

Higher Futures Sustainability Review

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of a recent review of partner views on the value and sustainability of the Higher Futures (HF) Lifelong Learning Network. A total of 84 colleagues across all 12 partners within the HF network contributed to the survey, which was conducted in February 2009.

Partner organisations identified a wide range of strategic and operational objectives that are supported by HF activity, including widening participation, increasing retention and progression, improving the student experience, employer engagement and partnership working. Partners were also asked to comment on the following:

Network Development

- HF partners indicated that working with other colleges and universities had added most value to the work of their organisation, with the opportunity to share good practice featuring strongly. Two partners highlighted the value of HF links with Aimhigher.
- A wide range of unanticipated benefits from participating in the HF network were reported by partners, including links with peers at other colleges, continuing professional development (CPD) for HF staff, raised awareness of higher education (HE) among college pastoral staff and establishment of more efficient internal financial monitoring procedures.
- HF communication activities were rated highly by partner organisations.

Improving Progression

- Progression-focused activity has been widespread. All 12 partners reported that local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4 had been identified within their institution. The majority also stated that their organisation had undertaken curriculum development/adaption, development of progression agreements and internal discussions with those responsible for HE admissions.
- A number of partners reported successful outcomes relating to the development of foundation degrees (FDs) within their institution.
- Several partners referred to the setting up of progression agreements; some successful outcomes are already being reported in relation to this activity.
- In relation to local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4, partners identified a wide range of positive outcomes, including increased numbers of students progressing to HE.
- Several partners referred to the development, through HF activity, of good working relationships with staff responsible for HE admissions, both in their own institutions and higher education institutions (HEIs).

Increasing awareness of HE

- The positive impact of enhanced and targeted information, advice and guidance (IAG) featured strongly in responses from partners. Almost all colleges reported a rise in the numbers of vocational learners expressing an interest in HE, several with statistical evidence to support this.
- Almost all partners reported changes in practice and processes in the organisation and delivery of IAG, with benefits for staff CPD. A wide range of changes were identified, including embedding IAG into the curriculum, linking of activities between departments and facilitation of referral systems for vocational learners from student services for specific IAG.

Increasing workplace demand

- The majority of partners reported that the network has had a positive impact on engagement with employers and sector organisations around higher level skills. Partners outlined a number of ways in which HF has supported them in enhancing employer engagement, including the delivery of employer awareness raising events. These events broadly fell into two categories; internal CPD events aimed at staff within institutions and those that involved employers themselves.
- On the whole, partners could not say if involvement in HF activity has led to increased demand from employers for higher level skills, with five partners stating that they did not know if HF has increased demand from employers for higher level skills and four reporting that demand has not increased.
- More positively, six partners reported that HF activity has facilitated the establishment of links between HF and the business-facing areas of their organisation.

Embedding and future developments

- Partners described the HF activity that, overall, had added most value to their organisation and three broad themes emerged, relating to institutional culture, practice and operation. Activities highlighted included reducing the academic/vocational divide within a further education (FE) college, the positive impact of a seconded Maths Officer and access to pump priming funding.
- Various difficulties/challenges in partnership working were identified, including those relating to pace of development, differences of focus in sectors and pressures on staff time and competing demands of other project work.
- Almost all respondents felt that their organisation will embed HF IAG services and practices beyond the funding period.
- A range of ideas were highlighted by partners for future activity, focusing on IAG activity, progression agreements, progression routes, curriculum and professional development.

- Both HEIs reported that they would like to further develop partnership working with the colleges.
- All partners felt that an HE/FE partnership model would be necessary to sustain networking activity developed through HF and would be willing to support this partnership structure. There was a reported willingness to provide staff time and/or administrative support for this model, although only one partner felt they could offer direct funds.
- Partners' perspectives on a preferred model to take HF work forward beyond the current funding period were divided between the 'collaborative' model (strategic with shared objectives, governance and management structures) and the 'alliance' model (nominated contacts from each partner with lead institution, act as communication channel on topics of mutual interest/opportunity).

Higher Futures Sustainability Review

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a recent review of partner views on the value and sustainability of the Higher Futures (HF) network. As agreed by the Strategic Management Board (SMB) the views of partners were sought to inform the first stages of the development of a sustainability strategy.

The survey was designed to gather data from all Higher Futures partners on their views of the value-added benefits of participation in the network. A word version of the questionnaire was circulated to members of the Operational Management Group (OMG) on 3rd February 2009; these individuals were asked to co-ordinate the response from their institution. As this was an institutional response, they were asked to consult with sector, IAG and other colleagues as appropriate within their organisation to compile the information. An online version of this questionnaire was sent to OMG representatives on 23rd February 2009 to complete and provide a single institutional response by Friday 27th February 2009.

This document provides a summary of the responses from the 12 partner institutions within the network.

This report is divided into 6 sections:

- Section 1: Partner organisations
- Section 2: Network development
- Section 3: Improving progression opportunities
- Section 4: Increased awareness of HE
- Section 5: Increasing workplace demand
- Section 6: Looking to the future

Section 1: Partner organisations

- 1.1 Partners surveyed included: Barnsley College; Chesterfield College; Dearne Valley College; Doncaster College; Longley Park Sixth Form College; North Nottinghamshire College; Northern College; Rotherham College of Arts and Technology; Sheffield College; Sheffield Hallam University; Thomas Rotherham College; and The University of Sheffield. (Although University Campus Barnsley kindly submitted a response, this has been used for information as a developmental tool and not included in the analysis, as the institution is part of the University of Huddersfield in West Yorkshire)
- 1.2 All 12 partner organisations returned a response to the survey. Ten of the twelve OMG representatives consulted with other colleagues in compiling their response. (See Appendix 1 for a list of those who were consulted)
- 1.3 A wide range of strategic and operational objectives that are supported by HF activity were highlighted by all 12 partners. The most common themes included:
- widening participation ;
 - increasing participation;
 - increasing progression;
 - issues around improving student experience;
 - employer engagement;
 - partnership working (schools, employers, HEIs and training providers); and
 - Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).
- Other themes mentioned included:
- educational and social transformation;
 - the promotion of prosperity in the local community;
 - the encouragement of individuals to fulfil their potential (2 respondents stated this explicitly);
 - development of staff skills (again, 2 respondents talked about this aspect of Higher Futures work)
 - the delivery of vocational excellence;
 - supporting young people to stay on in learning; and
 - increasing number of adults with full Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.
- 1.4 One HEI also pointed out that HF has provided considerable staff development in vocational areas and built developmental staff teams across the partnership, linking in with one of the main themes of their corporate plan. In addition, one university highlighted that HF activity helps to support learners' transition into university life and, through its support for the institution's Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, to meet the characteristics of the 'Sheffield Graduate'. Both HEIs within the network referred to HF support for aims outlined within their corporate objectives, including more flexible approaches to admissions.

Section 2: Network development

Adding value to individual organisations

2.1 The HF network has supported a number of partnership activities, including:

- working with universities;
- working with colleges;
- curriculum mapping and planning;
- sharing good practice;
- joint events to target parents and vocational learners;
- joint events to target employers; and
- joint events to target staff.

2.2 Partners were asked to what extent these activities have added value to the work of their organisation. Working with universities was felt to be the most valuable activity partners had undertaken, with 11 stating that this was either valuable or very valuable. One respondent reported:

‘Working with universities has enabled vocational departments to be part of the admissions process, facilitating flows of information between relevant organisations.’

A high number of partners (10) reported that working with colleges was valuable or very valuable for their organisation. Similarly, 10 respondents indicated that joint events to target staff were valuable or very valuable. Nine partners valued sharing good practice through HF activities and joint events to target parents and vocational learners. One respondent commented additionally that HF had provided *‘excellent opportunities for joint bids and well co-ordinated.’*

2.3 Partners were asked to state which of the activities had been of most value to their organisation and to give a rationale for their choice. The opportunity provided by HF to share good practice appeared to be rated most highly; partners supplied explanations for their choice that included the following comments:

‘Sharing good practice has been of great value in the development of foundation degrees and helped enormously with employer engagement. This would have not been possible without the LLN.’

‘IAG Network Team has been a very valuable forum for the exchange of ideas and good practice and for delivering joint IAG activities.’

2.4 Working with universities was also highlighted as being of most value to individual institutions within the network. Comments explaining this choice included:

‘Working with universities has created a clear flow of information into the college, where this can be rapidly disseminated between departments and to students, where before

the filter down of information was slower due to absence of clear lines of communication.'

'The sharing of good practice is always a valuable experience. However, working with the universities has proved to be the most useful in terms of new developments.'

2.5 Two of the colleges flagged up the value of HF links with Aimhigher:

'Linking activities between Higher Futures and Aimhigher has facilitated a strategic co-ordinated approach to raising awareness and supporting transition to HE for vocational students.'

'Working alongside the IAG team more directorate events have been organised and value added by having both Aimhigher and Higher Futures input increasing the capacity to replicate success and share risk on unknown events such as the Aimhigher Road Show where the IAGTO took on a supporting and facilitating role for the event.'

2.6 Other specific HF activities that were highlighted by partners in addition to those listed above as adding value to the work of their organisation were:

- excellent, well co-ordinated opportunities for joint bids;
- progression Agreement development ; and
- joint IAG activities.

Unexpected/unanticipated benefits of being a partner institution within the Higher Futures network

2.7 A wide range of unanticipated benefits from participating in the HF network were reported by 9 of the 12 respondents (with one FEC partner listing 9 unexpected benefits). The benefits included:

- links with peers at other colleges. For example, one college felt that HF had led to links with partner colleges in the region that they would not have explored '*on their own*' but that are now '*excellent*' as a result of HF.
- CPD for HF staff cascading through the organisation to appropriate staff to develop knowledge, strategies and share good practice;
- emergence of employer-based sector visits for students which in turn provides a method of professional updating for staff;
- has raised awareness of higher education in the minds of the college pastoral tutors;
- releasing the college's existing IAG staff resource for targeted activities with other cohorts of students;
- establishment of more efficient internal financial monitoring procedures which were put in place to manage project funding;
- re-profiling underspend to benefit the whole network by extending activities;
- higher than anticipated levels of development support for staff have helped focus on higher level pathways as a distinct team activity;
- raising the college's profile with other Higher Education Institutions

- emergence of employer based sector visits for students which in turn provides a method of professional updating for staff; and
- providing an opportunity to explore cross-sector possibilities for curriculum development.

One university reflected that *'participation in the Higher Futures network has raised awareness within the institution of how other partner institutions perceive the University. It has been very useful to understand this in order to start discussion about potential change internally to alter these perceptions. Without contact and dialogue with other partner institutions it is possible to become inwards-looking which can perpetuate existing thoughts and practices'*.

HF communication activities

2.8 HF has delivered a variety of communication activities:

- Higher Futures website;
- occasional newsletters;
- activity roundups;
- fortnightly news digest;
- sector team meetings;
- IAG team meetings;
- minutes of the OMG/SMB; and
- Directorate communications (e.g. email).

2.9 Partners were asked to indicate how useful they had found each of the activities. Eleven respondents felt that IAG team meetings were either 'useful' or 'very useful', and all partners rated both the 'Activity Round-up' and 'Directorate Communications' such as emails as either 'useful' or 'very useful'. All the partners circulate the information provided by HF within their organisation, in a variety of ways. Four partners stated that information is circulated electronically, while one university circulates information from Network meetings via a shared filestore. This university pointed out that *'Newsletters and Activity Roundups ... are circulated to a wide range of staff in the University from the central Network Team – these have, therefore, not been circulated further'*. Two respondents mentioned that team meetings are used to disseminate Higher Futures information.

2.10 Eight partners opted to give additional feedback about Higher Futures communications activities. Apart from one comment about the volume of information, all the views were positive. One college in particular gave in-depth feedback on almost all the activities listed in the survey and provided the following view about the positive impact of IAG team meetings:

'The IAG Team Meetings have proven to be invaluable in supporting the work of the IAG and Transition Officers. They have provided a forum in which discussions can take place, partner updates and sector overviews can be provided, good practice can be shared,

communication and funding issues can be addressed and strategy development, including working with cohort groups and delivery plan updates can be devised.'

- 2.11 Other comments included praise for the administration efficiency in arranging meetings and for the relevance of the information circulated.

Section 3: Improving progression opportunities

3. All 12 partners reported that local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4 had been identified within their institution and 9 stated that their organisation had undertaken curriculum development/adaptation, development of progression agreements and internal discussions with those responsible for HE admissions. Three partners gave further information about activities relating to progression within their institution, including:
- setting up an Early Years Forum to raise aspirations amongst tutors and learners involved in Level 3 courses and to encourage progression; and the
 - development of a calendar of events and checklists for IAG/CAG and curriculum staff within HE and FE institutions.

Evidence of successful outcomes

- 3.2 Partners were asked to detail evidence of successful outcomes relating to several areas of HF work linked to improving progression opportunities; their responses are summarised below, although it is worth noting that partners also included current, ongoing activities when reporting on evidence of successful **outcomes** within their organisation.

Curriculum development/adaptation

- 3.3 Five partners reported successful outcomes relating to the development of Foundation Degrees within their institution. One respondent noted their organisation's Level 4 community development model, while another listed several developments within their institution, including:
- 'Return to Learning' Access module offered to Level 3 students as a preparatory bridging course;
 - Study Skills bridging course for part-time PCET students sourced by the IAGTO and delivered to the students by college directorate staff;
 - production of a personal learning journal for CACHE and BTEC students as a supporting material in progression and as an aide to help tutors write their UCAS references; and
 - member of staff trained to support Level 3 learners on a 'Forest Schools' research project.

One HEI reported the positive impact of ongoing Higher Futures activity that has led to the *'identification of issues relating to BTEC students and subsequent activities with these students to support them'*.

Development of progression agreements and progression routes

- 3.4 Clearly, from the responses, a considerable amount of Higher Futures activity has taken place - and in some cases already made an impact - in relation to progression. Several

partners referred to the setting up of Progression Agreements and, although these are very much ‘work in progress’, some successful outcomes are already being reported in relation to this activity. For example, one respondent stated that a number of partners now have borough-wide passports allowing progression to a range of HE programmes. The fact that HF is mentioned on UCAS applications was highlighted by one college and another college reported that the development of 2 Progression Agreements has enabled them to maintain links with the higher education institutions into which students from their college progress.

3.5 In relation to local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4, respondents identified a wide range of positive outcomes resulting from Higher Futures activity:

- the production of a range of progression maps for the HF sector areas which identify skills, knowledge and potential occupations by the IAGTO;
- the production of case studies by the IAGTO (from BTEC to Foundation Degree in Health-related Exercise and Fitness and from Employment to Fd in Early Years) in order to inspire learners and raise awareness of local progression routes from Level 3 to 4;
- codifying through the HF model of existing local progression routes that has application across all curriculum areas;
- the development of a resource base providing access for IAG to students on vocational courses, supporting both group and 1:1 activity and ensuring that resources available to advisors are accurate;
- the development of bridging courses leading to recruitment on FdA in Early Years;
- increased numbers of students progressing to HE;
- growth in Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) from the network;
- dialogue with 8 local companies around training and educational needs within the engineering/manufacturing sector focussing on progression during and post apprenticeship (Level 3); and
- the modification by one HEI of prospectus entries to better outline application requirements for BTEC students.

Dialogue with admissions

3.6 Several comments referred to the development, through Higher Futures activity, of good working relationships with relevant members of staff responsible for HE admissions, both in their own institutions and in HEIs. One respondent highlighted the impact that Higher Futures activity had upon staff knowledge through closer working. In one institution, where guidance and a handbook have been produced, there is now ‘*clear understanding within faculties and central admissions*’. The response of one HEI mentions mapping of entry requirements and the increase in enrolments ‘*after clear guidance developed*’.

Section 4: Increasing awareness of HE

Activities undertaken to target and improve IAG services for vocational learners

4.1 All partners reported that their organisation had undertaken the following activities relating to IAG:

- identifying IAG needs of vocational learners;
- support for groups of vocational learners;
- support for individual vocational learners;
- support for vocational tutors and teaching staff; and
- special events for vocational learners, e.g. visits to HEIs, UCAS information events.

However one college partner felt it was important to stress that their organisation does not serve learners who could be described as 'vocational' in the same way as those who are studying for qualifications relating to childcare, construction etc in FECs.

4.2 Fewer institutions (9) reported that an audit of IAG provision had been carried out and for one HEI this activity was felt to be 'not applicable'. In addition to the activities listed relating to IAG, one partner stated that they had undertaken case studies and set up a buddy system. The following activities were also outlined by another respondent:

- introduction of work experience for National Diploma in Manufacturing Year 1, with a view to rolling this out to other sector areas; and
- more joined up working with Curriculum Learning Centre Staff to provide training and updates on HE related information

4.3 A third partner provided the following response:

'Through the IAG network we have been able to host both Team meetings and visits to the Careers Service for IAG workers. This has established good working relationships with staff in colleges, improved awareness of the University and support for students and contributed to CPD for the staff concerned.'

Numbers of vocational learners expressing interest in HE

4.4 All ten college partners felt that there had been a rise in the numbers of vocational learners expressing interest in HE. When asked for evidence, several said that they had statistical data to support their claim. One partner reported '*difficult to quantify but a definite increase*' whilst another reported UCAS data. This college noted that the number of students who progress to university from the institution had risen from 363 in 2003 to 513 in 2008 and attributed this rise in part to the impact of the IAGTO. In addition, this college reported a slight increase in the *range* of HE institutions where students have been accepted, up from 58 last year to 69 this year.

Changes in IAG practice/processes

- 4.5 Eleven respondents reported that practice and process changes had been introduced relating to IAG within their organisation, as a result of HF activity. A wide range of changes were identified, including:
- a more consistent cross-college approach, with co-ordinators having a real impact and receiving good feedback;
 - all sessional tutors have received IAG awareness-raising training and IAG is much more embedded into the curriculum;
 - a programme of staff development for tutors across the college to broaden awareness and knowledge of IAG;
 - development of various supporting IAG resources relating to finance and progression information - processes are now more structured and it is anticipated that this improvement will continue;
 - a designated person assigned to work with vocational learners and provide a bespoke programme of IAG. In addition, time assigned to a work placement officer specifically to visit this target group while on work placement;
 - IAG worker meets FD students to establish contact with an identified worker;
 - increased referrals from sector workers as a result of IAG team member briefings;
 - linking of activities between departments and facilitation of referral system for vocational learners from student services for specific IAG;
 - more systematic tracking of IAG that allows the organisation to measure impact of the Higher Futures activity;
 - introduction of a careers education programme targeting learners interested in progression to HE;
 - training to support staff who work directly (or indirectly) with students applying to or considering HE;
 - expansion of number of themed HE/Careers Weeks to provide a more targeted approach; and
 - expansion of HE Finance activities to include drop-ins for parents and learners with the financial application process.

Section 5: Increasing workplace demand

Engagement with employers and sector organisations around higher level skills

- 5.2 The majority of partners (8) reported that the Network has had a positive impact on engagement with employers and sector organisations around higher level skills. Partners outlined a number of ways in which Higher Futures had supported them in enhancing employer engagement. For example, several of the partners highlighted employer awareness raising events. The type of events reported broadly fell into two categories: internal CPD events aimed at staff within institutions; and those that involved employers themselves. Examples of internal events included workshops on employer engagement and work-based learning progress review meetings. Examples of external awareness raising events included events such as 'Skills For Care'.
- 5.3 Two partners highlighted that they had been supported in consulting in skills needs. One college stated:
- 'Consultation on skills needs within the Early Years sector through the promotion of the Foundation degree in early years with ninety nurseries within the local area being consulted and employers being supported with their transition onto the course provision'*
- 5.4 Other ways in which partners highlighted Higher Futures support in this area included: bridging courses; assistance with arrangements and funding of events; and attendance of HF management at events.
- 5.5 Three partners felt that Higher Futures has not enabled them to enhance engagement with employers and sector organisations around higher level skills and one partner did not know if this was the case or not.
- 5.6 One partner highlighted the difficulties of engaging with employers rather than the support received by HF to achieve increased employer engagement. This organisation stated that in terms of employer engagement:
- 'The experience has been 'patchy' and dependent largely on the subject areas within sectors. For example, Engineering employers and Health and Social Care employers are clearly visible and therefore easily contactable. This is not the same for Sustainable Communities. This pattern was replicated on one HF Awayday on employer engagement, where we found ourselves talking to ourselves.'*
- 5.7 When asked if partners felt that HF has increased demand from employers for higher level skills, 5 partners indicated that they did not know and 4 felt that it had not. Only 3 partners felt that HF had increased employer demand, stating that *'Employers have expressed interest and commitment to FdAs'* and *'Responses to the employer survey have demonstrated an interest in employers supporting and in some cases expressing a wish to become involved in the development of alternative curriculum'*

- 5.8 One partner highlighted a number of areas of evidence in support of their positive response, including:
- the Business Development Unit has had several enquiries relating to higher level skills, especially Foundation Degrees;
 - work on the Early years Foundation Degree transposed 29 enrolments from contact with 90 Public/Voluntary/Independent sector organisations; and
 - contact with the Local Authority workforce development officers suggest significant increase in FD EY.

- 5.9 Six of the partners have established links between HF and the business-facing areas of their organisation (one respondent did not know if links had been forged). Partners described these links as:

'Just started and developing well'

'Close links with Partnerships and on-line development'

'Links to the Employer Engagement effective (programme re-located within this area of the college)'

'The employer engagement unit has been pro-active in marketing HE taster, bridging courses and Foundation Degree provision'

'The IAGTO works with the college's business development unit'

'Links with Services to Business team to add FD's to their advice and information portfolio'.

Section 6: Looking to the future

Added value

6.1 Partners were asked to identify the aspect of Higher Futures activity that has added most value to their organisation. The following themes emerged from their responses:

Institutional culture

- Supporting students to stay on in education at a higher level
- Raised profile of vocational education to such an extent we do not feel we have a huge academic/vocational divide with all the underlying attitudes that often accompany this issue
- Underpinning ethical and educational values of the departments have been challenged and awareness raised around vocational students and students across the range of backgrounds

Institutional practice

- Positive impact of seconded Maths Officer
- Benefits resulting from IAGTO presence
- Networking and sharing of good practice

Institutional operation

- Stronger links with HEIs and other FE colleges
- Time to make contacts with employers
- Financial benefits, i.e. access to pump priming funding, implementing more efficient financial monitoring procedures to manage external project funding
- Service level advisor linking with Aimhigher to complement activity.

Difficulties/challenges

6.2 When asked if there have been difficulties or challenges in partnership working with Higher Futures, 7 partners answered 'yes'. Difficulties and challenges outlined included the following:

- institution unable to draw down any additional student numbers through HF, which impacted significantly upon ability to deliver programmes to meet demand generated by HF activity
- frustration at slow pace of development, with partners '*moving at very different speeds*'
- different foci from different partners within one sector
- resistance to 'yet another project'
- at a service user level there were concerns of 'poaching' of students, although this was waylaid as the project activity was shown to be beneficial in supporting the institution's IAG activities

- linked to the previous point, one partner talked about the issue of ‘institutional protection’, although again this seemed to have been resolved ‘*amicably through dialogue*’ on the whole
- challenge of time-limitation on shared developments – again these appear to have been resolved
- balancing workload for HF staff working on fractional posts
- a perception that HEIs seem reluctant to accept progression agreements
- a perception that one HEI has been slow to respond to another partner’s FD needs

Embedding HF activities

- 6.3 Almost all respondents felt that their organisation will embed HF IAG services and practices beyond the funding period. Three partners reported that progression agreements will be developed; one referred to the development of pathway links with HEIs, while one HEI talked about embedding progression routes in the university structures in the future. Three partners felt that work to engage employers will continue, for example one institution said they will produce a ‘*framework for the development of progression programmes to suit employer needs*’. One response anticipated the future return of HF students who have progressed to higher education, to talk about their experiences, as a result of work carried out with the mentor/buddy scheme at an HEI. Another response referred to ‘*embedded aspiration*’ for vocational learners at their institution.
- 6.4 One confident partner asserted ‘*because of the close links with AH and the HE programme, much of our activity is already being embedded. A full range of internal progression agreements will be developed across the college and best examples of supportive IAG work with vocational groups will continue.*’

Developing HF activities

- 6.5 Partners were asked which Higher Futures activities they would like to develop further. A range of responses was given, including:

IAG activity

- IAG developments and progression
- Systematic IAG work

Progression Agreements

- Progression Agreements for students involved in Sustainable Communities and for voluntary/community sector organisations requiring Management qualifications and Social Enterprise qualifications
- Progression Agreements between delivery partners and employers

Progression Routes

- Identify strategies to promote progression for NVQ learners

- Training around the developing progression routes, building on previous work around mapping; there is an acceptance that this would be time-consuming but it is felt that now is the time to up-date
- Joint pathway development
- Development of a strategy to link professional engineer status to apprenticeships and Foundation Degrees
- Work with universities to promote progression

Curriculum development

- Development of strategy and framework around specialist curriculum for the Generic Foundation degree
- Development of bridging courses
- Further work of the Foundation Degree group

Professional Development

- Work with identified parties to develop and offer internal staff development sessions on professional updating and tutor responsibilities with a particular focus on sector areas involved in the team improvement plan
- Development and delivery of a professional updating staff development session on higher level qualifications and funding to internal employer engagement staff within the ten college partners

6.6 Both HEIs highlighted they would like to develop partnership working with the colleges; one university flagged up that this should be through the IAG network. They also reported a desire to develop further links with partners beyond the immediate lifelong learning network. One university reported they want to develop '*partnership with other parts of partners beyond sectors identified*' while the other university would like to develop '*further links with other University Widening Participation initiatives, especially those funded through Aimhigher*'.

6.7 In addition, two respondents stated that they would like to develop employer engagement activity. Other developments that partners said they would like to develop included:

- extension of the remit to media
- evaluate the use of Personal Learning Journals across the network
- further development of resources
- Buddy Bank

Partnership models

6.8 All twelve of the respondents felt that an HE/FE partnership model would be necessary to sustain networking activity developed through Higher Futures. Partners were asked to select one or more potential models from a list of three:

Collaborative model – strategic level, with shared objectives and governance and management structures

Alliance model – nominated contacts for each partner, with lead institution, act as communication channel on topics of mutual interest/opportunity

Grassroots model – practitioner led groups create communities of interest, with shared administration.

- 6.9 The collaborative model received 10 ‘votes’, the alliance model 9, and the grassroots model 5. Three respondents made additional comments; one felt that a HE/FE partnership model already exists between themselves and a local HEI. Other comments were:

‘All models are possible, the main constraint is the financial commitment’

‘Elements of all models necessary but with a strong organisational lead’

- 6.10 All respondents reported that their organisation would be willing to support the HE/FE partnership model. When asked to indicate the *type* of support that could be provided, 11 partners felt that staff time could be offered; 8 partners said they could give administrative support, while one offered direct funds. A further suggestion was that resources could be shared.
- 6.11 Partners were given the opportunity to make any additional comments or observations. One stated that their organisation had been *‘delighted with Higher Futures professional and value added service’*, while another said that their Careers Service *‘has been pleased to develop a Widening Participation element to its activities through the support of Higher Futures’*. They went on to highlight that they would welcome the opportunity to continue working with partners through an IAG network. One respondent was concerned that, despite some good results, the HF structure has *‘absorbed too high a proportion of the cost, at the expense of more intensive grass roots activity’*.

Concluding comments by Director of Higher Futures

Gathering evidence from the partners of the benefits, challenges, and value-added outcomes of participation in the network was a central component in developing the Higher Futures sustainability strategy. These survey results are extremely positive and point to a number of areas with potential for sustained activity, as illustrated in the report. The conclusions we can draw from the survey outcomes and analysis are summarised here.

Partnership and network development

A range of corporate and organisational objectives are seen as being supported by Higher Futures, notably widening participation, increasing progression and retention, improving the student experience, employer engagement and partnership working. All these can be grounded in the business case for sustainability. There is clearly scope here for links with the new requirements of the widening participation strategic assessments and for further inter-relation between Higher Futures and Aimhigher activity, where collaboration has already started.

The genuine value-added benefit of working with the universities and inter-college collaboration has featured very strongly, which is vital to any continuing strategy. In particular, the value placed on sharing practice and its impact on the continuing professional development (CPD) of staff is a real legacy. Our communication strategy appears to have worked well, with many positive comments and evidence that information is cascaded through the partners in many ways. In retrospect, it would have helped to try and find out what impact it had; this is an area that could be picked up by the external evaluation.

Improving progression

Progression focused activity has been widespread and takes many forms - identifying progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4, negotiating progression agreements, dialogue with admissions staff, curriculum development/adaptation and bridging programmes, improved IAG resources - and evidence too of a positive impact on awareness of HE and the numbers progressing. This is where the embedding of a system for monitoring the progression of vocational learners relates most obviously to the implementation of systems and models for improving that progression.

Increasing awareness of HE

The impact of enhanced and targeted IAG has been marked, with almost all colleges reporting a rise in the numbers of vocational learners expressing an interest in HE, several with statistical evidence to support that perception. In other respects, Higher Futures investment has led to important changes in practice and processes in the organisation and delivery of IAG, particularly how it is structured and co-ordinated, again with positive spin-offs for staff CPD.

Increasing workplace demand

Most partners agreed Higher Futures had enhanced their engagement with employers and sector agencies around high level skills but, equally, could not say if this had increased demand, though some did reported increased interest. Employer engagement is a universally tricky activity for LLNs, so it was really encouraging to see that many partners had established links between the employer engagement work and their business-facing services, for the benefit of marketing provision, improved IAG services, and better interaction between staff. This would suggest there may be scope to build on employer engagement strategy within the partnership. The recent successful bid to the HEFCE Economic Challenge Investment Fund (ECIF) will provide an opportunity to test this assumption.

Embedding and future developments

It is clear Higher Futures activity and practice has or will be embedded beyond the funding period. This is especially true of IAG services but there were also indications of further development of PAs and the embedding of progression routes. It will be important to capitalise of this intention at an early stage in the sustainability strategy, not least to spread good practice within the partnership.

A variety of ideas are put forward for future activity, again in the areas of developing IAG and progression activities, but also in relation to partner networking, links with employers and continued partnership with Aimhigher.

Challenges

The difficulties and challenges expressed through the survey were typical of those you would expect from a relatively short-term funded, partnership based initiative - the pace of development, differences of focus in sectors, and pressures on staff time and competing demands of other project work. On balance, there was far more positive experience and a genuine commitment to support a continuing partnership model.

Sustainability models

Whilst there was unanimous agreement that some form of partnership model was necessary to sustain activity, how it might be supported and resourced is less clear. The slight favouring of the 'collaborative' over the 'alliance' model and a majority indicating a willingness to offer staff time and/or administrative support provides a basis for further discussion. The questionnaire did state this would be followed up by further discussion with partners to clarify the resource commitment, and that is the stage we are moving to over the coming months.

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of staff consulted

The results of the survey incorporate the views of the twelve Higher Futures OMG representatives who contributed to and co-ordinated the institutional responses. In addition, the following staff members were consulted by their OMG representative in compiling the collective response:

College A

Head of Careers
Careers Advisor

College B

Director Curriculum and Strategy
Curriculum Development Manager 14-19 Team
Project Leader 14-19 Team
Sector Development Officer for Engineering
Senior Finance Officer
Curriculum Leader – Engineering
Curriculum Leader – Engineering Maths

College C

Aimhigher Co-ordinator
IAG & Transition Officer
Deputy Principal

College D

Director of Academic Office
Dean of Higher Education
Heads of Faculty
Associate Director Student Experience
Progression Pathways Co-ordinators

College E

Director of School
IAG and Transition Officer
Deputy Principal

College F

Tutor Organiser (HE)
Learning for Work Programme Manager
Student Support and IAG Manager
Principal

College G

IAG and Transition Officer
IAG Manager
Head of Engagement

HE Manager
Sector Development Officer
Director of Engagement and Learner Services

College H

Lecturers (7)
Programme Area Manager for Business and Professional Studies
Librarian
Sector Development Officer
IAG Officer
Transition Officer
Director of Business and External Relations
Principal
Marketing Manager
Business Development Manager
Customer Service Manager

College I

Head of Employer Responsiveness
IAG and Transition Officer
Vice Principal

College J

IAG Co-ordinator
Sector Development Officer
Director – Strategy and Partnerships

University A

Sector Lead Engineering
Sector Lead Early Years
Sector Lead Health and Social Care
Sector Lead Sport
Sector Lead Sustainable Communities
Higher Futures Co-ordinator
Admissions Officers
Widening Participation Officers

University B

Faculty Recruitment Officer, Engineering
Assistant Registrar, Planning Services
Careers Adviser, Pre-entry and Transition
Course Director: Literature and Creative Media
Director of Careers Service
Course Director: Women's Studies
Maths Development Officer, Engineering
Lecturer in Social Sciences and Health
Lecturer in Health Studies
Director for the Institute for Lifelong Learning
Co-ordinator: Music and Creative Media

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Higher Futures Sustainability Questionnaire February 2009

This survey is designed to gather data from all Higher Futures partners on their views of the value-added benefits of participation in the network. It has been agreed by the Strategic Management Board (SMB) as one of the first stages in developing a sustainability strategy. The questionnaire has been circulated to members of the Operational Management Group (OMG), who have been asked to co-ordinate the response from their institution. As this is an institutional response, please consult with sector, IAG and other colleagues as appropriate within your organisation to compile the information. **The survey should be completed by Friday 27 February 2009.** Thank you for taking part.

Where check boxes have been provided for response, please double click the desired check box and select Checked, then OK, to mark.

1. Organisation:

2. Name of OMG member co-ordinating this response:

Section 1: Higher Futures and your organisation

3. Please list the **job titles** of the colleagues directly involved in Higher Futures activity within your organisation. Please indicate with a 'Yes' or 'No' whether each individual has been consulted in compiling this response.

Job title	Consulted (Yes/No)

4. Have any other colleagues been consulted in compiling this response?

Yes / No

If yes, please list job titles:

5. Please identify which of your institution's corporate, organisational and/or strategic objectives are supported by Higher Futures activity.

Section 2: Network development

6. As a member of the Higher Futures network, your organisation is involved in a range of partnership activities. Please indicate below to what extent each of these has **added value** to the work of your organisation.

	No value	Limited value	Valuable	Very valuable	N/A
Working with universities	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Working with colleges	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Curriculum mapping and planning	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Sharing good practice	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Joint events to target parents and vocational learners	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Joint events to target employers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Joint events to target staff	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other (please describe briefly):					

7. Of the various network development activities covered in question 6, please describe which has been the most valuable? Please give a brief explanation for your choice, giving examples where possible.

8. Are there any unexpected/unanticipated benefits that being a partner institution within the Higher Futures network has brought?

Yes / No

If yes, please explain briefly:

9. Higher Futures has delivered a variety of communication activities. Please indicate below to what extent each of the following communications has been **useful** to your organisation.

	Not useful	Limited use	Useful	Very useful
Higher Futures Website	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occasional newsletters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Activity roundups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fortnightly news digest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sector team meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
IAG team meetings	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Minutes of the OMG/SMB	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Directorate communications (e.g. email)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Is this information circulated within your organisation?

Yes No

If yes, how and who to?

11. Please provide any other comments you would like to make on Higher Futures communication activities.

Section 3: Improving progression opportunities

12. Which of the following Higher Futures activities have been undertaken within your organisation to improve progression opportunities?			
	Yes	No	N/A
Curriculum development/adaptation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Development of progression agreements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identifying local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internal discussion with those responsible for HE admissions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please describe briefly)			

13. What evidence do you have of successful outcomes linked to these activities?
Curriculum development/adaptation
Development of progression agreements
Identifying local progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4
Internal discussion with those responsible for HE admissions
Other (Please describe briefly)

14. If you have answered 'No' in question 12, please outline briefly the reason(s) your organisation has not undertaken that particular activity.

Section 4: Increasing awareness of HE

15. Which of the following have been undertaken within your organisation to target and improve information, advice and guidance (IAG) services for vocational learners?			
	Yes	No	N/A
Audit of IAG provision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identifying IAG needs of vocational learners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support for groups of vocational learners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support for individual vocational learners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support for vocational tutors and teaching staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special events for vocational learners e.g. visits to HEIs, UCAS information events etc.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (Please describe briefly)			

16. Would you say there has been an increase in the number of vocational learners expressing interest in HE?

Yes No Don't know N/A

If yes, please indicate what evidence you have to support your response:

17. Have you introduced any changes in IAG practice or processes as a result of Higher Futures activity?

Yes No Don't know N/A

If yes, please explain briefly:

Section 5: Increasing workplace demand

18. Which of the following sectors has your organisation been involved in?		
	Yes	No
Early Years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health and Social care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public Wellbeing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sustainable Communities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

19. Would you say Higher Futures enabled you to enhance engagement with employers and sector organisations around higher level skills?

Yes No Don't know

If Yes, how has Higher Futures supported your organisation to do this?
(e.g. consultation on curriculum and skills needs, employer awareness raising events, CPD exchange opportunities etc.)

20. Would you say Higher Futures activity has increased demand from employers for higher level skills?

Yes No Don't know

If yes, please indicate the evidence you have to support your response:

21. Have links been established between Higher Futures and the business-facing areas of your organisation (e.g. enterprise office, workforce development team etc.)?

Yes No Don't know

If yes, please describe these connections within your organisation. If no, please explain why this has not taken place:

Section 6: Looking to the future

22. What aspect of Higher Futures activity has added most value to your organisation?

23. Have there been difficulties or challenges in partnership working through Higher Futures?

Yes No

If yes, please outline briefly the main issues:

24. Which Higher Futures activities will your organisation be able to embed beyond the funding period?

25. Which Higher Futures activities would you like to develop further?

26. Would you say a HE-FE partnership model was necessary to sustain networking activity developed through Higher Futures?

Yes No Don't know

If yes, please select any or all of the potential models outlined below, or suggest one of your own, to show what might it look like?

Collaborative model - strategic level, with shared objectives and governance and management structures	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alliance model - nominated contacts for each partner, with lead institution, act as communication channel on topics of mutual interest/opportunity	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grassroots model - practitioner led groups create communities of interest, with shared administration	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other suggestions: (please explain briefly)	<input type="checkbox"/>

27. Would your organisation be willing to support this partnership model?

Yes No

If yes, please indicate the type of support that could be provided. Please note this will be followed up in more detailed discussions with partners.

Direct funds	<input type="checkbox"/>
Staff time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Administration (e.g. organising meetings)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please explain briefly):	<input type="checkbox"/>

28. Please use the space below to provide additional comments or observations:

An online version of this questionnaire is being prepared, which we will be asking all partners to use to provide a single institutional response by Friday 27th February 2009. Details will be sent to your OMG representative. If it is not possible to access the online survey, please email your completed questionnaire to:

Margaret: Margaret.lewis@sheffield.ac.uk

Louise: L.E.Ritchie@sheffield.ac.uk

Tel: (0114) 2228121 or 2228128

Appendix 3: Glossary of Acronyms:

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council (BTECs are work related qualifications built to accommodate the needs of employers and allow progression to university).
CACHE	Council for Awards in Children’s Care and Education (provides CACHE and NVQ qualifications ranging from beginners' courses to advanced training)
CAG	Careers Advice and Guidance
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
ELS	Education Learning Support
EY	Early Years
FD	Foundation Degree
FdA	Foundation Degree Arts
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HF	Higher Futures
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
IAGTO	Information, Advice and Guidance Transition Officer
LLN	Lifelong Learning Network
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
OMG	Operational Management Group
PCET	Post-compulsory Education and Training
SMB	Strategic Management Board
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service