

November 2006

Aimhigher makes a difference

On August 1 2006 we entered into a new phase of Aimhigher. The funding streams which were previously delegated to local authorities and the higher education sector have been brought together under the control of the Area Steering Group (ASG). The ASG agreed to continue the support for Aimhigher activities in schools and colleges which have developed over the past 5 years. As a result, approximately 75% of the South Yorkshire funding has gone back to schools, colleges and the local authorities whilst 25% has been retained for area wide activities.

The success of Aimhigher will, ultimately, be judged by the changes it has brought to the participation in higher education of those from under-represented groups. We can only do this if we have a thorough, evidence-based understanding of those groups, the barriers they face and the activities which have a demonstrable impact on removing those barriers. These understandings are much more difficult to achieve than might be thought. A recent report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England by Stephen Gorard *et. al* (*Review of Widening Participation Research - available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2006/rd13_06/*) shows, for example, that we know something about participants in HE but very little about non-participants. Even our knowledge of participants is limited, partly due to the poor quality of much research. In South Yorkshire we have conducted independent evaluations of activities which have assisted the ASG in formulating decisions about those projects which have been carried forward into the 2006-08 period. We have also established a substantial database of information relating to attainment, progression, as well as geographical and social characteristics which will aid the targeting of activities.

This edition of the newsletter will focus on brief reports of some of the research activity which has been conducted into widening participation on South Yorkshire. Four of such activities are included:- the database, research into the Brightside constituency, research into the transition of learners with specific learning difficulties, research on the admission and progression of vocational students at The University of Sheffield. In the future, we hope to conduct investigations into qualified non-participants in HE.

The Continuing Professional Development programme for 2007 has been agreed and brief details of the events are included on the back page of this issue.

Jed O'Neill, Director of Aimhigher South Yorkshire

Aimhigher South Yorkshire partnership receives praise from HEFCE

We have only just got into the swing of 'phase 2' of Aimhigher (2006-8), yet we are already turning our attention to the post 2008 era. The Higher Education Funding Council and Action on Access have been keen to emphasise the importance of identifying and recording evidence of the impact of Aimhigher. This message was re-enforced at a recent AH Regional Partnership Board where it was clear that the National Partnership Board were very keen to be able to put the best case forward for Aimhigher within the Comprehensive Spending Review. The work outlined in this edition of the Newsletter is evidence of how seriously we are taking this issue within the South Yorkshire sub-region.

We have also had feedback from the Regional Partnership Board about the Aimhigher South Yorkshire monitoring report 2005-6. The feedback from the Board says that 'the report provided a strategic and balanced assessment of the partnership's progress Of particular praise were the examples of activities being embedded and the focus in the report to show how SYAH has aligned itself with other sub-regional strategies.' We were very pleased to receive such an unequivocal endorsement of Aimhigher in this region. My colleagues on the Area Steering Group want to pass on our thanks to all those working on area, borough and institutional projects and initiatives. The feedback from the Regional Partnership Board recognises the outstanding way such a wide range of organisations and professionals have become involved with Aimhigher. I do look forward to being able to report further excellent progress for the coming period.

Clive Macdonald, Chair of the Area Steering Group

The Aimhigher South Yorkshire Database

With an increasing need to produce “hard evidence” of the impact of widening participation initiatives, a South Yorkshire database of school attainment and Higher Education progression data has been compiled. Using reliable and robust data collected on an annual basis by external agencies, this has been aggregated at institutional and geographical area levels into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets which can be analysed using pivot tables.

At Institutional level this includes all secondary and post-16 education providers in the area with data for secondary schools on KS3; GCSE results from 2000 to 2006 and numbers on role where available sourced from PLASC files and the DfES Attainment Tables.

Attainment in post-16 qualifications for post-16 schools and colleges has been incorporated as average point scores and HE progression data from individual applicant level UCAS data purchased from UCAS by Yorkshire Universities for 2000 to 2005.

The UCAS data covers applicants and accepts by gender, ethnicity, socio economic background, disability and accepts by Russell Group HEIs, Yorkshire and Humber HEIs, and UCAS tariff scores. Using pivot tables the HE progression data can be aggregated at various geographical levels, including lower and middle level super output areas, postcode sectors and ward levels and by local authority.

The database has been designed such that it can easily incorporate other types of appropriate data which become available at institutional and/or area levels, and be updated on an annual basis.

The raw UCAS data at individual applicant level has been retained for possible further analysis of parameters not currently included in the database, eg, disabled learners, BME, type of qualification etc.

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Investigating HE Participation amongst Young People in Sheffield Brightside

Sheffield Hallam University is involved in a national project funded by The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which is focussed on four constituencies in the UK with particularly low participation rates in higher education by young people. In the HEFCE paper "Young Participation in Higher Education" (HEFCE 2005/03), these constituencies were identified as Nottingham North, Bristol South, Sheffield Brightside and Hodge Hill (Birmingham).

The project, which Sheffield Hallam has been working on, focuses on the Sheffield Brightside constituency.



The aims are to develop a better understanding of the particular reasons why many young people within the area do not progress to higher education and how these factors

interrelate. We will also use the research findings to make recommendations, which can be used to try and improve the progression rates of young people.

The main elements of this strand of the project are:

- Establishing what is already known through a review of the existing literature in the area, such as Sheffield City Council strategies, Neighbourhood strategies and other literature relating to Widening Participation and progression in Sheffield.

- Providing a clear picture of the relationship between area factors and patterns of young participation, including the geographical mapping of the deprivation index and educational statistics relating to areas of low and high participation (as shown in the map below).
- Building on existing knowledge to determine the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of young people and adults within the area, through the use of questionnaires and focus groups.
- Determining the nature of the information, advice and guidance that young people receive with regard to progression to post-16 provision and higher education, through the use of interviews and focus groups.
- Identifying examples of good practice in reaching out and engaging young people in post-16 and higher education.

The project is due for completion in November 2006 and the report will be made available on the HEFCE website (www.hefce.ac.uk).

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Identifying and building on good practice in schools and colleges for 16-18 year olds with Specific Learning Difficulties— Facilitating smooth transition into Higher Education Institutions

This project is a collaborative pilot study between:
Aimhigher South Yorkshire
The Sheffield Universities
2 regional Further Education colleges
4 schools
1 local branch of Connexions

It investigated how to widen participation of learners with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) and expand links with local education providers.

Good practice in schools depends on early identification of children with SpLD. Data from SENCOs suggests that support is more comprehensive, and additional requirements for these learners are more likely to be met, when identification takes place early in a child's education.

To support transition to Higher Education, the information links need to be improved between institutions providing post-compulsory education, and early direct contact is advocated with universities so that potential learners can envision themselves there in the future. The bond between support staff and learners and the type of liaison that they negotiate is important to successful learning.

This is achieved by: SENCOs encouraging academically able learners to view FE and HE as a possibility; student ambassadors with SpLD going into schools to talk about their learning experiences; student mentoring, as already implemented by many UK universities.

Provision also depended upon whether a learner had child or adult status, and responsibility to disclose increased accordingly. Learners with SpLD should have the opportunity to develop the social tools to be able to deal with disclosure and to manage their learning effectively. Disclosure was certainly a problem for non-compulsory educators who had to ensure that they fulfilled the Disability Discrimination Act requirements. HEIs need to work towards creating a supportive environment which encourages disclosure and should implement effective communication systems so that, with consent, students with SpLD can be identified and relevant support implemented early on.

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Researching practice and developing new models for vocational pathways

In response to the new enthusiasm on the part of Government for the development and promotion of vocational pathways for 14-19 year old students, Aim Higher funded a study of the admission and progression of students entering the University of Sheffield with BTEC National Diploma qualifications.

The study involved discussions with staff and students (admitted over the 2002-5 period) within the University, including 15 admissions tutors and other staff involved in recruitment and marketing. There were also discussions with staff in colleges in South Yorkshire involved in the Building Pathways advocate project and staff involved in information, advice and guidance from Sheffield Futures. In addition, the study analysed data on admissions and acceptances for those admitted over the period 2002-5, and data on degree performance and first destinations of graduates from 2005.



The study findings were disseminated and discussed at a regional conference held in June 2007. It was reported that the numbers of conventional age students from vocational pathways who apply and are admitted to the University are currently very small.

However, the study identified a number of models for developing a positive policy and practice for supporting the admission and progression of such students. Using research such as this to stimulate a review and understanding of current practice and facilitate the development of new policy and practice, provides a useful model for widening participation. This study suggests that building research-policy-practice relationships is a strategy that Aim Higher should encourage.

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