

Future of Aimhigher: response form for comments

Please complete, and e-mail to aimhigher@hefce.ac.uk by midday on **Monday 27 June 2005**.

In the interests of transparency, and in the spirit of the Freedom of Information Act, we will make all responses publicly available, unless we consider that there is a risk that they might breach legislation. Responses will be anonymous.

Name:Lesley Gannon, Head of Widening Participation.....

☐ Response on behalf of the following group or organisation:

.....The University of Cambridge

Response template

Section 1: The changing context: schools, further, and higher education

- a. What is the distinctive contribution of Aimhigher in the new context? To what extent is it still an important part of the widening participation landscape?

On a regional level, Aimhigher's distinctive contribution should be to continue to bring all sectors together to agree strategies best to serve the needs of their local area/region.

However, the proposed changes still do little to address the issue of the role of nationally recruiting/selective HEIs – especially in areas with few other providers of HE.

- b. Given the new funding arrangements, what are the risks and opportunities for partnerships? How great are they?

Allocating funds to schools rather than to Aimhigher could result in the development of closer working relationships between stakeholders (facilitated by Aimhigher) to ensure that the Outreach activities on offer meet the specific learning needs of schools/colleges and their learners. This, however, assumes that all schools/colleges will choose to use their funding to 'buy in' Aimhigher activities. As schools do not have to report on how their funding has been used to establish links with HE, we remain unconvinced that schools, with so many demands on their resources, will choose to use their funding allocation in this way.

We are also concerned about the possible development of an 'outreach market' with HEIs and private consultants 'competing' and activities being chosen by cost rather than quality and/or relevance.

As with other Russell Group Universities we are concerned too that the Higher Education Funding Council is using higher education monies to 'prop up' other funding councils and activity in other sectors. We do not agree that this is an appropriate use of the funding. It is inappropriate for Universities to have responsibility for progression and progression targets: these should be the responsibility of schools and colleges, through a common methodology, and will require greater joined-up thinking across the school and FE sectors than we have seen hitherto. HEIs should, of course, continue to support schools and colleges in these efforts in the many ways they do already.

- c. Can Aimhigher develop a successful 'brokering' role, bringing different programmes and initiatives together?

Aimhigher will be able to act as a successful broker only if it maintains its credibility with all sectors, rather than focusing on pockets of activity.

Section 2: Funding

- d. Do you agree that regional forums should advise us on the appropriate distribution of overall funding between areas and regionally-led programmes, with a strong steer that underlines the importance of regions?

Regional forums are important within the overall structure of Aimhigher and would seem to be the logical place for local/regional discussions to develop. However, we support the Russell Group response to this consultation that nationally recruiting institutions, such as Cambridge, whose widening participation strategies embrace not only England but the UK as a whole, may find it more difficult to work with partners under Aimhigher if focus is restricted to the local area/region. We believe that it is part of our social responsibility to increase and widen participation in higher education. We are working hard to ensure that those with the ability and potential to succeed in higher education have the opportunity to do so regardless of background, and we are involved, both through our Faculties and Departments and Colleges, in working nationally as well as locally. If more emphasis is to be given to regional forums, clear lines of communication between all stakeholders must be in place. These should include systems for ensuring stakeholders are informed of national developments, examples of good practice from other regions and regular updates from their own region. It is also essential that the perspectives of all HEIs are represented at these forums.

- e. What funding should be earmarked for the summer school programme?

Cambridge welcomes the commitment to continue funding summer school activity. In line with the Russell Group, we would strongly resist any suggestion that the regions should decide whether this should (or should not) continue. We would also like to continue specialist Summer Schools, which have proved popular with students and have been highly valued. We would, however, welcome a separate debate regarding the administration of the Summer Schools and the balance between national, regional and local administration. We are keen to start planning for our Specialist Summer Schools for 2006 but are concerned as to how funding for these, if any, could be accessed.

- f. Should we use the same formula for distributing partnership funds as HEFCE uses to distribute the widening access allocation (that is, on the basis of a combination of measures – HE participation for young people and average educational attainment for mature and part-time learners)? Should we explore the scope for smoothing any significant fluctuations in the way funding is distributed?

In light of the outcomes of this consultation, the University of Cambridge may need to revisit its Access Agreement, in particular the outreach element. Statements were submitted on the basis of the continuation of Aimhigher funding as specified last year, and our priorities will need to be re-assessed in light of Aimhigher funding reductions. The University also feels it is disingenuous to link the income from top-up fees with the changes to Aimhigher (as stated in the foreword) as the additional income was promised on the basis of investment in higher education more generally.

- g. Do you agree that LEAs should be able to hold back funds in the way described in order to continue to employ Aimhigher (formerly Excellence challenge) co-ordinators?

For an effective national Aimhigher network to be established, it is vital that key personnel are retained. Aimhigher co-ordinators in schools/colleges are the obvious choice. However, they will need to work more closely with the recently appointed Area Aimhigher co-ordinators.

Section 3: Proposed revised guidance for partnerships

- h. Should the aims and objectives of the programme give greater weight to work with mature and part-time learners, and with work-based and vocational learners more generally whatever age bracket they fall into?

As mentioned above, for Aimhigher to remain credible with all sectors, it should avoid over-emphasis on work-based learning and vocational pathways. Restricting focus to these areas may result in Aimhigher activities losing relevance and currency with research-led institutions. An over-emphasis on vocational pathways and work-based learning may also result in Aimhigher ceasing to serve the needs of many young people.

However, focus on under-represented groups is welcome. Mature students are particularly significant in this context as they are often those learners who did not have access to the range of support initiatives now available to standard age learners.

- i. How can we use Aimhigher to support the development of provision for gifted and talented pupils?

For Aimhigher to effectively serve the needs of gifted and talented students, it is essential that schools/colleges are encouraged to work nationally as well as regionally and to develop links with a wide range of HEIs, thus ensuring that appropriate provision is available for their learners. For that reason, Cambridge welcomes the funding of national initiatives for gifted and talented students from groups currently under-represented in Higher Education.

- j. Do we need to make any changes to the guidance we provide on management and governance structures of Aimhigher?

The proposed changes to Aimhigher present an opportunity to provide more detailed guidance (and requirements) for the governance of the Regional Forum and Area Steering Groups; indeed this will be necessary with the limited funding available to militate against expensive bureaucratic structures.

- k. Is the structure of Aimhigher broadly right, that is a National Partnership Board, Regional Partnership Boards, and area and regional organisation?

The structure has had little time as yet to bed in. However, a key area for development is the amount of repetition of activity in the system, with key personnel forced to attend multiple meetings covering the same ground. This repetition must be eliminated to ensure continued participation by key decision-makers from all institutions.

Additional comments