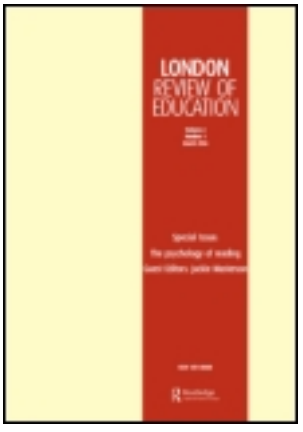

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Raised aspirations and attainment? A review of the impact of Aimhigher (2004–2011) on widening participation in higher education in England

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Aimhigher was discontinued on 31 July 2011. This paper reviews the literature analysing its contribution to widening participation to higher education in the UK. Successes of Aimhigher are considered alongside its challenges; particularly the necessity to situate policy within the diverse demands of 42 areas covering England. These issues are considered in the context of wider contemporary debates concerning the quality of research into widening participation and instruments used to evaluate policy. Four strands of literature are identified and analysed: Aimhigher's impact and evaluation, its effectiveness in targeting beneficiaries, the progression and tracking of students and policy.

Keywords: impact; performativity; research 'new orthodoxy'; evidence-based practice; cause and effect; policy theory

The discontinuation of Coalition government funding for the Aimhigher initiative in July 2011 was the symbolic end of an important New Labour instrument of enhancing social inclusivity through raising educational attainment and aspiration with the purpose of widening participation in higher education. This paper has several purposes in evaluating the contribution made by Aimhigher to this goal. It firstly provides a brief summary of the development of Aimhigher and its aims and priorities. It then positions it within a wider policy and research context, involving a consideration of the consequences for Aimhigher of the link between policy and research. The literature is then considered using four themes of impact and its evaluation, effectiveness in targeting, progression and tracking and finally policy. The majority of the articles and documentation considered relate to the first of these, and this is reflected in the treatment given to this theme. The final section of the paper reflects on lessons from the review in terms of policy and research, particularly in the context of the recent higher education White Paper (DBIS 2011).

Widening participation to higher education, the policy context for Aimhigher, has been central to New Labour policy, especially since 1998 (HEFCE 1998). The rationales for the policy however have been diverse, often reflecting ideological positions, and this has created a degree of confusion, especially when it comes to the evaluation of particular policy interventions such as Aimhigher. For example, widening participation has coincided with a need to upskill the UK workforce to compete in a global economy, and this has led to assertions (Doyle 2003) of competing progressive and utilitarian motives and discourses in widening

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participation policy. McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007) refer to tensions between 'meritocratic' and 'social justice' interpretations, and Gorard et al. (2006, 121) summarise different definitions of widening participation (access, utilitarian and transformative discourses) 'informing different aspects of government policy and interventions'.

Within this fluid and rather fuzzy policy arena the Coalition government has withdrawn funding for Aimhigher (in July 2011), and instigated a new 'framework' for widening participation, which places more responsibility on universities, building on their existing Access Agreements. Such agreements have clouded claims by Aimhigher for the impact of its interventions. In this context this paper provides a review of the literature published on Aimhigher since its inception.

The scope of the review is based on responses to the national call by the Aimhigher Research Network (ARN) in September 2010 for published materials to be uploaded to its website by November 2010. The ARN is a research network based in the Northwest of England with members from all regional universities, further education (FE) colleges and Aimhigher networks and has provided a forum for researchers and practitioners since 2004. The call also went to all Aimhigher Directors across the UK. It was supplemented by a web-search for Aimhigher related published papers and reports since its inception, using tools such as *Web of Knowledge, Ingenta, Connect and Google Scholar*. In total, this provided approximately forty outputs, of five categories: Aimhigher evaluations of impact; government publications on Aimhigher; peer reviewed Journal articles; conference proceedings; and 'think tank' evaluations of Aimhigher.

The articles were coded and analysed to consider patterns and indications of the success or difficulties of this widening participation initiative. The coding was applied to all sources. These codes emerged with the analysis of the literature, and were identified as it was decided particular issues were important or unanticipated issues seemed to become recurring themes. Where themes only emerged in later sources, this required a re-analysis of earlier sources. Overall this was a helpful way of drawing together common themes and divergent perspectives on issues within Aimhigher. In total 42 codes were used, and for ease of analysis were categorised, for example as 'Positives of Aimhigher' (for example, motivates students), 'Negatives of Aimhigher' (for example, targeting – fails to reach certain groups), and 'Perspectives' (for example, pupil perspectives, teacher perspectives).

Aimhigher: aims and approaches to policy delivery

Aimhigher was established to widen participation in higher education, particularly for young people from under-represented groups. It was integrated into a single initiative in 2004, bringing together Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge (established in 2001), and Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression (established in 2003). McCaig, Stevens, and Bowers-Brown (2008, 2) provide an account of the development of Aimhigher, noting the major strategic aim of partnership working at local and sub-regional levels, and hence the small proportion of Aimhigher funding spent on national projects (£7 million between 2004–2006 from a budget of approximately £500 million between 2001 and 2008). Aimhigher has therefore been characterised by a series of localised interventions aimed at potential first generation entrants to higher education. The purpose of the interventions has largely been a combination of attainment and aspiration-raising with target pupils, and owing to policy and funding cycles that require demonstrable results, has mainly focussed on pupils in school years 10–12 (ages 14–16). Typical interventions include: summer school experience on university campuses, master classes, campus visits, guest lectures and mentoring.

This emphasis on local partnerships, 'to create the conditions for clear co-ordination without blanket prescription and with the freedom to create projects that suit local needs'

(Moore & F. Dunworth. 2011, 1) resulted in 42 regional partnerships engaged in situating national policy within locally determined priorities. Even below this level lies a tier of at times contested priorities, evidenced for example by the diversity of the ten boroughs within Greater Manchester Aimhigher. The issue of using such a fine-grained approach to situating policy coincided with a lack of focus on particular targets by HEFCE. Indeed Moore and Dunworth (op. cit.) imply the negotiated and emergent nature of the partnership processes and priorities fed into dialogues with HEFCE in a process of 'continuous consultation' leading to the clearer and more quantifiable targets for Aimhigher partnerships (HEFCE 2008). Criteria for evaluating Aimhigher impact have therefore been crystallised and have focussed priorities at local and regional levels mainly since then.

The risk of such a fine-grained approach to respecting 'localised complexity' (Ball 1993, 10) is the evaluation of impact nationally across such a diverse terrain. Over the period of Aimhigher's existence target group participation and progression increased (Corver 2010). However, the challenge for Aimhigher is making claims in contributing to these developments; a task made even more difficult at local levels experiencing multiple interventions, for example through Aimhigher, FE College and university initiatives (often competing initiatives in the same locality with the blurring of 'participation' and 'recruitment' imperatives).

Aimhigher: policy and widening participation research contexts

Aimhigher was a key policy instrument in New Labour's drive to increase participation rates in Higher Education (HE) up to 50% by 2010. Demands for evidence of Aimhigher's impact naturally followed from the use of public funding and the prevalence of 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984) in policy, whereby knowledge, practice and resources are legitimated through the delivery of outputs. However, the 'impact' of Aimhigher needs to be seen within debates around 'evidence' and particularly the contested area of 'evidence-based practice' throughout the whole of New Labour's pragmatic, but possibly reductive preoccupation with 'what works' (Ball 2008a, 87; Hodkinson 2008), continued and indeed 'ratcheted up' (Ball 2008b) under the Coalition government with its drive to cut public spending.

The prevalence of performativity has coincided with and reinforces what Hodkinson (2004, 10–11) terms a 'new orthodoxy' of mainly quantitative educational research, the authority of which is premised on 'the assumption that method can ensure objectivity'. The majority of the research into widening participation and especially Aimhigher is, however, qualitative. Yet 'evidence-based' policy-making and practice, Hodkinson claims, is 'contested and controversial... a partisan approach masquerading as a universal truth' (op cit.). Hodkinson's relativistic position on evidence contrasts with Gorard et al's (2006) largely 'new orthodox' critique of research on publicly funded interventions to widen participation in HE that has had consequences for Aimhigher.

Their generalised criticisms of that largely qualitative research include lack of rigour, unclear research questions, questionable methods, lack of control or comparator groups, limited data and analysis and unjustifiable conclusions and claims making in many of the reports. However, in also dismissing a valid range of generalised qualitative research methods (for example practitioner research or single case studies) as well as their actual deployment in particular contexts, they essentially provide an example of the discourse and 'socio-politics of evidence-based' practice, of which Clegg (2005, 146) claimed the 'current discursive location at the core of New Labour thinking is not the only one available'. Clegg also called for a 'greater clarity about the epistemological as well as the socio-political roots of these debates and their methodological consequences' (146).

Such debates illustrate the link between policy funding decisions and narrow quantifiable metrics of 'evidence', and indeed might call into question the integrity of such approaches. While broadly acknowledging Gorard et al's (2006) position on research quality (and we will return to this later), their critique of widening participation research has left a legacy that at worst undermines potentially important and valid interventions, the impact of which cannot be captured in the simple linear causal terms that satisfy their epistemological position. In evaluating issues of impact of Aimhigher from the literature, we will attempt to offer a broader perspective.

Two issues in particular are problematic, and these demonstrate why, despite the positive contributions we will identify in the literature, it is hard to ascertain the true impact of Aimhigher. The first is the challenge of actually evidencing impact on widening participation. The second is evaluating its success in making access more equitable: the issue of social justice. Over the past decade participation in higher education has widened and increased to the relative benefit of Aimhigher target groups (Corver 2010), but beyond the positive and largely local success stories that we will illustrate, some critics believe Aimhigher's contribution is unclear. For example, Emmerson, Frayne, McNally, and Silva (2006, 2) claim that whilst the initiative tended to help disadvantaged children 'the policy did not have a positive and statistically significant effect on further/higher education participation rates (and educational attainments) for young children'.

Morris and Golden (2005, iii) support these findings, suggesting a lack of evidence that experience of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge influenced decisions about progressing to higher education. They observed that those in Year 10 not considering university responded negatively again in Year 11, despite experiencing Aimhigher interventions. It might have been too early to tell what effect these activities were having. Alternatively, Gorard et al. (2006) stress the need to address not only wider social issues in disengagement with education, but also to ensure that policies provide a lifecourse dimension, starting early in a child's educational experience. The pressure on Aimhigher to demonstrate results on policy investment over short-term cycles render such a position difficult.

Aimhigher also faced a second challenge that they found equally difficult to overcome: the issue of social justice. In many respects this issue is related to the first. It addresses HEFCE's (2007) claim that 'widening participation is vital for both social justice and... improving economic competitiveness'. However, whilst Aimhigher provides positive examples, it cannot provide a consistent body of evidence (in 'new orthodox' terms) which shows target pupils progressing into higher education as a direct result of its interventions, largely because of competing or parallel schemes and the fact that specific targets and ways of measuring impact were not built in sufficiently from the start.

This does not mean that social injustice was not tackled. Of course issues of social injustice could never be completely resolved by Aimhigher; it was simply one intervention in New Labour's 'Third Way' project. The main proponents of this critique present it as 'friendly fire' rather than a full frontal attack on 'methodological or ideological grounds' (McCaig and Bowers-Brown 2007). There is no reason to doubt this, as in other publications they have praised Aimhigher and have been some of the biggest champions of its 'major role in widening participation' (McCaig, T. Bowers-Brown, & L. Harvey. 2006, ii). In fact, McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007, 16)

> . . . conclude that Aimhigher fails to fulfil its potential to be a force for social justice, in part because of a fundamental weakness in the concept of Aimhigher, and in part because of a structural weakness in the operations of Aimhigher 'partnerships'.

However, the number of outputs of the Aimhigher partnerships cannot be questioned. Moore and Dunworth (2011) quantify these for the academic year 2009–2010 as a total of 54,544 events, 2,226,580 individual contacts (it is acknowledged by the authors many participants had more than one contact) and 4850 national 'road shows' for 70,000 learners. Clearly the challenge for such interventions is impact and its evaluation. This will be the first and most important of the themes we consider in the review of the literature. Targeting, progression and tracking and policy will follow subsequently.

Perspectives from the literature

Evaluation of the impact of Aimhigher

A typical typology of interventions featured on the websites of all 42 Aimhigher sub-regional organisations, with emphasis and priority determined locally by Area Steering Groups influenced by both need and demand. There are examples from the literature that, whilst not providing a definitive solution to the challenge of widening participation, nevertheless suggest progress in terms of impact. This section firstly considers this literature and balances this with some comment based on the challenges and unanswered questions of Aimhigher's impact.

Aimhigher interventions have given young people an opportunity to learn more about higher education (Hatt, Baxter, and Tate 2005, 2007). Sub-regional planning and resource allocation has resulted in them being purposefully varied so that as many individuals as possible can experience them (EKOS 2007, 70–96). The activities have involved an extension of the curriculum by providing support and advice beyond that already received. These took the form of specifically tailored lessons encouraging students to consider the possibility of remaining in education post-18. However, whilst important in establishing 'first contact' with many students, these activities were not typically highlighted in the literature as having the most impact.

Once students had registered an interest in continuing into higher education, two subsequent categories of activity were deemed much more effective. The first of these is the summer school (Ireland, Golden, and Morris 2006). Similarly, Hatt, Baxter, and Tate (2009, 333) claim that summer schools are the most important widening participation activity, and that for many young people provide a 'turning point' in their attitudes towards higher education. The impact of summer schools in this process is highlighted throughout the literature and is one of the most positive stories (see also Pennell, West, and Hind 2005; The Focus Group 2010).

Another activity that builds upon the original classroom event are conferences, at which students can discuss the possibility of (and obstacles to) enrolling upon a degree course. The Aimhigher Health Strand contains an example in which young people were encouraged to consider progression into higher education for a career in health or social care. At a conference designed specifically to consider these issues the evaluations indicated nearly half of all students were positively influenced to consider health care or social work as career options (Aimhigher South East 2010). Such literature, however, can be said to be focusing on the evaluations of events rather than on the actual progression of students to higher education, and this is Gorard et al's (2006) criticism. In addition, the integration of undergraduates into many of these events also provided a positive experience. Students provided a trustworthy and influential voice, engaging individuals in the benefits of staying in education whilst alleviating their fears through sharing experiences and answering questions.

Other activities took place primarily *outside* the traditional classroom setting. For example residential visits gave students opportunities to visit a university campus, and these helped those struggling to make a decision about progression choices. In a study of Aimhigher activities those involved with residential visits, especially a long way from home,

were most satisfied (EKOS 2007, 3). Some found these 'inspiring and exciting' and ultimately they made a 'big difference' in decision-making, determining which university they would apply to (Focus Group 2010, 8).

One-on-one mentoring was demonstrated to have substantial impact. This allowed for an individualised service through which students could assist those needing more guidance. Morris and Golden (2005, vi) suggest this was especially important for those lacking in confidence to participate in summer schools or fully engage in activities associated with campus visits. Rogers (2009, 112) endorses this, suggesting that these individuals not only helped students with tasks like filling in forms and improving study skills; on numerous occasions they also provided 'psycho-social' support during a period of pressure and change in teenagers' lives. Students appreciated and benefited from a level of 'personal investment' in a quite different and more extensive way than any other Aimhigher activity. In fact, the only criticism of mentoring found in the literature (Rogers 2009, 112; The Focus Group 2010, 18–19) was that it needed to be more extensive. Although these activities had limitations, largely brought about by the structures in which they were being delivered, overall they were deemed a positive characteristic of the Aimhigher initiative. They provided space and experience for students facilitating more informed decision-making.

Many of the Aimhigher activities outlined above were perceived to be impacting on applications, and widening participation. In a national evaluation McCaig et al. (2006, v) found that 35% of HEI's attributed increased applications to their institutions to the impact of Aimhigher activities. The number was lower (23%) for students on vocational routes but this still demonstrates a perceived impact. In addition local evidence provided support for these claims. Various reports (Aimhigher Greater Manchester 2010; Aimhigher London North 2009a) claim that widening participation activities have led to a steady increase in applications to higher education. Indeed, Morris and Golden (2005, 2), in their local analysis of Aimhigher Excellence Challenge, suggest 'Statistically significant associations were identified between policy interventions [Aimhigher activities] and pupil aspirations to higher education'. The value of this evidence and whether these students would have progressed without these interventions will be discussed in more detail in the discussion on targeting.

Aimhigher also claims to demonstrate an impact in contributing to raising awareness, aspirations and confidence. Effectively this is a multi-stage process beginning with raising awareness about the possibility of progressing to university. Several studies highlighted this aspect (see McCaig et al. 2006; HEFCE 2006) with a local survey of school staff suggesting activities had raised awareness in no less than 29% of the Aimhigher cohort (Aimhigher Greater Manchester 2009). For such students raising awareness was the first step on what Hatt et al. (2009, 342) call the 'aspiration stairway'. The relevance of this concept will be considered later in the paper, but the authors apply it to explain the phased engagement by young people with processes of progression into higher education. These authors had expressed previously a similar satisfaction with the Aimhigher initiative: 'the picture is overwhelmingly positive, with a high level of agreement that the programme has raised aspirations and awareness' (Hatt, Baxter, and Tate 2008, 136).

By raising aspirations and awareness it is claimed other 'psycho social' benefits such as improved confidence can follow (for example, Rogers 2009). These benefits are at least associated by young people with their experience of Aimhigher activities such as mentoring and summer schools.

Aimhigher has been credited with raising academic attainment within schools by providing goals and enhancing confidence. Morris and Golden (2005) supported these claims showing a statistically significant link between involvement in Aimhigher activities and performance in GCSE examinations. Hatt, Baxter, and Tate (2007, 298) stop short of

attributing the rise in GCSE results solely to Aimhigher partnerships, which they claim would be 'overambitious', but they do claim that the partnerships have worked with schools 'to contribute to the rising trend in GCSE results'. They highlight the opportunity for students to use university facilities in order to enhance their subject knowledge as particularly helpful and effective interventions.

Aimhigher also impacted at institutional, organisational and group levels by enabling and encouraging collaboration. In a national evaluation of Aimhigher it was found that 87% of higher education institutions and 64% of further education colleges were working with a greater number of secondary schools as a result of Aimhigher (McCaig et al. 2006, iii). It was also noted that for similar reasons 80% of work-based learning providers collaborated with schools to support learning (ibid., iii).

Evidence of positive impact of Aimhigher in the literature points to at least correlations with improved attainment and aspiration-raising. However, the successes of Aimhigher impact have to be balanced with the challenges and unanswered questions which we believe can also teach academics, practitioners and politicians about how widening participation initiatives might be more effectively organised. For example, the diversity of the activities may be interpreted as both a strength and a weakness of Aimhigher. To illustrate, before championing its 'major role in widening participation', McCaig et al. (2006, iii) suggest that Aimhigher's 'potential is sometimes dissipated by the diverse nature of the activities to which it is linked'. A related problem is a potential duplication of activities by other bodies committed to widening participation. The demise of Aimhigher's area co-ordinating function after 2011 will exacerbate this issue. As Hatt et al. (2007, 286) suggest, 'Aimhigher does not work in isolation', it works with local authorities, learning networks and the schools improvement programme as well as other organisations. This collaborative approach causes problems in evaluating impact. It 'enables the programme to avoid duplication and get good value for money, but at the same time it makes it impossible to disentangle the impact of Aimhigher from other funding streams' (ibid.).

Therefore we can only consider the correlational *contribution* of Aimhigher to widening participation through its impact on performance in schools, application rates to higher education and to a limited degree, social class. There is also a gap in the literature on the impact of Aimhigher on progression rates of lower socio-economic groups' progression to more elite universities. Furthermore the inevitably local character of the evidence produced is abundant in the widening participation literature (according to Gorard et al. 2006), but it is not entirely clear how robust or generalisable it is. Ultimately, this means that much of the literature is limited and context-specific in its applicability and this undermines efforts to show what Aimhigher has actually achieved. An alternative perspective on this is that such localised embedding of policy is positive, and is what makes it more effective and performative. This will be considered in the final section of the paper.

Effectiveness of targeting

A further criticism of Aimhigher is that it was too often targeted incorrectly. This can be related to the lack of specificity on targeting until the HEFCE directive in 2008. Morris and Golden (2005, iv) suggest that access to Aimhigher by certain groups (such as Bangladeshi and Indian children) was particularly low. Also too often it attracted students who would have continued on to higher education anyway rather than those disinclined to do so. Supporting this claim a study commissioned by Aimhigher Greater Manchester also suggests that 'almost all undergraduates [in the groups they analysed] had already decided to go to university before taking part in Aimhigher' (The Focus Group 2010, 14).

Therefore as positive as the activities were in providing information and raising aspirations, the initiative, at least up to 2008, was not consistently impacting on 'hard to reach' target cohorts who were at least uncertain about higher education. There is positive targeting, of course, and one such group has been disabled students. For example, residential visits were very helpful for disabled students. The London North Disability Programme (2009) suggests that Aimhigher made a difference for these individuals, allowing them to experience 'campus life'.

Aimhigher might have played a valuable role in guiding young people into higher education for those already committed, and those inclined but uncertain. Targeting the 'right' individuals was not a simple process, however. Hatt, Baxter and Tate (2005, 344–5) discuss the difficulties of determining the best criteria for selecting individuals. They highlight problems with using class, socio-economic background, parental income, parental experience with higher education and geographic location, as each of them can still lead to the wrong people being targeted. They also noted that using sensitive measures like income and socioeconomic background 'risks the alienation of intended beneficiaries', stigmatising them and making them less willing to participate (op cit., p. 344).

This does not mean that careful targeting could not occur, but to widen participation and tackle social injustice, work has to be done to ensure that the right people are involved. In mitigation Aimhigher has been faced with providing evidence of quick returns on policy and spending. Its overriding focus on Years 10–12 has reinforced short term perspectives, and it should not necessarily be judged for limitations in widening participation policies needed to relate to 'quality of life' and 'lifecourse' issues that, as Gorard et al. (2006, 27) assert, are 'key to our understanding of disengagement rather than participation'. It is also the case that Aimhigher coincided with a raft of new initiatives on the school sector resulting in a degree of initiative overload. In spite of this a report by the NFER for HEFCE (Morris, Rutt, and Mehta 2009) did demonstrate that over the life of Aimhigher it contributed to a modestly improved participation in higher education by disadvantaged groups.

Progression tracking

The ineffectiveness or absence of adequate systems for tracking pupils' progression after involvement with Aimhigher interventions has caused problems in evaluating their impact. Aimhigher activities may be actually making a difference in the way that young people think about higher education, but this may remain unknown and unrecorded in any statistically relevant or applicable way. Passy, Morris, and Waldman (2009, 7) suggest that this was not simply a case of Aimhigher lacking the forethought to track individuals. In their analysis, 'interviewees reported a number of external challenges that impact upon their ability to set up, manage and sustain an effective system of data collection'.

One challenge is that access to UCAS and HESA data is expensive and complex. Additionally, not all institutions monitored attendance at events, and those who change institutions, particularly at 16, are difficult to track. There is no shortage of recommendations in the literature, therefore, for the proper recording, storing and exchange of data. For example, Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009, iii) recommends that Aimhigher: 'develop systems for the consistent tracking of learners. A starting point would be the systematic recording of UCAS applications and acceptances on a college-wide individual learner record system'.

Systems of this kind are needed to help both managers and researchers to fully understand the impact of Aimhigher and any future initiatives of this kind. Gaps in this important data, compounded by structural difficulties in data systems across sectors and at key student progression points, as well as the late focusing of targets for Aimhigher by HEFCE (2008)

have exacerbated this problem. A result is Aimhigher, as a single agency, has difficulties showing the extent to which it has widened participation and contributed to improvements in social justice.

Government policy and Aimhigher

Government policy has had a large impact on the effectiveness of Aimhigher. In fact, this is one of the key reasons that McCaig and Bowers-Brown (2007, 16) cite for its failure to achieve the ambitious goal of social justice. They claim:

> Aimhigher suffers from confusion at the heart of government widening participation policy: it is expected to both deliver increased participation and widen access to higher education. Yet the pre 92 universities engage only to the extent of widening participation by offering a limited number of places to the academically gifted while post 92s, though engaging in valuable developmental work on vocational pathways into higher education and innovative curricula, merely provide more educated workers for the labour market. Given this set of circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that Aimhigher fails to live up to its social justice potential.

This division has been reinforced and potentially further widened by the 2011 White Paper with its outcomes of differential fees and 'core' and 'margin' funding methodologies (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2011).

Government policy has at times obstructed Aimhigher objectives. The former tends to emphasise the economic utility of higher education, highlighting the instrumental benefits of a better educated workforce. Aimhigher tends to emphasise the emancipatory benefits of higher education, both for the individual and the wider society. However, the needs of the economy and the needs of individuals can sometimes conflict, resulting in a tension which is reflected in certain unfulfilled ambitions of Aimhigher. An example is the uncertainty over its continued funding. This was one of the most commonly cited challenges in the literature (Passy, Morris, and Waldman 2009; Pennel, West, and Hind 2005). Although it may have a positive side effect of focussing targeting and selection on those that need help most, managing a project of this kind with little long-term security almost certainly diminishes its impact.

It is worth ending this section by emphasising the combined effect of the challenges which Aimhigher faced when trying to widen participation. Individually the challenges outlined above would be difficult to overcome but when considered collectively, it is more understandable why Aimhigher experienced problems alongside its successes. It is also clearer why we cannot accurately demonstrate, in the narrower prescriptions of evidence asserted by critics such as Gorard et al. (2006), how Aimhigher as a single intervention has widened participation, nor why its contribution to greater levels of social justice can be verified in those terms. Nevertheless, these challenges need to be balanced against the positive messages also outlined. In the final section we reflect on the research overall, and consider it from two perspectives: issues of validity in assessing impact within the wider debates taking place around educational research, and finally from a policy theory view we suggest an alternative perspective on evaluating Aimhigher's contribution to widening participation.

Reflections on the status of the research from a policy theory perspective

Gorard et al's (2006) generalised criticism of the research into widening participation is acknowledged earlier in the paper, tempered by Clegg's (2005, 146) critique of the 'socio-politics' of 'evidence-based practice'. However, reviewing the literature indicates the difficulty and complexity of attempting to attribute simplistic cause and effect responses to

specific interventions, particularly in the case of Aimhigher. This is made even more complex when 'widening participation' is interpreted and prioritised in different ways, as discussed in the introduction to this paper.

Gorard et al's (2006) 'new orthodox' concerns are arguably excluding, and indeed contradictory. For example the first recommendation of their review asserts: 'if we genuinely wish to know how to widen participation then a series of controlled trials and design experiments each based only on one intervention should be conducted' (op cit., 139).

Yet earlier in the review in summarising 'Pre-entry suites of activities for school students' (34–5), they conclude:

> The findings suggest that the most effective strategies in raising attainment and increasing pupils' aspirations are those that are part of an ongoing programme of events... Where more in-depth research has been undertaken, the evidence suggests that it is not possible to identify specific causes and effects of interventions.

This is consistent with our review of the Aimhigher literature. In stressing the importance throughout their review of 'lifecourse' and learning identities and trajectories there is a recognition of the multi-layered, reinforcing and cumulative complexity of the issues affecting engagement with education (op cit., 27). Yet their prescriptive and rather reductive methodological position leads Gorard et al to assert: 'In the absence of clear evidence about what works to widen participation, it is difficult to justify using public money for any unwarranted intervention, policy or practice' (op cit., 139).

The power of this narrow but overstated and epistemologically contested conclusion, linked to public funding, undermines their broader critique of widening participation research, and exposes it to accusations of capture within discourses of performativity. Indeed it might be accused of presenting an example of:

> ... an orthodoxy of research practice... intolerance... of the capacity to suggest alternative indicators of validity of research to critics who try to import positivistic assumptions into territory where that language is not spoken. (Ozga 2000, 130)

There are of course alternatives to this position. Their dismissal of 'the often fruitless nature of reflexive research' (op. cit., 144) associated with practitioner research, for example, is unreasonable based on their (justified) criticism of the actual examples they examine. The use of practitioner research and single case studies needs to be rigorous, but they are perfectly valid modes of enquiry if linked to an extended interpretive repertoire to read empirical material in a variety of critical ways. Long established examples of this approach from educational research include Watson (1996), Tierney (1993), Fairclough (1993) and Alvesson (1993). This position does not invalidate Gorard et al's critiques of the actual examples of research that they examine. It does, however, illustrate that alternative research perspectives if rigorously applied, and using appropriate theoretical analysis, have claims to validity.

One such perspective is rooted in the phenomenological underpinnings of certain policy theory analyses. Aimhigher consists of 42 local or sub-regional partnerships, each operating within imperatives to situate policy as perceived within their localities (certainly up to 2008). Such an operation does not easily lend itself to narrow quantifiable metrics. In the north west, for example, Greater Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Lancashire have hugely differing policy topographies. Drilling down further, within Greater Manchester there are wide differences in the needs and priorities of its ten individual boroughs. Ball (1993) uses the term 'text' in moving from generalised, espoused policy 'discourse' to its positioning and

implementation within the needs and affordances of particular contexts, usually determined by a need to deal with 'localised complexity' (op cit., 10).

However, the emphasis in using these terms is not dichotomous, but rather relational (after Henry 1993 and Ozga 2000) and 'intertextual' (Fairclough 1992). Within the framework of the policy discourse, the outcomes have to be interpreted, prioritised and 'textually' enacted. Ball makes his distinction to accommodate this localised complexity in his position on policy implementation. Aimhigher is policy driven, and the localised implementation is problematic, and not linear. Thus: 'the enactment of texts relies on things like commitment, understanding, capability, resources, practical limitations, co-operation, and (importantly) intertextual compatibility' (Ball 1993, 13).

Policy theory provides a richer theoretical dimension, and illustrates the complexities in capturing data that allows for (contested) causal analyses of impact. There is a need for research instruments that allow for analysis of single interventions where they can be isolated and traced, but that also facilitate comparison, and see such interventions as cumulative and contributions, as advocated by Hatt et al's (2009) 'aspiration stairway' (a graduated taxonomic process of decision making about progression to higher education). However, the impact of policies such as Aimhigher and broader widening participation interventions, have been limited by a lack of understanding of the constraints facing the potential beneficiaries of such policies. It is this that leads Reay, David, and Ball (2005, 106) to assert that widening participation is both 'under-researched and under-theorised', resulting in it to date being 'all about grand designs and inadequate realisations' (107).

The 'grand designs' have been recently continued with the 2011 White Paper, purporting to centre 'Students at the Heart of the System' (DBIS 2011). This essentially coincided with the end of Aimhigher, with the justification by the Coalition government that the £78 million per annum for Aimhigher was to be replaced by £150 million for the National Scholarship Programme. Alongside the outreach work within Access Agreements required by OFFA, this is presented as a more comprehensive package. Widening participation policy is moving discursively from inclusivity to selectivity, with an emphasis on meritocracy (McCaig and Bowers-Brown 2007) for the elite universities chasing unrestricted numbers of candidates holding AAB A level grades, and resulting in a mixed or even a segregated market with restricted and more utilitarian choices for lower socio-economic group students. Indeed, Thompson and Bekhradnia (2011, 10) assert that social mobility will be an 'unintended victim' of the White Paper's proposals, with the new methods of resource allocation 'likely to reinforce relative disadvantage rather than remove it'.

A further consequence will be the demise of sub-regional collaborative infrastructures set up by Aimhigher, which offered a degree of objective guidance for learners about progression choices. Interestingly, this has been recognised recently in Birmingham, with the four universities within the city and its region having set up a partnership to replicate the Aimhigher function. Ironically this partnership, the Birmingham and Solihull Aimhigher, was opened on October 2011 by Simon Hughes, the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats with the endorsement:

> I believe the Birmingham model is significant in that it has proudly retained the Aimhigher brand. With this come the values and legacy of the hard work which has inspired a generation of young people to believe that a university education was the right option for them. (University of Birmingham 2011)

The impact of Aimhigher has been hard to measure in narrow, macro cause and effect terms. Its success has been localised and cumulative – a reflection of effective delivery in

diverse local policy landscapes with often differing social and educational priorities. Its challenges, including dealing with changed policy priorities, have also been cumulative in their effects and, in many cases, have limited the potential of this initiative to demonstrate its impact in terms of the narrow metrics used by policy makers in assessing performance. This is not to diminish its actual impact at local and sub-regional levels.

If Aimhigher were to be redesigned and re-launched on a wider scale than the Birmingham initiative there is an argument for the positive aspects outlined in this paper to be further developed. A key issue however, is how the challenges need to be addressed. Linking widening participation policy to 'selecting' universities' OFFA targets to justify charging maximum fees does not inspire optimism. There needs to be a wider role for OFFA in this – rigorously evaluating Access Agreements and the co-ordinated analysis of outcomes to inform emerging policy. As Reay et al. (2005) assert, the whole area needs to be understood more fully, defined more clearly and for policy and interventions to be more effective they need to be informed by a range of high quality research involving an inclusive methodological vision and a rich theoretical tapestry.

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