

Section Two

Supporting Diverse Learners

‘Sorry, too busy!’: a study of staff development provision for widening participation

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Introduction

Since Partnerships 4 Progression, the forerunner to Aimhigher, Aimhigher teams throughout the country have reported that some lecturers and teachers provide little support for their aspiration raising activities. A key challenge is the apparent lack of knowledge, understanding and commitment to widening participation of many university and school staff.

While practitioners bemoan the lack of support, initial discussion suggests that there is a lack of clarity about what teachers and academics *do* actually understand about widening participation and government led initiatives such as Aimhigher.

The central premise of this paper is that essential to the long term success of widening participation policy, including initiatives such as Aimhigher, is the need to educate and inform those who practise within educational settings about widening participation. As such the paper seeks to:

1. Explore what teachers and academics understand about widening participation and government led initiatives such as Aimhigher, including the extent to which the Initial Teacher Training curriculum includes or refers to introductions to such government policies and their related initiatives; and the extent to which continuing professional development (CPD) for both teachers and academics offers opportunities to learn about such government policies and their related initiatives.

In doing so it is intended that the paper will:

2. Draw out key issues surrounding widening participation and thereby propose further areas for research;
3. Offer ways forward for Aimhigher partnerships.

The problem

‘Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising HE awareness, aspirations and attainment among young people from under-represented groups’ (Aimhigher, n.d.). The programme operates across 44 area partnerships throughout England. Its partnership-based structure means that its success is highly dependent upon the commitment and energy of area partnerships, including local universities, schools, colleges, local authorities and Education Business Partnerships to name but a few.

In my own partnership, Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight, the on campus aspiration raising programme (one of more than eight aspiration raising programmes) provides an opportunity for students to experience life on a university campus first hand. The programme offers places to 3600 young learners across 37 target schools and 17 target colleges through at least 24 separate activities including residential experiences, each partnership involving a broad network of practitioners, school teachers and academics. The success of the activities is highly dependent upon the willingness and commitment of these individuals to engage.

In our 2007-8 teacher survey taken by Aimhigher outreach workers carrying out workshops and assemblies in schools and colleges, 29 per cent of respondents said that they did not know anything about Aimhigher, while 59 per cent knew ‘very little’. One teacher recently asked ‘are the Aimhigher students normally very bright?’ There have been other (perhaps less printable) examples suggesting a lack of understanding about the objectives that widening participation is setting out to achieve.

At the regional level too, questions have been raised about the need to know more about what our colleagues in schools and at university understand. So too at the national level, as identified by the Government’s recent research report *Raising Young People’s Higher Education Aspirations: teachers’ attitudes* (Johnson et al., 2009) which examines the role and impact of education practitioners on the higher education aspirations of young people. Its findings are based on views gathered from 108 teacher interviews in 17 schools. The research suggests that Aimhigher is largely welcomed by teachers as an initiative particularly because of the concrete resources provided to tackle low aspirations. In its recommendations the report (Johnson et al., 2009: 79) stresses the need for improved guidance for teachers:

...need for better communications with and guidance for practitioners about this important initiative and how they can use it to support progression-related work in their schools.

Methodology and scope

The first stage of our research included a literature and desk-based review of the content and structure of teacher training courses and CPD opportunities for teachers and academics, and their supporting professional standards. The literature review proved to be disappointing in that it identified little relating to the specific theme of this paper. Much of the literature focuses on staff development undertaken to improve retention of widening participation students in HE. Although this is not within the scope of this paper, the notion of adapting teaching and learning strategies for widening participation students is nonetheless relevant when looking at teacher training courses.

In the second stage of research a sample of seven course leaders, providers and CPD professionals were interviewed to provide an overview of how the professional standards are implemented in practice.

In reviewing practice for academics, a case study approach was adopted; while there exists a professional standards framework for HE, its implementation and support through CPD or staff development is down to the policy of each individual higher education institution (HEI).

First stage research findings: teachers and Initial Teacher Training

The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) is the national agency and recognised sector body responsible for the training and development of the school workforce.

A framework of professional standards for teachers defines the characteristics of teachers at each career stage (TDA, n.d. a). It provides professional standards for the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), teachers on the main scale (core), teachers on the upper pay scale (post-threshold teachers), excellent teachers and advanced skills teachers (ASTs). The framework is arranged around three interrelated sections covering professional attributes, professional knowledge and understanding, and professional skills.

An initial review of the QTS standards, or so-called 'Q-standards', revealed no specific references to either 'widening participation' or 'Aimhigher'. However, as Annex 1 illustrates, it is clear from the framework that there are *opportunities* to be found to address both, either through knowledge and understanding or through skill development. For example, Q3 focuses on policy instruments and legislation governing education, including The Education Act 2002 and Every Child Matters. Of the 33 other standards 7 refer to broader terms that *relate to* the objectives of widening participation; terms such as 'diversity', 'socio-economic background of the learner', 'needs of minority groups' and 'barriers to learning and progress' all feature in the standards. Perhaps most relevant are Q18 and Q19 which specifically address 'achievement and diversity' and have as their emphasis the differentiation between learner needs.

Second stage research findings: teachers and Initial Teacher Training

Identifying opportunity for learning about Aimhigher and widening participation is one thing; what actually happens on the ground is another. In interviews with course leaders for Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) courses in secondary school subjects there was evidence in all cases of a strong will to ensure that students engage with widening participation; in the words of one course director, ‘we go beyond asking them to engage [with widening participation policy], it is an expectation’. Another course director was kind enough to share her plan for the provision of widening participation activities within the course with me, and examples of some of these activities, as well as some of the key issues, are provided as follows.

1. Evidence of trainee teachers engaging in Aimhigher activities

In some cases trainee teachers participate in Aimhigher activities through their school based practice. In one particular example the trainees took part in a university taster day with the school in which they were doing their teaching practice; in another, PGCE students have been asked to engage in Aimhigher English and geography taster days, supporting pupils from Aimhigher priority schools through on campus activities. Indeed such practice has recently been adopted by a partner university using PGCE maths students to mentor year 10 and 11 pupils from Aimhigher priority schools in maths attainment raising workshops.

It is worth noting, however, that course directors did concede that while this activity based engagement may take place, many students may not necessarily connect the activity with a particular educational or political agenda such as widening participation.

There is also evidence of a proactive approach to widening participation activity in primary teacher training. PGCE (primary) students at one institution had organised ‘Kids On Campus’, a one day taster at university which included a mock degree ceremony for year five pupils from a school in a deprived area where ‘only one parent in the whole school had been to HE’ (Dean of Faculty).

2. Development of a broad skills base

All course leaders emphasised how courses focus on broader skills to enable students to work with, respond to and influence change in government policy and its social and economic context:

Teachers need to be able to develop the intellectual tools necessary for critical assessment and analysis. (PGCE course leader)

The inference here is that research informed teaching should equip teachers to relate to wider government policy and its influence on how students learn.

3. The importance of background, experience and future plans

Some course leaders were keen to stress the extent to which a teacher's own background can influence their learning and willingness to engage with widening participation. One institution actively sought to recruit trainee teachers from a non-traditional background to ensure that the workforce represents the population. It was felt that often those trainees who had followed traditional routes were less likely to aspire to working in the more challenging schools where progression to HE was particularly low. As such, ensuring that teaching practice offers a wide ranging experience was a priority.

4. Time is of essence

While there is evidence of engagement with widening participation activity, all interviewees emphasised the challenge of time and the extensive curriculum to be covered in a nine month PGCE course that involves two work placements and just a few weeks of study. Nearly all mentioned the sheer volume of education related acronyms and educational terms that students have to cope with in just a short space of time. Thus covering widening participation – or indeed any government policy initiative – in any depth remains a huge challenge.

5. Creating opportunities for mutual benefit

Undergraduate courses of course have less marked time constraints. Recent discussion with one institution offering a four year undergraduate education programme has progressed towards the possible development of an Aimhigher-related activity that students in their final year might organise as part of their self-directed learning. Although in the early stages of design and discussion, this is an exciting development that has the potential to benefit the trainee in terms of a widened experience and aiding the completion of particular QTS targets that are less easy to achieve (for example, engagement with parents), and also be of benefit to Aimhigher in its own objectives of working in primary schools and engaging with parents.

First and second stage research findings: teachers and CPD

CPD for primary and secondary teachers is both complex in terms of the range of providers, and, in the words of one CPD professional, 'messy'. All teachers have an entitlement to time out for CPD and where it is accredited it can lead to progression through the aforementioned standards (TDA, n.d. a) – from QTS through to ASTs. In this way, the standards mirror those set out for QTS and are therefore similar in the way they reference widening participation. Usually teachers can access CPD in one of three ways: courses offered through the Local Authority, and these may be in partnership with a number of providers; courses offered by or organised by their school, sometimes in collaboration with other schools; or courses offered by another external agency. The TDA (n.d. b) also provides a database which offers information on CPD opportunities from a range of providers.

To begin with an Internet based survey of the courses offered through the TDA's database was carried out. Using the search facility for a range of terms including and related to widening participation and Aimhigher, the results were as detailed in Table 1.

Given the findings relating to teacher training courses, the absence of reference to widening participation or Aimhigher is perhaps not surprising, though no less disappointing. Exploration into CPD for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) in my own Local Authority did provide some interesting and positive results, however. All NQTs are required to complete an induction programme which is run in partnership with the Local Authority and one HEI. A review of the induction programme offered shows that each year induction conferences are held for NQTs in primary and secondary schools. In each case the variety of workshops varies and a wide range of displays from education providers in the area is organised. Although no discussion has taken place, there would seem to be the opportunity for possible engagement with the programme which has the potential to strengthen understanding about Aimhigher and widening participation among NQTs in partner schools.

Discussion with a representative of the HEI partner with which Aimhigher has a strong relationship proved fruitful, however, and as such serious consideration is being given to the creation of a CPD module, which not unlike the aforementioned undergraduate model, would be to the mutual benefit of the NQT and Aimhigher in terms of aims and objectives.

Research findings: staff development opportunities for academics and staff in HEIs and Aimhigher practitioners

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey in any meaningful way how staff development is organised across a range of HEIs. A case study approach has, however, provided a greater insight into staff development, and again through discussions with professionals in HE opportunities were revealed with positive outcomes. The following two case studies offer two very different examples of how an HEI and an Aimhigher partnership are providing staff development opportunities in relation to widening participation.

Table 1: Search terms used on the TDA CPD database

Term	Results
Aimhigher	0
Widening participation	0
Equality	9 all relating to disability, race and gender and special needs
Diversity	37 most relating to special needs
Inclusive teaching and learning	44 including special needs and mainstreaming
Government policy	4 none related to WP of Aimhigher

Case study one: an example of widening participation through staff development policy in a university in the south of England

A key strategic target of the university is to 'foster stronger recruitment from groups currently under-represented in higher education, by working to raise aspirations and break down barriers to participation such as those created by culture, geography, [and] social and economic factors' (Strategic Plan 2005/6 to 2010/11). This strategic objective is reflected throughout its staff development, and learning and teaching strategies.

The overall aim of staff development at the university is to 'facilitate personal and professional development to enable individuals to achieve their potential and contribute to the provision of excellent teaching and research, and high quality student experience' (Staff Development Policy 2008-9). An overview of the principle staff development strands is provided as follows.

Induction for all new staff

A formal induction programme for all new staff is provided both within each faculty and also through a formal induction programme held on three occasions during the year (September, January and April) at which attendance is compulsory. The induction covers university policy as well as an introduction to the variety of services offered throughout the university. It includes a brief introduction to Aimhigher funded aspiration raising activities organised by the university.

Collaborative Enhancement of Teaching

A significant element of funding for staff development is devolved to university services and faculties. Each faculty is able to determine how staff development funds are allocated and hence can develop their own staff development plans. University policy does, however, require all academic staff to engage with the university's Collaborative Enhancement of Teaching (CET) policy which focuses on the sharing of good practice. The programme requires academic staff to demonstrate through a questionnaire how they have engaged with 'collaborative enhancement' throughout the year, and covers development of practice in teaching and learning as well as broader professional development through workshops and events. In support of CET policy a series of CET development days and CET lunches are offered as a 'practical space in which to foster collaborative engagement' (quotation taken from the university's website). The lunches, new in 2008-9, included an opening session on widening participation and its implications from a political and social perspective, as well as for the university's own widening participation policy.

Funding research in teaching and learning

Each year staff are invited to bid for funding from the university's learning and teaching fund. This is offered to give staff the resources and time to research and develop new approaches

to learning and teaching such as the development of blended learning, innovative assessment, and research informed teaching and learning. The Learning and Teaching Development Unit (LTDU) supports this funding process and it is evident from examples of funded research that support is given to subjects related to widening participation, including Black and minority ethnic (BME) students, students with disabilities and a range of inclusive teaching and learning strategies.

Central staff development – and collaboration with Aimhigher

The central staff development programme focuses on supporting staff through broad skills such as management and leadership. Subject areas covered include leadership and management, and information and communications technology (ICT). Already further discussion with the director has led to the development of a staff development session on widening participation, planned for November 2009, and a draft outline of the proposal is set out as follows:

Widening participation – striving for equality in access and equality in outcomes

This session will focus on the University's key values of Social Justice; Diversity; Individuals Matter. It will be of interest to a wide spectrum of staff including those involved in learning and teaching, outreach, community engagement, student services and recruitment. We will explore national policy drivers for widening participation, and how these are implemented through national projects such as Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks. We will then review strategy at the university and explore how effective we are in recruiting students from under-represented groups and enabling them to succeed. By attending this session you should be better informed about widening participation and the role you can play in extending the benefits of higher education to students from disadvantaged groups.

This offers an exciting opportunity for Aimhigher to develop understanding among staff about widening participation and it is hoped that this will lead to strengthened engagement in aspiration raising activities.

Case study two: development of a widening participation qualification by an Aimhigher partnership

Managers of an Aimhigher partnership in the north of England decided to undergo a review of its staff development needs since many practitioners were known to have a non-education and/or non-widening participation background. A survey was conducted among Aimhigher practitioners in the partnership, including 4 universities and more than 120 schools. Those surveyed included learning mentors in schools, and 14-19 coordinators and enterprise officers based in the partnership area. There were two key findings: firstly, the

survey revealed a concern among staff that while staff development was on offer, none was accredited; and secondly, staff demonstrated a relatively poor understanding of the context in which they were working – for example, that widening participation is part of a political and social inclusion agenda.

The response was the development of an accredited qualification delivered by a partner HEI, details of which can be found as follows. The course offers both practical and theory based approaches to learning, and one of the starting points for the course was unit one which puts Aimhigher and widening participation in a historical context through lectures and essays. It was initially (year one) set up for the partnership but has since been marketed nationwide. The target group to date has been Aimhigher practitioners and in particular those working in schools and colleges. The course leaders plan to widen their target base to other staff working at the partner universities – e.g. admissions staff.

The BTEC level four qualification for Widening Participation in Education and Training

Accredited by Edexcel [a UK examining board], this qualification offers practitioners from all organisations and institutions involved in widening participation a chance to formalise the practical and enhance their knowledge of theoretical aspects of the social inclusion and widening participation agenda. The BTEC covers 5 units: Exploring the Social Inclusion and Widening Participation Agenda, Working with Young People: Theories and Principles, Engaging with Young People, Supporting the Widening Participation Practitioner and Young People's Progression to Further and Higher Education. The qualification gives candidates the chance to 'add value' to their work and to also acknowledge the many additional skills needed and obtained when working in this relatively new but also mainly 'short-term' contractual field of educational initiatives, we wanted to add to their personal and professional development. (Taken from the Aimhigher partnership's practitioner website)

Already seven practitioners in Aimhigher Hampshire & Isle of Wight have registered for the course as a means of gaining accreditation for their work.

Conclusion: the way forward

The findings presented in this paper are part of an exploratory study, and some specific ways forward for Aimhigher partnerships and those who share the widening participation mission are put forward as recommendations as follows. However, a most important and admittedly unexpected outcome has been that *all* of the individuals I interviewed (either in person or by telephone) *voluntarily* offered for me and my colleagues within the partnership to contribute in some way to their teacher training or staff development programme. Simply in talking about the issues and the challenges, collaborative opportunities with mutual benefit were identified and in many cases are now under development.

1. Although the evidence suggests that teacher training courses offer no direct engagement with widening participation and Aimhigher, it is clear that the QTS standards offer *opportunities* to develop activities that can encourage engagement in Aimhigher activities. Examples of existing and potential collaboration between Aimhigher partnerships and undergraduate and postgraduate teacher training providers demonstrate that these opportunities can provide mutual benefits and should be embraced.

Recommendation: Aimhigher partnerships that have teacher training providers in their area should not hesitate in making a first contact with those providers to discuss ways in which joint working could take place. This is relevant to both primary and secondary undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

2. Investigation of CPD opportunities within the local authority area also reveals a range of routes to engage with teachers in local schools.

Recommendation: An initial investigation into the way CPD is organised in the Aimhigher partnership area is likely to reveal further avenues to be exploited. That CPD is often organised through groups of schools hints also at opportunities for Aimhigher partnerships to offer bespoke training to groups of schools - possibly by geographical area or existing partnerships – in order to provide clarity regarding the role and objectives of Aimhigher, and the political and social context of the mission.

3. Examination of just one HEI exposed a range of different staff development opportunities for academic and administrative staff.

Recommendation: Aimhigher partnerships are encouraged to investigate the staff development policies of their own partner HEIs for ways to further the Aimhigher cause.

4. It is acknowledged that the lifelong learning sector, including sixth form colleges and colleges of further education, has not been considered in this paper; the range of courses is wide and complex.

Recommendation: Further research should be conducted to gain an in depth understanding of the extent to which widening participation is covered through teacher training and CPD in this sector.

5. Finally, in putting forward these suggestions it is of course acknowledged that many partnerships will already have found a range of similar and alternative models that are not represented here.

Recommendation: It seems only appropriate therefore to recommend the sharing of good practice among partnerships by documenting alternative models of staff development for widening participation as part of ongoing research.

Annex 1: Standards for QTS related to widening participation

Attributes

Relationships with young people

Q1: has trainee planned to meet diverse needs?

Q2: demonstrate an understanding of the needs of minority groups and appreciate the values that individual groups and their families place on education.

Q3: be aware of the professional duties of teachers and the statutory framework within which they work.

Be aware of the policies and practices of the workplace and share in collective responsibility for their implementation.

Knowledge and understanding

Teaching and learning

Q10: Does the trainee recognise and take account of the specific needs of individuals and groups of learners, for example, those with special educational needs, and those for whom English is an additional language?

Achievement and diversity

Q18: understand how children and young people develop and that the progress and well-being of learners are affected by a range of developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences. Understanding of the influences on children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities, learners from minority ethnic groups including those for whom English is an additional language, those from particular socio-economic backgrounds such as those eligible for free school meals (FSM), and those who might otherwise be at risk of underachieving depend on teachers and a range of other colleagues with specific responsibilities to monitor and manage their learning and well-being, and provide them with the support that they need.

Does trainee know how various factors can present barriers to learning, progress and well being?

Is trainee able to recognise any differences in the rates of progress and development of boys and girls, and factors relating to the underachievement of boys?

Q19: Is trainee able to take into account a range of learners' needs in an inclusive approach?

Does the trainee know how to identify the needs of specific groups of learners, e.g. [gifted and talented], [special educational needs] and those from diverse social, cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds?

Skills

Teaching

Q25a: Does the trainee use a range of teaching strategies and resources including e-learning, taking practical account of diversity and promoting equality and inclusion?

Does the trainee promote equality and inclusion of all learners in teaching strategies?

Does the trainee identify and address the needs of different learners?

Q25c: Does the trainee use inclusive language?

Learning environment

Q30: Does the trainee identify opportunities for learners to learn in out of school contexts?

Source: TDA (2008)

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