

Supporting Vocational & Work-based Learner Progression into HE



The results of a scoping study to identify joint Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Network Activity that supports vocational and work-based learner progression to higher education

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1. Introduction

A scoping study was undertaken to identify joint Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) partnership activity to enhance vocational and work-based learners' progression to higher education (HE). The aim of the study was to provide some sense of the benefits of joint working and where possible to identify activity which may be sustained beyond the life of the partnerships. The study, commissioned by Action on Access in partnership with the LLN National Forum, involved a desk-review of all LLN and regional and area Aimhigher websites. A request for information sent to both the LLN National Forum's and Action on Access's mail-lists resulted in more detail on activity. Joint developments were differentiated in relation to focus and content, and identified: governance arrangements, curriculum developments, progression agreements, resources and materials, information, advice and guidance (IAG), staff developments, and targeted developments for Apprentices, vocational and diploma learners.

The study was limited due to the research timescale and there may be gaps in detail as joint activity was not always highlighted on websites and/or the information offered by practitioners was scant. Further, the email responses were given by self-selecting individuals. A decision was made to be sensitive to other developments overlapping with this scoping study. Firstly, the ongoing national evaluation of LLNs being undertaken by SQW on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (this evaluation was alluded to by several respondents). Secondly, the evidence within annual monitoring reports submitted to HEFCE by both Aimhigher and LLNs, including final reports by some LLNs, already include impact evaluation data of these activities which would require a duplication of effort by practitioners and thus further requests for this were not made.

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2. Context

2.1 Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks

Aimhigher and LLNs are strands of the HEFCE programmes of work which support national widening participation strategy, including encouraging fair access to HE.

The Aimhigher programme operates across 42 area partnerships throughout England. Each area has a programme of work that involves schools, further education colleges (FECs) and universities. The role of Aimhigher is to:

- Raise aspirations, attainment and motivation to enter HE among young people from under-represented groups who have the potential to gain the academic or vocational qualifications that will enable them to enter HE
- Strengthen progression routes into HE via vocational courses
- Offer information, advice and guidance to potential students, their families and teachers

(DCSF website 2010)

Aimhigher has a broad remit to target activity at learners following different programmes, with vocational learners being just one element.

LLNs have been supported by the HEFCE since December 2005, with many of them now completed or coming to the end of their programme of work in 2010. The main aim of the Networks is to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) and FECs to work in partnership to effect coherent, clear and certain progression pathways into and through HE for vocational and work-based learners. There are 30 networks (including 2 national), spanning 113 HEIs and more than 260 FECs. Core characteristics of all LLNs are:

- Curriculum development to facilitate progression
- Information, advice, guidance and learner support
- Production of network-wide progression agreements

(HEFCE website, 2009)

The Aimhigher programme focuses on young people from lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC groups 4-8) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low. LLNs are specifically focused on vocational and work-based learners and it is generally acknowledged that vocational learners tend to be predominately from lower socio-economic groups. This was identified in the Foster review of the future of further education which had formally recognised the role of FECs in providing learning for a higher proportion of disadvantaged learners than the local population average. It is recognised that there are fewer progression opportunities for learners in many vocational programmes than for those following the academic route. 90% of those on conventional A level programmes enter HE, but only around 40-50% of those qualifying at level 3 on vocational subjects do. (DFES 2005)

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It therefore seems appropriate that LLNs and Aimhigher partnerships work together to support and improve progression for vocational learners in FECs in order to increase participation in HE by these groups. The HEFCE provided guidance to LLNs about working with Aimhigher partnerships in order to discourage duplication of effort and funding for the same target groups. They were encouraged to build on the work Aimhigher had already done by developing mechanisms and agreements to ensure progression, support learners in partner institutions, make adjustments to the curriculum in order to facilitate progression and deliver the HE opportunities that Aimhigher has helped to promote. (HEFCE 2005, 2005a, 2006) Guidance for Aimhigher practitioners at local and regional level on the funding arrangements and management of the Aimhigher programme from 2006-08, identified the importance of identifying the complementarities of Aimhigher/LLN roles. LLNs were issued with similar advice in May 2006. (HEFCE 2006, 2006a)

Key areas for developing synergy included:

- Aimhigher partnerships would promote improved IAG, and raise aspirations and attainment among vocational learners, but mapping of learning pathways and IAG could be done jointly with LLNs
- LLNs would realise many Aimhigher ambitions through working with HEI/FEC partnerships to develop progression opportunities for vocational learners, the active transfer of learners into HE and developing associated curriculum change
- Governance arrangements would reflect the agreed working arrangements between Aimhigher and LLNs

2.2 Policy Developments

National Skills Strategy

The work of the LLNs and Aimhigher fits with other national strategies, not just for widening participation and addressing fair access to HE, but also in relation to the need to increase the number of people with higher level skills and education as outlined in the Leitch report, 'Prosperity for All in the Global Economy - World Class Skills' (Leitch, 2006).

A recent UK Commission for Employment and Skills report, 'Towards Ambition 2020: Skills, Jobs, Growth' (UKCES, 2009), noted that in comparison with other countries the UK lags behind in the number of young adults who acquire advanced vocational skills after leaving school and that there is a need for more people with skills at the intermediate technician, associate professional and skilled occupation levels 4/5 which are critical to many of the industries of the future (see also UKCES, 2008: Working Futures 2007-2017). Consequently there is a renewed focus on the importance of vocational qualifications and to ensuring that the learning pathways associated with undertaking such qualifications are clear to learners, their advisers and employers. This includes not only routes into work and further training but routes into HE.

The white paper, 'National Skills Strategy, Skills for Growth' (BIS 2009) and the 'Higher Ambitions' white paper (BIS 2009) identified 'a new overarching ambition for

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our higher education and skills system that 75% of people should participate in HE or complete an advanced apprenticeship or equivalent by age 30'. The skills strategy outlines the need to ensure the skills systems begin to 'mesh' more closely with HE in such a way that there is a clear vocational route from Apprenticeship to technician to Foundation Degree and beyond. This will both meet an economic need and, through increasing advanced vocational routes into work, give a wider range of people the opportunity to gain the skills for a rewarding career. These ambitions fall resolutely into the category of work that the LLNs have been piloting and developing over the last five years in association with Aimhigher.

Higher Ambitions

'Higher Ambitions' (BIS, 2009) reinforced the need to widen participation in HE for reasons of social justice, but also to support the needs of the UK economy that globalisation and a knowledge economy demands. The report suggested there was a need for 'stronger ladders' of opportunity through vocational and work-based routes into Foundation Degrees, including advanced Apprenticeships and new technician qualifications. There was a suggestion for new partnership between schools, colleges and universities, where schools would identify pupils with the ability and aptitude to reach for the top well before GCSEs, with proper support in setting their sights on university. (Although why Aimhigher and LLN partnerships are not acknowledged here is unclear but may reflect the work being undertaken by some HEIs researching into how partnerships can work together more effectively as recommended by the National Committee for Educational Excellence (see HEFCE 2009b). The report identified the need for changes in the HE offer including: more part-time study, more vocationally-based foundation degrees, more work-based study and more study whilst living at home. Thus the work of Aimhigher and LLN in supporting progression information for work-based learners and the creation of new curriculum is relevant to this agenda.

Fair Access

The National Skills Strategy refers to the recommendations of an additional report by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 'Unleashing Aspiration' (Cabinet Office 2009), which highlighted that the UK's professions have become more, not less, socially exclusive over time and that routes through Apprenticeships and vocational learning should support more entry into professional programmes in HE. Some Aimhigher programmes have already been focussed on these activities. ¹

¹ An example of the work of Aimhigher South Yorkshire:
<http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/syorks/resources/PPP%20report-FINAL.pdf>

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LLN and Aimhigher partnerships' work to identify progression routes for vocational and work-based learners has the potential to highlight some of the barriers and successes in operating these recommendations.

A focus on HE in FE is of interest to the work of the LLNs which have developed significant activity to support and highlight vocational progression routes in HE in FE; not least in relation to IAG in FECs regarding foundation degrees and other higher-level learning, but also externally to regional and sub-regional university HE programmes.

Information, Advice and Guidance

Underpinning the policy agendas relating to schools, colleges and the national skills strategy, is the need to ensure quality IAG for young people, their teachers and parents. The IAG strategy, launched in October 2009, entitled 'Quality, Choice and Aspiration' (DCSF 2009), outlines potential guarantees for students in terms of the IAG and the careers information they can expect. The development of services for young people should also link with the adult advancement and careers service as outlined in 'Shaping the Future', the prospectus produced by BIS (DIUS 2008). LLNs and Aimhigher both have a remit to improve IAG on progression into HE aimed specifically at target groups where participation rates are low. These developments have been over and above that offered by the statutory services but in many cases, particularly with LLNs, they have offered services where there appear to be gaps. The co-ordination between developments in the statutory services and those resources developed jointly by LLNs and Aimhigher could be important for the future sustainability of LLN and Aimhigher work.



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3. Methodology

A mapping exercise was undertaken via a desk review of websites providing information relating to Aimhigher and LLN joint activities. The initial focus was on LLN sites and searching using a number of terms: Aimhigher, Aimhigher partners, area partnerships, and widening participation partnerships. The findings were then collated into common themes: downloadable documents; references to Aimhigher personnel/membership on groups; projects/programmes; IAG; news/events; and links to Aimhigher sites.

A similar exercise was conducted for Aimhigher area websites and the information was then cross referenced with the LLN information. A summative list produced common areas of activity: governance arrangements; curriculum developments; progression agreement developments; IAG; and staff development.

Within each of these themes, activities were categorised in line with the approach by Aimhigher partnerships to raising aspiration and awareness activities, for example, IAG included mentoring, student ambassadors/associates; progression and curriculum issues included campus visits, master classes, subject enrichment or revision sessions, summer schools and HE-related residential experiences, and school or college based interventions; although this level of detail is not given prominence in this report.

An email invitation to all LLN directors/managers to send information on joint activity was sent out by the National Forum Jiscmail and nine responses were received. Responses came from: Linking London, Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull, the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA), Move, Progress South Central, Western Vocational, Leap Ahead, and Kent and Medway. Similarly an email was sent by Action on Access to Aimhigher practitioners and fifteen responses were received. Some of the Aimhigher responses highlighted the same activity as the LLN responses, including the GMSA (3 responses), Progress South Central LLN (2 responses), and the Western Vocational LLN (3 responses). In addition, Aimhigher practitioners drew attention to work involving further LLNs including Coventry and Warwickshire, South West, MOVE, and Skills for Sustainable Communities.

The interim report on the scoping study made recommendations for further scrutiny of a number of the developments highlighted from the initial trawl of websites. Some responses indicated therefore that the information was already in the public domain and thus further collation was not required; thirdly the LLN National Forum report into IAG systems and processes already identified those jointly developed by Aimhigher and LLN partnerships (Reed, 2008). Consequently it was agreed to highlight those activities that appear relevant to the current policy agenda and make specific reference to activity that could be influential on partnerships/institutional approaches to enhancing progression for vocational and work-based learners. The activities highlighted by respondents themselves would appear to be of primary interest and this included curriculum developments, some specific IAG activities, staff development, and progression agreements.

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Terminology

Throughout the report vocational learners include:

- Younger learners undertaking qualifications such as BTEC National award, Advanced Certificate in Vocational Education (AVCE) (also known as VCE A-level), and the Apprenticeship framework at Level 2 and Advanced Level 3
- Adult students on vocational programmes
- Work-based learners, including those undertaking training programmes such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) or Apprenticeships/Advanced Apprenticeships or other occupational or professional qualifications or learning
- Those studying for a 14-19 Diploma. Often referred to as the Diploma, this is a new qualification that combines theoretical study with practical experience. Whilst not considered a 'vocational' learning programme, the Diploma is considered as a progression qualification into HE, employment and/or training and has a particular vocational/sectors focus in content. As such Diploma development has been supported by LLNs and this is recognised in the research.



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4. Findings

The websites of both LLNs and Aimhigher partnerships were scrutinised. LLN sites in general contained more information and possibly reflect the approaches different LLNs have taken to using websites for sharing and marketing their developments. In contrast, Aimhigher websites have a more standardised feel which probably reflects the national approach that has been taken to supporting Aimhigher and the maturity of the Aimhigher programmes.

The information obtained was categorised thematically into:

- Governance arrangements
- Curriculum developments
- Progression Agreement developments
- IAG
- Staff development
- Specific target group developments

However, whilst the themes are identified separately below there are strong inter-relations between them. Most LLNs have worked with Aimhigher on particular developments and this report does not provide a full picture of the variety of joint work.

4.1 Governance Arrangements

Most of the LLNs, including the national LLNs, identified that Aimhigher was a key stakeholder on the management boards of LLNs, and partnership with Aimhigher was included in LLNs' business plans. These plans included aims for sharing information on data and tracking of learners, mapping of provision and jointly exploring barriers to progression. Some of the Aimhigher responses indicated an earlier involvement in planning the LLN proposal (for example, Aimhigher North West).

Some LLNs and Aimhigher partnerships have developed a co-ordinated approach to widening participation with an established protocol for working together and identifying areas of mutual interest. In Kent and Medway, this involves joint membership of key working groups, as well as shared communications, shared research and evaluation information and expertise. Additionally, a joint tracking analysis through a LLN, FEC consortium and Aimhigher project will provide an analysis of progression at individual course and institution level. Further analysis will look at demographic factors underlying the progression flows from vocational programmes such as gender, ethnicity and post code.

Evidence was found on LLN websites that Aimhigher is involved in specific activity groups and forums, for example, in West Yorkshire, Sussex and South London. These groups relate to centrally relevant activity for LLNs, such as progression issues, IAG, staff development and specific vocational/sector developments. Some of the websites accessed are jointly developed which may indicate close working relationships and avoidance of duplication, for example, in Staffordshire, Shropshire,

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Stoke on Trent, Telford and the Wrekin. This provides evidence that partners responded positively to advice from HEFCE on partnership working.

4.2 Curriculum Developments

Only a few examples of joint curriculum developments were highlighted on websites or by practitioners. This is to be expected, as the LLN role is to develop appropriate curriculum to enhance progression, whereas Aimhigher is more focused on aspiration and achievement. One example is the Western Vocational LLN working with Aimhigher South West and the Open University to undertake a feasibility study into the need for study skills/learner support materials for vocational learners to support their progression into HE. Kent and Medway LLN built on a Certificate in Supporting Children and Young People led by Aimhigher as well as establishing a joint staff development group of HE and FE practitioners to be 'aware of developments within the health sector and engage in initiatives to develop curricula'. Progression Agreements have been developed to support learner progression.

Kent and Medway LLN and Aimhigher Kent and Medway - Certificate in Supporting Children and Young People (CSCYP)

The aims of the project were achieved in the following respects:

- Course materials were produced
- An accreditation framework at HE level 1 (20 credits) and Masters (20M level credits) was developed
- An assessor and tutors training course was developed and piloted with ten associate tutors at Canterbury Christ Church University in March 2008. The course is now an accredited short induction course for anyone working with children and young people, for example, Learning Mentors, Personal Advisers, Foster Carers, and Education Welfare Officers who all support learners. The course was delivered to 20 Aimhigher Learning Mentor and Aimhigher Kent and Medway staff. 12 of the learning mentors registered on the Masters level course, and of these, 5 progressed onto either a PGCE or GTP teacher course. Four learners registered on the HE level 1 course. The six day CSCYP programme was delivered in June 2008 as a pilot to 6th Form students at Canterbury High School working with children as part of their Health and Social Care or work-related courses and, in October 2008, to staff at Canterbury High School as part of their continuing professional development programme. The course is being rolled out in other London boroughs.

Whilst LLNs have made substantial curriculum developments, in particular Foundation Degrees, there have also been some smaller developments providing transition support for work-based learners. Only one joint Aimhigher and LLN development was identified here: the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance's programme supporting Apprentices progression to HE as outlined below.

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The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) Step-in Module



The Step-In to HE Project is an innovative project developed by Aimhigher Greater Manchester and the GMSA, aimed at increasing progression to HE by Advanced Apprentices and other work-based and vocational learners. The Step-In to HE Project began in September 2007 and target groups were Advanced Apprentices who had completed, or were about to complete, the requirements of their Apprenticeships, and learners who had completed, or were completing, other work-based or vocational qualifications at level 3. The main aim of the project was to build learners' confidence in their ability to progress to HE via a new short study skills course developed especially for the project. Providers are those who had not only substantial experience of working with the target groups, but also significant experience of delivering at Level 4. Work-based learning champions have been working on the development of the programme. The University of Bolton has validated the Step-In Module as a CPD course worth 10 credits at Level 4.

A pilot cohort of 36 learners was recruited across four centres in 2007-08, with 32 learners completing the Step-In Module by the end of July 2008. In 2008-09, a cohort of 30 learners was recruited across three centres, 26 of whom completed the course. Approximately 20 further learners registered 2008-09.

Of the 32 learners who completed the Step-In Module in 2007-08, seven (22%) had started HE courses, while others were still keen and intended to progress. Of the 26 learners who completed the Step-In Module in 2008-09, 24 (92%) stated the intention to progress to HE; nine had put in applications to HE courses; seven planned to put in applications as soon as possible; and eight planned to apply to HE within the next two years. Therefore, the percentage of completers intending to

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progress to HE was higher in 2008-09 than in 2007-08 and the rate of actual progression for 2008-09 was projected to be higher than that for 2007-08.

Issues encountered during the project's development included: working with training providers on the programme and identifying the cohorts of learner; the flexibility of provision, marketing and recruitment by the providers traditionally focussed on a September recruitment date; and support for work-based champions.

Addressing sustainability, the Aimhigher Greater Manchester Work-Based Learning Strategy and Partnership in 2008-09 began to establish systems which should ensure that it will become the main source of recruitment for Step-In in future. The partnership aims to bring together a network of work-based learning providers across Greater Manchester and to engage them in Aimhigher activities.

4.3 Progression Agreements

A central component of LLN plans and activities is to instigate agreements between FE and HE partners for learning pathways that support vocational learner progression. There is evidence that Aimhigher and LLNs have worked together in negotiating and embedding progression agreements, particularly in the East and West Midlands. For example, Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN have a well established online tool for identifying progression agreements and supporting learners through learning pathways into HE. This is part of the joint West Midlands development identifying progression pathways for learners across the sub-region through the Aimhigher Learning Pathways System. They have also built on earlier Aimhigher work developing a 'technology' HE CARD (Choose A Real Deal) scheme which uses a compact-style framework to support year 10-11 technology/engineering vocational learners to progress into HE in the region. The joint work is underpinned with IAG and supporting materials and resources.

The LLN and Aimhigher have worked closely in Coventry and Warwickshire on the development of a progression partnership for work-based learners but this is still in the early stages and too early to evaluate. In the East Midlands, Leap Ahead has held an event for Aimhigher Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire staff to specifically explain the progression agreements developed locally.

In Kent and Medway there are a number of joint initiatives to develop progression agreements and to ensure they are understood by staff in colleges. The LLN has a growing database of progression agreements that are available to download for advisers (67 progression agreements were signed with over 1,828 vocational pathways). LLN co-ordinators based in partner institutions have focused on consolidating, simplifying and embedding the progression agreements developed in 2007-08 and have worked closely with Aimhigher co-ordinators, IAG staff and course tutors to ensure progression agreements are sustained in institutional practice and that learners are aware of progression routes beyond the life of the LLN.

Aimhigher in the East of England and the MOVE LLN are developing progression agreements from Apprenticeships to HE with a focus on the healthcare sector.

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4.4 Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG is one of the areas that most LLNs have focussed on, and in many cases their work builds on that done by Aimhigher. Joint developments range from providing additional IAG services to students in FECs, such as advisory personnel, mentoring schemes and student ambassador programmes, to producing shared materials, resources and online resources, running summer schools and residential events. The developments include supporting advisers in their knowledge and understanding of vocational learning and progression.

The Sussex LLN has worked with Aimhigher in the South East to incorporate into the Aimhigher website, regional information across fourteen broad careers areas and seventy careers strands where progression opportunities exist for vocational learners. The LLN has complemented Aimhigher developments by researching and adding Sussex labour market information and opportunities for employment.

The LLN and Aimhigher in Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull have worked together closely, with both the LLN Director and the Aimhigher Area Co-ordinator sitting on their respective Steering Committees in varying capacities. For example, the latter is Vice-Chair of the LLN's IAG & Learner Support Group. The group's work has moved ahead considerably with clear LLN 'products' in place, such as progression agreements and an advisory service for over 1000 learners.

The six Aimhigher partnerships in the West Midlands, led by the Black Country, have worked in partnership with two West Midlands based LLNs to develop a web-based 'progression tool' which details progression agreements. Based on the existing Aimhigher IAG web resource 'ALPS' (<http://www.alps-wm.ac.uk/>), additional websites have been created for the LLNs with specialised searches for progression agreements. The links lead to a common site (<http://ahwm-lln-1.winona-dot.com/courses.aspx>). This provides easily searched and accessible information explaining routes into HE programmes in the region. The site can be accessed through the Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull LLN HE Route Planner (www.herouteplanner.co.uk) and the Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN Info Hub (<http://infohub.llnstaffordshireshropshire.org/>).

Some LLNs and Aimhigher partners have worked together to provide activities directly aimed at learners. The Vocational Progression into Higher Education Fair, organised by the Lifelong Learning Network for Herefordshire & Worcestershire, and assisted by Aimhigher and University of Worcester, demonstrated opportunities available to people with vocational qualifications living in Herefordshire & Worcestershire. Targeted at vocational learners in years 11, 12 and 13, the event attracted over 500 learners. The LLN arranges the HE providers, employers, IAG staff and talks, and Aimhigher provide and fund the students. The LLN is hoping that the event will become embedded into the Aimhigher programme when the LLN finishes. A similar event is held in South Yorkshire by Aimhigher South Yorkshire and the Higher Futures LLN. The Aimhigher Progression Opportunities Fair was a sub-regional event which showcased progression opportunities for adult and vocational learners in South Yorkshire and the Sheffield City Region. Over 750 people attended.

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A key target for the Sussex Learning Network and Aimhigher Sussex was to increase the profile of their Student Network website. Since some prospective learners found their way to the site via search engines (rather than through marketing), existing social networking sites (such as YouTube and Facebook) were explored as a means of raising the website's profile. Videos on YouTube were successful, with 1,000 views in total during 2007-08. A Facebook group was created but membership did not grow, perhaps because a group identifying itself as being student orientated was unlikely to become popular with users who did not yet identify themselves as students.

4.5 Staff Development

Many LLNs have set up joint sector and/or curriculum groups to bring together staff from both HEIs, FECs, employers and training providers to explore requirements for supporting vocational and work-based learners in order to progress to HE. Staff development, for academics and teachers and for IAG personnel appear as common areas for development. Hampshire and Isle of Wight LLN for example held a staff development day on LLN developments and progression. Other LLNs have established groups and forum for joint work.

The Western Vocational LLN has an Employer Engagement Group which was set up to establish protocols for effective working and to avoid duplication of processes with other agencies. The Group operates with a strategic and regional focus and membership includes: senior managers from the Western Vocational LLN, Aimhigher, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), Train to Gain, HLSP and Leadership & Management Brokerage.

Achievements of the group include:

- Increased knowledge of HE and progression opportunities for work-based learners and Train to Gain brokers
- Liaison with the National Apprentice Service regarding Apprenticeship agreements
- Distribution of LLN resources to maximise awareness of progression opportunities
- Maximising the effectiveness of strand co-ordinators and avoiding duplication with HLSP Intermediaries and Train to Gain brokers
- Dissemination of good practice in employer engagement through conferences and workshops

Some LLNs and Aimhigher partnerships have worked together on producing resources and materials to help both advisers and teachers in supporting progression.

Progress South Central worked with Aimhigher Berkshire and Next Step to provide a substantial programme of activities and training and resources for guidance workers. The Aimhigher Progression to Higher Education Toolkit, first developed in 2006 by Next Step and Aimhigher Berkshire, has been revised and updated to ensure that it is current, relevant and accurate. The Toolkit provides information on the changing

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nature of, and routes into, HE for potential adult learners. Through using the Toolkit, guidance workers receive training on the changing nature of HE and therefore they are better equipped to deliver advice and guidance to potential learners. It also includes a 'Getting through the Maze' game which enables learners to embed their knowledge of progression to HE in an informal way. The programme is being evaluated, with potential for roll out over the lifetime of the Progress South Central partnership and across other parts of the Progress South Central region. Progress South Central also worked with Aimhigher Milton Keynes to deliver a joint conference for IAG practitioners on progression routes for vocational learners with a further event planned focussing on work-based learners.

The Sussex Learning Network has worked closely with Aimhigher Sussex to identify areas where work could be complementary. They have jointly recruited staff to focus on vocational learners, raising awareness of opportunities to study vocational HE courses locally, such as Foundation Degrees. Aimhigher and the Sussex Learning Network have run joint sessions for students and staff within partner institutions, as well as attending events where they have exhibited together.



4.6 Working with Specific Target Groups

Vocational Learners

Many LLN activities have focussed on BTEC learners on full-time programmes in colleges. These learners often fall into the category of target groups for Aimhigher activities in schools and colleges. LLNs have worked with Aimhigher to share knowledge of this group and they either continue work Aimhigher started or developing new activities. For example the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance

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(GMSA) Pathways website, was started by Aimhigher Greater Manchester but built on by the LLN. It is an online enquiry service which maps progression routes into HE from level 3. The GMSA has considered sustainability from the outset, which is evident from the design of Pathways and the engagement and role of partners in supporting the development.

The Pathways website provides an online search tool for BTECs, Foundation Degrees, the Association of Accounting Technicians and Higher National Certificate learners linked to progression agreements. Learners can search almost 15,000 local HE opportunities through Pathways. It was based on a database which ensures that in the long-term partners can add to it. The database also allows the sharing of data with other LLNs or other IAG services. Partners are able to enter data for new agreements via a web-based form which aims to make the process simpler.

The Pathways website has been well documented elsewhere. An evaluation of use to date indicates clarity of progression for over 10,000 learners on level 3 vocational programmes across Greater Manchester, predominantly on BTEC programmes though now including Apprenticeships. The GMSA Pathways project includes nearly 500 HE programmes with content input from all GMSA HE members. The GMSA Pathways is accessible, user-friendly and easy to navigate as all the information is in one place. Practitioners reported that the on-line progression tool has been well received and generally perceived as a long overdue and timely intervention resource.

Work-based Learners

There has been an increasing interest in developing opportunities for work-based learners and in particular aimed at Apprentices, for example, Staffordshire, Stoke on Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin LLN's GetupGo website which was developed in association with Aimhigher and a training provider. Aimhigher Northamptonshire is working with the Skills for Sustainable Communities LLN on their Apprentice engagement programme, the 'A' Factor, which is designed to: build apprentice confidence through new experiences; raise awareness of the different options available after Apprenticeship; provide space to meet like-minded people and role models from industry and commerce; access a range of information, advice and guidance opportunities for careers and training; and experience peer learning. Aimhigher Coventry and Warwickshire are working with their local LLN on the development of a progression partnership for work-based learners.

Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire LLN's work on progression is centred on a 'Passport' which details routes into HE for vocational learners in the four LLN sector strands. In the first two years of the LLN, the Passport was distributed to vocational learners in FE Colleges. In 2008, the LLN worked with Aimhigher to develop a separate passport for Advanced Apprentices. The aim of the Apprentice Passport is to raise the aspirations of Advanced Apprentices regarding progression into HE. Progression routes within the LLN sector strands are highlighted and the guidance section is tailored towards learners who are likely to participate in part-time higher level qualifications whilst working. The Passport contains information on funding part-time HE and applying for part-time courses. It also features case studies of students who have completed studies whilst working or who have progressed via the

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Apprenticeship route. Following the success of the Apprentice Passport, the LLN and Aimhigher worked together again to arrange a visit to Edge Hill University. 20 work-based learners and 25 Apprentices attended the session. The learners were all studying for level 3 qualifications and interested in moving onto higher level study in the near future. The programme for the day included a session on the benefits of progression to HE and a tour of the campus. The campus tours were conducted by current students. The group was then split into subject specific areas of Education and Early Years, Business and Management and Health. This enabled the attendees to talk to lecturers about the content of the programmes available and entry requirements.

Common features of the above developments include raising awareness of progression for Apprentices, including locally developed Foundations Degrees.

The Sussex Learning Network has developed a Foundation Degrees in Sussex website, to provide a searchable, online database of all the HNC, HND and Foundation Degree courses offered across Sussex. The LLN has provided a number of small staff development sessions to address the emerging issues regarding accessing information and are working with providers towards a cycle of continual improvement. The LLN, through work with Aimhigher and the IAG team have begun to reach out successfully to vocational learners, learners in the workplace and their employers. Information has been developed specifically for these target groups and is widely available to learners, potential learners, advisers and employers, and through the follow up of enquiries and subsequent staff development, has fed into the improvement of university and college-based student support.

The Western Vocational LLN has worked with local Aimhigher partnerships to highlight issues of progression for vocational and work-based learners. Two local colleges (Bristol City and Gloucestershire), together with Aimhigher, bid for funding for an action research project entitled, 'Apprenticeships and progression to HE: investigating barriers, building aspirations', to enhance the understanding of issues surrounding progression for Apprentices and to strengthen practices in relation to encouraging and supporting progression to HE. The research is ongoing and the Aimhigher West Partnership Vocational Pathways Strand has provided staff time to support the project. A different collaborative research project is investigating how many individual work-based learners have taken the opportunity to study to a higher-level in the West of England LSC area. The aim is to identify barriers that may have prevented or impeded opportunity for progression, and to identify whether there is any difference between a college-based and private training provider experience in relation to learner progression.

The Birmingham, Black Country and Solihull LLN has produced a substantial resource base with their local Aimhigher partnership, including IAG material and guidance to over 4000 year 10-11 pupils and their parents, as part of the National Apprenticeship Service road shows. The LLN and Aimhigher hosted a joint stand with materials for learners who were considering which sector to choose, as well as the progression opportunities from Apprenticeships into HE via Foundation Degrees. The LLN spoke to over 400 Apprenticeship candidates about Foundation Degree progression opportunities. Aimhigher spoke to pupils about general vocational progression from school to HE. Part of the joint LLN and Aimhigher strategy had

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commenced earlier in 2008/09, when the LLN agreed to adopt, adapt and update some of Aimhigher's existing materials on vocational progression routes.

This resulted in the joint production of two new information resources, the 'A to Z Guide to Vocational Learning', and 'Foundation Degrees in Birmingham, the Black Country and Solihull'. With the agreement of National LSC and local offices, the publications were circulated to over 3,500 Advanced Apprentices, and detailed actual provision of Foundation Degrees in a range of vocational areas across Birmingham, the Black Country & Solihull.

A significant development by the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance is the development of a Work-based Learning Strategic Development Framework. The Framework supports Aimhigher in developing a Progression Framework with a specific focus on work-based learning. It sets out suggested activities that will best meet the needs of work-based learners to ensure appropriate opportunity to progress at various intervention points. It includes Apprentices, Advanced Apprentices and adults in the work-place. The programme provides a structured plan for raising aspirations and information provision. It will be an interesting development to watch for progress.

The Move LLN and Aimhigher in the East of England have an ongoing joint project focussed on Apprentices progression in the health-care sector.

Adult Learners

A number of LLNs have joined forces with Aimhigher to extend or develop new resources aimed at adult learners in line with guidance from HEFCE.

The Western Vocational LLN has developed an Access Agreement which was assimilated into their suite of agreements following initial funding by the HEFCE and Aimhigher. It was further supported through an information film aimed at Access to HE learners. The film was produced in conjunction with Aimhigher and the City of Bristol College. It has been uploaded on to an independent site and since the launch in August 2009 there have been over 600 visitors (www.access-students.org.uk). Future usage of the film is being considered by the National LSC. Feedback from widening participation teams at partner institutions has been positive and that the use of clips has been of real value in presentations to adult learners.

The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, Aimhigher and Union Learn have worked on a joint project promoting HE in the workplace with a suite of short HE openings and CPD courses that allow adults to try HE. The Sussex Learning Network has also developed web and paper-based resources aimed specifically at part-time adult learners. Through the Learning Opportunities website, the Sussex Learning Network have provided information for this group of learners on issues such as funding, childcare and finding time to study. This is supported by a paper booklet which has been widely distributed through public venues across Sussex. Through the work of the IAG team, the Sussex Learning Network has connected with learners in work

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and their employers, and developing links with unions. They also included brokerage agencies such as Train to Gain in the project.

Progress South Central joined forces with Nextstep Berkshire and Aimhigher Berkshire to provide guidance interviews for adult learners. The learners selected were aged 20 or over and qualified to a minimum of level 3. The interviews assessed their potential for HE and offered information on progression opportunities. 30 interviews took place initially, with progression information being offered and progression pathways agreed. Learners appreciated the one-to-one help and guidance; previous experience had suggested that group work would not be welcomed. This pilot programme of interviews may be rolled out over subsequent years in Berkshire and, potentially, in other areas of the Progress South Central region. It would be a parallel programme to that already offered through Aimhigher Berkshire for under-18s.

The South West LLN provided an additional impetus to the Aimhigher developed project, HE Guidance. The South West LLN provided funding and support to encourage growth of the service across the region through a network of advisers based in LLN partner organisations. They also monitored and evaluated its uptake and usefulness for extending access to quality IAG for their target learners.

HE Guidance offers a service for part-time learners and employed learners and an enhanced service for HE students in FECs who need advice about top-up routes, for example, those studying for Foundation Degrees. The site also supports IAG advisers. The software is easy to use and allocates queries to advisers, tracks enquiries and monitors statistics. Training workshops dealt with concerns advisers had about e-guidance (particularly about 'writing it down' and liability), the guidance process, and the potential work-load. The site is now located on Gradsouthwest, which is a regional website with a HE focus providing an all age/all comers service for pre- and post-entry users. Users have registered a 100% satisfaction and 100% state they would recommend the service to others. The aim is to continue the service using the University of Plymouth website and there are ongoing discussions with HERDA to find a way for long-term sustainability.

Supporting the 14-19 Reforms

As reforms to the 14-19 education strategy have progressed, Aimhigher and LLNs have worked together to raise awareness amongst FEC and HEI partners of the implications of the changes, and developing entry opportunities and progression agreements. For example, many have produced a substantial number of resources aimed at students, their parents and teachers and advisers.

Aimhigher Peninsula has jointly funded the development of Diploma Advocates (for all subject lines) with regard to Gateway applications for five local authorities and their local partnerships. The Western Vocational LLN has developed a 14-19 Strategic Group to facilitate HE engagement with individual consortia to strengthen Diploma partnerships and facilitate connections between consortia and HE. This has resulted in a successful Diploma event attended by over 140 delegates and supported by local authority 14-19 advisors and Aimhigher.

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5. Commentary on Findings

This scoping study was designed to identify joint Aimhigher and LLN activity that provides examples of good practice, and where possible evidence of impact and sustainability. The study was not designed to provide a full evaluation of the work of Aimhigher and LLN partnerships and should be considered as complementary to any other evaluations undertaken. However the exercise has demonstrated a number of key points which should be highlighted with respect to future developments to increase participation in HE amongst vocational and work-based learners.

- The majority of LLNs appear to have some engagement with Aimhigher partnerships and there is evidence that HEFCE guidance on partnership working between Aimhigher and LLNs has been heeded and that many of the developments have been complementary.
- Aimhigher and LLN partnerships have pooled resources to aid the tracking of learner progression, and contributing to area and regional datasets on widening participation. This has been developed as a result of joint governance arrangements.
- Approaches to address the three main aims of LLNs: to produce progression agreements between FECs and HEIs to enhance vocational learner progression, to develop and adapt curriculum to aid progression, and to enhance IAG for vocational and WBL, all appear to have been assisted through working in partnership with Aimhigher.
- The evidence indicates that Aimhigher is playing an important role in ensuring that progression agreements are understood and recognised by schools, colleges and universities through the production of information material and joint staff development activities.
- There is evidence that Aimhigher has been involved in curriculum developments, mainly Foundation Degree developments through participation in joint curriculum development groups. However, Aimhigher involvement has focussed on increasing understanding of why this progression route is required and contributing advice on target groups rather than detailed involvement in the curriculum content.
- IAG activities appear to be the most common area for collaboration. This may be because of a gap in the IAG required to support vocational and work-based learner progression. There are some innovative developments which should prove sustainable but there is a need to ensure that these are used by the target audiences and evaluated.

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6. Recommendations

The joint activities of Aimhigher and LLNs have produced outcomes that support current policy agendas. The following recommendations are aimed mainly at LLNs or their successors, and at Aimhigher partnerships.

- IAG materials and resources, including websites, are a significant feature of joint work. IAG partners should be encouraged to take ownership of the resources and partnerships should establish local protocols with IAG providers for transferring ownership of resources as appropriate, including links on regional and national websites. In addition, it would be beneficial to remind local authorities of the extent of material jointly produced.
- Information materials aimed at learners, their teachers and parents have been produced to support the 14-19 Diploma. Some of these materials are of a high quality but as the Diploma becomes more established these materials will become out of date. There should be an attempt to work closely with local authorities and schools to ensure that materials are recognised and updated in information packs which support the Diploma. These materials are already providing the information that the national IAG strategy outlines as important, such as information targeted at different audiences, and therefore it is important that these materials are recognised.
- The growing focus on Apprentice progression provides a platform for highlighting the good work that the LLNs and Aimhigher have undertaken in this area. Identifying exemplars of good practice in working with training providers, providing curriculum support, progression agreements and evidence of impact, is crucial and should be shared with the National Apprentice Service. The activities highlighted in this report may only be a small element of the work undertaken in this area (jointly with Aimhigher or by LLNs alone). The recently published 'Developing Higher Apprenticeships in England' (Lifelong Learning Networks National Forum Policy Paper May 2010), usefully highlights the role of LLNs in developing progression for apprentices.
- To support the recommendations of the report by the Fair Access to the Professions Panel, partnerships should pay particular attention to highlighting evidence of any joint activity that has supported vocational and work-based progression to professional programmes. This could be through Apprenticeship routes, such as with specific sector groups or through the Aimhigher national health strand into nursing or allied health professions. Any targeted work with black and ethnic minorities or disabled students should also be highlighted.
- This study has been focussed on joint partnership activity. There is a need to highlight how working together has raised awareness in schools and colleges of the importance of supporting vocational learners to progress, and within both LLN and Aimhigher evaluations, to capture any impact on widening participation targets for these groups.

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