentoring] ...doesn't work for everyone.”
(FE Practitioner)

As a result of evaluation one college in the programme is considering delivering support by e-mentoring.

5.5 Work related learning

The Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Partnership's work related learning is delivered by a network of Educational Business Partnerships (EBPs) based across the area. Delivery is monitored and co-ordinated through Partnership Network, which is the consortium body for the provider network. The aim of work-related programmes is to link the local business community with young people in schools and colleges and their parents. The programmes delivered by the EBPs include: Step Into, Working Lunches and Mentoring.

5.5.1 Step Into

These structured one day programmes provide a vocationally linked experience for learners in the following sectors: Health and social care, Local Government, Composites and Environmental protection. Learners gain an overview of a particular sector or business as well undertaking a specific half-day challenge to develop team work, communication skills, problem solving ability and financial awareness. In the academic year 2009-2010 some 950 learners from across the area will benefit from this programme.

5.5.2 Working Lunches

The Working Lunches programme is aimed at learners and their parents in target schools. A restaurant or workplace is used as the setting for the enthusiasm or aspiration raising event for learners and their parents using a speed dating format with employer facilitators and additional input from HEIs and FECs. In the academic year 2009-2010 some 546 learners and their parents will enjoy and benefit from a working lunch.

5.5.3 Mentoring

The mentoring programme uses a combination of face-to-face mentoring and e-mentoring using a dedicated application, e-Mentor Pro. The application provides secure e-mail communication (the e-mail addresses of mentor and mentee are not disclosed), e-mails are logged to provide a history of transactions, and scanned for inappropriate words or phrases and forwarded to a coordinator for action as necessary. The emphasis is on providing not only general support but also focussed support in particular vocational areas. In the current academic year over 80 learners are expected to benefit from this programme.

Respondents drawn from Educational Business Partnerships noted that there is a role for the partnership in bringing together HEI and FE partners and local authorities on their shared aim of employer engagement. Whilst local authorities have a responsibility for employer engagement "*...they don't have the capacity and vision to do this*" (EBP respondent). Bringing together education (learners from schools, FE and HE) and employers is a role that the partnership already fulfils.

5.6 Primary schools – working with younger learners

A recent report on Aimhigher engagement with primary schools, noted that over half of Aimhigher partnerships engage with primary schools and of these some 50% have well established programmes of activity (Action on Access, 2009).

Work with younger learners takes place both on and off-campus. Of their on-campus activity one respondent commented that:

“The on-campus workshop went down a storm with the 56 young people.”
(HE Practitioner)

5.6.1 Opportunity to engage with parents

A number of respondents working with primary schools noted the opportunity to engage with parents. They reported that it was far easier to engage the parents at primary school than it was at secondary school. When asked why this should be, the most common response was that most primary school children are taken to and from school by their parents and secondly that because of size and class organisation parents and teachers have a closer relationship.

Engaging with parents at an early stage in their child’s learning career enables them to better understand the importance and value of raising their children’s aspiration and attainment in partnership with their school.

5.7 Healthcare Strand

5.7.1 Funding

In contrast to other Aimhigher activities the healthcare strand is jointly funded by the Department of Health (DoH), the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and HEFCE. Funding of £1.8M per annum is provided through Aimhigher partnerships to support activities that widen access to the healthcare professions. Projects are expected to address issues around access and diversity affecting new entrants to the healthcare professions as well as prospective entrants within the NHS workforce.

Initially healthcare activities were organised at regional level, but with the cessation of funding for the Aimhigher regional structure in 2008, activities are now funded through area partnerships and have been reconfigured for delivery at area level. The healthcare strand is currently funded until July 2010, and at the time of writing, HEFCE are working with Aimhigher partnerships reviewing evidence of impact to inform decisions on any future funding.

5.7.2 Aims and objectives of activities

The aims and objectives are to:

- Raise aspirations and motivation to enter HE relevant to the healthcare professions among young people in schools, further education and workplace learning, who are from under-represented groups and who have the potential for a career in healthcare.
- Raise the attainment of potential recruits to healthcare professions, who are from under-represented groups, so that they gain the academic or vocational qualifications and learning skills that will enable them to enter HE courses relevant to healthcare.
- Strengthen progression routes into HE via vocational courses, including apprenticeships, whether they are delivered in schools, colleges or the workplace.
- Raise the aspirations and motivation of existing NHS employees to enter HE courses relevant to the healthcare professions. (HEFCE 2004: 1-2 Annex A),

5.7.3 Coordination and management

In Hampshire and Isle of Wight this strand of activity is coordinated and managed across the partnership on a part-time consultancy basis. The consultant is a former Aimhigher regional manager with extensive experience of the health and social care sector.

The focus of partnership relationships in the health and social care strand is different to other strands of activity because of the contribution the NHS. For example in Southampton there is a reduced demand on HEIs *per se*, because of the established relationship with the University Hospital Trust. In other areas the contribution of HE partners is more significant.

5.7.4 Targeting

The coordinator commented that targeting learners for activities in the Healthcare strand is different and difficult compared to other strands of activity because it is profession specific. The dilemma is whether to select learners in the Aimhigher target group or those learners in the health and social care group. The coordinator noted that this is further complicated firstly, because:

“...the NHS would rather have [who they perceive as] high achieving students.”

(Coordinator)

Secondly:

“...schools won't come unless they can bring the whole group.”

(Coordinator)

However, practitioners organising subject specific taster days face the same challenges and also have to work with schools and teachers who would prefer to be inclusive.

5.7.5 Sustaining activity

A number of area partnerships have made provision at local level to fund this strand of activity for a further year, in line with the main Aimhigher programme. Whilst activity continues in the Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight partnership the coordinator has already begun the process of engaging with Chief Executives of NHS Trusts. The approach in some ways is similar to the conversations with senior managers in HE, highlighting the importance of this activity to the Trust in terms of recruitment and workforce development, and embedding it in their strategic plans. Where Trusts are considering moving towards Foundation status engaging with and supporting Aimhigher activities provides evidence of community engagement.

5.8 Targeting

The issue of targeting has always been a sensitive and challenging issue for practitioners. The partnership has identified specific target groups for priority action who are people from:

- lower socio-economic groups
 - disadvantaged groups in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low
- and
- people with a specific learning disability (SLD)
 - looked after children in the care system

As Hatt, Baxter and Tate (2005) note whilst under-represented groups can be readily identified in principle, operationalising these definitions can be both challenging and problematic. *“Striking the right balance is difficult, but essential for ensuring the [Aimhigher] programme is effective.”* (Hatt et al, 2005:342).

As one respondent noted [targeting] “Has to be done” (FE Practitioner)

Most respondents were positive about targeting, believing that on the whole the methodology used for targeting was accurate and consequently the programme, or for many practitioners, activities were being delivered to intended participants.

However there were some concerns about:

- Postcode anomalies
- Inclusiveness
- Misunderstanding
- Subversion

Which are borne out by the comments below:

“Postcode data is not effective...we don’t stick to it rigidly, there is more flexibility, we use local knowledge.”

(FE Practitioners)

The negative aspects of targeting were referred to by a number of practitioners in interviews as well as in the feedback from the Aimhigher annual conference. Feedback from Aimhigher coordinators revealed a concern for equity and a desire to be more inclusive but this was also tempered with the recognition that resources were limited.

From our fieldwork and also the literature we recognise that the relationship between the HEI coordinator and school/college coordinators is key. A number of respondents noted that problems with targeting arose where they had been unable to establish an effective dialogue with staff in schools. They further commented that there is sometimes a misunderstanding with schools confusing the Aimhigher cohort with Gifted and Talented cohort.

Asked how targeting could be improved one respondent said:

“Put another hour in the day”

(HE Respondent)

One of the challenges is actually getting time to talk to the teachers on the ground, rather than the head teacher, recognising that teaching staff time is constrained and that: ... “teachers have too much to do.” (FE Practitioner).

Others were more forthright on the challenges of targeting:

“Has been a headache...”

(HE Respondent)

But these are the comments of practitioners who not only want to get targeting right but devote their time to learners and needs to be contrasted with:

“The targeting we learned from Aimhigher has been embedded and that won’t disappear post Aimhigher”

(Practitioner, Isle of Wight)

Perhaps the final word should go to the practitioner who commented:

“The last word has to be with the teacher – we have to give teachers guidance – it’s a starting point, We have to rely on their knowledge – it’s a compromise.”

(HE Practitioner)

5.9 Using technology

Where appropriate, and when time permitted, we asked respondents to tell us how technology could be used in their Aimhigher work. We wanted to ascertain whether they were using technology and if so what they were using, how they were using it and why they were using it. Irrespective of whether or not they were currently using technology we also wanted to explore practitioners' thoughts on how technology might be used to enhance or extend coverage of Aimhigher type activities.

Two examples of where information communication technology has been used in the partnership are texting and e-mentoring. Texting, for example, has been used by one FE partner to remind students of appointments such as support sessions. Initially a pilot project, which the partner would not have undertaken without funding from the partnership, has been so successful that it is not only being sustained by the partner but extended to learners at another site.

The second example which is larger in scale is the e-mentoring delivered through the EBPs to support business mentoring.

Information communication technology can be used to increase and enhance communication rather than be seen as a substitute. In relation to mentoring a number of practitioners thought that a blended approach – combining face to face with on-line sessions – was the best way forward.

5.10 Embedding Aimhigher activities in the school curriculum

Previous reports (Johnson, 2008) commissioned by the partnership have noted that teaching staff at secondary school level did not feel that Aimhigher activities were integrated into the curriculum and that they were seen as an extra-curricula activity. It was recommended that Aimhigher co-ordinators explore the possibility of embedding Aimhigher activities more widely into the PSHE curriculum.

Some practitioners in the current study noted that Aimhigher activities were being delivered in PHSE education in secondary schools - evidence that this recommendation was being followed through - and that there are opportunities to extend this work more widely, highlighting the benefits to schools in general and learners in particular of gaining academic credit towards Certificates of Personal Effectiveness (CoPE) as well as ASDAN Aimhigher Awards.

5.11 Alternative sources of funding for activities

Practitioners were less certain about how Aimhigher activities could be funded post 2011. Practitioners in more strategic roles and those with experience of other sectors were able to put forward suggestions about the possibility of seeking funding from other sources such as charitable organisations, local authorities and regional development authorities (RDAs) and a small number had already begun exploring potential opportunities. They recognised however in the current economic climate

that funding from these streams was uncertain, given the financial constraints on local authorities, the likely increase in applications to charitable organisations, and the short term nature of such funding.

They were however certain that schools and colleges would not be able to meet the cost of Aimhigher activities, especially on-campus activities where transport to and from the school is required. This is reinforced by comments from teachers (Johnson, 2008) who value the Aimhigher activities primarily because of the benefits to learners but also because they are organised externally and are free. As one respondent in commented:

“The fact that it is free for the kids, the fact that it is free for the school to use is something that is of major importance because with all the pressures of funding and budgets at school and with all the pressures of time, it is something I doubt we would be able to put in place ourselves. So it’s a service that we use as much as we can because it does a massive amount for our kids.”
(Johnson, 2008:11)

5.12 Conclusions

5.12.1 Prioritising activities

As noted previously, respondents were passionate about the activities which they delivered and were responsible for. Whilst practitioners noted the need to adopt a progressive and sustained approach as encapsulated by the learner journey, they recognised the impact of intensive activities such as summer schools over other interventions.

This is supported by a number of research studies funded by HEFCE which suggested that some activities had a demonstrably greater impact than others:

- residential schools
- campus visits/ open days
- mentoring of school/college pupils and young people
- subject-related taster events
- information, advice and guidance

These were considered to be especially effective when they formed part of an ongoing and coherent package of support. Preserving the “package” and retaining a coherent programme with reduced resources may require more focussed targeting resulting in a smaller cohort of learners.

5.12.2 Learner journey

Although one practitioner noted that:

“One-off interventions can be life changing.”
(HE Practitioner)

What is evident from our discussion with practitioners is a view that one-off interventions are not life changing for the majority of learners. Interventions and activities should not be viewed in isolation or as one-off events, but rather as a learning journey, during which aspirations are created, internalised by the learner and developed, with each activity having a distinctive role in helping learners to progression through to further and higher education. What is important is the combination and pacing of activities in relation to each other.

The partnership has developed a Learner Progression Journey (see Appendix 9) which is based on a model – The Learner Progression Framework (LPF) produced by Action on Access, for the delivery of sequential and progressive activity by Aimhigher partnerships in schools and colleges. The framework, or in this case the journey aims to facilitate effective cross-sector collaboration by placing the emphasis on individual learner progression in line with both the aims of widening participation and school and college priorities. More importantly it seeks to demonstrate a robust evidence base which evaluates the impact of a sequence of activities on progression and attainment and which articulates with local systems to track learners.

Surprisingly, very few of the respondents interviewed, particularly practitioners, mentioned the Learner Progression Framework (LPF) although a number did speak in terms of learning journeys and the importance of activities being progressive and sequential.

6.0 Conversations with senior managers

6.1 Introduction

A member of the research team and the Director of Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight met with the Vice Chancellor (VC), Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) or a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC) and the senior manager with responsibility for widening participation at each of the four partner HEIs. These meetings were presented and structured as a conversation, an informal discussion, between the participants rather than a group interview.

6.2 Recognising the institutional benefits of Aimhigher

Our informal discussions with senior managers at the four partners HEIs revealed strong support for Aimhigher and a recognition of the benefits that accrue to the institution by delivering activities through partnership working. This was also echoed by senior managers working in partner FE Colleges. Whilst these benefits are differential between and across HEIs and FECs senior managers recognised the following common benefits in terms of good practice and staff development; supply chain management and a single point of contact; efficiency of shared services; and the provision of information and data.

6.2.1 Aimhigher partnership facilitates good practice

There was a recognition and consensus that the Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight partnership facilitated good practice between the partners and as a consequence contributed to staff development by enhancing skills and increasing knowledge.

The partnership provides a focal point for practitioners working in a range of institutions and organisations in different contexts and settings across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Practitioners are able to draw on extensive partnership resources to inform their practice and deliver activities as well as network with fellow practitioners in the community of practice which the partnership has engendered and continues to foster.

As noted in our interviews with practitioners it is through this community of practice, as well as opportunities for formal and informal learning facilitated by the partnership, that they are afforded opportunities for support and professional development in terms of both skills and knowledge.

6.2.2 Aimhigher partnership provides single and consistent point of contact

All respondents acknowledged the important role the partnership plays in the supply chain, or “*food chain*”, as described by one senior manager, through co-ordination of

work between HEIs, FECs and schools, managing contacts and serving as a single point of contact.

The partnership provides a vital role in forging and maintaining strong links between schools, FECs and HEIs. Working in partnership provides institutions with the potential to engage and work with a wide range of institutions across Hampshire and Isle of Wight in a more cost effective way than working independently.

6.2.3 Aimhigher partnership contributes to efficiency through effective shared services.

The partnership was seen as contributing to efficiency through shared services and common provision thereby avoiding costs of developing and maintaining similar services at institutional level.

One example of an efficient and effective shared service, which was highlighted in practitioner interviews and learner focus groups, is the provision of training for staff and learners delivering Aimhigher activities. Where appropriate such training opportunities could be extended in terms of both participants and subject coverage. Other shared services which could be offered, as outlined below, include the provision of information and contextual data.

6.2.4 Aimhigher partnership provides valuable intelligence and data

A number of senior managers saw the value of the partnership in terms of intelligence gathering and the provision of data, in particular contributing to developments around the use of contextual data at a time when there is strong demand for undergraduate places.

Through its participation in the south east regional database, experience of targeting and learner targeting tools the partnership is well placed to provide information and data to partner institutions. For HEIs contextual data will be increasingly important in terms of fair access and targeting widening participation activities. It will help inform interview and admissions decision making; help assess learners in terms of both academic and financial support; and provide data for monitoring and reporting purposes.

6.3 Support for Aimhigher going forward

Some managers commented that given the most likely scenario post 2011 would be a reduction in funding; they would expect the partnership to review its current targets for learners and schools with a view to reducing them through tighter targeting.

Whilst senior managers could see the case for their institution funding Aimhigher type activities, they noted that there may need to be a change the way in which Aimhigher is presented, with one respondent noting that this may mean a rebranding.

6.3.1 Learner targeting

From our interviews with practitioners we note the very positive comments about how the partnership has not only improved learner targeting but also how this methodology and the rationale for targeting has been communicated to practitioners in general and school based practitioners in particular.

In terms of going forward the partnership may need to review both numerical targets and specific groups to be targeted based on available resources.

6.3.2 Aimhigher – brand value

Aimhigher as a national brand is strong, with value and currency inside and beyond the education sector. In terms of hard measures it has a large support base, a significant presence in HE, FE, secondary schools and to lesser extent primary schools. It is also recognised by employers in both the public and private sector through the work of education business partnerships and other similar organisations. In terms of softer measures, given its market share and scope, there is a high degree of brand awareness. Other soft measures on which the brand performs well include: brand relevance, heritage and perception.

As one practitioner commented:

“Schools and colleges recognise and are keen to work with the Aimhigher brand”

(HE Practitioner)

In Hampshire and Isle of Wight the Aimhigher brand performs well on both hard and soft measures. It has a significant presence in HE, FE, secondary schools and through the primary programme a developing presence in primary schools. Led by the Partnership Network, the work of the education business partnerships is demonstrated by extensive employer engagement. Based on current funding the partnership is also cost effective in terms of the activities it supports and added value it provides.

In terms of the soft measures there is a high degree of brand awareness both within and beyond the sector. The relevance of the brand is demonstrated by both individual and institutional capacity to relate to the brand and their predisposition to support it. Whilst the Aimhigher brand does not have the longevity of commercial or charitable brands it has become embedded in local culture within a relatively short period of time. In terms of perception individuals are generally extremely loyal to the brand.

6.4 Conclusions

In summary our meetings with senior managers were positive and thoughtful, as well as thought provoking, and demonstrated institutional willingness to take forward the Aimhigher agenda and Aimhigher type activities independent of HEFCE funding.

The Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight partnership, through its Director and executive staff team will need to capitalise on this support and recognition of the

importance of the Aimhigher agenda and Aimhigher type activities by continuing the conversation or dialogue with senior managers based at partner institutions.

Whilst recognising the competing demands on PVCs and senior managers for their time and attention, continuing to provide them with timely information on the local impact of Aimhigher activities; the benefits to their institution; and how this aligns with their strategic priorities, will contribute to the business case for institutional funding of Aimhigher type activities.

The Aimhigher brand has value and currency inside and beyond the sector. It has become embedded in the local culture and has a loyal support base. Whilst rebranding may be necessary in the future in the short to medium term the partnership should continue to maximise the value of the brand.

7.0 Learner focus groups

7.1 Introduction

In this section we report on findings from our focus group meetings with learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities. The rationale for interviewing learners, who are closer in age to the beneficiaries than salaried practitioners, was to gain another perspective on delivery and impact of Aimhigher activities.

The focus group discussions were structured to address the following key issues:

1. Identify their role in relation to Aimhigher.
2. Ascertain their perception of the impact the activities they delivered and supported had on beneficiaries.
3. Identify how their role as an Ambassador, Associate or Mentor had benefitted them in their current studies and how it contributed to their current and future employability.
4. Explore what the partnership could do to make more use of learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities.

In the following sub-sections we describe the recruitment process and give a brief profile of the respondents who participated in the focus groups before reporting on findings from the focus group meetings.

7.2 Recruitment of focus group respondents

Aimhigher coordinators at the four HEIs and two FECs were asked to identify and recruit learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities at their respective institutions. During the course of our fieldwork we met with a total of 37 learners. The largest focus group comprised nine learners, whilst the smallest was three. All but one of the groups was conducted over a buffet lunch in order to minimise impact on their time.

Respondents were sent a briefing sheet in advance of the focus group meeting which set out the aims and objectives of the research as well as outlining the themes for the focus group discussion. A copy of the briefing sheet is reproduced as Appendix 2.

7.3 Profile of respondents

The majority of respondents in the focus groups convened at the four HEIs were in their second or third year of undergraduate study, with one respondent studying at postgraduate level. All respondents had current experience of delivering Aimhigher activities as Ambassadors, Associates, or Mentors; some had also been the beneficiaries of Aimhigher or progenitor programmes and had, in their own words been: "*Aimhigher'ed.*"

Respondents in the focus groups convened at the two FECs were also currently supporting Aimhigher activities as Ambassadors and Mentors. Respondents were drawn from both academic and vocational programmes and like their counterparts in HE a number of them had also benefitted from Aimhigher activities.

7.4 Role of learners in supporting delivery of Aimhigher activities

“They see us as positive role models”
(HE Focus Group)

We asked learners to tell us about their role in relation to the Aimhigher programme and the activities they delivered and supported, in part as a warm up question, but also to help frame and focus questions for the subsequent topics and provide context for their responses. Without exception, all of the respondents clearly articulated their role or multiple roles as Ambassadors, Associates and Mentors, delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities. This clarity of purpose is in part due to the quality of training for ambassadors, associates and mentors delivered by the partnership.

Respondents clearly enjoyed undertaking training and valued the opportunity to train with learners from other colleges or institutions. One group of respondents based in a Further Education College particularly welcomed the opportunity to undertake training at their local HEI. The quality and depth of the training was evidenced by their knowledge of Aimhigher, in particular that their role was to contribute to raising aspiration, attainment and progression to FE or HE in general rather than their institution in particular.

“We’re unbiased – we don’t have anything to gain.”
(HE Focus Group)

The quality and depth of training was further evidenced by all of the HEI focus groups and one of the two FEC focus groups having more than a basic understanding of how learners were targeted or selected to participate in Aimhigher activities, with some even commenting on what they saw as the shortcomings of postcode targeting.

7.5 Perceptions of impact

We asked respondents to tell us about their work for Aimhigher and their perception of how it impacted on learners.

In general terms they saw the work they did as broadening young peoples’ horizons, opening their eyes to opportunities; getting them to think beyond exams and plan for the future, as well as preparing them for transitions between school, college and HE and generally helping them to hit the ground running.

One of the FE respondents drawing on his own experience of being mentored commented:

“I was really worried about going to college... [being mentored]... took the weight off me...without mentoring I wouldn't have gone to college”
(FE Focus Group)

“Without a mentor it would have been a slow process getting used to college.”
(FE Focus Group)

A number of respondents reported that some of the learners they were working with were “disinterested” and “disengaged” (HEI Focus Groups) and that their teachers had given up on them. Once they had established a rapport with these learners the respondents perceived that their intervention had:

“sparked up interest – really got them hooked and reengaged”
(HEI Focus Group).

When asked why, respondents thought that younger learners found it easier to relate to somebody closer to their own age.

Most of the focus groups raised the issue of working with learners or cohorts in a sustained way over a period of time. They recognised that engagement (and interest) would vary with age and therefore intensity of activities had to be progressive. They believed that early engagement, starting at Primary School, was important and should be sustained throughout the secondary phase.

7.6 Benefits of delivering Aimhigher activities

We asked respondents to tell us about the personal benefits that they derived from delivering Aimhigher activities. The benefits cited ranged from reinforcing career choices to gaining transferable skills thereby enhancing employability; and from gaining an additional source of income to giving something back to the community.

7.6.1 Enhances employability and informs career choice

In terms of careers, a number of respondents noted that delivering Aimhigher activities had reinforced their career choices, for others it opened new options:

“...kind of made me want to be a teacher.”
(FE Focus Group)

Or review career choices and change direction

“Through the Aimhigher experience I've decided to change career direction.”
(HE Focus Group)

7.6.2 Gain and enhance skills relevant to academic study

Delivering Aimhigher activities also gave respondents the opportunity to gain and enhance transferable skills which not only benefitted them in their academic study but also enhanced their employability. Respondents in the FE focus groups also saw the benefits in terms of progression to higher education and being able to include this activity in their personal statement in the UCAS application.

Communication and social skills were the most frequently cited skills, whilst a few respondents noted that they had developed and improved their planning and time management skills.

"I hadn't really done any big speeches.... I wrote a presentation and spoke to 200 pupils."

(HE Focus Group)

"Puts me ahead, especially in jobs where I'll need communication skills."

(HE Focus Group)

"I want to work in a BUNAC camp in America...this has helped me."

(HE Focus Group)

"Good skills for life."

(HE Focus Group)

"Good to put on my CV"

(FE Focus Group)

Respondents noted that writing and delivering presentations, often to large audiences, not only improved their confidence but also enabled them to produce and deliver better presentations as part of their studies. They recognised that the skills they had gained and developed such as: interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and counselling skills would also be valuable in securing and retaining employment.

Practitioners and staff working with ambassadors, associates and mentors in both FE and HE settings were also very clear about the benefits to be gained from taking an active role in delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities.

7.6.3 Social responsibility

For some respondents the work conferred status, with respondents from the FE groups reporting that it was seen as being "cool." The consensus from a number of focus groups felt that it set them apart, in a positive way. One respondent in a FE focus group noted that because he enjoyed doing this at college (FEC) when looking at prospective universities he looked to see whether there were opportunities to work as an Ambassador or Mentor.

Running through all of the focus groups was a deep seated sense of social responsibility – which was couched in terms of making a difference and wanting to give something back.

“Thinking that you’ve made that one little bit of difference...”

(HE Focus Group)

“I like knowing that I’ve helped somebody”

(FE Focus Group)

A former FE Ambassador e-mailed to say:

“I am now in my 2nd year at University in Bath and with the mentoring in college being so rewarding I have signed up to the Aimhigher programme to mentor again.”

(Former FE Ambassador)

7.6.4 Source of additional income

Discussion about payment for work as an Ambassador, Associate or Mentor elicited a wide variety of opinions and responses with some reporting that they would continue even without pay whilst others stated that if they were not paid then they would have to reduce their commitment.

“I’d do it even if there was no pay.”

(HE Focus Group)

“I’d do it the same, even if the money weren’t there.”

(FE Focus Group)

“As long as it didn’t cost me anything... I’d want to be paid for my travel expenses...”

(HE Focus Group)

“Getting paid for something I enjoy!”

(HE Focus Group)

“...money...that’s an added bonus.”

(HE Focus Group)

Most respondents agreed that whilst the rates of pay were fair compared to other “student jobs,” flexibility and the ability to fit the work around their study was paramount. The learners’ assertion that they would undertake the work in a volunteer capacity – without pay – was reinforced by a HE practitioner who commented that 70% - 80% of the Aimhigher Ambassadors she worked with would do so. She noted that this was because of the opportunity to gain credit through the institution’s undergraduate ambassador scheme.

7.6.5 Alternative benefits in lieu of payment

Respondents in the HE focus groups were asked to comment on the attraction of other benefits, such as academic credit or discounted fees in lieu of payment. A limited number of respondents thought that gaining additional academic credit would be of interest however the majority did not, stating that they saw their Aimhigher work as enjoyable and did not want it to become “*academic*”.

In terms of discounted fees, respondents were more receptive, “...*every little helps...*” (HE Focus Group) but sceptical about how it would work in practice.

7.7 Effective use of ambassadors, associates and mentors

When discussing how the partnership could make more use of its student ambassadors, associates and mentors respondents were prompted for their thoughts about the use of technology.

7.7.1 Using technology

This was clearly an issue that a number of learners in some of the focus groups had given thought to and indeed adopted, albeit through circumstance rather than design.

At a FE College one mentor reported that he had used technology (e-mail and Skype) to continue mentoring and maintain contact with a mentee during a period of bad weather which prevented students getting to college. Whilst this was not planned it demonstrates that some learners already have the technology and confidence to use it for such activity.

“During snow week I mentored using e-mail.” Reporting on their mentee
“They said: ‘It was pretty cool’”
(FE Focus Group)

Learners noted that for some subject such as maths and music there may be difficulties where symbols are used. However, they were aware of the availability of software to produce music scores which would overcome this problem and with the prevalence of MP3 devices saw little problem in sharing sound clips.

7.7.2 Using subject skills

A number of respondents, particularly those with a sports background or studying sport thought that some of the activities should be more subject specific thereby drawing on their subject experience and expertise.

7.8 Conclusions

Our focus group discussions with learners working as Aimhigher Ambassadors, Associates and Mentors provided tangible evidence of the beneficial impact of the Aimhigher programme in general and the programme as delivered in Hampshire and Isle of Wight in particular.

Their commitment to the work was summed up by one respondent who noted that one of the criteria he would be using to select which HEIs to apply to would be whether or not they offered opportunities to work as an Ambassador, Associate or Mentor.

7.8.1 Delivery

Because they are well trained and closer in age to the beneficiaries, using learners as Aimhigher Ambassadors, Associates and Mentors, is an effective method of raising young people's aspiration and attainment, and in some cases getting disengaged learners to reengage with education.

7.8.2 Wider benefits

In addition to meeting the needs of beneficiaries the learners delivering the activities benefit in terms of developing skills that are relevant and useful in their academic study, enhance their employability, develop a sense of community responsibility and become active citizens. Practitioners and academic staff note that the wider benefits of this activity is the impact it has on their classes in particular and their institution in particular in terms of learner attendance, engagement and attainment.

7.8.3 Reward structure

Whilst a number of respondents in both the FE and HE focus groups indicated that they would be willing to deliver and support Aimhigher activities without being paid, respondents in the HE focus groups qualified this by saying that the time they could commit may be reduced for economic reasons. Whilst we did not ask respondents to elaborate on their domestic and financial situation it would be reasonable to assume that the majority of HE students would be paying fees and living away from home compared to their FE counterparts who would not have the burden of fees and are more likely to live at home. If there was a reduction in commitment, in HE at least, Aimhigher staff would need to recruit additional volunteers to maintain the same level of service and consequently face an increased administrative burden.

7.8.4 Effective use of resources

The majority of learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities and the beneficiaries they work with are familiar with Web 2.0 technologies. With experience of online chat and social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace learners are comfortable communicating both synchronously and asynchronously using a variety of applications and technologies.

8.0 Proposals and next steps for the partnership

In this section we firstly restate the impact of an uncertain funding environment; and secondly, outline a twin-track approach to move the partnership towards sustainability. Thirdly, based on findings from our fieldwork we set our proposals and next steps for the partnership.

8.1 Approach to an uncertain funding environment

Whilst it is not uncommon for initiatives to cease when funding ends, the start up costs and loss of credibility for high profile public programmes such as Aimhigher make it unlikely that funding will cease completely after July 2011. A more likely scenario is a transitional phase, where funding is reduced or tapered over time. Although the possibility of no transitional funding should not be discounted completely.

We have noted the high degree of uncertainty that characterises future funding for widening participation, including Aimhigher, and that any announcements are unlikely to be made before early to mid autumn following the CSR announcement in late October 2010. The partnership will need to keep its plans under review, amending and refining them as more information becomes available and a clearer picture emerges providing greater certainty on which to base decisions.

8.2 Approach to sustainability

Sustainability of any funded programme such as Aimhigher is determined by a number of factors including the degree to which its vision and aims have become embedded and its position within partners' strategy. Based on our interviews with Aimhigher practitioners, learner focus groups, conversations with senior managers and changing policy landscape we suggest that the partnership adopts a twin-track approach to sustainability. The twin-tracks can be characterised as:

- Continuity funding
- Embedding and mainstreaming

8.2.1 Continuity

In terms of continuity we suggest that the partnership continues to explore alternative and additional sources of funding for its current portfolio of activities and a potentially different and more diverse portfolio of activities in the future. As noted in our interviews with respondents, a number of respondents are already exploring or considering the possibility of seeking internal funding from their own institution

"...a potential source...[HEFCE] WP Premium money could be one source... could be a case to look at what academic schools deliver and how funding is apportioned."

(HE Practitioner)

As well as external funding from national charitable organisations, such as The Sutton Trust; charitable organisations with local focus and commissioning bodies, such as Local Authorities.

Compared to other Aimhigher partnerships, at an operational level the partnership does not currently work as closely with the county council or local authorities and this is a relationship that could be usefully developed with a view to securing support for Aimhigher activities through commissioning.

“The local authority would be sympathetic, but not as far as money is concerned”

(HE Practitioner)

“The local authority is unlikely to make up any shortfall in [Aimhigher] funding.”

(HE Practitioner)

However, as noted by the respondents above, it should be recognised that many public sector bodies, such as local authorities (LAs) and regional development authorities (RDAs) will also be facing significant budgetary cuts.

The speed at which the partnership moves to embedding and mainstreaming activities will depend firstly on the capacity and willingness of partners and secondly on whether there is a transitional phase with funding post July 2011 and thirdly success in generating or obtaining funds from new funding streams.

8.2.2 Embedding and mainstreaming

The partnership has been considering embedding and mainstreaming activities within institutions. Initially embedding, incorporating Aimhigher activities within another activity, may be easier than mainstreaming which more often than not entails a change in working practices.

Examples of activity which could be embedded include aspiration raising work with primary schools. This could be embedded in the school curriculum as well as being aligned with the school improvement plan (SIP) and the wider Every Child Matters agenda. Alignment with the latter may also provide an opportunity for the school to leverage funding.

Mainstreaming activities is more challenging, particularly when working with academic schools and faculties in HE, since it entails a change in working practices and ultimately some cost, which could be met from the widening participation premium funding. Aimhigher type activities could be mainstreamed within academic departments (and some cases service departments) by giving recognition, in terms of workload, for undertaking such activities. For individual academic staff and their

school or faculty one of the prime benefits is the opportunity to develop a research strand which has impact in terms of the Research Excellence Framework.

8.3 Proposals

In this sub-section we set out our proposals arising from the study. The proposals are grouped by theme or activity, rather than being addressed to specific partners, since some of them are partnership wide and many of them are cross cutting and will be relevant, in varying degrees, to different partners. Other than the first proposal, those that follow are not set out in order of importance.

8.3.1 Review APC five point action plan in the light of restrictions on communication and dissemination activities

Following the Chancellor's announcement on 26 May 2010 to reduce expenditure the government has implemented an immediate freeze on all new government advertising and marketing spend. Consequently HEFCE has written to all Aimhigher Partnerships setting out in more detail the implications of these restrictions in terms of coverage and existing contracts.

In the light of these restrictions the task group which reports to the APC will need to review the five point plan, which was devised to guide the partnership towards sustainability, since one of the five key points was on communication and dissemination. Other key points in the plan, relating to, or underpinned by this activity, will also need to be reviewed. Since these restrictions are being implemented stringently there is unlikely to be any room for manoeuvre.

8.3.2 Take the lead role identifying alternative funding streams and developing bids

Local authorities and charitable organisations

A number of partners have already begun thinking about alternative sources of funding and in some instances identified potential sources such as local authorities and charitable organisations.

Rather than adopt a piecemeal and fragmented approach the partnership could take lead role in this activity by gathering intelligence and building relationships with funding and commissioning bodies. Since the demand on charitable organisation and commissioning bodies is likely to increase at this time proposals and applications will need to be well crafted and aligned with funding priorities. The partnership would be well placed to develop bids and proposals for funding.

Institutional funding

The partnership should explore the possibility of seeking funds from institutional funding streams such as the HEFCE widening participation premium allocation for Aimhigher type activities.

Pupil premium

The Department for Education (DfE) have recently announced, in outline, details of the proposed pupil premium aimed at raising attainment of disadvantaged children which will start from 2011. The proposed pupil premium would provide additional per pupil funding in addition to existing funding to schools. Importantly for the partnership, schools will be free to spend the additional funding as they choose to raise the achievement of disadvantaged children (DfE, 2010)

The partnership is well placed to work with schools across the area to raise the aspiration and attainment of disadvantaged learners. The success and impact of the programmes is demonstrated by a research and evaluation informed evidence base. As a first step the task group, through the central team, should liaise with target schools in the first instance to explore how the partnership could support schools to ensure maximum benefit is derived from the premium to benefit disadvantaged learner.

8.3.3 Provide expertise in learner targeting to institutions and make use of Aimhigher infrastructure for delivery of institutional outreach activities

Over time Aimhigher Partnerships in general and Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight in particular have developed expertise in learner targeting and learner targeting tools. This expertise combined with the well developed associated infrastructure makes delivery of institutional outreach activities through the partnership an attractive proposition for both HE and FE partners.

8.3.4 Develop and offer expertise in widening participation at postgraduate level

Very few HEIs address widening participation at postgraduate level. In view of the cap on undergraduate student numbers institutions will be looking to develop and increase other market segments including: part-time/distance; international; and postgraduate offerings. The partnership could develop and offer support in terms of enhancing and delivering widening participation at postgraduate level.

8.3.5 Maintain effective channels of communication with partners and continue engaging with staff

Partners

Practitioners noted communication to be one of the benefits of partnership working and viewed the partnership as effective in this respect. Whilst many practitioners have experienced the impact and outcomes of a changing policy landscape the current shifts in the landscape are likely to be of a greater magnitude and will impact on a wider range of public services than previously.

It is essential that the partnership maintains effective lines of communication with all partners to keep them informed of changes, the likely impact and where possible what can be done to reduce or mitigate adverse impacts.

Senior Managers

The conversations with senior managers undertaken as part of this study were the first step to reinforcing the value and benefits of Aimhigher activities. The partnership will need to develop a strategy to engage with senior managers and secure the commitment of their institution. This will mean ensuring that there is alignment with the institution's aims and objectives. For some the emphasis may be on making the business case for widening participation and Aimhigher, for others the emphasis may be on social justice and community engagement.

Staff

As outlined in the methodology section our fieldwork brought us into contact with staff engaged in Aimhigher at all levels. One of the consequences of the study is that it has created not just awareness but also a readiness for change. The partnership should continue to engage with staff who, through this study and the annual conference, have demonstrated that they are ready rather than resistant to change.

8.3.6 Promote shared staff development and explore other opportunities to collaborate and share services between partners

There are a number of areas where the partnership can act as a vehicle for shared services. The most common example cited by practitioners was staff training and development. The partnership should continue to provide a staff development and training offering across the partnership whilst exploring how this offer could be enhanced and diversified beyond widening participation. One potential area, for example, would be staff development and training around learner diversity and institutional flexibility.

Practitioners have noted the added value the partnership brings to work between HEIs and school and college partners through coordination. This coordination allows economies of scale, reduces unnecessary competition and therefore maximises access to limited school and college time.

Using the Aimhigher partnership as a vehicle, institutions could explore other opportunities for further collaboration and cooperation. Building on existing work and the contribution made by the Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) the partnership could develop and consolidate existing progression routes for learners from level three to level four.

8.3.7 Provide monitoring and evaluation to HE and FE partners

The partnership has a wealth of experience and expertise in monitoring and evaluating Aimhigher activities and programmes. This experience and expertise

could be used to supplement existing institutional resources with a view to improving monitoring and enhancing evaluation of institutional outreach activities

This expertise and experience could also be deployed beyond traditional outreach work to linked areas such as admissions where monitoring and evaluation could identify tensions or anomalies between pre-entry advice and guidance and fair admissions procedures.

8.3.8 Informing and aligning institution's strategic objectives

The widening participation strategic assessments (WPSAs) have provided an opportunity for HEIs, and where appropriate FECs, to review and demonstrate their commitment to widening participation. Whilst institutions have different histories and missions, with some seeing widening participation as central to their mission and others seeing it as a contributing factor and therefore more peripheral to their mission, there has been an increased focus on widening participation.

The partnership should capitalise on this increased focus on widening participation and work closely with institutional partners to ensure that the full range of Aimhigher activities are captured and reflected in future WPSA updates with the consequence that Aimhigher type activities become embedded.

8.3.9 Embedding Aimhigher in local education strategies and developing closer links with local education authorities

The partnership, particularly with the recently announced consultation on the pupil premium, has an opportunity to present itself as being integral to local education strategies. The partnership needs to articulate to local authorities how the learner progression journey supports whole school improvement as well as individual learner achievement. The partnership has a strong evidence base supported by research and evaluation to assure local authorities of the impact on learners.

8.3.10 Embedding Aimhigher activities in the curriculum

Schools and colleges

A number of Aimhigher activities have already become embedded within the curriculum, at secondary school level mainly in Personal Social Health & Economic (PSHE) education sessions. The partnership should continue to update Aimhigher staff working with schools on academic awards such as ASDAN Aimhigher awards as well as other opportunities where Aimhigher activities could be used to count towards academic credit. The partnership should continue to work with schools to embed Aimhigher activities in PSHE sessions and highlight the benefits to learners of gaining academic credit towards ASDAN Aimhigher Awards and CoPE.

HEIs

At HE level institutions could embed and sustain the work of Aimhigher Ambassadors, Associates and Mentors by incorporating these roles or the learning outcomes from these roles into academic programmes.

8.3.11 Brand value, leveraging funding and the multiplier effect

As a brand Aimhigher has currency both nationally and locally and is valued by stakeholders - both beneficiaries and partners. As one respondent noted:

“The value of Aimhigher transcends the stand alone projects – it is the umbrella of Aimhigher that adds so much value – the multiplier effect of the Aimhigher brand.”

One respondent noted that in some areas, such as the Isle of Wight, that although Aimhigher funding was minimal it was important because it attracted funding from other sources. Whilst the partnership will need to take account of the potential loss of “matched funding” or funding received as a result of undertaking Aimhigher activities there is also the potential to explore the capacity of Aimhigher to leverage funding from other sources.

8.3.12 Sustaining Health & Social Care

Activities with a specific focus, such as the health and social care strand may benefit from working with relevant sector skills councils such as Skills for Health; and developing better relationships with Trusts. The partnership should continue to support the work of the Health and Social Care co-ordinator, who has already approached selected Trusts to ascertain how they could work together on shared agendas in a reduced funding environment.

8.3.13 Lobbying

Prior to the election prospective parliamentary candidates expressed their support for Aimhigher in general and the Hampshire & Isle of Wight partnership in particular. The partnership need to continue lobbying activities, which commenced prior to the General Election in May 2010, building on the support and recognition achieved to date.

Following the general election the partnership needs to continue to lobbying, building on early successes, using political capital and influence, in positioning the partnership.

8.3.14 More focussed and targeted

A number of practitioners considered the possibility of working with fewer partner (target) schools and colleges and consequently fewer learners. In a reduced funding environment in order to deliver the programme to a cohort of learners over a sustained period of time this is an option that will require further consideration.

8.3.15 Maintain contracted service levels

As the partnership moves into the final year of current funding the task group should review its contingency plans to assess the partnerships' resilience in the event of Aimhigher staff leaving prior to the end of their employment contract. The APC task group, through the central team, may wish to work with institutions to agree, if necessary, how resources could be reallocated within the partnership in order to achieve targets and maintain quality of delivery to beneficiaries.

8.3.16 Use of technology and blended widening participation activity

The partnership has successful experience of using technology, such as e-mentoring, to deliver and support Aimhigher activities. Widening participation practitioners are often early adopters of such technology as a means of delivering effective personalised learning. Learners delivering and supporting Aimhigher activities have also demonstrated that they have the expertise to use a variety of technologies to support beneficiaries.

The partnership should give further thought as to how information and communication technology (ICT) could be used to deliver blended widening participation activities. The successful experience of e-mentoring could be developed and extended into other areas of activity.

8.3.17 Reporting and recording value of Aimhigher activities for schools and colleges

A number of respondents noted the value of Aimhigher activities to schools for self reporting (Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and school improvement plans (SIP) as well external monitoring and reporting by OFSTED.

National level

At national level, the partnership, perhaps in collaboration with other Aimhigher partnerships, should seek to work with HEFCE to enter into a dialogue with OFSTED about the way in which Aimhigher and school-HE links in general might be reported in inspections.

Local level

At local level the partnership should also consult with local authorities, in particular school improvement officers, not only to ensure that Aimhigher type activities are recorded in monitoring reports but also how activities can be embedded and mainstreamed within schools to meet both school and local authority targets.

School level

At school level the partnership should work with staff responsible for Aimhigher activities to ensure that the work is reported formally within the school. Formal reporting will ensure that information and data is readily available for self-evaluation reports (SEF) and school improvement plans (SIPs) as well as dissemination within the school beyond those taking part in the activities.

8.3.18 Further research

The partnership has been proactive in tackling the issue of sustainability, evidenced by the commissioning of this study and other related activities. Respondents welcomed this early intervention and opportunity to contribute to the research, thereby informing the evidence base. Having started this process the partnership will need to develop an appropriate communication strategy to keep partners updated on the implications of financial settlements once they have been announced and the work of the APC task group.

Whilst this research study aimed to be inclusive, particularly in terms of delivery partners, it was not possible to include all delivery partners and beneficiaries. When planning programmes and activities post 2011 the partnership may wish to consider undertaking more extensive research on the perceptions of learners and their parents, building on previous research projects, as well as engaging with school based coordinators.

Appendix 1 – Interview Themes

Overview for Question Themes for the Sustainability Study

1. Introduction and briefing

Will include a briefing on confidentiality

2. Current Job role and scope

Introductory questions to ascertain what activities the interviewee is involved in

3. Activities

Focus on the Aimhigher activities in which the interviewee is involved. This will include a review of the activities and their impact vis-à-vis the Aimhigher mission

4. Targeting

Questions about the effectiveness of school/college targeting as well as learner targeting

5. Your institution and partnership working

Questions to derive thoughts about partners, including your relationship with key partners such as schools and colleges, and the partnership, including work of Aimhigher in relation to the institution

6. Planning for the Future

Sets the scene for reduced or zero Aimhigher funding to ascertain opinions about which activities should be sustained

7. Opportunity for Questions and further thoughts

The interviewee will have the opportunity to ask questions and share any additional thoughts not covered during the interview

Appendix 2 – Focus Group Briefing Sheet & Discussion Themes



A briefing note from Tony Acland, Director, Aimhigher Hampshire & IOW

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in the focus group. We value the voice of the learner and your contribution will help shape the future of the Aimhigher partnership.

Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight is entering a crucial phase of planning for the future, particularly in terms of sustaining the good work of the partnership when the current round of funding ends in July 2011.

As part of a series of measures to support the Aimhigher partnership in planning for the future, we have commissioned the Continuum research centre, based at the University of East London to conduct a 'Study of the effectiveness of the Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight programme and to make recommendations and proposals for the Sustainability of activities'.

This includes the activities in which you have been involved - perhaps as an Aimhigher ambassador at your college or university, or as an Aimhigher Associate working with local schools. The aim is for all those involved with Aimhigher, to have the opportunity to meet with the evaluators and express their experiences and views.

The focus group will be led by Tony Hudson, Research Manager at Continuum. He will be asking questions relating to the following themes, but please feel free to share with Tony any other information relating to your experience with Aimhigher. Anything you do share with Tony in this focus group will be treated confidentially.

Key themes:

- What is your role in relation to Aimhigher?
- What impact do you think your work has on those students with whom you work?
- Has the role been beneficial to you and your studies? If so, how?
- How could Aimhigher make more use of its Ambassadors/Associates?

Thank you very much for your time. This work is extremely important and a great opportunity for everyone to engage in the process.

Tony Acland
Director

February 2010

Appendix 3 – Consent Form



Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight Sustainability Study - Consent Form

I have been given information about the Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW sustainability study and about the way in which my contribution will be used.

I agree to take part in the study and give my permission for my contribution to be used on the basis that:

- My contribution will be kept safely and confidentially, with access only to those with permission from the researcher.
- I can withdraw my consent at any time up to publication, by contacting the researchers.

I agree that my contribution can be used and disseminated by the researcher in subsequent research and publication, and that copyright for my contribution rests with the Research Team.

Do you want to be identified in the research publication? Please tick the statements which apply to you:

- I give my permission for the information I am about to give/have given to be used for research purposes only (including publications and reports) and agree that I may be identified.

OR

- I give my permission for the information I am about to give/have given to be used for research purposes only (including publications and reports) and agree that I may not be identified.

AND

- I would like my name acknowledged in the list of contributors in the scoping study report. I understand that this will not link my name with any content or quotation.

Name: (please print) _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions about the Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight sustainability study.

Tony Hudson
Professor John Storan

Email: a.hudson@uel.ac.uk
E-mail: j.storan@uel.ac.uk

Appendix 4 – Workshop Activities

Workshop guidelines

Following the presentation delegates will be asked to work with colleagues on their table to address the three topics listed below. Each of the topics contains a series of questions or prompts to facilitate discussion but please do not feel constrained by them.

Before beginning the task we suggest that you select one person to facilitate the discussion and keep the group on task and one person to act as a note taker.

**** Flip chart paper and markers have been provided for each group.*

1.0 Models of partnership working

Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight is a mature partnership which delivers a national programme tailored to meet localised needs. The partnership has developed over time, in part as a result of changing government policies, but also through being attuned to these local needs and circumstances. Whilst partnership working requires partners to collaborate in achieving common aims, even where these aims are agreed, the means of securing them will be contested.

- *How do the current partnership arrangements align with the needs of your institution/organisation?*
- *In a changing funding environment what are the options to sustain and develop the partnership?*
- *Are there other models of partnership working e.g. a more devolved model, which would better meet the needs of learners?*

2.0 Learners

Aimhigher is a targeted initiative, working with specific groups of learners, to raise aspirations and progression.

- *In terms of targeting, are we currently working with the right groups? If not, who should we be working with?*
- *In terms of targets are we working with too many or too few learners?*
- *In a changing funding environment which groups should we prioritize?*

3.0 Activities

The partnership currently undertakes a wide range of activities with a number of partners across a variety of settings.

- *When should we start e.g. which year group, working with learners?*
- *What activities are most effective in terms of impact?*
- *Which activities are most cost effective?*
- *In a changing funding environment which activities would you prioritise*

Appendix 5 - Aimhigher South East Summer Schools 2010

Year 10

Institution	Title of Summer School	Start Date	End Date
Canterbury Christ Church University	A Media Journey	Mon 12th July	Fri 16th July
University for the Creative Arts	Designing for the Catwalk	Mon 26th July	Sat 31st July
University of Oxford	Murder in the Cloisters	Tues 6th April	Thurs 8th April
University of Portsmouth	University life, are you UP for it?	Sun 20th June	Wed 23rd June

Years 10 and 11

Institution	Title of Summer School	Start Date	End Date
University of Southampton	A World of Science	Sun 11th July	Wed 14th July
University of Sussex	CSI: Brighton - Communicating Science in Brighton	Sun 4th July	Thurs 8th July

Year 11

Institution	Title of Summer School	Start Date	End Date
University of Brighton	Cracking Crime 2010!	Sun 4th July	Wed 7th July
University of Kent	Step into Your Future!	Mon 28th June	Fri 2nd July
University of Reading	Reaching Higher: A Taste of University Life	Tue 6th July	Fri 9th July
University of Winchester	Get set for University!	Mon 5th July	Thurs 8th July

Year 12 and FE

Institution	Title of Summer School	Start Date	End Date
Buckinghamshire New University	Games Design and Computing	Mon 12th July	Thurs 15th July
Southampton Solent University	Media, Fashion or Sport... Become part of the Solent success story	Tues 6th July	Fri 9th July

Care Leavers

Institution	Title of Summer School	Start Date	End Date
University of Greenwich	Yes, Higher Education is for YOU! Care Leavers' Summer School	Mon 5th July	Wed 7th July

Appendix 6– Respondents

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
David	Brown	Partnership Network	09.02.10
Josie	Whitcher	Partnership Network	09.02.10
Cath	Longhurst	Portsmouth & South East Hampshire EBP	09.02.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Tony	Acland	Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW	11.02.10
Helen	Rowland	Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW	11.02.10
Debbie	Mildenhall	Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW	12.02.10
Rob	Gresham	Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW	11.02.10
Helen	Piper	Aimhigher Hampshire & IoW	11.02.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Helen	Briers	University of Winchester	17.02.10
Frankie	Swithinbank	University of Winchester	17.02.10
Sarah-Louise	Collins	University of Winchester	17.02.10
Rachel	Smith	University of Winchester	17.02.10
Terri	Sandison	University of Winchester	17.02.10
Laura		University of Winchester	17.02.10
Kelly		University of Winchester	17.02.10
Vicky		University of Winchester	17.02.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Paul	Walker	University of Portsmouth	26.02.10
Ali	Crowe	University of Portsmouth	26.02.10
Peter	Reader	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Anne	Burrill	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Christine	Martin	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Sara	Denham	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Joyce	Schorah	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Amanda	Cochrane	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Emma	Schlesinger	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Carly	Wilcox	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Melissa	Flack	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Angelina	Varchione	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Peter	Frizelle	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Emma	Coppins	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10
Matt	Blake	University of Portsmouth	01.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Steve	Lake	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Chris	Jackson	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Geeta	Uppal	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Lizzi	Brazier	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Kate	Walker	Southampton Solent University	26.02.10
Trevor	Thorne	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Sophia	Basi	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Sharon	Elegbede	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Oliver	Parry	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Russell	Moralee	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Emma	Jephcott	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Richard	Sayer	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10
Anthony	Moreno	Southampton Solent University	05.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Paul	Holyome	Ryde High School	08.03.10
Malcolm	Lloyd	Young Chamber	08.03.10
Louise	Tatton	IoW Local Authority	08.03.10
Sue	Churches	IoW College	08.03.10
Cath	Scallon	Sandown High School	08.03.10
Rachel	Weldon	St George's Special School	08.03.10
Janet	Cass	Sandown High School	08.03.10
Grainne	Andrews	Medina High School	08.03.10
Ian	Watterson	Carisbrooke High School	08.03.10
Robert	Bartlett	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Lucy	Burns	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Luke	Chiverton	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Liam	Harbour	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Aidan	Hartland-Davis	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Charlotte	Mennie	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Kate	Nutbourne	Student, IoW	08.03.10
Ashley	Sollis	Student, IoW	08.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Kay	Doyle	Andover College	10.03.10
Sally	Sims	Andover College	10.03.10
Pam	Hearsum	Andover College	10.03.10
Kah	Wei-Lo	Andover College	10.03.10
Sarah	Taylor	Andover College	10.03.10
Catherine	Hendrick	Andover College	10.03.10
Hannah	McDougall	Andover College	10.03.10
Ben	Seviour	Andover College	10.03.10
Luke	Wood	Andover College	10.03.10
Michelle	Chennells	Andover College	10.03.10
Theresa	Daley	Andover College	10.03.10
Luke	Croudace	Andover College	10.03.10
Aaron	Pepper	Andover College	10.03.10
Max	Barnett	Andover College	10.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Nicola	Peacock	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Kirsten	Pantry	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Muniza	Siddiqui	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Richard	Kennett	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Janette	Thompson	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Kate	Bartlett	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Anne	Brooks Butcher	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Jennifer	Graham	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Jonathan	Brooks-Bartlett	University of Southampton	11.03.10
Andrea	Bell	University of Southampton	11.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Sue	Riley	Basingstoke 14-19 Consortium	12.03.10
Alison	Ray	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Erivan	White	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Denise	Valler	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Helen	Beer	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Thomas	Barfoot	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Kirsty	Tate	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Carla	Mitchell	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Camilla	Bolton	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Rebecca	Chappel	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Keith	Nkosana	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10
Victoria	Purcell	Queen Mary's College	12.03.10

First name	Surname	Institution	Date
Mary	Somerville	Consultant	31.03.10

Appendix 7 – List of partner schools and colleges

Partner schools (38)

Aldworth Science College	John Hanson Community School
Bitterne Park School,	Mayfield School
Bridgemary Community Sports College,	Miltoncross School
Brune Park Community College	Oak Farm Community School
Cantell Maths & Computing College,	Oasis Academy Lord's Hill
Chamberlayne Park,	Oasis Academy Mayfield
Charter Academy	Park Community School
City of Portsmouth Boys' School	Priory Sports College
City of Portsmouth Girls' School,	Quilley School of Engineering,
Costello Technology College	Redbridge Community School
Cowplain Community School,	Regents Park Community College
Cranbourne Business and Enterprise	St. Edmund's Catholic School
College	St. George's Catholic School
Crestwood College for Business and	Staunton Community Sports School
Enterprise	The Connaught School
Everest Community College	The Sholing Technology College
Fort Hill Community School	The Vyne Community School
Hardley School & Sixth Form	Upper Shirley High School,
Harrow Way Community School	Winton School
Hayling College	Woodlands Community College

Source

www.aimhigherhants.ac.uk/folders/partnerships/04._partner_schools.cfm

Accessed: 08 February 2010

Partner colleges (21)

Alton College	Isle of Wight College
Andover College	Itchen College
Barton Peveril	Peter Symonds College
Basingstoke College of Technology	Portsmouth College
Brockenhurst College	Queen Mary's College
Eastleigh College	South Downs College
Fareham College	Southampton City College
Farnborough College of Technology	St Vincent College
Farnborough Sixth Form College	Tauntons College
Havant College	Totton College
Highbury College	

Source

www.aimhigherhants.ac.uk/folders/partnerships/05_higher_education_partners.cfm

Accessed: 08 February 2010

Partner higher education institutions (4)

Southampton Solent University
University of Portsmouth
University of Southampton
University of Winchester

Source

www.aimhigherhants.ac.uk/folders/partnerships/05_higher_education_partners.cfm

Accessed: 08 February 2010

Appendix 8 – Responsibilities Central Team

Director, Tony Acland, Tony.Acland@winchester.ac.uk

- Responsible for promoting the development of a robust and effective partnership by establishing effective communications and collaboration between partner organisations and other stakeholders in the sub-region and region.
- Ensuring the effective development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Aimhigher Plan on behalf of the Area Partnership Committee.
- To work closely with and support the Action Programme Leaders to ensure the efficient and effective implementation of planned activities.
- To represent the Hampshire & the Isle of Wight Area in national Widening participation networks in order to identify and share good practice.

Deputy Director, Helen Rowland, helen.rowland@winchester.ac.uk

- Providing assistance to the Director particularly in the preparation of annual reports, financial profiles, development and co-ordination of an annual conference to disseminate project findings).
- To work with the Director in establishing effective communication and administrative arrangements, including organising and overseeing the secretariat for the Area Partnership Committee and the Operational Management Group.
- Taking the lead for Staff Development.

Project Manager, Rob Gresham, rob.gresham@winchester.ac.uk

- Taking specific responsibility for projects such as the Aimhigher Associates scheme (undergraduate - schools mentoring), Residential Summer Schools, Healthcare, and attainment raising projects.
- Supporting the Deputy Director and Director in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Aimhigher strategic plan 2008-2011
- Leading the communications strategy, including the media relations and projects, web activity, and publications.

Administrator Debra Mildenhall, debra.mildenhall@winchester.ac.uk (Administrator to the Central Aimhigher (Hampshire & Isle of Wight) team and main contact at Winchester.)

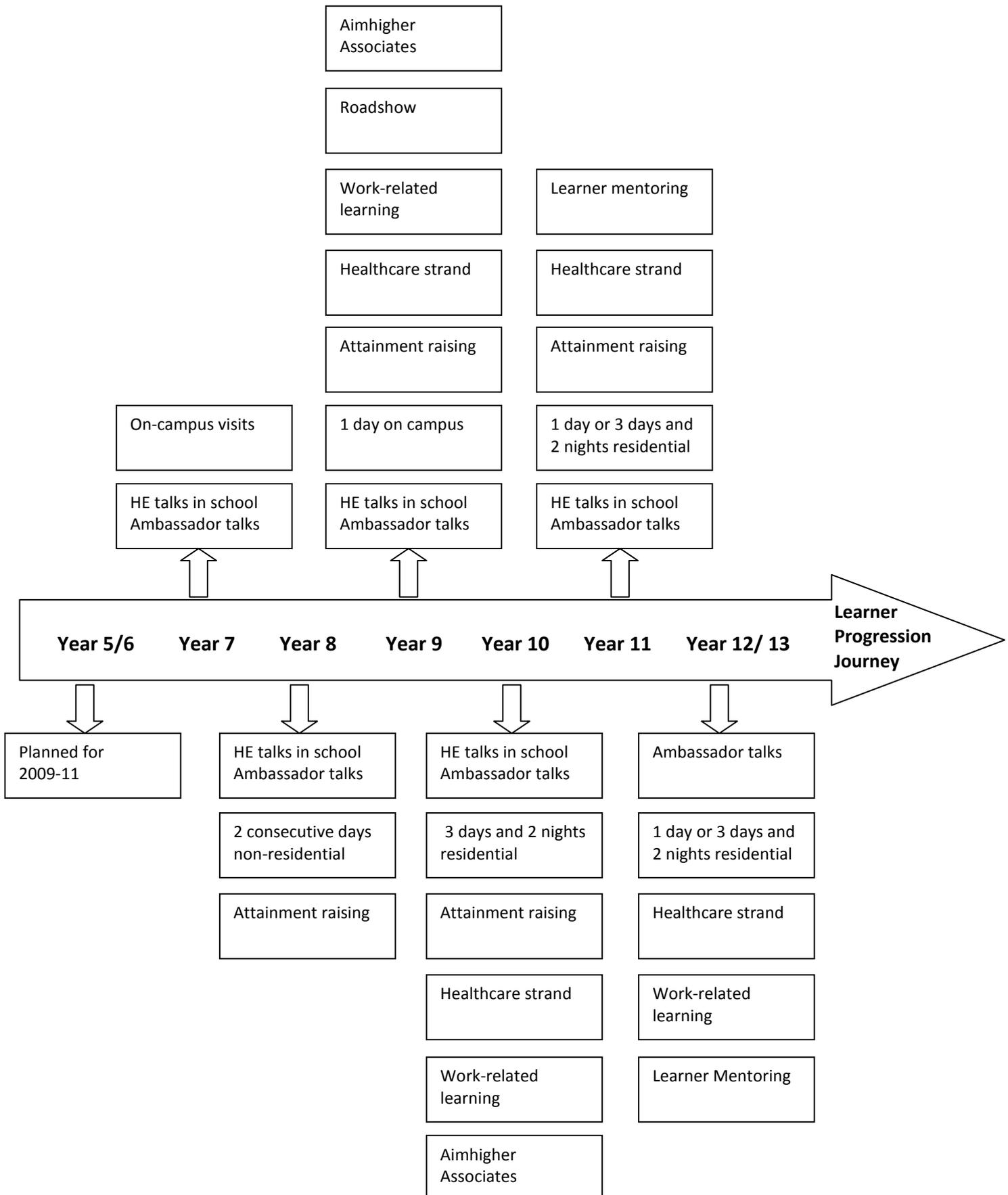
- To work with the Director and Assistant Director in establishing effective communication and administrative arrangements with all partners including maintaining a central contacts list and up to date membership of the Operations Management Group, diarising and calendar arrangement.
- Working with the Deputy Director in the development and co-ordination of marketing and promotional activities (including the production of a regular newsletter, activity brochure, web links and the organisation of an annual conference to disseminate project findings).

Source

www.aimhigherhants.ac.uk/folders/about_us/roles_amp_responsibilities/

Accessed: 08 February 2010

Appendix 9 – Learner Progression Journey



Appendix 10 – References

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Appendix 11 – Abbreviations

APC	(Aimhigher) Area Partnership Committee
ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education & Skills
DIUS	Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
DoH	Department of Health
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
EBP	Education Business Partnership
EC	Excellence Challenge
FEC	Further Education College
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IoW	Isle of Wight
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Education Authority
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
LPF	Learner Progression Framework
LSC	Learning & Skills Council
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
CoPE	Certificate of Personal Effectiveness
P4P	Partnerships for Progression
PSHE	Personal Social Health & Economic education
PVC	Pro-Vice Chancellor
RDA	Regional Development Agency
SEF	Self-evaluation form

SIP	School Improvement Plan
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
VC	Vice Chancellor