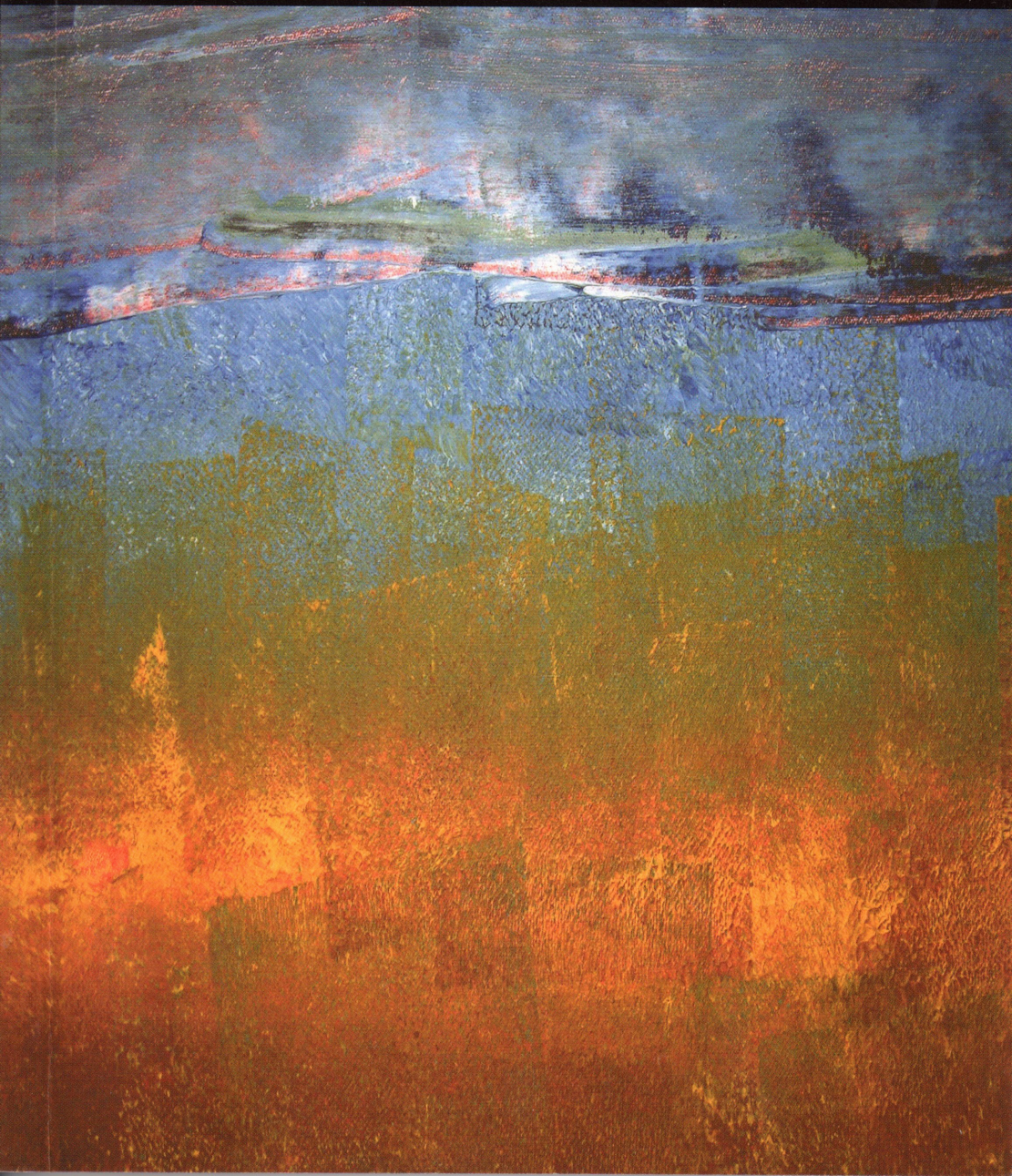


Beyond the boundaries

The Impact of Aimhigher in Leeds

Tim Challis, David Wilkinson & Simon Maguire



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About the authors:

Tim Challis and **David Wilkinson** have recently delivered research and consultative projects for the NHS, the Department for Education and Skills/University of Warwick the Regional Development Agency for Yorkshire – Yorkshire Forward (e-skills needs of Leeds SMEs, linked to disability), the Learning and Skills Council West Yorkshire (consultative survey and conference cataloguing staff development resources available for those working with disabled people in West Yorkshire), Leeds City Council's Equal ICT and Employability programme (research project exploring Disability, ICT and Employability.). They were also part of the University of Leeds evaluation team for the regional Employability initiative for Yorkshire Forward (the Regional Development Agency for Yorkshire and the Humber) and the NHS.

Simon Maguire is a teacher with many years experience of working with Aimhigher and widening participation activities in schools. Until recently, he was part of the management team at Morley High School, Leeds and had the responsibility for raising achievement in the school.

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Introduction

This is a book about the history, development and impact of one Aimhigher programme, Aimhigher Leeds. It is also an attempt to capture some of the richness, intensity and determination of its workers, co-ordinators and managers' experiences, as they endeavoured to make sure that the children of one major northern city had all the support, encouragement and resources they needed to aim for their highest possible attainment levels.

Aimhigher Leeds faces many of the same challenges faced by other urban programmes, with the socio-economic and demographic profile within boundaries varying enormously from one postal district to another. Inner-city neighbourhoods with high levels of deprivation sit alongside wealthy suburbs. The city itself is the second largest metropolitan authority in England, and despite its rising prosperity, still contains many areas of serious disadvantage. Of its 750,000 population, almost 11% are from Black and minority ethnic groups, a percentage that rises amongst the 180,000 children and young people under the age of 19, largely as a result of a significant increase in the number of children from migrant or asylum-seeking families.¹

When OFSTED conducted the Joint Area Review of Leeds Children's Services Authority Area, published in 2008, it singled out the work of Aimhigher Leeds in schools and further education colleges. 'The Aimhigher programme is particularly effective in raising aspirations and attainment for a wide range of 14–19 learners.

Progression to higher education is good and increasing', the inspectors said (JAR, pages 21–22). Leeds Aimhigher had been particularly effective in promoting widening participation through initiatives targeting learners from economically disadvantaged communities, with considerable progress reported against looked after children, Black and Ethnic Minority learners and White working class boys.

OFSTED gave particular praise to Aimhigher Leeds' work with looked after children, and its mentoring support: 'A comprehensive strategy to improve educational outcomes for looked after children has been implemented. Targeted work, such as mentoring and the Stepping Stones programme, has raised young people's aspirations', it said (page 12), and 'Leeds has been at the forefront of a number of initiatives to support the personal and social

¹ See for instance JAR report, *Leeds Children's Services Authority Area Report* 2008.

development of young people. A well-established and effective mentoring scheme is in place to support children and young people from disadvantaged areas and from minority ethnic backgrounds' (Page 30).

Over 4,000 young people every year and over 20,000 students since the inception of Aimhigher have benefited from the service provided by the Aimhigher Leeds team.² But what is the broader context within which Aimhigher Leeds operates, and why has the Leeds programme been so successful, what lessons can be learned to inform other Aimhigher initiatives working with similar demographic and socio-economic populations?

Aimhigher's origins lie with a government directive, in 2003, that by 2010, 50% of all people between the ages of 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to enter higher education.³ As the White Paper said, "But we must also raise the aspirations of schools and young people. A unified national Aimhigher programme will build better links between schools, colleges and universities, including through summer schools and a pilot programme offering students the chance to support teachers in schools and colleges."

Aimhigher began its existence as two separate but closely linked schemes, Excellence Challenge, which had been launched by the DfES in 2001,⁴ and Partnerships 4 Progression in further and higher education. By 2004, these had been amalgamated into a single, unified Aimhigher programme, with a clear commission to raise the abilities and aspirations of young people from socio-economic groups of society that are particularly underrepresented in our universities and colleges⁵. These included:

- People from lower socio-economic groups;
- People living in deprived geographical areas, which included rural and coastal areas;
- People whose families have no history or experience of higher education participation;
- Those young people in care;
- People from minority ethnic groups who are underrepresented in HE, or in certain institutions or subject areas;

² <http://leedsaimhigher.org/news/2008/may/leeds-aimhigher-praised-by-ofsted>

³ Charles Clark, January 22, 2003. See the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education*.

⁴ Morris and Golden, 2005.

⁵ HEFCE, 2004.

- Other people who are underrepresented in certain institutions or subject areas;
- People with a disability.⁶

The Aimhigher Programme continues to be a key component of government policy to widen, and thereby increase, participation in higher education, by supporting the attainment, aspirations, motivation and self-esteem of widening participation students and gifted and talented students aged 14-19. Widening participation students are those who have the academic potential to go on to higher education but may be underachieving academically and lack motivation and self-esteem. Gifted and Talented students are those who are academically in advance of their peers or who show pronounced ability in the talent domains of music, performing arts and physical education.

In the case of Leeds, the Aimhigher and Gifted and Talented initiatives have been integrated on a wedge basis under the direction of Mohsin Zulfiqar, Aimhigher's charismatic co-ordinator. Each of the five wedges is chaired by a school or college representative, and the integration of Aimhigher and Gifted and Talented creates a cultural dynamic in which the two initiatives support and inform each other.

It was largely to capture this dynamic that Aimhigher Leeds in 2007 commissioned an evaluation of its activities, with a particular focus on the four cornerstones of Aimhigher Leeds' work: looked after children; Black and ethnic minority learners; White working class boys; and Gifted and Talented.

Method

After discussion with the Aimhigher Leeds team, the programme evaluators decided to take an appreciative inquiry approach to the evaluation. Appreciative inquiry is a non-adversarial and highly participatory method that allows the evaluators to adopt a unique position as intermediaries between project management teams and operational staff, and to use the evaluation process as a mechanism through which data can flow from the one to the other in an informative and creative way.

A key element of appreciative inquiry is this use of a formative process of iterative feedback, so that initial findings can be discussed with key stakeholders, and their responses fed back into the data forming the evidence base for the evaluation. In practice, this allows key stakeholders – the project management team, operational staff and Aimhigher representatives in schools,

⁶ See <http://www.aimhigherwm.org/content.asp?CategoryID=874>.

colleges, universities and other engaged organisations – the opportunity themselves to play an active role in the evaluation by discussing the implications of findings on an ongoing basis, and to work with the evaluation team to reshape the process of enquiry and final conclusions and recommendations accordingly.

Within this, a complexity approach enabled implications and outcomes to be viewed from a range of different perspectives. For instance, the impact of new approaches will be valued in different and often unexpected ways according to the priorities, expectations and needs of individuals or groups involved. It is the sometimes 'hidden' or 'seldom heard' voices and perspectives that this approach captures, in addition to the more immediately accessible data and perspectives that were collected by the evaluation team.

This method, which was successfully adapted and used by members of the evaluation team, together with Dr Fiona O'Neill of the University of Leeds, for the evaluation of the NHS Regional Employability programme in 2007⁷, provides a powerful tool to help the authors 'tell the story' of Aimhigher Leeds, of its many successes and achievements, of the efforts needed and challenges overcome to make these occur, and of the valuable learning generated through its activities and experiences. It also allows the authors the opportunity to articulate some of the immense impact of Aimhigher Leeds on its primary constituency – the young people of Leeds and their aspiration to achieve the very highest attainment possible as individuals contemplating a future of higher or further education and employment.

In general terms, the evaluation team used the Kirkpatrick model, designed by Donald Kirkpatrick in the late 1950s to evaluate industrial training programmes, as a convenient and tested structure within which to map out, collect and initially classify data.⁸ The fact that Kirkpatrick's model is still used widely today is a testament to both its reliability and its versatility. The four levels of Kirkpatrick, which are reaction to initiatives or activities, the skills developed through them, how these skills are applied, and their impact or result, were used to construct a data collection matrix tailored to the specific requirements of the evaluation of Leeds Aimhigher, as they had also been successfully applied, for instance, to the evaluation of the NHS Regional Employability Programme.

⁷ Challis, O'Neill and Wilkinson, 2007.

⁸ Kirkpatrick 1996.

Data sources

Working closely with Mohsin Zulfiqar and the central team, the authors identified over 40 key members of staff engaged, in one capacity or another, with both Aimhigher and Gifted and Talented activities. In addition, approximately 20 Aimhigher Leeds programme participants were also interviewed to collect their views and experiences. Interviews and group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed for input into the qualitative data analysis package Nvivo.

Over 300 pages of transcript were produced from the interviews and discussions, and the evidence contained within them has formed the basis both for the evaluation of Aimhigher Leeds, and for this book.

All of the people identified were interviewed either individually or in groups, as the authors sought to investigate a series of central questions. These fell under a number of broad headings:

Target groups

Aimhigher practitioners were asked to identify their key target groups, and to discuss the particular issues that characterised these groups of young people, both in terms of Aimhigher Leeds, and in terms of national guidance on widening provision. Interviewees were asked specifically about the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) guidance that identifies four groups as meriting concentration; minority ethnic groups; disabled people; learners based in workplaces; and those involved with the gifted and talented programme.⁹

Interviewees were also asked about HEFCE's identification of travellers, asylum seekers and refugees as legitimate targets, and about whether they had considered targeting them as part of the widening provision agenda.

Aimhigher activities

Interviewees were asked how they viewed the effectiveness of Aimhigher Leeds' outputs, in terms of the number of events, the number of hours for each event, the number of participants, and the target groups their events were aimed at. In particular, the project team asked, were there enough events? Were they long enough? Did they attract sufficient numbers of participants, and if not, how can they attract more? Did they achieve adequate representation from their target groups?

⁹ HEFCE 2007 12.

Monitoring and evaluation

Practitioners were asked about their own monitoring and evaluation activities, and whether they monitored or evaluated the impact of Aimhigher Leeds on individuals against indicators other than entry into HE.

Targeting at area and learner levels

From Autumn 2006, HEFCE has been offering data sets for small areas grouped by rates of young participation in HE, and in some cases (i.e. Super Output Areas) the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Interviewees were asked about the extent to which they have considered how these data might be used in the context of their own areas, or in the context of Aimhigher Leeds more generally. Interviewees were also asked to consider the issues they felt they might encounter using data like these.

Interviewees were asked about targeting at learner level. HEFCE expects that many activities will be targeted sufficiently through area level data sets. For the most intense activities, however, such as mentoring, master classes, revision classes, extended tasters, day schools etc, it will be useful for individuals to be selected. This will mean stakeholders such as teachers and others will have to select which learners from disadvantaged backgrounds should be included. Which indicators (or 'proxies') could be used, interviewees were asked. What problems might be encountered using indicators such as free school meals, or educational maintenance allowances? Could Aimhigher be sure that all the children eligible for free school meals, for instance, were actually claiming them?

Monitoring the effectiveness of targeting

HEFCE has recommended that the process of obtaining permission of parents/carers also gives an opportunity to gather personal data, including:

- Occupation of main wage earner;
- Educational background(s) of parents/ carers;
- Ethnicity, age and sex of learners, and any disabilities they might have; and
- The home postcodes of learners, and of the school, college or training provider.

Interviewees were asked how relevant they felt these data are in terms of monitoring Aimhigher's success in targeting disadvantaged learners, and whether there were any alternative or additional data that might be useful.

They were also asked what problems, if any, they were expecting to encounter when collecting this information.

Partnerships

It was clear from the beginning of the evaluation that partnership formed a central and powerful factor in the success of Aimhigher Leeds, and interview subjects were asked in detail about the partnerships they had been part of or were aware of, and whether they felt these to have been successful or not. People were asked for examples of particularly strong partnerships with HE, employers and others, and for some indication of the partnership's material outcomes and headline activities. Could partnerships have been improved, interviewees were asked?

Widening provision (WP)

Aimhigher Leeds workers and activists were also asked about HEFCE's key WP aims for Aimhigher (2007 12), which are:

- to refine the definition of the target group for Aimhigher and outreach activity by HE providers;
- to provide a methodology to make the targeting more effective; and
- to set out a process for measuring the effectiveness of targeting.

In particular, in terms of seeking value for money, HEFCE's key guidance points to WP practitioners working within Aimhigher are:

- focus on those groups of learners where we know there are persistently low rates of participation in HE;
- seek better coherence for WP activities in an area, and build on existing good practice that delivers results;
- ensure synergy with other activities to support groups of learners with special learning needs (such as schemes to support those with disabilities or gifted and talented learners);
- provide targeted learners with a progressive, differentiated and coherent programme of activity; and improve the data sources to support targeting.

Interviewees were asked for their first-hand experience of the extent to which they felt these were achievable in Aimhigher Leeds, and the extent to which they felt that they would, in practice, materially assist HEFCE's widening provision targets.

Other data sources

In addition to interview and discussion data, policy documentation, activity material and other reporting documentation were consulted by the evaluation team. All programme documentation was made available to the team from the Aimhigher Leeds offices.

This evaluation report examines the activities of Leeds Aimhigher. These can be framed under a number of evaluative strands:

1. An examination of the effectiveness of current structural arrangements for the development and delivery of Aimhigher provision and the importance of interaction of the Aimhigher initiative regionally, sub-regionally and locally.
2. An overview of the progression of students from Leeds to higher education in the context of West Yorkshire.
3. An examination of the reasons for the development of Aimhigher strands in Leeds and their impact on specific areas, including: 14-19 development, gifted and talented learners, black and minority ethnic (BME) learners, looked after children, language development, raising attainment in science, mentoring programmes, and work with primary children.
4. An assessment of the effectiveness of Aimhigher in the school, further, and higher education sectors.
5. An evaluation of the quality of information in Leeds Aimhigher publications and reports.

The data for this evaluation was collected from current participants of Aimhigher programmes and activities, and Aimhigher core staff and associates between October 2007 and January 2008..

Chapter I: Aimhigher Leeds

Structural arrangements within the Leeds Aimhigher district are responsive to the developing and changing needs of learners within West Yorkshire. This flexible approach complements the recent findings of a national review of widening participation, which argued that discreet and separate activities need to be reinforced and related to further activity of relevance to local and regional need (HEFCE, 2006: 4-8).

Leeds Aimhigher has representation and an effective presence within a number of initiatives both inside and outside of the region. Nationally, Leeds Aimhigher holds (through the actions of its co-ordinator Mohsin Zulfiqar) membership of the BME Strategy Group, and regionally it is centrally involved with the Yorkshire Universities Summer Programme Practitioner Group, The Yorkshire and The Humber Regional Partnership for Gifted and Talented and the Excellence Hub for Yorkshire and the Humber. Leeds Aimhigher has enabled the focusing of resources in an effective and powerful way to enhance participation of BME learners, and their communities.

From many points of view, Mohsin's personal history echoes that of the communities he supports through Aimhigher: once described as having a "shock of white hair, a white bushy mustache and an intellectual air that bring to mind an Indian Einstein"¹⁰, he was born in Lucknow in India, his family emigrating to Karachi in Pakistan when he was only 17 years old. From a young age, he realised the importance of education, teaching chemistry before leaving Pakistan in the early 1970s for postgraduate research at Nottingham University. A postgraduate certificate in education qualified him to teach Science in secondary schools, but Mohsin developed instead a powerful reputation in adult learning and widening provision, both through the Workers' Education Association and as Head of the Access Studies Unit at Manchester College of Arts and Technology. Mohsin Zulfiqar has always championed equality of opportunity, and it was as Further Education adviser with additional responsibility for race equality issues that he joined what was then the Leeds Local Education Authority, an appointment that led ultimately to his Aimhigher role in the city.¹¹

... you have to see Leeds in perspective of West Yorkshire ... We organise the largest amount of activities ... our percentage of participation is much, much

¹⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 2005.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohsin_Zulfiqar

higher than some of the other districts ... In terms of black and minority ethnic learners, something like 15% of all the secondary kids participate in one way or another in our core activities or programmes.

Mohsin Zulfikar, Coordinator, Leeds Aimhigher

Because of the determination of Mohsin and the team he has drawn around him, Leeds Aimhigher is also recognized as a leader in approaches to the development of gifted and talented provision and effective structural arrangements developed to support it. Core staff at Leeds are currently developing training provision for teachers of gifted and talented students to enable the development of transparent and standardised initiatives for all gifted and talented youngsters in the region.

We are currently developing materials and provision for the Leading Teacher for Gifted and Talented education programme, which is a major thrust of government policy ... we're going to implement a system whereby all secondary and all primary schools will have a leading teacher for gifted and talented, which I think is critical and crucial – it complements and supports the work on extension and enrichment opportunities that we have through the architecture of Aimhigher. But in addition to that, it allows an effective change at classroom level, which is seen as being absolutely critical.

Jim Hagart, Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinator

Within the sub-region of West Yorkshire, Leeds Aimhigher provides a powerful influence on a range of Aimhigher provision. Central Team members are members of West Yorkshire Aimhigher District Coordinators Group, Advice and Guidance Sub-Group, Aspirations and Achievement Raising Sub-Group, the Communication and Editorial Sub-Group, Aimhigher Mentoring Service and Aimhigher Primary Project.

I represent Education Leeds at national conferences, where I have presented and co-presented papers based on our work. In terms of our work for Aimhigher, the central management team work closely with the Aimhigher Coordinator to produce district plans. In addition, I am the Vice Chair of the Making The Difference group, which I think really exemplifies partnership in its broader sense.

Jim Hagart, Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinator.

The local (Leeds-driven) infrastructure is comprehensive and supportive of the number of linked, wide-ranging activities, events and programmes

operating within Leeds. These include a 14-19 Strategy Implementation Group and Co-ordination Team, a District Aimhigher Team, Gifted and Talented Wedge Teams, Mentoring Teams and the 'Making the Difference' Steering Group. The coordination and progression between activities and programmes is an important element of all substantial provision within the Leeds area – this echoes the guidance issued by HEFCE in that they should be: "undertaken in a progressive, sequential and differentiated programme which reflects the needs of individual learners over a period of time" (HEFCE, 2006: 24-27).

I would say, with all the Aimhigher groups I work with, I am most impressed with Leeds' provision.

Lucy Hawkins

Access and Schools Liaison Officer for St John's and Merton Colleges,
Oxford University

Monitoring and evaluation

Effective structural arrangements also include monitoring, assessment and evaluation mechanisms developed and rigorously applied by Leeds Aimhigher. All activities and associated programme provision is carefully developed by experienced practitioners and systematically evaluated by practitioners and participants (pupils/students) following engagement. In terms of evaluation and impact, a range of quantitative and qualitative indicators are considered.

These include statistical analysis of participating cohorts in key Aimhigher activities, in terms of GCSE actual outcomes against Fischer Family Trust predicted outcomes, tracking student participation and related progression statistics (particularly in relation to Russell Group Universities). Mapped onto these are more discursive qualitative assessments (collected from participants (pupils/students) and teaching staff involved with activities) which examine developments or changes in attainment, aspirations, motivation, and progression.

Aimhigher Leeds monitors and evaluated its activities in line with HEFCE's recommendations; evaluation results feed back to the central team, and from there back to HEFCE.

The *Reach for A** programme, for instance, sought qualitative data from participants in relation to: the quality of teaching received in each subject session attended; whether or not the programme had a positive impact on confidence and exam preparation; the quality of accommodation and

classroom support resources; and other aspects specific to the content of the programme. 2007 data indicated that 89% of participants thought that the standard of teaching was good or excellent, and 77% felt that exam preparation had been significantly improved as a result of undertaking the programme.

There is also a clear commitment to use evaluation as an operational tool. There is, for instance, an evaluation of the HEFCE funded summer schools each year, which from 2007 onwards began to assess how valuable individual students found the experience; this evaluation is proactive, so when a particular concern arose around the number of young people who withdrew from the summer school, they were contacted individually to find out why. As one Aimhigher team member put it, "I've hunted down this year every last child of those that dropped out on the day ... it was only eight, I mean it wasn't many in terms of 128 [who] actually went, but nevertheless, there were eight who didn't turn up on the day. And those concerned, every one of those has been hunted down to find out why."

Informal monitoring, where Aimhigher team members capture their own observations about the student experience, also forms an important supplementary mechanism. "On the monitoring side with the Key Stage 3 Saturday morning SAT Success programme, we monitor in the sense that some of us are there every Saturday," one co-ordinator said, "so we can pick up on what the students say...The students from Leeds Met, the parents and anyone really, so we pick up on that. Secondly, attendance is monitored and then they're pursued...if they don't turn up. And then thirdly, within our team meetings, we discuss progress and so on. So I think that's quite a robust sort of monitoring system."

Capturing the quality of the student experience, something largely missed by a purely outputs-based evaluative system, forms a recurring theme amongst the Aimhigher team members. "You know, nobody's mentioned the Aimhigher bus, which for us is a big thing," one said, "when the Year nines actually have their first vision of students, you know, what they could be doing at university."

Others point out that outputs-based evaluation is much easier. Gathering comments from young people themselves, and sometimes from their parents as well, can be a time consuming process: "Retrieving GCSE results is a lot easier," one team member said, "but getting a feel of how the young people found [the experience] or how much they thought it benefited them, I think is a lot more difficult."

Some areas of Aimhigher's activity needs evaluating in comparatively innovative ways. Looked after children, for instance, are one group of the City's young people who will consistently face disadvantage in terms of opportunities for progression, and simple outputs-based evaluation will achieve little other than to reinforce the already-worrying conclusions of, for instance, the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 'Children looked after by local authorities' reports (see Chapter 2 later). Instead, Aimhigher staff evaluate Stepping Stones initially in terms of the number of people who are involved in the programme, and what people think about it as an experience. The Aimhigher staff who run programmes for looked after children also prepare detailed reports looking at the level of involvement and the way this has impacted on the way that young people feel about themselves.

Fischer Family Trust Value Added data are also used to show the impact of mentoring on looked after children. One recent cohort of looked after children, for instance, registered 1007. "If you take it into context with the Leeds average of 985 and the top school in Leeds, 1012, you can see the value added of mentoring is very, very high," one member of Leeds Mentoring said.

The success of support programmes for looked after children can also be measured through attendance rates, which are higher, the Aimhigher team points out, for this group of young people than the average Leeds attendance rate for all children. This was because, one team member felt, "they were seeing the value of good school attendance, they were seeing the value of rewards for attainment" something that was reinforced, he felt, through the Derek Fatchett City Learning Centre "identifying success, praising success, and acknowledging success." In this case, success is quantified using Key Stage 3 SATS results as well as Fischer Family Trust data.

Gifted and Talented

Monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented programme is carried out on a West Yorkshire basis, and then reported back to Education Leeds and the Aimhigher team.

Evaluation takes place on all events and activities, including invited speakers. Interestingly, evaluation of Gifted and Talented participants has identified the

fear of debt as one of the main concerns that puts students off progression to higher education.¹²

Co-ordinators interviewed during this evaluation agreed that the biggest hurdle to progressing to higher education was the prospect of debt. "It's the first thing they put down," one said.

Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator Jim Hagart agrees that this is a worry, but feel that students need to change their mindset to deal with it. He stated that if a graduate with a student loan were to have a starting salary of £18000 per annum, that the loan to be paid back would be at 9% of £3000, (which is the difference between the starting salary of £18000 and the threshold limit of £15000, below which no repayment need be made). "That is £270 a year, or £5.19 a week- the equivalent of paying back a packet of cigarettes a week, or something like that," he said.

In common with Aimhigher itself, Gifted and Talented evaluation focuses on the impact of activities on the young people who participate, rather than solely on outcomes. As one co-ordinator said, "We always try and evaluate everything that we've done, and we give the kids the questionnaires and we try to see what their views were, and how their views have changed in light of [the] activity they've just done."

The same interviewee also discussed the fact that exam results were used as part of the Gifted and Talented evaluation as well but added a note of caution, pointing out that good exam results "might be because of the things that you've put in place, but equally might be all kinds of other factors as well."

As noted above, and in common with Aimhigher's own evaluations, Gifted and Talented co-ordinators and activity organisers focus on qualitative evaluation of impact rather than simply measuring outcomes. This qualitative evaluation is frequently carried out on a one-to-one basis.

As one co-ordinator said, "I speak to them as well as evaluate, so when we do a Saturday programme, I'll sit down and say to them 'Is there anything that doesn't work for you? Would you like me to change something?' So it's a verbal evaluation as well as a paper one."

From the perspective of higher education providers, maintaining a consistent relationship between student volunteers and participating young people is

¹² Something identified nationally as particularly an issue for students from lower social classes, see Jackson and Callender (2005).

important. For this reason, the same students are wherever possible used for each session to provide continuity.

Even though the impact of Gifted and Talented on the individual is of paramount importance to its organisers, this itself can sometimes be judged in terms of its quantitative outcomes. These are not measured only in terms of progression to higher education (the data for successful applications to higher education are considered later in this section) but also by the extent to which participating young people 'come back for more.' "I think the proof of the pudding is that we've retained the students that came last year," one co-ordinator said, "and they come on a regular basis now. So every Saturday programme that we have, we have a good attendance. It's usually 100 per cent."

Mentoring

Evaluating the impact of mentoring has at times formed a critical aspect of its relationship with participating schools. At one stage, in 2004, when Aimhigher's continuation funding was under threat, it looked as if the schools might have to pay for the services of Leeds Mentoring. One interviewee, a Leeds Mentoring co-ordinator, took up the story: "I got together with a group of head teachers and said, 'Look, you might have to pay for mentoring yourself next year.' And the two questions that they asked me [were] first of all, 'How much is it going to cost us?' and 'What's the impact it's going to have on my students?' And you know that's when we set out to evaluate the impact. And we do."

Using the Fischer Family Trust added value, Leeds Mentoring is able to show dramatic benefits from their work, something referred to in detail by interviewees during our evaluation. They cite as an example that, in 2006, 11.3% of the students being mentored (or 600 of the 4000 mentees) were predicted failing to achieve five GCSE A to Cs and yet actually achieved at least five A* to C at GCSE. Looking at the Fischer Family Trust value added data, Leeds has a score of about 985, with the top school at 1,012. Peer mentoring, however, scores 1,022, business mentoring 1,017, BME mentoring 1,028 and Junior mentoring 1,045. As one co-ordinator put it, "The average across all mentoring in Leeds is 1,015, which is higher than the top school in Leeds, so what we're saying is that mentoring has an impact in support across a range of different activities and expectations and aspirations."

Even so, Leeds Mentoring also looks to capture qualitative or 'soft' outcomes rather than concentrating on just hard outcomes. As Leeds Mentoring's co-ordinator, Barry Hilton, points out, peer mentoring is in effect 'transitional

mentoring', which needs to be measured through 'soft' outcomes, something that can be done by the children themselves, or through their tutors' observations. Again, the focus is not simply on measuring exam results; as a Leeds Mentoring co-ordinator expressed it, "And that certainly isn't the aim of the programme either. The aim is to get them settled into high school."

Primary Group

For obvious reasons, evaluation and monitoring of primary group activities is informal and *ad hoc*. The Aimhigher central team does issue questionnaires at the end of activities, but these are primarily geared to measuring how the attitudes of participating youngsters have changed.

"We had review meetings at the end of the first year, Year 5, [where] we met all the teachers and we had a kind of fairly informal review meeting with every school," one primary co-ordinator said, "And obviously, at the end of Year 6, I shall go back to all the schools and do that more formally, where we can write these things down, you know, about what we've found. But it's a bit unscientific... There is no really good, scientific way of measuring something like that. It's more about attitude rather than anything else, really."

Fischer Family Trust data

As mentioned above, Fischer Family Trust outcomes are used as a measurement device for Leeds Aimhigher programmes. In particular, they have been used to measure the value-added of the *Reach for A** programme. Recent results have shown that the impact of the programme (per participating student) has been +1.0 grade in science, +0.8 in English language and +0.7 in maths. The Fischer Family Trust value added for 1117 year 11 students who were mentored was 1015 (The Leeds FFT average is 988, the best Leeds school FFT is 1035 and the worst school 949).

National evaluation recognition has also been secured by Leeds. A study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) examined the impact of ten Aimhigher partnerships, including Leeds Aimhigher. The study praised approaches and processes adopted by Leeds and other Aimhigher partnerships. Specifically, it commended actions that improved the attainment, aspirations, motivation and self-esteem of widening participation students (NFER, 2005: 113-114).

Partnership

Partnership forms an important foundation for much of Aimhigher Leeds' success. Aimhigher Co-ordinator Mohsin Zulfiqar is an unequivocal advocate of its impact. "I'm keen on partnership," he said in an interview with the

authors, "I work heavily with different HEIs, I've worked with [professional] bodies as well, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry."

For Mohsin, translating the enormous success of Leeds Mentoring into subject specific partnerships is critical. "We've got a really big peer mentoring programme," he said, "Every year we train up about 800 to 1,000 students from Year 10 to Year 12 to act as buddies, mentors and friends to students lower down the scale."

"I set up a programme called 'Partners in Law', which is a subject -specific mentoring [programme], supporting students who've got aspirations to go into the legal profession." As well as the University of Leeds Law Society, Notre Dame College, Lawnswood and Horsforth high schools, the partnership also includes nine city-based law firms willing to provide work experience.

During the evaluation, other members of the Aimhigher Leeds team also talked about the value and impact of the programme's partnerships. One co-ordinator in particular highlighted the considerable improvement that could take place in participating young people's skills bases, and referred in particular to their presentation skills, and the way in which their employer partners helped foster these. "I've been going in about every term to assess their presentation skills," he said, "and to see those students now from what they were when they started is absolutely fantastic. Their skills have just developed incredibly...there were two students who went to KPMG on internship, and KPMG gave them a laptop, a Blackberry and a mobile 'phone throughout the internship."

Others felt that the impact of partnerships with employers came through enhanced motivation. "As somebody who's worked in business before I've worked in schools, and having been at a lot of events with the kids," one co-ordinator said, "sometimes the contact from the kids with businesses, for example like Construction Week events and team building events, and just an insight into business, I think, also motivates them to do better. To go out into the world of work...that really does help a lot of kids."

Another advantage of partnership working is that it can encourage better 'buy in' from parents. "When we work with...Leeds Met and Education Leeds and Aimhigher...that's what the parents buy into," one co-ordinator said, "we're not single-handedly delivering the projects or programmes, something that he felt reminded parents that one of the objectives of Aimhigher was progression."

Aimhigher's partnership activities in each of its target areas are examined in more detail later in this book, but the underlying philosophy of partnership remains something that is nurtured and promoted by the Aimhigher team centrally.

"The prime mantra that surrounds Aimhigher is that it seeks to improve attainment, aspiration, motivation and self-esteem, and the quality of identification, provision and support in the schools and colleges," one senior management team member said, "And the essence of that has been around partnership."

An FE co-ordinator also highlighted the importance of partnership working for widening provision. "We've recently taken on an additional group from the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Service," she said, "so we're beginning to partner in its broader sense, which really I think is the essence of Aimhigher, not for individual institutions to remain in silos, but...partnership working, to bring added benefits to the young people in Leeds to improve their life chances."

Central co-ordination

Participants did feel that Aimhigher's decision to devolve their central booking system for events out to participating institutions had caused some difficulties. "Whether or not an event goes ahead lies solely with each institution that runs it," one interviewee said, adding that staff illness or other unexpected personnel changes can mean that events are cancelled unexpectedly.

Equally, some co-ordinators felt that communication had become an issue. "And in many cases, because of a teacher's workload, they can't communicate directly...I find I'm to-ing and fro-ing, and then things often don't go ahead because of miscommunication," one said, "so I think when it was centrally organised, to a degree, it was better."

Wedge structure

Although schools in the Wedge structure will tend to have their own specialisms, with perhaps one organising activities around the performing arts, and another around business and enterprise, there is usually a commonality there too. "I suppose the beauty and the flexibility of the Wedge structure," one co-ordinator said, "is that there are some elements of how the wedges are put together that schools have at least some things in common. Not always, but in most instances, yes."

Quantitative outcomes

Although Aimhigher Leeds has been evaluated from the perspective of its impact on individual learners, its impact on young people in general across the city is inevitably important, both in terms of the Central Team's assessment of their own effectiveness, and in terms of reporting to central government and HEFCE. So what kind of impact has Aimhigher Leeds had?

As described throughout this book, Aimhigher Leeds measures itself against many indicators other than entry into higher education; encouraging young people to aspire to their highest potential forms one of its central tenets, whether that means applying for a university place or not. None-the-less, increasing the number of young people who successfully apply for places in higher education institutions remains one of the key objectives of Aimhigher, together with its widening provision mission to encourage greater participation from minority communities.

From these perspectives, the success of Aimhigher Leeds can be demonstrated through quantitative data analysis.