



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.

Report Summary

This is a summary of the report, the full report is available on the Action on Access website (www.actiononaccess.org).

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1. Summary of the Report

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 and Action on Access email 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.

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.

2. Findings

2.1 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. For example, Kent and Medway have developed a co-ordinated approach to widening participation with an established protocol for working together and identifying areas of joint concern.

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 and Aimhigher is seen as a key player in the developments. Some of the websites accessed are jointly developed which may indicate close working relationships and avoidance of duplication.

2.2 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. The Step-In to HE Project is one example of an innovative project developed by Aimhigher Greater Manchester and the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance, aimed at increasing progression to HE by Advanced Apprentices and other work-based and vocational learners.

2.3 Progression Agreements

There is evidence that Aimhigher and LLNs have worked together in negotiating and embedding progression agreements, particularly in the East and West Midlands. 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 worked closely with Aimhigher co-ordinators.

2.4 Information, Advice and Guidance

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, as well as staff development initiatives.

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>).

Specific examples of smaller scale partnership work include: HE fairs for vocational learners, such as those in Herefordshire & Worcestershire and South Yorkshire; and the Sussex Learning Network and Aimhigher Sussex have used Web2.0 technologies for targeting information to learners.

2.5 Staff Development

Many LLNs have set up joint sector and/or curriculum groups to bring together staff from both higher education institutions, further education colleges, employers and training providers to explore requirements for supporting vocational and work-based learners in order to progress to HE.



3. Targeting Specific Groups

3.1 Vocational Learners

The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) and Aimhigher Greater Manchester have targeted vocational and work-based learners through their joint Pathways website. 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 Pathways project includes nearly 500 HE programmes with content input from all GMSA HE members.

3.2 Work-based Learners including Apprentices

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. Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire LLN's work on progression is centred on a 'Passport' which details routes into HE for vocational learners.

Common features of the above developments include raising awareness of progression for Apprentices, including locally developed Foundations Degrees. The Western Vocational LLN has worked with local Aimhigher partnerships and training providers to highlight issues of progression for vocational and work-based learners.

3.3 Adult Learners

A number of LLNs have joined forces with Aimhigher to extend or develop new resources aimed at adult learners, for example, the Western Vocational LLN/AH partnership have developed an Access Agreement supported through an informative video aimed at access to HE 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. Progress South Central joined forces with Nextstep Berkshire and Aimhigher Berkshire to provide guidance interviews for adult learners. The South West LLN provided an additional impetus to the Aimhigher developed project, HE Guidance.

3.4 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.

4. Commentary of Findings

- 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.

5. 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.

6. Acknowledgements

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