

Aimhigher and the further education college: strategic synergy?

Jim Tate and Sue Hatt

University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

This paper explores the alignment of the Aimhigher programme to widen participation in higher education (HE) with the strategic priorities of further education colleges (FECs) and the sustainability of the activities within that programme post-Aimhigher. It is drawn from research into the ways in which the 31 colleges in the south west (SW) of England work with the three Aimhigher area partnerships to plan and deliver a coherent programme of activities to targeted learners. In particular, the study has investigated the ways in which and extent to which colleges were:

- targeting learners from National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) 4-8, disabled learners and looked-after young people (LAYP);
- aligning Aimhigher with wider agendas in their college.

Methodology and context

The study used desk-based research to explore the academic and policy literature to contextualise the findings from the SW and used questionnaires and interviews to identify and examine the ways in which the SW colleges have been involved in delivering the Aimhigher programmes.

The literature review noted that policy guidance about the role of colleges in widening participation and in Aimhigher has shifted considerably during the last decade. While the *Excellence Challenge* programme funded colleges to work with their post-sixteen learners to promote progression to a largely traditional model of a three year honours degree delivered in universities, the *Partnerships for Progression* programme focused on a wider age range from 13 to 30 years old and placed considerable emphasis on 'progression routes to HE through workplace learning' (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2002: 7). The integration of these two programmes into Aimhigher led to a stronger focus on learners aged thirteen to nineteen and a weaker emphasis on older learners and progression to alternative forms of HE through work-based routes. This change in policy caused the area partnerships in the SW to rethink the role of colleges in their programmes and led to adjustments to the roles that colleges played in the delivery of Aimhigher.

Although Aimhigher is a national programme, the ways in which it has been operationalised have differed as each area partnership has sought to accommodate its own particular blend of local circumstances. All three partnerships in the SW recognised the importance of

engaging FECs in their programmes of activity, but the approach that each partnership adopted depended on the relationships between FECs, higher education institutions (HEIs) and schools. This has resulted in three different models of engagement for colleges in the areas' strategic plans for 2008-11 as Table 1 shows.

The Peninsula partnership has operated within a rural and coastal area with poor transport networks and pockets of considerable deprivation. Indeed, despite its attraction as a holiday location, Cornwall still ranks as one of the poorest areas in the European Union. The HEIs in the area have a history of collaboration to widen participation that pre-dated the Aimhigher programme and they have sought to ensure that Aimhigher activity supplemented, extended and balanced the institutional outreach work. In addition, one HEI had well established and extensive institutional partnerships with the colleges to distribute the delivery of HE programmes across the area.

The Peninsula partnership developed a clear and well articulated strategy for involving colleges in the 2008-11 phase of the Aimhigher programme. The colleges' roles involved working with vocational level 3 learners in their own colleges and the key influencers in the communities where college and school target cohorts reside. A questionnaire to record Aimhigher activity between November 2008 and February 2009 found that delivery was

Table 1: The role of FECs in Aimhigher area plans 2008-11

Aimhigher area	Where	FECs focus on engagement with
Peninsula	Devon Cornwall Taunton and West Somerset	Level 3 vocational learners in colleges Key influencers for target group within local community
LIFE	Bournemouth Dorset Poole Yeovil	Key stage 3 and 4 learners in schools
West	Gloucestershire Wiltshire West of England Bridgwater	Wide variety of learners in schools, colleges and the community

aligned with this strategy as FEC respondents reported that 77 per cent of their events were delivered to vocational level 3 learners during this period, and a further 15 per cent involved key influencers. The partnership decided to work with all vocational level 3 students on courses with low HE progression rates and staff in FECs welcomed this approach as it simplified the targeting process. Indeed over 90 per cent of respondents reported that they found their partnership's targeting guidance 'easy' or 'very easy' to follow.

The LIFE partnership covers the large conurbation of Bournemouth and Poole and its rural hinterland. In contrast to Peninsula, the partnership used colleges primarily to deliver activities to school students where the college has a particular subject specialism. Examples included days themed around adventure management, animal behaviour, clinical nursing and fine dining. The questionnaires showed that master classes accounted for half of their activities and that 75 per cent of these were delivered to students in schools. The participants for these activities were selected by the schools rather than the colleges, obviating the need for the colleges to implement the HEFCE targeting guidelines (HEFCE, 2007), which specified that participants should be drawn predominantly from lower socio-economic groups and areas of relative disadvantage where HE participation was low.

Aimhigher West is the largest area partnership in the SW, and includes areas of severe economic and educational deprivation in urban locations such as Bristol, Gloucester and Swindon. The partnership included seventeen colleges which worked as both recipients and providers of activities. The partnership has adopted a structural approach that supports, rather than directs, delivery. Consequently the questionnaire indicated that the colleges had engaged many different sorts of learners across schools, colleges and the community, in contrast to the focus on particular groups that characterised delivery in LIFE and the Peninsula.

Aimhigher West has concentrated on devolving funding to colleges for Aimhigher coordination and the partnership has facilitated a further education (FE) forum. FE coordinators have been expected, as a minimum, to identify the cohort, be a point of contact, produce plans and submit monitoring reports in line with the criteria in the Aimhigher HEFCE guidance. Operational details about targeting, delivery and activities have been left to the discretion of individual colleges and questionnaire responses indicated considerable diversity in the type of activities and the methods of identifying the cohort.

The FE forum was proving to be a useful conduit for information and the questionnaires showed a high level of awareness of both the HEFCE targeting guidance (91 per cent) and the HE Progression Framework (82 per cent). The absence of detailed guidance on targeting from the partnership, however, left cohort selection to the FE coordinators and the complexity of this task was compounded by the large number of students who met the HEFCE (2007) criteria. These difficulties were reflected in the questionnaires as 39 per cent of the college respondents reported that they found targeting to be 'difficult' or 'very difficult'.

The findings from this research indicate the extent to which Aimhigher has been customised to accommodate local circumstances and history. Aimhigher partnerships in the SW have established themselves within their local landscape and consequently have chosen to emphasise different aspects of the evolving Aimhigher policy guidance in developing their area strategies, and the place of colleges within those strategies. The SW partnerships presented three case studies of ways in which FECs have been engaged in Aimhigher and these provided some valuable insights into the interaction between national policy and local implementation.

Strategic synergy and alignment

Cooperation between FECs and Aimhigher is mutually advantageous in that FECs enable Aimhigher to reach its target group and Aimhigher promotes the progression of school students to FE and the progression, in turn, of FE students to HE. There would appear to be an ostensible synergy that would favour FECs incorporating Aimhigher into their institutional strategies. In addressing the issue of aligning the Aimhigher programme with strategic priorities, the published research makes it clear that senior institutional management play a key role, in that institutional policies and priorities are formulated at senior management level by the people who can provide ongoing commitment and stability.

Institutions refer to the involvement of senior management as being key to the success of their widening participation strategy. It facilitates the decision-making process and promotes a more integrated approach to widening participation across the institution. (Thomas et al., 2006: 175-6)

The extent to which widening participation and diversity was championed at the most senior level had an impact on how they were perceived and valued within the institution, and therefore how embedded they were in the minds of the staff. (Bridger et al., 2007: 5)

Whilst these quotes refer to HEIs rather than FECs, the interviews conducted with Aimhigher FE coordinators in the SW indicated that senior management support was also important in FECs. However, the interviewees were very clear that this was not the whole story. They felt that it was necessary to look to middle-managers to address the difficulties of implementing new policy and its alignment with existing institutional strategies. Middle managers carry responsibility for addressing concerns about the new policy's implications for teaching and learning practice, careers advice, and so on. Their role is to mediate between the senior managers who shape the college's mission and the academic and student-facing staff who are oriented towards their own particular role in the delivery of college curricula and services. As Bridger et al. (2007: 2) noted:

senior managers tended to take more of a broad, society-level view whereas academic staff were more concerned with teaching, learning and assessment implications.

Whilst the importance of policy-making senior management was not downplayed by the interviewees, they believed that in order for Aimhigher to maximise its significance to FECs and to embed itself into college philosophy and practice, it is crucial for Aimhigher to reach staff at middle-management level. There was a consensus amongst interviewees that these are key personnel in that they are the staff who can tie Aimhigher to the FE curriculum:

We are the curriculum managers. We do have an HE strategy group, which is all the curriculum managers and some of the programme managers who teach higher education.... Senior managers recognise and say ‘there’s a need for a role here’ but we’re the doers.... You’ve got to have people who have got that curriculum knowledge.¹

The essential point here is that when strategically aligning different policies and priorities within the college, the implementation of this is done at middle-management level because it must be implemented within the college curriculum. It is at this level that the alignment actually takes place in real terms, so the personnel at this level must understand and appreciate the value of widening participation if it is to succeed. Consequently, and over-simplifying somewhat, we might encapsulate this view by saying that both levels of management have their necessary roles in strategic alignment: senior management for strategy and middle management for practical implementation.

I wouldn’t expect my Vice-Principal to have a heavy involvement in Aimhigher because their role is wide and varied...the Vice-Principal has a good awareness of it and he knows where he wants to [go] with it and what role it fulfils and...what role it should be fulfilling, but it is up to middle managers like myself to make sure that those strategic goals are put into place and embedded within curriculums.

Some went a little further by emphasising that the impetus may in some cases be driven more from the bottom-up than from the top-down:

All the student services are aware of Aimhigher, the senior tutors are aware of Aimhigher, the personal tutors are aware of Aimhigher where they have been involved and we have made sure that virtually every single level 3 tutor has been involved so we are pushing it, rather than the Vice-Principal top-down pushing it.

Not only is the involvement of middle managers in Aimhigher significant because of their curriculum awareness, but they are also essential in connecting Aimhigher activities to the FE curriculum in order to justify the investment of student/staff time. To make Aimhigher attractive to educational providers, tying activities into the learners’ curriculum is more than just desirable; it may be a condition of an institution’s involvement. For example, as one FE coordinator said:

What schools would say to you [is], ‘We cannot afford the day out, we cannot afford the staff for the day out and we can’t afford the coach for a day out that doesn’t have a return for student’s curriculum.

This approach is likely to place a high value on master classes/subject-enrichment activities and this is consistent with the FE questionnaire results where almost a quarter of events (24.7 per cent) were reported as being ‘master class/subject-enrichment’ events. The only categories of event that scored higher were the extremely broad categories of ‘college-based activity’ and ‘provision of IAG [information advice and guidance]’ which both scored 27.3 per cent.

Sustainability

This ‘return for student’s curriculum’ is likely to be relevant also for sustaining the beneficial effects of Aimhigher in FECs beyond the lifetime of the programme itself. Our analysis suggests that it is useful to divide sustainability into three distinct categories: continuity, embedding and legacy. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Continuity is taken to refer to situations where Aimhigher activities have proven so valuable to an institution that they will be continued beyond their funded life under an alternative source of funding. Some interviewees speculated about which of their current range of Aimhigher activities they might continue under some alternative source of funding.

Probably what wouldn’t happen would be the summer schools; possibly the health taster days. Pretty much, I think, everything else would continue.

If you take something like the master classes, you know, that we really benefited from; we would have to fund-raise...linked to every course is enrichment money.... It could be that a proportion of that is used.... So, yes, I suppose there could be other sources there that one would have to look at because this is so important.

Embedding is taken to refer to incorporating one thing within another larger entity. The embedding of Aimhigher occurs when an Aimhigher activity is incorporated within other larger events and activities organised by the institution.

The progression weeks and that sort of thing would happen anyway, because we involved Aimhigher with us, we would run without them.

In other cases, activities draw on many different sources of funding. Provided some of the participants come from the Aimhigher cohort it is seen as legitimate that Aimhigher funding should make a contribution to the cost of the activity, as in the following example.

All the kids will benefit from it in the class by going on the trips, [Aimhigher funding] paying for a coach or something, but if there are five Aimhigher students in there, then it covers them.

Aimhigher, of course, seeks to embed itself in activities that will continue post-Aimhigher, activities that are embedded within curricula. Notice that in the two examples mentioned,

the first implies a continuation of the embedded activity but the second does not carry this implication, as a coach trip might be a one-off activity whereas the progression week was an annual event at the college. Therefore not all embedding entails sustainability.

This incorporation of an Aimhigher element into a larger institutional event is sometimes adopted in the first instance, not in the interest of embedding but simply because it is one way to reach Aimhigher learners. Whilst it is the most minimally targeted of methods, it seems common to many colleges, but this rather loose method of targeting can promote an element of embedding as an incidental gain.

Legacy is taken to refer to the enduring lessons from Aimhigher that will continue to influence and inform the institution's other activities. Although the specific activities currently funded by Aimhigher might not continue as such, the benefits to the widening participation agenda will persist.

One way in which an Aimhigher legacy may arise is as a result of Aimhigher's involvement in institutions being interwoven with other related activities. Given that Aimhigher coordinators in colleges usually have institutional roles that are highly compatible with their Aimhigher role, there may sometimes be only a vague distinction for them between activities that are identified as being 'Aimhigher' activities and those that are not. This interweaving or blurring of activities can occur in different ways. For example, where Aimhigher's purposes are served by non-Aimhigher interventions:

...it is hard to say what is Aimhigher and what is not, because things are happening anyway with branded things. We say it is Aimhigher, but with a lot of the taster days and visits, there aren't Aimhigher taster days on offer for FE colleges so we organise them with other universities but it is just part of their general marketing... I still get what I need from the universities even if they are not seeing it as an Aimhigher offer.

Alternatively, this interweaving of widening participation activities occurs where Aimhigher activities are not given a separate identity. For example, an intervention with learners may not be branded as an Aimhigher activity to the learners, but the FE practitioner is classifying it as an Aimhigher activity because this intervention is a means by which the practitioner is reaching the Aimhigher cohort.

...we then spend more time with those [students] but we don't say 'you are an Aimhigher person', we say 'you have identified you require some learning support; we would like to help you understand what that could mean in practice and what other support...you need to help you actually move on into higher education'.

As this quote implies, the Aimhigher coordinators in FECs would hold that the blurring of the separate, discrete identity of Aimhigher is less important than ensuring that the benefits

of Aimhigher reach its recipients successfully. Although this blurring adds to the difficulties of monitoring Aimhigher's progress and measuring its success, it generates significant compensation in contributing to the Aimhigher legacy.

Conclusion

Taking these several points together, an overall picture surfaces. The alignment of Aimhigher with the FECs' strategic objectives entails a multi-level involvement that extends from executive level through middle management to the student-facing staff and learners. The policy development is integrated with the colleges' strategic priorities; its implementation is negotiated by the curriculum managers to align with their day-to-day operations until, at the end of the line, the learners benefit from these activities even through they might not recognise the role of Aimhigher as the provider.

One interpretation of this might be to view this process as the kind of practical modification that policy undergoes due to its migration through different levels of an institution: 'At each stage in the process of migration, policy is modified' (Williams, 1997 and Eggins, 1999 cited in Greenbank, 2007: 211); and 'As it passes down the "implementation staircase" policy-makers and practitioners may interpret or change policy in an attempt to meet "local" objectives' (Cyert and March, 2002 cited in Greenbank, 2007: 211).

From the evidence of these interviews, any modification to Aimhigher that is taking place in FECs is being driven by the practicalities of implementation, learning through doing and a creative seeking of effective methods to reach the target cohort; it is modification in pursuit of policy objectives.

What is striking in this process is the way in which the issue of strategic alignment connects via the curriculum with the issue of sustainability. Since curriculum delivery is central to the work of the college, strategic alignment requires compatibility with the existing and developing curriculum in which the alignment of different strands of institutional strategy is played out, whilst at the same time curriculum is the arena of teaching and learning practice in which continuity, embedding and legacy takes place. This connection is so strong that the strategic alignment and synergy of Aimhigher with FECs might best be understood as being indivisible from issues of FE curriculum development and the sustainability of Aimhigher.

Key points

- Strategic alignment must include not only the commitment of senior managers but also the middle-managers (curriculum managers) who have the responsibility for the actual implementation of any such alignment.
- For implementation to be successful, strategic alignment must also be understood in terms of how well Aimhigher activities can be made consistent with, and complementary to, the college curriculum.

- Our understanding of ‘embedding’ should mean being embedded *within curricula*.
- The sustainability of Aimhigher activity post-Aimhigher may usefully be clarified in terms of continuity, embedding and legacy.
- Strategic alignment, curriculum development, and sustainability are not three separate issues for Aimhigher. Rather there is a direct connection uniting these three things as elements of a coherent whole.

Note

1. All unattributed quotes are from Aimhigher FE coordinator interviews and have been anonymised by agreement with the interviewees.

References

- Bridger, K., Shaw, J., Brain, K., Foreman, J. and Reid, I. (2007) *Embedding widening participation and promoting student diversity: what can be learned from a business case approach?*, York: The Higher Education Academy.
- Greenbank, P. (2007) ‘Introducing widening participation policies in higher education: the influence of institutional culture’, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 12, 2: 209-224.
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2002) *Partnerships for Progression: Call for strategic plans to release funding*, November 2002/49, Bristol: HEFCE.
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2007) *Higher education outreach; reaching disadvantaged learners*, HEFCE 07/12, Bristol: HEFCE.
- Thomas, L., May, H., Harrop, H., Houston, M., Knox, H., Foong Lee, M., Osborne, M., Pudner, H. and Trotman, C. (2006) *From the margins to the mainstream*, London: Universities UK/SCOP.