

# A rough guide to working in parTnership

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special thanks to Mary Brittain, Philip Burch,  
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# Foreword & acknowledgements

Aimhigher is the national campaign to increase the participation of young people in higher education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This guide was funded by Aimhigher East Midlands which, in its strategic plan, recognised the critical importance of working in partnership with others.

The contributors are committed to making an impact on the prospects of young people in the East Midlands. Their tasks include finding ways of ensuring that alternative talents are acknowledged, encouraging work-based apprentices to progress, enhancing the achievements of borderline pupils and addressing the challenges faced by young people in inner city and isolated rural areas. Their success depends on working in partnership with others. The factors that influence the achievement and progression of young people are many and interconnected. In addressing them, those working for Aimhigher require not only considerable commitment but also ingenuity, innovation and a range of practical and political skills.

The guide was compiled through a series of meetings of the Aimhigher East Midlands area co-ordinators and interviews with other contributors. The aim was to facilitate full and open reflection on the challenges of working in partnership, and an important pre-requisite was the assurance of confidentiality. For this reason, in most cases the quotations used have not been attributed. Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that none of the contributors are presenting themselves as 'experts.' Through four years of making partnerships to improve the prospects of young people, Aimhigher has tested approaches and honed collaborative skills that may prove invaluable for individuals and organisations to thrive in the future. However, all involved stressed that with political context, funding, organisations and personalities continually evolving and interrelating in dynamic and complex ways, there can only ever be a 'rough guide' to working in partnership.' Nevertheless our contributors have told their stories so that others may benefit from their experiences, and all deserve warm thanks for their generous contributions.

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**East Midlands' Aimhigher area co-ordinators** - Mary Brittain, Nottinghamshire, Philip Burch, Northamptonshire, Neil Stock, Leicestershire, Kryssy Hartley, Derbyshire, Sue Knight, Lincolnshire and Rutland.

**and many others whose reflections contributed to the case studies and enriched the guide**

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*'Raising attainment and increasing progression to higher education is challenging enough without being "honest broker" or "professional lubricant" to a host of individuals, organisations and agencies ....'*

# 1. Introduction

*'Aimhigher needs to make a distinctive contribution.....Effective partnership working will, we believe, be an essential precondition to added value because effective co-ordination fosters important synergies, and because a collaborative forum such as Aimhigher can play a strategic role in bringing separate streams of activity together.'*  
(HEFCE Aimhigher: funding for 2006-08 and future of the programme)

The publication of HEFCE's guidance on the future of Aimhigher, made clear that aiding collaboration and partnership was seen as its primary role. This perception was underlined in March 2006 by release of HEFCE's strategic plan 2006-11 which renewed commitment to Aimhigher stating:

*'We will continue to provide funding to Aimhigher.....Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships which break down the barriers which institutions and systems can unwittingly create for learners'.*

But what is 'effective partnership working'? What approaches and skills are required for Aimhigher people to 'play a strategic role in bringing separate streams of activity together'? Some might argue that raising attainment and increasing progression to higher education is challenging enough without playing the role of 'honest broker' or 'professional lubricant' to a host of individuals, organisations and agencies.

The compilation of *a rough guide* was suggested by Mary Brittain, Director of Aimhigher Nottinghamshire. The idea was for the five East Midlands area co-ordinators to share experiences, to identify some common themes, and to begin to frame some 'rough guidance' that might be helpful to others. This approach acknowledged that no two situations are the same. Nothing is fixed. The political context, funding, organisations, personalities – all are dynamic and continually evolving. There can be no single 'right way' to approach working in partnership.

Despite this, the co-ordinators were able to provide each other with suggestions, thoughts, ideas, materials and resources and, at times, the simple reassurance of shared experience was enough.

The co-ordinators suggested the case studies, one from each area, and guided the writer to research materials to illustrate common themes. Additional individual interviews were conducted with other experienced partnership managers, including some from outside higher education. None of those involved were presenting themselves as experts, but they hoped that reflecting on their experiences might suggest some useful ways forward for others. The intention therefore is for the 'rough guide' to complement more detailed guides and research into partnership working; to signpost to useful resources, and to provide the sort of information usually gleaned from colleagues outside formal sessions at conferences. Hopefully anyone involved in developing partnerships will find something helpful, interesting or thought-provoking – whether they are responsible for underpinning administrative systems or long-term strategy.

Finally it is hoped that the guide will highlight the complex skills required to develop, foster and maintain partnership working and promote recognition of the need to develop, nurture, and reward, those people that can make things happen in this way.



*'If you are not living on the edge, you are taking up too much space'*

## 2. Context

*'A history of working together is critical but it is the future that matters now – everything is uncertain'*

The Aimhigher environment is in flux and even longstanding and successful partnerships are feeling the effects. New relationships with schools, the changing role of Area Steering Groups, the introduction of top-up fees and Access Agreements in higher education institutions, the emergence of the Lifelong Learning Networks, the 14-19 reform programme – all are affecting Aimhigher's relationships with others. Some traditional partners are uncertain of their future, and new policies, such as Every Child Matters and School Improvement Partnerships, are altering the balance of power between partners.

*'Certainty is so last century!'*

Nevertheless HEFCE confirmed the position of Aimhigher in its strategic plan 2006-11,

*'Aimhigher remains our primary vehicle for collaborative work across the schools, further education and HE sectors. We will work with the Department for Education and Skills and the Learning and Skills Council to develop this programme over the longer term. Continuity is vital, as the Aimhigher programme works in the medium to long term.'*

Aimhigher's underpinning principles of 'putting the learner first', impartiality, and enhancing information, advice and guidance, have helped it to operate as the 'honest broker' and bring different organisations together. However the dynamic environment and uncertain future of some key partners is generating tensions and, as one of our contributors remarked,

*'a great weight of policy is intended to be delivered through partnerships (sic) the essential sub-structure is still competitive. The incentives in the system are still essentially those designed in*

*the 1990s to promote competitive activity between independent autonomous institutions.'*

Negotiating partnership agreements in this challenging arena will require considerable skill on the part of Aimhigher people to:

- Avoid overlap and duplication
- Address lack of trust and concern for territory
- Minimise undermining influences and factors
- Keep increasingly anxious people and organisations on side
- Identify the most effective leverage factors

Furthermore, to date Aimhigher's unique selling point has been that most of its activities have been provided free of any charges, a position which may not be sustainable in the future. Ever more imaginative ways of working in partnership with others will be required to fulfil Aimhigher's mission to increase and widen participation in Higher Education.

*'To assess Aimhigher's 'added value' you need to put yourself in the shoes of others and assess how valuable you are to them...'*

Significant research has been undertaken, or is underway, to identify those of Aimhigher's activities and strategies that promise greatest impact and value for money. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published the experiences of ten partnerships in an evaluation of Aimhigher Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression prior to their



integration. Chief amongst its conclusions, the research suggests,

*'effective partnerships are comprised of effective individuals. Whilst central co-ordination was generally regarded as making a significant contribution to the partnership's success, in turn this was dependent on the central co-ordinator's enthusiasm, skills and experience. (p.93)*

The forthcoming Aimhigher Area Studies Final Report (2007) also addresses effectiveness, and considers different models of partnership-working to identify those more likely to support effective interventions. The researchers discovered that Aimhigher included a range of partnership structures but no clear candidate for the most effective. Each approach had strengths and weaknesses. For example, significant economies of scale could be achieved by those partnerships providing a central unit to co-ordinate a range of generic services and activities. On the other hand, approaches that involved greater devolution of funding and responsibility helped to secure buy-in from partners, ensured more cash was spent directly on beneficiaries, and made it more likely that activity was sustained in the longer term. This suggests the 'challenge for partnerships may be to blend the benefits of both approaches to ensure high quality, targeted experiences which become embedded in mainstream activity.' The report highlights lessons and good practice that emphasise not so much the influence of the structures, but of the people involved and their ability to engage partners.

This guide addresses 'working in partnership' by starting with the experiences of the people involved, although exploring their experiences has brought about reflection on different kinds of structures and how they may help or hinder. Increasingly the contributions of the area co-ordinators, and others, suggested similarities with experiences of those working in other sectors and across sectors. Highly skilled partnership-makers, able to build and nurture relationships, have become vital to problem-solving

in business, not-for-profit and the public sector. It seemed important therefore to consider Aimhigher experience in the broader context of how new approaches to complex challenges are developing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Reflection on these may suggest areas for debate by Aimhigher and those concerned with maximising its impact.

A key area is increasing acknowledgement of the critical nature of the 'soft stuff' in building and nurturing partnerships. By its nature this may be impossible to measure and hence most attempts to identify effective partnership approaches tend to focus on the hard structures. Peter Senge et al (2004, p.192), comment on the 'familiar dichotomy of the "hard stuff" (what can be measured) versus the "soft stuff" (what can't be measured).'

*'If what's measurable is "more real" it's easy to relegate the soft stuff, such as the quality of interpersonal relationships and people's sense of purpose in their work, to a secondary status. This is ironic because the soft stuff is often the hardest to do well and the primary determinant of success and failure. ....The problem is not measurement per se. The problem is the loss of balance between valuing what can be measured and what cannot, ....when this happens, you see managers "driving" organisations to meet quantitative goals set at the top, with little serious effort to build the capacities required to achieve sustainable levels of improved performance.'*

Aimhigher area co-ordinators all have strategic plans with detailed quantifiable targets, but their reflections strongly suggest that the principal focus of their work was developing capacities among diverse organisations to collaborate. In this way they could accomplish changes it would be impossible for organisations to achieve individually.



## Creativity at the 'edge of chaos'?

It may be that the Aimhigher approach is about to come into its own. Stephen Hawking famously predicted that the 21st century would be "the century of complexity" and many scientists argue that the greatest creative leaps are made at the 'edge of chaos' when small movements can bring about radical change. Our contributors heralded change as a constant, and it seems that organisations and individuals everywhere are trying to make sense of both the present and predictions for the future. Old systems of management and control seem to be breaking down and whereas organisational change has hitherto been characterised as 'top-down' or 'bottom-up,' management writers are arguing that the 21<sup>st</sup> century approach has to be middle-out with everyone involved.

*'Managers need to move from playing a god-like role above the process and descend into it with little more authority than anyone else. For the 'edge of chaos' to be effective, managers need to participate in and facilitate free-flowing conversations which are absolutely critical to success. They need to encourage diversity of thinking and of interactions, and break down hierarchical organisational and contractual structures. Managerial focus should be on constraining group dynamics to keep the project's broad objectives in mind, rather than on controlling the work'* (PA Consulting Group, 2006)

Constant change, fluctuations, disturbances and imbalances need not be signs of impending disorder but could be the primary source of creativity. There is a growing body of literature applying complexity and edge of chaos theory to organisations, business and management. What was particularly striking talking to our contributors was how often their way of working demonstrated the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills much of this literature describes. The Newtonian model of the world focuses on things rather than relationships, whereas the 'new' science gives primary value to the relationships that connect discrete parts. Donella Meadows, uses an ancient Sufi teaching to describe this shift,

*'You think because you understand **one** you must understand **two**, because one and one makes two. But you must also understand **and**.'* (Cited in Wheatley, 1994)

Our Aimhigher co-ordinators and other partnership-makers focus their work on the '**and**'. It is tempting to conclude that, whether intentional or not, HEFCE's decision to continue to fund Aimhigher is, in part, recognition of those things that the Aimhigher approach can achieve, and old-style 'command and control' funding systems may not.

## Co-opetition – combining competition and co-operation

An essential 21<sup>st</sup> century skill is an ability to fuse competitive and co-operative imperatives. Some of the more broadly experienced contributors reflected on this as a deliberate approach – appealing to 'mutual enlightened self-interest' - but others had also done this instinctively. It is undeniable that many colleagues round the table share the desire to 'make a difference' to individual lives and support progression to HE, and so do the organisations they represent. However, incentives in the system continue to promote competitive activity between institutions and all agencies have to compete for funding and meet their own carefully constructed targets. 'Co-opetition,' heralded as a new mindset for business in the late 1990's, (Nalebuff & Brandenburger) describes a way of deliberately combining the particular strengths of competitors to provide a more attractive service or product. Contributors highlighted the need for an increasingly more sophisticated approach to working in partnership, one that could acknowledge competitive pressures and design a win-win situation for all participants.



## Partnership ‘producers’?

A number of contributors reflected that the uncertain context, the complexity of the challenges they faced and the need for sophisticated approaches may require deliberate development of some different skills. One likened the role of ‘partnership broker’ in this context to that of a film producer, combining financial, organisational and business skills to manage the process of bringing together different organisations from the initial idea through to the ‘post-production reviews’ or final evaluation. The uncertainty of our contributors’ own situation was not lost on them, and the ability to deal with (even enjoy) uncertainty on an organisational and a personal level was highlighted as an essential attribute.

## Servant-leaders?

Our contributors seemed uncomfortable thinking of themselves as ‘leaders’, preferring to use other words or analogies to describe their roles. Arguably the cutting edge of current leadership thinking is the concept of the ‘servant-leader’ first outlined by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970’s. Continuing to create a quiet revolution in workplaces ever since, a number of commentators argue this approach may be the best hope for thriving in the new century.

*‘The only way to lead when you don’t have control is you lead through the power of your relationships. You can only deal with the unknown if you have enormous levels of trust, and if you are working together to bring out the best in people. I don’t know of any other model that can truly work in the world right now except servant-leadership.’ (Wheatley cited by the Greenleaf Centre)*

True leadership, Greenleaf argued, emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. Although not often spoken about aloud, this intrinsic motivation was clearly the driving force for our contributors. Servant-leadership emphasizes service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making. At its core, it is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work - a way of being that has the potential for creating broader positive change.



*'Don't be too quick to judge partners.... don't assume you know what they do and why they do it ...listen and you might get a different way of looking at things...'*

## 3. What is 'working in partnership'?

The phrase 'working in partnership' has become ubiquitous, a stock phrase in the opening paragraph of many bids and project reports. Used in this way, it embraces those partners you have a long-standing and fruitful relationship with, and those you asked for support the day before putting a bid in. Whilst most would acknowledge that partnerships are first and foremost about people and building relationships takes time, the government imperatives for Aimhigher have been to present 'oven-ready' partnerships with strategic and operating plans every two years. Nevertheless, Aimhigher has brought people and organisations together successfully and the need to build on these achievements for the medium to longer-term, is acknowledged in HEFCE's current strategic plan.

In practice 'working in partnership' was expressed in a variety of ways by our contributors,

*'Partners can work as individual institutions on activities and add the results to the partnership 'pot' of outcomes. This is not the same as collaboration where partners have to plan and deliver together and take a holistic view of provision. This can mean some institutions having to forsake some potentially advantageous activities because they would simply duplicate what is already being delivered by others in the collaborative venture.'*

*'A spectrum of activity in which people and institutions work together towards a common goal.'*

*'A state of mind.'*

*'We identify the gaps between what different organisations do and work in partnership on those things that will benefit us all.'*

The Ladder of Partnership					
Collaboration	Exchanging information	Altering activities	Sharing resources	Enhancing the capacity of another agency	For mutual benefit & to achieve a common purpose
<b>Co-operation</b>	Exchanging information	Altering activities	Sharing resources		For mutual benefit & to achieve a common purpose
<b>Co-ordination</b>	Exchanging information	Altering activities			For mutual benefit & to achieve a common purpose
<b>Networking</b>	Exchanging information				For mutual benefit
<b>Go-it-alone</b>					



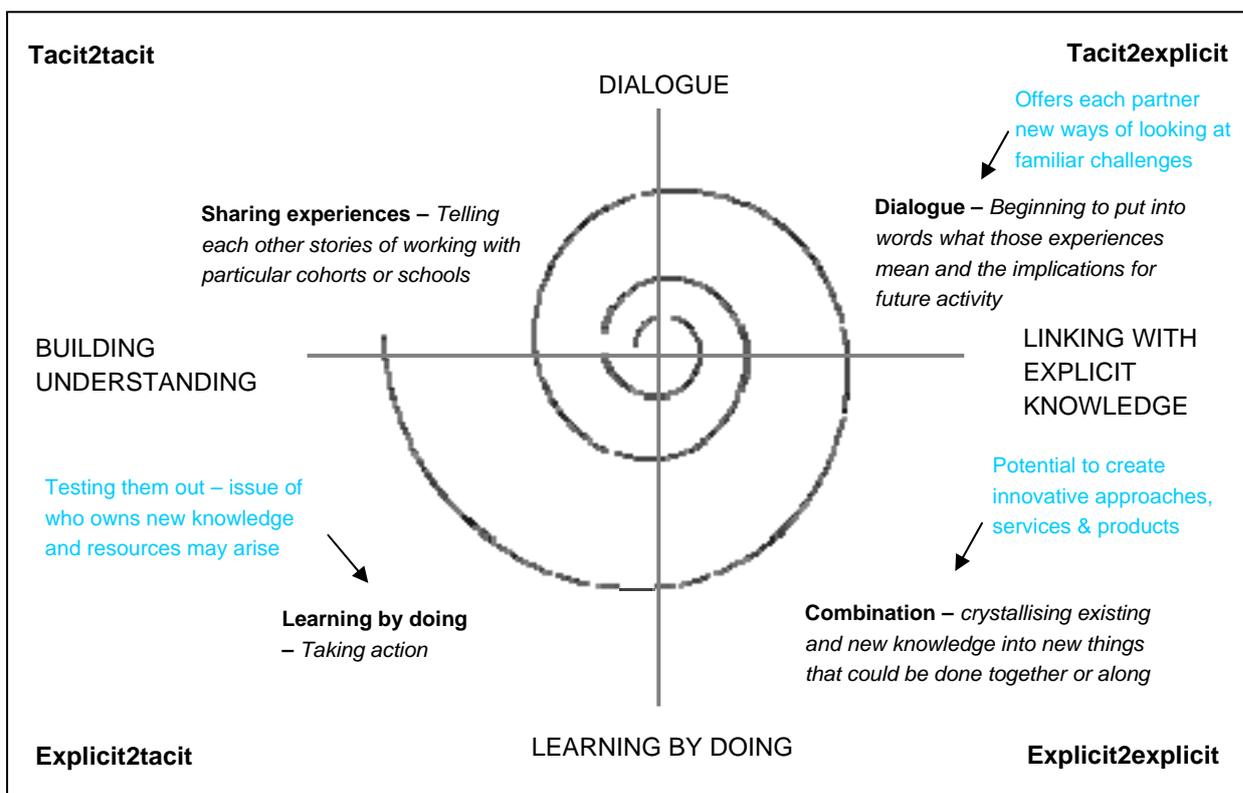
In her work on multi-agency groups Wendy Ranade (1998) described a 'ladder of partnership' (see above). The concept suggests not that the higher on the ladder you are, the better the partnership, but that there can be different kinds of relationships between partners.

## What can happen when you work in partnership?

Contributors suggested that their partnerships with other organisations often started simply by exchanging information. As they got to know more about each other, what each did and how each worked, there was greater potential for developing innovative approaches combining their knowledge and resources.

Nonaka and Takeuchi, (1995) suggested that the process of working together creates the potential for developing new and innovative approaches, products and services. Central to this is the process of transforming 'tacit' knowledge into 'explicit' knowledge.

'Tacit' knowledge is personal, context-specific and hard to formalise and communicate – it is usually embedded in the stories people tell you about their work experiences, rather than in the monitoring reports! The case studies in this guide and many of the quotes are an attempt to capture some of the tacit knowledge of our contributors. The simple exchange of information may not be enough to cause people to try to articulate their tacit knowledge, it becomes more apparent if people have to explain why they approach challenges in certain ways. If partners are open to it, this process can offer fresh perspectives and opportunities to create innovative approaches to new and familiar challenges.



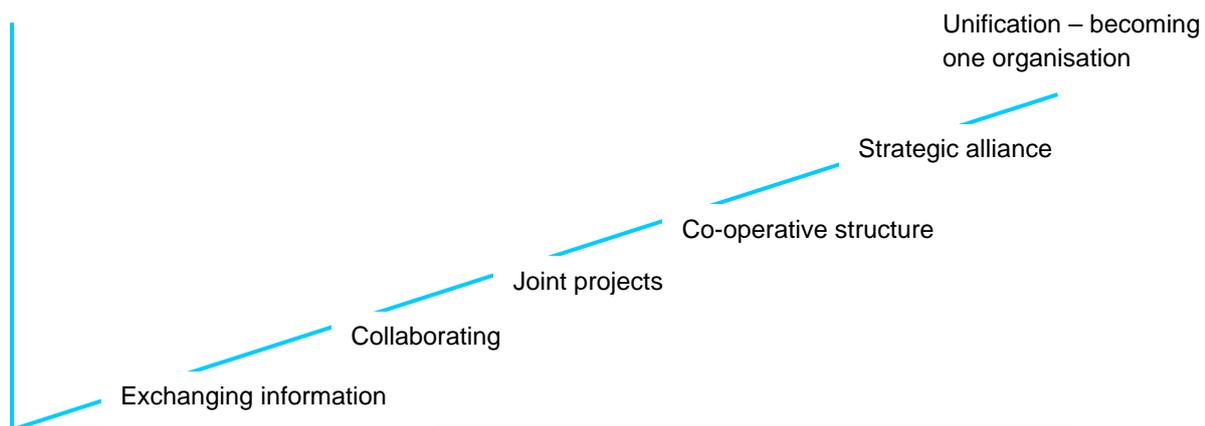


## Partnership structures

Contributors frequently referred to ways in which informal and formal ways of working in partnership need to complement each other. For instance, flexible, friendly ways of working needed to be underpinned by robust, efficient systems (see case study 3).

The area co-ordinators suggested that a way of addressing the uncertain future was to consider appropriate formal structures. This might mean working towards a formal strategic alliance or setting up an organisation of partners to bid together for sources of funding.

was no obvious candidate for the most effective. For example, significant economies of scale could be achieved by those partnerships providing a central unit to co-ordinate a range of generic services and activities. On the other hand, approaches that involved greater devolution of funding and responsibility helped to secure buy-in from partners, ensured more cash was spent directly on beneficiaries and activity was more likely to be sustained in the longer term.



Amongst our five areas, there were examples of larger Aimhigher organisations delivering an extensive range of activities themselves, and others with much smaller centres reliant on their partners for front-line delivery. Their structures might owe as much to history as to deliberate design. The forthcoming Aimhigher Area Studies Report (2006) considered different models of partnership-working to identify those more likely to support effective interventions. The researchers found that despite a range of partnership structures, there was great similarity in Aimhigher activity. Furthermore each structure had strengths and weaknesses and there

The overwhelming message seems to be that there can be no 'one size fits all' definition of working in partnership but that part of the skill required by partnership-makers is the ability to design and nurture structures that enable partners to connect in ways that are meaningful to them.



These might include:

## Federalism

*'Federalism is both centralist and decentralist at the same time, keeping to the centre those functions and decisions that can be most usefully done there but allowing everything else to be carried out by the parts. The trick is to work out which is which.'*  
(Handy, 2002 )

Federalism allows independent units to collaborate together without losing their own identity and allows some central functions to be carried out by the parts.

Aimhigher has a number of examples of making use of quasi-federalist structures to support working in partnership. Some of the Aimhigher regional operations provide central services such as marketing and staff development for a number of Aimhigher areas operating independently. Similarly some of the Aimhigher areas work with schools by providing some central co-ordination of activities and services and simultaneously supporting schools to provide their own activities.

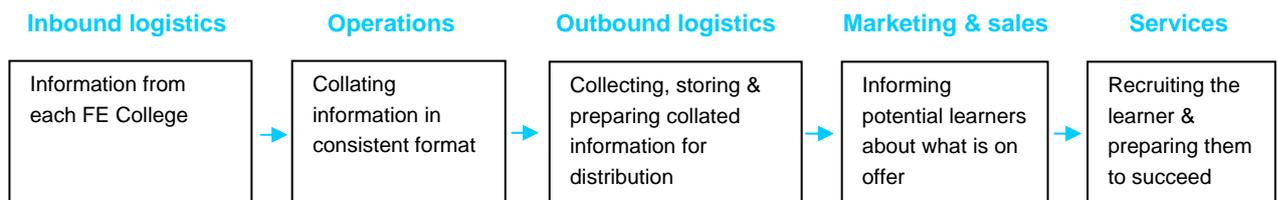
Federalism has two key principles. Firstly, power is divided; each partner has their own specific roles to perform and the power that matters should reside as close to the action as possible. Secondly, power at the local level is not subject to alteration. Trust, as in so many of our contributors' observations, is key.

If partners are to trust each other to perform specific roles, there should be no fear of interference.

## Co-opetition

Co-opetition describes a way of connecting partners which maintains their autonomy, but enables them to combine specific strengths to target goals that are important to them individually. One way of looking at this possibility is to consider the processes involved in an activity that will benefit a number of partners. The example below is of a partnership producing an area-wide Higher Education in Further Education Colleges prospectus and uses a business model, Porter's Value Chain (Porter, 1985) to think about the processes involved. Individual partners may have particular strengths to contribute – such as information management, marketing or guidance, and recruitment is likely to be important to them all. Each partner is motivated to contribute to the whole because they believe they will benefit from the sum of the parts.

Contributors to this guide shared the idea of co-opetition as a means of appealing to 'mutual enlightened self-interest' to build partnerships. It was outlined as a business concept over a decade ago (Nalebuff & Brandenburger, 1996) and in its fuller form suggests a creative approach to developing partnerships using 'complements'.





*'Collaboration and 'partnership' are over-used words. You've got to talk collaboration and walk the talk ....'*

*'A complement to one product or service is any other product or service that makes the first one more attractive....it's about finding ways to make the pie bigger rather than fighting with competitors over a fixed pie.'*

Thinking about possible 'complements' to higher education suggests a diverse range of potential partners such as employers, private training providers, child-care providers, financial organisations, even bus companies.

*'Partnership is a state of mind – you've got to be thinking all the time 'who benefits from this' and reacting in a partnership sense. It needs to govern your whole approach'*

## Sharing platforms

What do Volvo, Volkswagen and Skoda have in common? Whilst they are distinctive brands targeting different sections of the car buying public - they share common components. It is possible for partners to work very closely together, have Steering Group members in common, share vital components *and* deliver different messages to distinctive sections of the community.

Information and communications technology is supporting a number of examples of shared platforms. In particular work is well underway in many Aimhigher areas and regions to map progression routes. Aimhigher Nottinghamshire has developed a website providing a single source of information on all post-16 qualifications in Nottinghamshire, the Progression Routes resource can be accessed in two ways: practitioners enter at [www.progressionroutes.co.uk](http://www.progressionroutes.co.uk), while students have their own site at [www.whatnextnotts.co.uk](http://www.whatnextnotts.co.uk). Both areas look radically different and have been designed with their target audiences in mind.

Users can explore routes from entry through to degree level and also the qualifications available through every school, further education college, university and training provider in Nottinghamshire. The huge database can be searched by subject area, course title, provider, or course duration and there are links to providers' websites and to information on specific careers. This database could easily, as currently being explored, provide a platform for emerging 14-19 partnerships, young apprenticeship schemes and lifelong learning networks with each adding components to make it their own.

*'Hold onto the sense of the whole needing to be more than the sum of the parts'*

## Network organisations

Some of our contributors reflected on the growth of networks and the potential of these to link together a diverse range of partners using a few key governing principles. However fears were expressed about being reliant on loose network connections to deliver required outcomes particularly concerning quality control and accountability. One contributor, more confident of the potential of networks to address the dynamic environment cited the example of Visa International. Arguably the largest business in the world, Visa emerged from the chaos of the early days of the credit card industry amidst massive financial collapse brought about by overexpansion. It is organised as a self-governing network of more than twenty thousand institutions that are also its owners. Each signs up to Visa's purpose and principles and is governed by a constitution that stipulates how governing boards are elected, the rights and obligations of members, how new members are admitted



and how members can be disqualified. In this way, one of the world's largest corporations operates as a self-governing democracy.

Numerous networks exist and are forming around education and skills agendas but perhaps, as implied, it may be possible to trust them to evolve innovative solutions to the complex challenges; each member contributing in their own way to achievement of the overall goals but with no one organisation in control.

## Weighing up benefits, costs and risks of working in partnership

The discussions of our contributors strongly suggested that while partnership structures are influential, the critical success factor was that those working together share an understanding of the kind of relationship they have and what they can expect from each other. Many contributors made the point that the term 'working in partnership' can be emotive and a minefield for misunderstanding unless its meanings are made explicit.

Generally they agreed that whether a potential partner will engage with Aimhigher and the degree to which they do so, will always be determined by three considerations.

### Benefits

What will their organisation (or sometimes themselves as an individual) get out of the relationship?

### Costs

Working with others takes time and effort. What will the 'transaction costs' of the process be?

### Risks

Will working with you present new risks or reduce existing ones?

If organisations don't weigh these up in the beginning and join a project simply because they share a common goal, they will, eventually be confronted with them.

Possible benefits include:	Possible costs include:	Possible risks include:
Access to funding or other resources including – expertise, data, equipment, buildings, routes to learners etc.	Meetings, administration, decision-making processes	The level of commitment may not be clear at the outset
Improving ability to identify learner/employer/provider needs and plan for the future	Organisation's time, resources and people taken up with projects	Could lose some autonomy
Developing the organisation's capabilities	Having to consult with others on things that it would be quicker to do on one's own.	Some of the partners may not deliver
Expanding the scale of capacity to deliver	Supporting others to deliver to consistent quality standards	Involvement might cause other organisations to view partners differently
Joining up things up for learners	Learners select options offered by others	Might pull the organisation in new policy directions
Creating new ideas and services	Research and development	Loss of focus
Improving long term sustainability of services	Funding opportunities tend to focus on short-medium term outcomes	Tied in with the fate of others



Addressing them directly can help to bring people on board at the start, and continuing to check them and recognising that they will change over time, can help maintain the partnership. Knowing how your partners feel about these things (and not assuming you know), was, our contributors highlighted, one of the most important tools of a partnership-maker (see case study 5). The chart opposite suggests some of the factors potential partners may consider. The benefits must outweigh the estimated potential costs to make partnership seem worthwhile.

This is not to suggest that a common goal is insufficient foundation for an effective partnership. Organisations and individuals can, and will, sacrifice their own interests. However, it seems critical that this is a conscious decision based on an accurate mutual understanding of the shared goal and absolute conviction that each of the partners is committed to working towards it. Notwithstanding, each partner must perceive '*collaborative advantage*' (Huxham, 1996) - either outputs can be achieved which no partner could achieve on their own or collaboration with others will enable a partner to achieve some of its individual objectives.



*'Start with something everyone can sign up to'*

## 4. Forming partnerships

All of our contributors agreed that it helps to start with people you know and that those Aimhigher partnerships with a previous history of working together have an advantage,

*'...the advantage was that integration built on the existing strong Excellence Challenge structures, management and governance, dispelling suspicion and enabling trust to form quickly and thus activities to get off the ground rapidly. There was little if any feeling of coercion or being rail-roaded.'*

*'Personal relationships were really important. There was a small group of us who had worked together previously and we all got on and looked after each other.'*

*'No single step is radical'*

However, one area started from scratch and with the opportunity to build new structures, has been equally successful building partnerships. Indeed, the dynamic context may be a challenge to even the most established and co-operative of partnerships. Several contributors described situations where organisations they thought they knew very well responded to an approach in an unexpected manner. They stressed that every organisation has to consider its own targets and ensure its own survival amidst rapid change and short-term funding scenarios. Common advice for approaching forming partnerships included:

*'Don't try to take people where they can't go'*

- Be clear about what you want
- Speak to the right people – those who can make the decisions you need
- Try to understand what they want and don't assume you know
- Check that the group of people you need are not already meeting as an existing partnership for other purposes – if they are, see if you can fit into their agenda
- Be prepared to work in different ways for different partners (see case study 2)
- Partnerships are about people, trust and respect, and take time and effort

The last point was emphasised time and again with the additional advice that partnership-makers must consider, at the start, how the time and effort is going to be sustained throughout the different stages of the partnership.

*'Start with co-operation around the fringes where there is obvious benefit to everyone and gradually work to a position where everyone is contributing to increase the capacity of the partnership as a whole – producing something greater than the sum of the parts – it's hard then for partners to give up the benefits. Takes time though and this is hard for the planners and strategists.'*

As one co-ordinator commented, you have to appeal to *'mutual enlightened self-interest'*. So whilst knowing each other provides a good starting point, sustaining partnership meant ensuring partners could derive specific benefits of particular value to their organisations (or possibly to individuals).



These might include:

- Having a greater impact upon their target groups
- Attracting more resources to their organisation
- Strengthening their negotiating power with key people/organisations/funders
- Learning new and more effective ways of doing things
- Obtaining information and knowledge that has wider value to their organisation
- Spreading the risk of trying new activities that may help them to secure resources in the future
- Reducing the cost of something they are already doing/want to do by sharing costs amongst partners

.....  
*'Be aware of your most powerful partners'*  
 .....

## Tools for forming partnerships

Contributors suggested the following tools they had found valuable in helping them to work out how to prioritise their efforts.

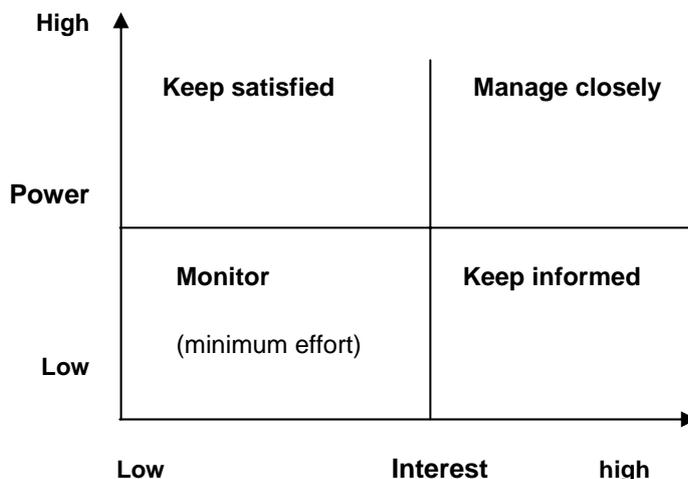
### Power-Interest matrix

This is a way of looking at the stakeholders involved in a particular initiative and assessing who you need to spend the most time and effort with. It is a useful tool for thinking about the various members of the Area Steering Group as well as partners in individual projects and activities.

**Power** relates to how much influence an organisation has over whether the partnership will achieve its objectives. Their influence might arise out of being an avenue to funding, or having particular skills, knowledge or expertise, or it might be political influence with other organisations or regulators that you need to keep on board.

**Interest** relates to how much of a stake or concern they have in the outcomes you are working towards.

First you need to identify your stakeholders. You may need to look beyond your named partners; there may be others who an interest in your activity and power you need to bring on board. Map out your stakeholders using the Power-Interest Matrix below.





An organisation's position on the grid suggests the actions you need to take with them:

**High power - interested people** – these are the ones you must fully engage and make the greatest efforts to satisfy.

**High power - less interested people** – put in enough work with these to keep them satisfied but not so much that they become bored with your message.

**Low power - interested people** – keep these people adequately informed and talk to them to check there are no major issues arising. They can often be very helpful with the detail in a project.

**Low power - less interested people** – monitor but don't bore them with excessive communication.

The next stage is to think through what you want from each of your stakeholders or partners and what messages you will need to convey to persuade them to support Aimhigher (and you) and engage in the ways you need them to. A suggested way of approaching this is to complete a Partnership Planning Sheet.

This takes a bit of effort but can save time and trouble later on. You might also do this together with members of your ASG, Executive Group or group of potential partners as a means of building trust and understanding between partners.

## Partnership Planning Sheet

Complete the columns for each partner

*'You need to know what the key issues are for individuals and be aware of what might be happening for them personally – things that might affect their buy-in to decisions the group might make. Otherwise it can seem like people are going along with things, or you've got collective agreement but things fall apart later. You need to keep checking understanding and if you can take action to address any specific individual concerns, do so.'*

<b>Power-Interest</b>	Position on the matrix
<b>Name &amp; organisation</b>	Think about whether you are focussing on the right person/people – you may need to work with several different departments in a university or school for instance
<b>Key interests &amp; issues</b>	What are the drivers for them to get involved? What are the constraints?
<b>Desired Support</b>	What level of support do you need – high, medium, low?
<b>Desired Project Role</b>	What role do you want them to play?
<b>Actions desired</b>	What do you want them to do – specifically?
<b>Messages Needed</b>	What messages do you need to convey to persuade them to engage in the ways you need them to? Focus on the benefits but address costs and risks. Being open about potential problems from the outset helps to build trust and confidence in your reliability.
<b>Actions and communications</b>	List the actions you need to take to bring this partner on board and secure their full engagement. Think about how they operate, communicate and reach decisions and whether you need to adapt your style to theirs.



*'Key lesson is ...the importance of recording agreements between partners and not just relying on verbal statements and everybody's memory. It should help everyone to have their roles and the responsibilities clearly laid out'*

Powell (cited in Ranade, 1998) suggests the kind of things you need to understand about your partners are:

- The structure of the organisation
- How decisions are taken and by whom
- Financial and planning processes
- What constraints partners face
- What partners are capable of doing
- What they find difficulty in doing

## Partnership agreements

A recurring problem discussed by our co-ordinators was making sure that partners delivered what was needed (and what Aimhigher thought had been agreed) and ensuring the quality of that delivery.

*'Key lesson is ...the importance of recording agreements between partners and not just relying on verbal statements and everybody's memory. It should help everyone to have their roles and the responsibilities clearly laid out.'*

One solution under consideration was developing 'Service Level Agreements' with partners to closely define what was expected from an individual partner in return for receiving Aimhigher funding. Such agreements are generally most appropriate where the relationship can be best described as that between a customer and supplier – with Aimhigher contracting with a supplier to purchase specific products or services – and perhaps prescribing penalties where these are not provided satisfactorily. However this may be a limited approach to partnership, usually ending the relationship when the money runs out.

Nevertheless documenting the arrangement between partners in a 'Partnership Agreement' is a good way of working through, together, the main elements you need to get right, clarifying roles and responsibilities and the necessary timetable. Whilst

not calling it a 'partnership agreement' Leicestershire Progression Accord developed a crucial partnership tool,

*'The timetable showing what needed to be done by whom and by when was invaluable. It was a great aide memoire for busy people but also meant that the co-ordinator could refer to it if something wasn't delivered.'* (see case study 1)

In addition to the timetable, which was laid out on an easy reference two-page spreadsheet, they developed a handbook describing individual partners' roles and responsibilities for making the processes work.

## Elements of 'partnership agreements'

Common elements to think about, discuss, agree and document with your partners include:

1. Aims and objectives  
What is the purpose of the partnership?  
What are you trying to achieve and how will you know when you have succeeded?
2. Strategy and activities  
What are you each going to do and when? This is a good place to insert a timetable of activity from start to close.
3. Membership and decision-making  
What should be the basis for membership of the partnership? How will you take decisions?
4. Management and Operation  
Will you have a Steering Group and/or Operational Group? Who will be responsible for day to day management? Where this is shared – who is responsible for what? What principles or ground rules will govern the partnership? How and when will performance be reviewed?



5. Resources  
How is the partnership to be resourced? This may cover cash and in-kind contributions.
6. Conflict avoidance/dispute resolution  
How will you deal with disputes, disagreement or non-delivery issues if and when they arise.
7. Information  
What information do you need to share? Be aware that in this 'knowledge age' some information such as mailing lists are not easy to share and may be commercially sensitive.
8. Evaluation  
How will you evaluate the success of the partnership overall and for individual partners? How can you each ensure you learn something of value for the future.
9. Ending the partnership  
Item 2 above should detail the period of commitment from each partner. What will each be expected to do as you approach the end of this period. Are there circumstances which might force any partners to withdraw earlier. How will you deal with this?
10. Risk assessment  
It is worth thinking through with your partners what might go wrong (a funding application might require this) – and what actions you will take to keep the partnership on course.

### Some additional pearls .....

*'It can take time to understand what your role is within a partnership – what you can best contribute. You've got to hang on in there, take responsibility & not leave it to the chair.'*

*'Write on the top of your agenda – What am I doing here? – how am I going to do it? – Have I done it? We don't evaluate ourselves – we get everybody else to fill in a feedback form after every event but we don't do it ourselves. Be a reflective practitioner.'*

*'Don't be too quick to judge existing partnerships. They might not have exactly your agenda in mind but they often have the benefit of history and knowing each other. It might not take too much to bring them on board and could be a lot quicker than starting from scratch.'*



*'You have to keep nurturing, checking, looking back, managing the current and thinking ahead ...'*

## 5. Maintaining partnerships

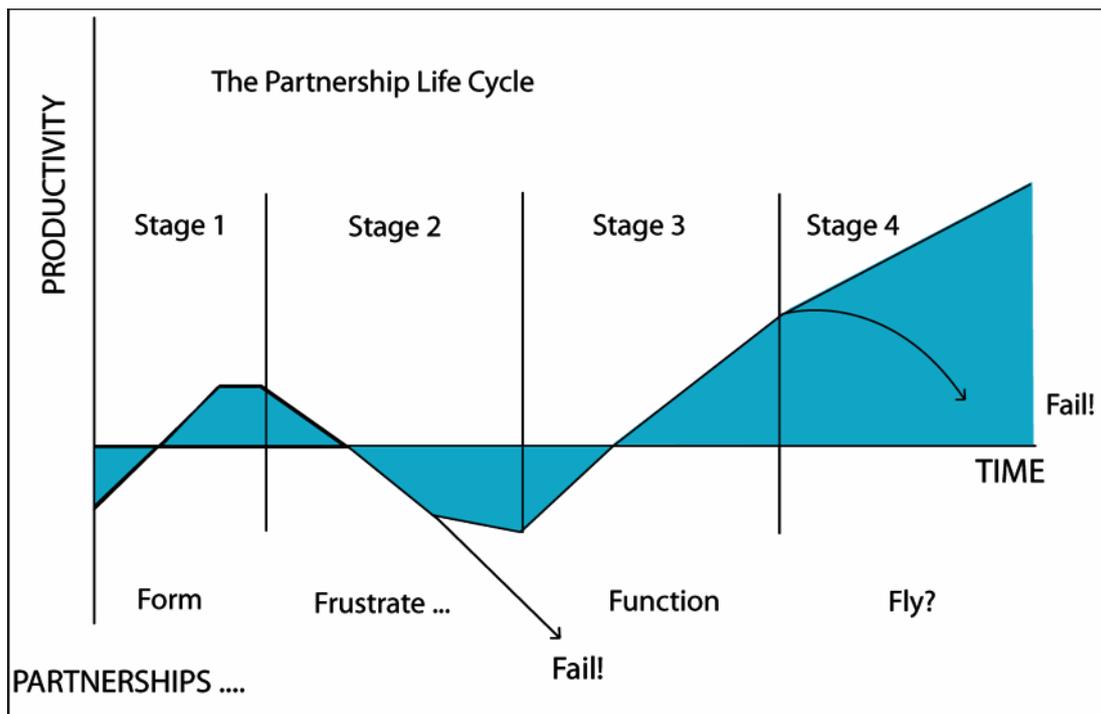
The trouble with 'working in partnership' is that the 'working' never stops. You can set up a partnership and document your partnership agreement but maintenance is continual. You have to keep 'nurturing', 'checking', 'looking back, managing the current situation and thinking ahead'. If you've worked through the Power-Interest Matrix this should help to identify those partners who need the most attention. However, our contributors advised you've always got to keep an eye on the effect the changing environment is having on your partners.

The co-ordinators were asked 'What advice might you give somebody new coming into your job?' Their response was unanimous – in this order -

1. The history – background – to prevent them 'putting their foot in it'
2. Guidance on personalities and personal agendas
3. Politics – local and national

All of the above emphasises that partnerships are about people and take time. While it may years to win the confidence, trust and respect of a partner, it can take moments to destroy it. Furthermore much of the knowledge that would prevent someone new from unwittingly 'putting their foot in it' is tacit: unwritten and couched in nuances, possibly even folklore.

In addition, partnerships naturally go through a series of stages. These can be scary or misleading while they are happening but once you are aware of them, they can be managed. Even in the best partnerships there is a tendency to falter unless there is conscious management of progress through the critical stages.





*'Resolve difference and contribute direction – but not as a director – as a producer.' Producers orchestrate the various resources needed to complete productions ..'*

### Working through the 'F Words'

If your partnership is at this stage ...	Characteristics include...	Possible actions
<b>1. Forming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploring what's needed and what's possible</li> <li>Sharing common cause, arising from shared interests, opportunities or threats</li> <li>Early enthusiasm</li> <li>Nature of commitments hazy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create opportunities for people to get to know each other</li> <li>Meet on neutral ground</li> <li>Encourage focus on common vision</li> <li>Appeal to 'mutual enlightened self-interest'</li> <li>Work through Power-Interest Matrix</li> <li>Focus on benefits to individuals and address costs and potential risks</li> <li>Start exploring parameters of possible partnership agreement</li> </ul>
<b>2. Frustration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hidden agendas</li> <li>Individuals questioning the purpose of the partnership &amp; reasons for being there</li> <li>Doubting each other</li> <li>Competing for credit and control</li> <li>Bit of 'a fog'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisit common ground &amp; allow time to redefine issues, purpose etc</li> <li>Plan a few quick wins</li> <li>Create the climate for open expression and constructive disagreement</li> <li>Clarify and emphasise benefits to individual partners</li> <li>Promote mutual appreciation of what each other can contribute</li> <li>Don't get caught up in blaming any particular party – fix the problem not the blame</li> </ul>
<b>3. Functioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling renewed vision &amp; focus</li> <li>Established clear roles and responsibilities</li> <li>Progress through joint project teams</li> <li>Feeling accountability to each other for actions</li> <li>Partners talking in terms of 'we' not 'you'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start implementing partnership agreement</li> <li>Agree clear objectives, milestones, responsibilities, success measures</li> <li>Establish ground rules &amp; principles for collaboration</li> <li>Develop common methods &amp; quality standards</li> <li>Encourage joint learning through training &amp; review activities</li> </ul>
<b>4. Flying</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Achievement of partnership goals</li> <li>Partners altering what they do &amp; how they do it to achieve partnership objectives</li> <li>Partnership priorities central to partners' activities</li> <li>Shared leadership</li> <li>Trust and mutual respect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep working at communications</li> <li>Anticipate future challenges &amp; build capacity to respond</li> <li>Ensure all the partners are getting the benefits they expect</li> <li>Celebrate success</li> <li>Reflect on whether the partnership still serves its purpose</li> </ul>
<b>5. Failing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recurrent tensions</li> <li>Disengagement</li> <li>Lack of commitment</li> <li>Breakdown or frittering away of relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisit stage 1</li> </ul>



*'We needed flexible systems to build confidence and trust but we also needed to ensure that the funding was spent to plan and we had evidence of impact'*

## Systems

The need for excellent administrative support systems was emphasised by all of our contributors and is a major theme throughout the case studies. Examples included explicit terms of reference, prior circulation of agendas, accurate minutes, schedules detailing partners' responsibilities and formal partnership agreements. Such systems underpinned good communication between partners but they are not all that was needed. Some contributors talked about partnerships needing to have a 'runner'; someone to pick up the practical tasks that ensure activities gel.

*'Aimhigher always had more action points than anyone else at the end of our planning meetings!'*

## Equality of respect and worth of contribution

The operational systems need to be built upon a first principle that everybody's contribution is respected and valued. Clearly not all the partners will be equal in terms of power or resources (and may not always like each other) but it is critical that respect, courtesy and consideration underpins working together. After all, the uncertain environment can bring about radical change in the relative position of partners.

## Being a good partner

Contributors suggested that a good partner is someone with the following qualities:

- Wants the partnership to succeed
- Seeks win-win solutions rather than suggesting compromise
- Is open, clear and honest about their own goals
- Listens well, acknowledges and responds to other views
- Is prepared to trust
- Has integrity and acts consistently
- Attends meetings regularly, participates and leads their colleagues/management in support of collaboration
- Delivers on their own tasks and responsibilities on time

- Respects others and their contributions
- Doesn't shelve difficulties but is prepared to discuss and deal with them openly
- Can be flexible but retains focus
- Understands how partners depend on each other

*'Don't try to be bigger than your partners – as 'facilitator' yours should be the 'organisation without an ego'*

## Achieving milestones

Several contributors emphasised the value of generating a collective sense of achievement, *'all working groups must have practical activity not just exchange information'*. While milestones are often written into funding documents, their importance in helping to maintain (indeed, sustain) a partnership can be underestimated. Taking time to acknowledge when a milestone has been reached, to celebrate achievement and ensure it is visible to all the partners, and if possible, to their stakeholders, all help to cement relationships and inject new enthusiasm. People need to be able to see results, to show them to others and feel a pride in their achievements.

*'The possibility of quick wins helped at first then, as people got to know each other and grew confident about the benefits of working together, we moved onto even more ambitious things'*



## 6. Ending partnerships

'I wonder if partnerships have a shelf-life?' asked one of our contributors. In part this was a reflection on how new, exciting and important Aimhigher appeared three years previously and how, over time, some of the passion of the campaign had seemed to fade and become more commonplace. Whilst it might not feel like it, this phenomenon is probably a sign of success. Most public ventures subject to short-term funding aim for 'embedding' or 'mainstreaming.' Injections of cash encourage and support imaginative approaches to complex challenges and hopefully those that show signs of success secure longer term, more stable funding, often from within the partnership or partners' stakeholders.

Our contributors offered a range of advice on ending partnerships,

**Celebrate** – if you've done what you said you would – or almost – celebrate. As publicly as possible – that way you get to celebrate success and your target audience benefits from the last drop of publicity from your campaign.

**Don't end it** – reinvigorate it! Never underestimate the value of distance travelled together. If you've got history and these organisations can help you address the challenges, work on exciting them again; go back to assessing costs, benefits and risks, and find a new angle that will get them interested again.

**If you've done what you need to do for now** – remember it is just for now – tomorrow you may need them again. Acknowledge everybody that has worked with you and thank them. Keep the lines open – in the not too distant future you may be hoping they will call on you.

There is another aspect, suggested by our first contributor's reflections. At the beginning of a new project or campaign like Aimhigher, many vacancies are often advertised. Those recruited have usually had to demonstrate enthusiasm, initiative, ability to initiate and to nurture new partnerships to address the complex challenges. Interview panels will often focus, at this point, on those able to persuade others to come on board. In the writing of this guide it was striking that whilst all five of the Aimhigher co-ordinators were highly experienced in starting, maintaining and finishing campaigns successfully, many of those who worked for them were talented campaign initiators and nurturers who might need reassurance to see the end of a partnership as a successful outcome.



*'We have to start to recognise, develop and reward the skills of those that make things happen through collaboration.'*

## 7. Partnership skills & roles

Area co-ordinators were asked what they might put into the 'Essential Skills' section of their job description. Common responses were:

- Emotional intelligence – ability to empathise, feel and understand the undercurrents
- Communication skills – ability to explain, persuade and negotiate
- Lateral thinking – ability to inhabit different worlds and to make connections between them
- Understanding of context – the 'ability to simultaneously look back, cope with the everyday and think ahead'
- Excellent project management skills
- Ability to manage uncertainty and change

Consider the skill-set described below,

*'leadership with "a light touch"; co-ordination; collaboration; information and communication; project management skills; spotting skill gaps and packaging together different expertise; creativity; cultural awareness; comfortable with ambiguity; flexibility; strong communication skills; creative ideas generation and problem-solving.'*  
( [www.oncourse-innovation.com](http://www.oncourse-innovation.com) )

This list was used to outline the skills required by Innovation Leaders – highly prized individuals who, in the private sector, are considered essential to bridge the gap between thinkers and operators; to turn ideas into reality. More often than not they operate without formal power, only their credibility. This kind of leadership requires entrepreneurial personalities and the ability to bring diverse parties together to identify common ground and initiate action. They lead multi-disciplinary groups of people working for different employers, often in different locations. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1985) described change-masters with 'kaleidoscope thinking'. Change-masters need political skills to build coalitions with shared vision of what they are trying to achieve. They take ideas from outside usual

sources and put them together in a new way, challenging the orthodox approach, the 'not-invented-here' syndrome, and actively seeking new ideas from outside.

*'Partnership-broking is the closest you can get to running your own business without the risk.'*

All of our contributors were uncomfortable using the term 'leader' in relation to themselves. One likened the role to that of a film or theatre producer, combining financial, organisational and business skills to *manage the process* of bringing together different independent organisations, from the initial idea through to the 'post-production reviews' or final evaluation. (they also added, 'partnership-broking is the closest you can get to running your own business without the risk.')

The Aimhigher co-ordinators' reflections strongly suggested that the principal focus of their work was *developing capacities* among diverse organisations to collaborate, and in this way to accomplish changes it would be impossible for those organisations to achieve individually

*'partnership requires a professional lubricant that needs paying for.'*



*'Partnership-brokers need to be able to merge the bottom-up and the top-down .... to bridge strategic vision and the reality of implementation.'*

Everybody emphasised the need to be able to take on different roles, 'you will have different status within different partnerships', and sometimes need to consciously consider, as an actor might, 'how shall I play this?' The ability to 'bridge strategic vision and the reality of implementation .... to merge the bottom-up and the top-down' implies not only operational ability to work across all levels of organisations but knowledge of the types of dialogue and performance likely to bring about successful partnerships.

## Enhancing the performance of the lonely 'boundary-spanner'

A small but increasing body of research examines the role of those who work across organisations to form interorganisational ventures (Ranade 1998, Williams 2002, Sullivan & Skelcher 2002). Ranade noted that 'the skills, strategies and tactics of 'boundary-spanners' need to be more widely understood, to underpin programmes of training, capacity building and development work.' Some of our contributors talked about not really belonging but sitting outside usual support and management structures. This might be perceived negatively as 'on the margins', or positively as 'on the frontiers', or both simultaneously.

*'No-one owns you, and to be trusted as an 'honest broker' it's important not to be associated with any one role. But that also makes you vulnerable.'*

*'You need the right people with an outward facing role, but these are often people living a kind of hinterland existence, working externally, outside the structures and the first to go when the money dries up.'*

*'there is an assumption that people can 'just do it'*

Some highlighted an urgent need to recognise that 'partnership requires a professional lubricant that needs paying for' and to provide support, training, career development and deliberate succession

planning. Their concern went further; that as funding gets tighter, the ability of institutions and individuals to sustain collaborative structures may well diminish.

*'On the one hand there is an assumption that collaboration is the natural order of things and therefore there is little need to invest in developing the skills and knowledge needed for successful collaborative working. On the other hand, there is the fact that the collaborative structures, largely voluntary, are standing on a sub-structure which is still, at heart, competitive and based around autonomous institutions.'*

Discussion of the skills and roles required in Aimhigher hinted at some possible tensions. The HEFCE Strategic Plan 2006-11 stated: 'We will continue to provide funding to Aimhigher.....Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships which break down the barriers which institutions and systems can unwittingly create for learners'. Does the primary value of Aimhigher derive from its impact on widening participation or its ability to develop partnerships that bring about innovation and change? If the latter is most important, why, one contributor asked, are there no indicators to suggest as much in the taxonomy provided for the 2006-8 Aimhigher Strategic Plans? One suggested that as a partnership maker you need to:

*'frame your objectives as a facilitator, not in terms of targets – you're there to help others achieve their targets. Your role is picking off the gaps. The collaborative approach is often to divide the targets between partners but an alternative approach is to identify those things that will help everybody to achieve more.'*

## Resources for professional development

De Montfort University has been piloting a postgraduate programme in collaborative working initiated by National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and



Leicestershire and Leicester City Partnership. Underpinned by recent research, this programme helps participants to reflect on the complexity of their professional practice, and has brought unexpected outcomes in the form of new relationships and creative collaborations.

The Open University will launch a new postgraduate module in May 2007. *Current Issues in Public Management and Social Enterprise* is likely to include such topics as partnership and multi-agency working, evidence-based management, stakeholder engagement and governance.

The Centre for Excellence in Leadership and the National College for School Leadership are developing opportunities for new learning about collaborative leadership. Commissioned by the DfES to support 14-19 reform, the programme will include modules on collaborative leadership, coaching and mentoring, leadership exchange and organisational development for leadership teams.

The Higher Education Academy is concerned about the professional development and career progression opportunities of a broad range of staff involved in widening participation activities and have commissioned Continuum, the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies, to undertake a scoping study between June 2006 and September 2007.

Some publications and online resources are contained in the section on Resources and further reading.



## 8. Case studies

### 1. Challenging entry requirements - Leicestershire Progression Accord

Not a case study of Aimhigher work, but an important one suggested by Leicestershire Aimhigher Co-ordinator, Neil Stock, with interesting resonances for current developments. It suggests ways to get schools, colleges and universities (including over 300 admissions tutors) in a geographical area to agree to a common progression agreement carrying UCAS points.

### 2. Targeting work-based learners - Aimhigher Northamptonshire's 'Apprentice' Factor

Advancing the progression of work-based learners is acknowledged as a major challenge for all involved in widening participation. Lee Jones, of Aimhigher Northamptonshire, reflects upon the early stages of this pioneering project working with less familiar partners.

### 3. Engaging schools in Lincolnshire and Rutland: developing essential systems to support partnership-working

Working with schools is fundamental to Aimhigher's work but most areas have small teams and many schools to work with. Jackie Johnson and Gail Pooley describe the systems they have put in place to enable them to focus on building relationships - the most important element of the work.

### 4. Focus on maths: Derbyshire partners working together to raise the grade

Getting more than 500 borderline GCSE students to focus on maths for a day is a major achievement. Aimhigher Derbyshire and the local authority Maths Strategy Consultants reflect on how pooling their respective strengths, and that of other partners, led to a conference that enthused and motivated all involved.

### 5. Competition or collaboration: Nottinghamshire's Progression Working group

How do you reconcile the funding imperative of learning providers to recruit successfully to themselves with ensuring that learners are aware of the broadest range of opportunities available to them? Aimhigher Nottinghamshire's creative approach to this challenge has led to collaborative working on publications, web resources and an annual 'What Next' conference.



*'There was something in it for everyone...'*

## 1. Challenging entry requirements - Leicestershire Progression Accord

*How do you get the schools, colleges and universities (including over 300 admissions tutors) in a geographical area, to agree to a common progression agreement, that carries 30 UCAS points?*

This is a key question for the emerging Lifelong Learning Networks; yet Leicestershire achieved it several years ago. Those involved in developing the partnership here share some of the lessons that can help others to build upon their achievements.

### Partners

Leicester City Cluster (now the VESA 13-19 Support Agency), the Open College Network, Leicestershire Aimhigher Partnerships for Progression and Aimhigher Excellence Challenge, schools and colleges, Connexions, Leicester University, De Montfort University, Loughborough University.

### Brief details of the Progression Accord

The Leicestershire Progression Accord (LPA) became the central feature of a 14-19 framework developed by Leicester City Cluster with its partners in response to the introduction of Curriculum 2000 into schools. The roots of the City Cluster lie in the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) in the mid-1980s, and it plays an important role as a curriculum and staff development agency working with schools and colleges across the city and county. True to its roots, the Cluster developed the 14-19 framework to reflect a commitment to work-related learning and the accreditation of 'non-subject' elements of Key stage 4 and post-16 curriculum.

Essentially, the LPA constituted a series of agreements which the colleges and the three local universities, Loughborough, Leicester and De Montfort University signed up to, agreeing to give GCSE or A-level equivalence to those successfully completing the appropriate level. The LPA was multi-

levelled, enabling learners to achieve from Entry Level up to Level 3, and originally comprised units externally accredited through the Open College Network (OCN). The units were written by a consortium of local practitioners and now feature as part of an extensive OCN bank available to institutions across the country.

Leicestershire Aimhigher P4P and Aimhigher Excellence Challenge initiatives built upon the original LPA to introduce the New Progression Accord in 2003. This focussed upon the three elements of Curriculum 2000 concerned with careers education, tutorial work and curriculum enrichment, and was designed to articulate with the (then) anticipated elements of the Tomlinson review of 14-19 qualifications.

At Intermediate Level the agreement was based on the Accord programme and two other local credit based programmes, Leicestershire Vocational Framework (LVF) and the Work-related Achievement Programme (WrAP), to enable learners of any age to use the Accord for progression to Advanced courses. At Advanced Level, it was agreed that the Admissions Tutors (of over 300 courses) would grant an enhanced offer of 30 UCAS points for Accord applicants. In addition, where an HE department also specified particular grades, successful Accord students would be granted a one-grade enhancement.

### Reflections of the partners

#### What helped the partnership to develop?

There was something in it for everyone. We didn't start off thinking about developing the Progression Accord. It arose out of teachers in schools, colleges and universities exchanging information. Each needed information from the other about what learners should know or be able to do to be



*'Clear processes helped. We devised a timetable clearly showing what needed to be done by whom and by when'*

able to progress - generically and within their discipline. We held cheap half-day conferences bringing teachers and lecturers together and they built personal friendships around their common interest in their discipline. They got to know who to call for help. Working together to further the interests of their learners fell out of this naturally.

There was also something in it for the different institutions. Leicester and Loughborough universities got students with broader key skills – essentially, bright kids got even better grades and were better prepared for university. For De Montfort University recruitment was more of an issue and the Accord made it possible to accept some students with lower grades, knowing they were better prepared. The FE colleges got Level 3 units and were able to get funding for teaching them. The schools had a way of knitting together disparate elements of learning such as PHSE and Careers Education and encouraging learners to think about what they should do early on. The students could use other things they were doing such as Duke of Edinburgh, Young Enterprise etc to achieve the transferable OCN units. It encouraged them to think outside their subjects and tried to bridge the gap between academic and vocational.

Personal relationships were really important. There was a small group of us who had worked together previously (the main person from Leicester University had previously worked at Leicester Polytechnic, now De Montfort University) and we all got on and looked after each other. Ideologically we were all on the same side of the fence in that we shared a sincere belief in the need to recognise and validate other forms of substantive learning than the traditional academic.

Having key people with energy and commitment was critical but also, as individuals we were all sufficiently senior enough to influence key decision makers and had credibility with those who would have to implement the Accord – the teachers, admissions tutors etc.

Neither of the leading organisations, the City Cluster or the Open College Network, could have achieved the Accord on their own – OCN provided validation,

City Cluster was the mediator between schools, FE Colleges and universities. In addition to having common goals and values, they could see individual organisational benefits. The OCN had an opportunity to develop an income stream through validation services, and the City Cluster obtained a reduced price for its member schools and colleges because of the volume of students going through the scheme.

The City Cluster was the mediator, perceived as the 'honest broker' – independent of LEA, schools, colleges or the universities – but with credibility because teachers were seconded to it. The Cluster also co-ordinated a pool of moderators drawn from schools, colleges and universities. Having the Cluster meant only one organisation to call rather than universities or schools trying to liaise directly with lots of the other. It also meant that the Cluster built up lots of information and contacts and would usually know somebody who knew somebody who could help.

We had more time than people do now

### **What helped it to achieve?**

Being able to do things cheaply. Now most institutions have to charge for rooms for conferences and everything costs more. Then institutions tended to have policies that meant that if your activity fell under a general educational remit, you could book rooms for free.

A named co-ordinator in each school. The City Cluster to co-ordinate overall and lots of work internally with individual departments and admissions tutors.

Having clear processes. We devised a timetable clearly showing what needed to be done by whom and by when. So you knew what it was that you needed to do. Active co-ordination and facilitation helped too. We set everybody something to do between meetings – like homework – and then you had to feed

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*'.. mutual enlightened self-interest held it altogether'*

back at the next meeting. These processes developed into a handbook clearly articulating everybody's role and responsibilities to make the Accord processes work. Of course all these things didn't work with everybody...

Simple practical tools to make things easier. For instance we developed a special Accord stamp for the UCAS forms. Before distributing UCAS forms to the relevant academic department, the central Admissions Office stamped those that were from Accord students and attached a brief explanation of the Accord agreement to remind the Admissions tutor.

Each of the partners could use the Accord to address aspects of their organisation's missions – a kind of 'mutual enlightened self-interest' held it altogether and ensured people would drive it through.

## Challenges?

Getting teachers released to come to half-day conferences and travel costs.

Accreditation could be very time-consuming and paper-heavy. A fast turnaround was needed at the same time as the A Level results. At one point there were over 1000 students on the Accord programme.

## Key lessons to pass on?

Agree your Terms of Reference early on and keep it simple!

Make each partner's responsibilities clear. The timetable showing what needed to be done by whom and by when was invaluable. It was a great aide memoire for busy people but also meant that the co-ordinator could refer to it if something wasn't delivered.

Different partners look for different things and may need to be approached and talked to in different ways. De Montfort University was developing a centralised admissions system, and a formalised standard agreement like the Accord could be negotiated centrally. At Leicester University, admissions was in the hands of tutors in departments, so it was critical to respect their autonomy and negotiate on a one to one basis.

### Contact:

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*'We're thinking it might help to agree a more formal service level agreement. This could clarify respective roles'*

## 2. Targeting work based learners: Aimhigher Northamptonshire's 'Apprentice' Factor

*How do you address the stark statistic of only 1-2% of work-based learners progressing from level 3 to Higher Education? (O'Connor & Little, 2005)*

Acknowledged as a major challenge for all those involved in widening participation, advancing the progression of work-based learners suggests the need to work with less familiar partners. Drawing upon the extensive work-based learning experience of one of its staff, Lee Jones from Aimhigher Northamptonshire has begun a pioneering project, the 'Apprentice' ('A') Factor. Whilst in its early stages at the time of writing, the reflections of the team are valuable to any organisation or practitioner trying to advance work in this area.

### Partners

Northamptonshire Training and Development Partnership (NTDP) which represents over 25 work-based learning providers.

### Brief details of The 'A' Factor

The 'A' Factor, launched in 2006, is a year's programme of activities for work-based learners. The project targets around 2800 apprentices at Level 2 and 3, across fourteen areas of learning. Provided by Aimhigher, the menu of activities includes an employer visit, university visit, opportunity to attend a Masterclass and a study skills weekend focussed on developing research methods. The programme aims to suggest to apprentices the possibility of their progression from the supervisory based competencies at NVQ level 3 to advancing the intellectual capital of their organisations through achievement at levels 4-6.

The role of NTDP is to provide a channel of communication with work-based learning providers, and from them, to apprentices. The role of the work-based learning providers is to assist with some career action planning and monitoring of individual

progress throughout the year. Providers receive £50 per learner for an initial and interim visit and a further £35 output payment for each learner progressing to a higher education qualification.

The first launch meeting with apprentices was held in April 2006 and whilst the Aimhigher team were disappointed with the numbers attending, the numbers choosing to participate in the programme has been very encouraging.

### Reflections from Aimhigher

#### How did you approach forming this partnership and why did you go for the model you did?

The Aimhigher person responsible for the project has an extensive background and experience in work-based learning, so knew the systems work-based learning providers work within and the language they use. The providers have to do monitoring visits anyway, and this model offered them payment if they included the requirements of this programme within their interview visits. This would encourage them not only to start to feel some ownership of the programme but to gradually improve the level of information given to apprentices about HE opportunities. Depending on numbers, the money could be fairly substantial, but the providers also needed to demonstrate to the Adult Learning Inspectorate that they covered progression issues with their apprentices – and participating in this programme was a way of doing that.

The NTDP was needed to inform the development of the programme and provide a communication route to the providers, and through them to the apprentices. We thought about paying them for overseeing the programme but felt that this would be a different approach to other areas of our work. For instance we do not pay money to schools



to oversee Aimhigher activities but we pay for individual activities – so this model seemed congruent with the way we work in other areas.

The rest of the programme, employer visits, Masterclasses etc, was based on tried and tested Aimhigher activities and making these relevant to apprentices.

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*'We had a really important breakthrough which establishes a national precedent. Through the data-sharing protocol agreement between DfES, LSC and HEFCE, we were able to contact and get a substantial amount of information on nearly 3000 apprentices'*

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## How do you feel it is working so far? Anything you might do differently?

We haven't really achieved the buy-in we hoped for from the providers. It's been us pushing everything all the time. We really could do with more help developing the programme, the promotional materials and getting the message out. Maybe the amount of money is insufficient incentive but it would be more if the message was getting out better and we were getting more potential recruits onto the programme.

We're thinking it might help to agree a more formal service level agreement. This could help to clarify respective roles and what the providers are expected, indeed contracted, to deliver. Training providers are used to this sort of thing from the contractual arrangements they have with the LSC. We don't want to get really steeped in bureaucracy or 'legalese' though.

We're also reconsidering our view on paying NTDP for overseeing the programme. It may be possible to discuss a service level agreement which gives them the clear responsibility for project management including acting as a portal for providers; supporting the delivery of progress interviews and returns, and selling the scheme to providers as a means of differentiating themselves from possible competitors.

## Are there other potential partners who could help you?

The LSC have already shown considerable interest in the scheme and maybe they could help advise us on the service level agreement/contractual arrangements we are thinking about.

Maybe we could involve parents more, as we are in other areas of our activities. At least three of the apprentices brought their parents/carers along to the launch presentation the other night.

Maybe we could link in more with schools and things happening such as the Specialist Diplomas - to build a route from schools, via vocational curriculum through to 'A' Factor.

It may also be worth finding out more about the provisions of Train to Gain and opportunities to link in with employers supporting learners on Level 2 programmes. New provision announced in February has some aspects looking at level 3 and beyond.

It could also be worth exploring collaboration with the other Aimhighers in the region. We know we've got the beginnings of a promising approach to engaging and progressing work-based learners. Between us, the Aimhigher counties could test different ways of using it and, over time, work together to construct a really successful programme.



### Any pleasant surprises so far?

We had a really important breakthrough which establishes a national precedent and will be useful to other Aimhigher practitioners trying to contact apprentices.

We sent out printed literature to nearly three thousand apprentices and we were able to get a substantial amount of information on each one including: name, address, date of birth, etc and all the details contained in the Provider monthly batch return. Learners who had expressed that they did not wish to share their data with LSC data sharing partners were not included.

Although it took a bit of doing, and helped that I knew the people involved, the data was supplied to Aimhigher as a result of the data-sharing protocol agreement between DfES, LSC and HEFCE. Any Aimhigher should be able to get similar from their LSC.

### Key lessons to pass on?

The importance of recording agreements between partners and not just relying on verbal statements and everybody's memory. It should help everyone to have their roles and the responsibilities clearly laid out.

The availability of contact details for apprentices from the LSC – see our pleasant surprises above.

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## 3. Engaging schools: developing essential systems to support partnership-working

*Working with schools is fundamental to Aimhigher's work but most areas have small teams and many schools to work with. How do you develop supportive administrative systems that are flexible enough to attract and maintain the engagement of schools and teachers under pressure, and firm enough to ensure the budget is spent as planned - and the paperwork returned to demonstrate impact?*

This must be one of the primary challenges for every Aimhigher area and whilst they would not presume to have all the answers, Aimhigher Lincolnshire and Rutland have developed some friendly, efficient and highly practical systems to strengthen their links and support their partnership work with schools.

### Partners

39 schools and colleges spread across a wide geographical area, mainly rural and bounded by sea to one side.

*'Building the personal relationships is the most critical part of working in partnership – but time-consuming – and having efficient systems frees us up to focus on the most important – and enjoyable bits of the work'*

### Brief details

Aimhigher Lincolnshire and Rutland work with 39 schools and FE Colleges. All the institutions are able to select from a menu of activities in accordance with their allocation of funding. The job of the Aimhigher

Schools Team is to encourage the schools to engage, make their selection and submit a coherent plan of how and when the activities will occur. Participating schools pay in advance for those activities requiring payment and reclaim the expenses when they have returned the evaluation forms relating to the individual activity. Using a combination of soft and hard systems, Jackie and Gail have increased the number of schools getting involved and the quality of that engagement.

## Reflections from Aimhigher

### How did you approach your partnership with schools?

It's really important to be flexible and acknowledge the competing pressures the schools and their teachers are dealing with. The will to benefit their pupils is always there but lots of practical issues – timetables, transport, taking pupils and teachers out of the classroom – can make it difficult and Aimhigher activity is not the first priority. So we wanted to have flexible systems to help us build the personal relationships, confidence and trust of our school contacts but also to ensure that the funding was spent as planned and we collected evidence of impact. That's why we developed the system that ties in reimbursement of expenses with getting the evaluation forms back to us. We've only had one example of this causing difficulty for the school and we found a way round that. Some schools positively welcomed receiving copies of the evaluation feedback and used it in their own school evaluation mechanisms.

Our systems use a combination of 'carrot and stick' and it helps that there are two of us, one with a focus on negotiating with the institutions and the other with a more systems-orientated approach, insisting on evaluations and/or monitoring before payment. Whilst we maintain control by keeping back money until we've got



everything we need, the real strength of the system comes from the way it helps us to keep talking to our contacts in schools and building the relationship. For instance, when we have the school plans outlining when activities will occur, we log all the information onto the calendar on Outlook. The email programme then alerts us when something is taking place, reminding us to give the school a call to see how things went and follow up for the invoice and evaluation forms. We set deadlines for everything, and explain what will happen if they are not met so that we can re-allocate funds.

We keep a file on each school with a telephone log in the front – giving brief notes of any discussions we've had. That way it doesn't matter which one of us picks up a call, we always know what has happened previously and this has helped to build trust and confidence in us. It helps to demonstrate to the schools that we are really interested and aware of what they are doing – and hopefully highlights their importance to us as partners. We've also created a number of specific email distribution lists so we can contact any number of schools quickly but still make it seem personal.

Every school nominates an Aimhigher co-ordinator so we deal mainly with them. The school can claim some expenses and cover for the co-ordinator. We also sometimes get calls from the school bursar when an invoice isn't paid. We've got systems to track invoices from the moment of receipt so non-payment is almost always because we haven't had the evaluation information back. Once we've explained this, the bursar will usually go and chase it up themselves, which just helps to reinforce the system.

Building the personal relationships is the most critical (but time-consuming) part of working in partnership and having efficient systems frees us up to focus on the most important, and enjoyable, bits of the work.

### **What factors have helped the partnerships develop?**

It has really helped that Jackie has been a schoolteacher and knows firsthand the pressures and the ways things work in schools. It means she's got credibility with the co-ordinators and headteachers and can suggest possible ways round difficult practical issues.

Flexibility is the key to success. In addition to the menu of activities, schools have the option of negotiating funding for a project they want to pursue or putting on their own interpretation of an activity.

It has been important to find ways of linking Aimhigher activity to particularly pressing aspects of each school's agenda. For instance, we had an example of a school that was in special measures. The Head naturally felt he'd got bigger and more immediate issues to deal with than Aimhigher. However, Jackie was able to show that some of the things the school could do can may help with getting out of special measures – and he very shortly became convinced.

### **Any particular challenges?**

Getting some schools engaged. Developing contacts and persuading some schools to get engaged can be really time-consuming. The personal touch is critical, identifying the particular issues for them and ensuring you address them. This makes it all the more important that once you've got them engaged, you really carefully maintain and develop the relationship; and with 39 schools and colleges you've got to flex the systems to enable you to do that.



## Any pleasant surprises?

Being flexible enough to enable schools to put their own interpretation on activities has helped to develop and shape the overall Aimhigher offer. For example we've been piloting a peer mentoring scheme where VI formers work with Years 9-11. One school decided they wanted to try a variation and get Year 13 students to work with small groups of Year 9. The idea was that as the Year 13 students were applying to university, they would discuss the whole process and their experience with their groups and that they would keep in touch with these groups once they had gone to university. It's a way of linking the choices the younger pupils need to make with the potential impact on their choices later on. During the first year at university, the younger pupils will be doing their GCSEs and thinking about their post-16 choices and so on. It seemed like a great project to support and, already promising as a pilot, it is likely to become part of the Aimhigher menu of activities.

## Key lessons to pass on

Design your systems to reinforce firm ground rules and principles but ensure that you explain the reasons for these. You can always deviate in exceptional circumstances – and people acknowledge it and feel happier about it when you do.

Make sure you can justify and explain why you ask for the information you do – it can be very difficult (and make you feel very silly) if you collect information without really knowing what it will be used for.

Try to fit in with the school planning cycle – really difficult because the early Aimhigher planning cycles tended to be out of step, but try – and/or explain why you can't.

Keep a sense of humour, and share it with your partners!

**Contact:** Sue Knight, Aimhigher Lincolnshire and Rutland, [sue.knight@bgc.ac.uk](mailto:sue.knight@bgc.ac.uk)



*'We had shared aims and it was important enough for everyone to go that little bit further, doing things on a goodwill basis even if it wasn't strictly within their remit ...'*

### 4. 'Focus on Maths' conference – Derbyshire partners working together to raise the grade

*Getting more than 500 borderline GCSE students to focus on maths for a day – an achievement for creative partnership working.*

Key partners Aimhigher Derbyshire and the local authority Maths Strategy Consultants reflect on the factors that contributed to a successful conference that enthused and motivated all involved.

#### Partners

Aimhigher Derbyshire, Local Authority (city and county) Maths Strategy Consultants, senior maths teachers from city and county schools, Maths lecturers and undergraduates from the University of Derby.

#### Brief details

The aim of the conference was to target those areas of the GCSE exam paper where marks are frequently lost. 25 secondary schools participated across a week, each taking groups of around 20 year 11 pupils to the University of Derby for a day. All of the pupils had been identified as capable of getting Maths GCSE grade C or above but were predicted to achieve a D grade. Maths undergraduates from the University of Derby supported the pupils in five sessions designed and delivered by the teachers and lecturers.

#### How did you approach forming this partnership?

The Head of Maths at one of the schools we were working with suggested that Aimhigher contact the Local Authority Maths Strategy Consultants. These are the people who work with schools on teaching and learning issues and their knowledge and support was invaluable. They had the insider knowledge to help us to identify inspirational teachers to deliver sessions, they knew the practical issues for schools and how to persuade them to get involved.

Aimhigher's role was in the organisation of the event, logistics and pulling all the strands together.

*'We also recognised that our own personal and organisational aims might prioritise different aspects and tried to accommodate these'*

#### What factors helped the partnership develop?

We had shared aims and it was important enough for everyone to go that little bit further, doing things on a goodwill basis even if it wasn't strictly within their remit. Consistent attendance at planning meetings meant that key decisions could be made as a group and the overall feeling of strong shared commitment prevailed. Even when there was some disagreement, we were able to overcome any adverse effects by openly discussing and explaining the rationale behind certain decisions.

We also recognised that our own personal and organisational aims might prioritise different aspects and tried to accommodate these. For instance, the LA Maths Strategy Consultants are concerned to raise attainment wherever it can be improved. Aimhigher had a list of schools to be targeted based on widening participation criteria. So we did some negotiation on schools to be included. It also helped that Aimhigher could take the lead on the major organisational issues - Aimhigher always had more action points than anyone else at the end of our planning meetings!

The organisation throughout the week was truly impressive. Each pupil received a pack with a personalised programme and name



*'Identify the key things your partners can contribute – their unique strengths - and make sure you play to them. Don't waste their time by asking them to do things that other partners could do equally well if not better'*

badge. Everything was colour-coded and easy to follow. It went like clockwork.

### Any particular challenges?

Sorting out the curricular issues – the content of the sessions - was challenging. There was the practical problem of teachers and lecturers, with pressured and conflicting timetables, getting together to design and plan the sessions. Also the university lecturers couldn't really be aware of what was needed to address GCSE borderline issues.

Communication could be challenging for Aimhigher trying to pull it altogether. Not everybody had dedicated email addresses (or used them) so there was a lot of printing, posting to pigeonholes and follow-up phone calls, to keep everything moving and ensure everybody had all the information they needed.

### Any pleasant surprises?

We hadn't really thought too much about the benefits to the undergraduates. Firstly, we were really surprised because we got ten volunteers and they stayed with us all the way through. I think they were handpicked or at least encouraged by their tutor. They were all really good too and some were even having a go at delivering sessions by the end of the week. They told us they appreciated the opportunity to try teaching. Their participation was a great addition to their CV and one was even offered a placement at the end of the week.

Some of the schools have requested the resources so they can reproduce the sessions themselves. It means we've got to develop more resources for the next conference but it's a great endorsement.

Although there's always been a good relationship, the conference has really spurred the city and county LA Maths consultants to do more collaborative work.

The local MP turned up and spent two sessions with the conference!

### Anything you might do differently?

There was a lot of discussion about whether pupils should have to wear uniform. Some thought it would make them feel uncomfortable and other schools had a uniform policy. We decided schools should decide for themselves but next time we will try to ensure that the uniform wearing schools attend at the same time.

We agreed 20 pupils should attend from each school without realising this was an awkward number for transport – too many for a minibus and too few for a coach.

We'll need to address schools taking the different modular and/or linear approaches to GCSE.

We hope to use the maths lecturers' specialist knowledge to focus on taster sessions for maths in HE.

We could probably get more press coverage – get the Times Education Supplement down there.

### Key lessons to pass on?

Keep all the interested parties informed of what is happening - including those who aren't directly involved but might have an interest or a need to know. With the conference there were others, such as the Widening Participation people in the university and the administrative staff in the Maths department, who the public might reasonably expect to know something about the conference. You can annoy people by not letting them know what's going on and you also lose the opportunity to find more people or resources to help you.

Identify the key things your partners can contribute – their unique strengths - and make sure you play to them. Don't waste their time by asking them to do things that other



partners could do equally well if not better – everybody is pushed for time and likes to feel their time has been well spent.

The Maths Strategy Consultants helped us make direct contact with maths departments - they could ensure messages or requests for help/information got to the right people. It's really important to think about the message you need to put across, and whether a partner might be a better channel than yourself. Sometimes they can give you a way of getting into networks that Aimhigher needs to be part of.

Have deadlines and make sure everybody knows who is responsible for what and when.

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*'Shared commitment isn't enough without a dedicated resource to support collaboration'*

## 5. Competition or collaboration? – Aimhigher Nottinghamshire's 'Supporting Progression' working group

*How do you reconcile the need of learning providers to recruit successfully to themselves with ensuring that learners are aware of the broadest range of opportunities available to them?*

Addressing this challenge was an early priority for Aimhigher Nottinghamshire which continues to develop an active partnership of learning providers. The group tackled tensions head-on and chalked up some major achievements, learning some important lessons along the way.

### Partners

The People's College, Broxtowe College (now merged as Castle College), South Nottingham College, West Nottinghamshire College, New College Nottingham, Bilborough College, Nottingham Trent University, University of Nottingham, Nottingham Education Business Partnership, Connexions Nottinghamshire, 14-19 County LA, City LA, Learning and Skills Council Nottinghamshire.

### Brief details of the Supporting Progression Working Group

The group arose from the Marketing and Marketing Intelligence Task Group established as part of the Nottinghamshire Aimhigher:Partnerships for Progression Plan in October 2003. The purpose was to help generate new ideas to contribute to the development of Aimhigher:P4P and support the recruitment of the new Aimhigher team, particularly the Marketing Manager.

Following her appointment in February 2004, the Group underwent substantive changes in membership and developed clearer focus with key tasks. The Aimhigher 2004-6 Strategic Plan set out the remit for newly named Progression Working Group to:

- support learners and learner progression through vigorous and imaginative promotion of opportunities and development of flexible cross-sector pathways
- develop mechanisms to enable learners to connect different experience and achievements, opportunities and employment outcomes.
- equip teachers, advisers, training providers, employers, carers and communities with skills, information and tools to reinforce Aimhigher messages and to support learning and progression.

Attendance has grown steadily stronger and participants have found ways of dealing with tensions arising from the imperative to promote their own institution's provision and the diversity of opportunities available to learners. Major achievements include collaborative prospectuses, the Student Guide to Higher Education Finance, the 'What Next' Careers and Opportunities Fair, and the online mapping of post-16 provision with the Progression Routes website.

### Reflections from Aimhigher and Working Group members

#### What factors helped the partnership to develop?

The Group was originally made up of senior staff but these were not the really the right people to take things forward. It needed the practical, hands-on people who understood marketing – the doers. However members also needed to have sufficient authority to make key decisions. Most members are from marketing or information teams and are committed to maintain consistent representation. We couldn't have worked with personalities changing from meeting to meeting.

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*'Things don't always happen as quickly as you'd like them to!'*

We shared a commitment to improving information for young people and encouraging progression into higher education. Some of the colleges had got together to produce collaborative publications before but Aimhigher provided the 'force behind us' – a dedicated resource from a neutral party - providing co-ordination and funding. Shared commitment isn't enough without a dedicated resource to support collaboration. All the things we've done just couldn't happen on the same scale without that.

Not being a provider, Aimhigher could work with the Group as the independent, unbiased and impartial chair. The ground rules were established early on that difficult issues could be put to a vote and everybody had an equal vote. Being chair also means doing most of the running, keeping everybody focussed, chasing when needed, and oiling the wheels with extra help or funding where necessary.

The individual credibility of the chair helps. As many of the activities and members are marketing- based, having someone who understands and has personal and professional credibility in that area really helps.

Everyone in the group having the same agenda. Members are given time to contribute and the meeting is not driven from the chair.

It's been important that the meetings are well managed, kept to time; aims and objectives are clear and agreed actions followed up. That way you never feel you have wasted your time attending.

The possibility of quick wins helped to begin with, then as people got to know each other, and grew confident about the benefits of working together, we were able to move onto even more ambitious things.

### **Any particular challenges?**

Meeting deadlines! In marketing, timing can be as important as content – a late publication could be almost worthless so everybody has to meet the deadlines the group has set. Everybody appreciates the pressure individuals and / or individual colleges might have, and some are struggling with fewer resources than others, but it is absolutely critical that

deadlines are met. Only alternative is going to print with incomplete information or perhaps not going to print at all. Even making funding available to help hasn't resolved this one entirely.

The group were aware that having schools with sixth forms and colleges as members might present some challenges but we had built up enough trust to talk through the issues openly.

*The possibility of quick wins helped to begin with, then as people got to know each other, and grew confident about the benefits of working together, we were able to move onto even more ambitious things.*

We are working our way through a number of other challenges including:

- obtaining data from individual institutions about their provision – and in time to meet the deadlines.
- agreeing how best to avoid duplication of activities and resources.
- deciding which colleges should provide interactive activities promoting specific occupational sectors at the 'What Next?' Careers and Opportunities Fair. This can present a challenge when the occupational sector may be an area of strength for more than one college.
- agreeing generic representation of sixth forms when schools want to keep a high profile amongst their own pupils.

Things don't always happen as quickly as you'd like them to!





*'When I am getting ready to reason with a man I spend one-third of my time thinking about myself and what I am going to say, and two-thirds thinking about him and what he is going to say.'* Abraham Lincoln

## 9. Words of wisdom

### Common themes in reflections from contributors

- Personal relationships are critically important. Learn others' language. Listen more than speak. Where partnerships fail it is often as a result of cultural differences or misunderstandings between the partners. Words can have different meanings and associations in different settings.
  - Don't over rely on key people, be alert to your most powerful partners and make sure there's something in it for everyone beyond the stated goal.
  - Don't make assumptions about what other people hope to gain from partnerships – find out and keep checking. It's easier to agree a common purpose if each organisation is clear about its own goals, priorities and values. Purposes will need to be redefined and negotiated at different stages of the partnership.
  - Make sure you're involving the right people. You need those that have the authority and discretion to take decisions without constantly 'checking back' with superiors and are able to get things acted upon in their own organisation.
- Contributors suggested a few strategies for getting the right people committed:
- Get others to relay your message – people who have more credibility and influence with your target organisation or person.
  - Get the person or organisation into a room/meeting with their peers – people supportive of your message – peer pressure is an important motivator.
  - Get others joined up and then go back to the person/organisation – often people can't stand not to be round the table with everybody else – just in case they miss something.
  - If people don't turn up to meetings ring them afterwards and tell them about the decisions made on their behalf.
  - Use the prospect of access to funding or access becoming more difficult in future as a carrot (or stick).
  - Be careful about overstepping boundaries. Partnerships can fail through one or more partners not understanding or respecting the boundaries of partnership arrangements: where the co-operation ends and competition begins, what is covered by the partnership and what is not, where relationships can be elastic and where they should remain formal. Boundaries need to be clear and shared. Furthermore, don't take credit for things that aren't yours. The partnership-broker needs to be 'without ego' (or as close to this ideal as humanly possible).
  - Efficient systems and good administrative support is essential. This includes well-managed meetings, written minutes, schedules describing partners' role and time-frame, and usually a 'runner' to ensure that it all happens.
  - Choose your chair and secretary (or 'runner') carefully. It's not always necessary to separate these roles, particularly at operational or 'Task Group' level, but you need to balance professional credibility and the role of the 'honest broker.'



- Have meetings to 'do things' rather than just exchange information. Make sure you complete, and have visible, products that partners can point to as outcomes.
- Check quality standards to ensure they are compatible with those of others in your partnership.
  - Vet them beforehand.
  - Don't get taken in by the pitch – check out their claims.
  - Take time to share experiences.
  - Get formal – develop partnership and service level agreements.
- We are in a knowledge economy and channels of communication are a critical resource. Don't expect partners to contribute mailing lists, promotion, databases, access to their networks etc without putting a value on them.
- Maintain motivation and enthusiasm by celebrating milestones achieved, 'time out', social opportunities and occasional use of 'goody bags'!
- Partnerships must operate on the basis of equality of respect and the equal worth of each partner's contribution. However there are few partnerships of equals. Unless a partnership has a formal legal identity (and even when this is the case) one or more partners will have a *de facto* or *de jure* leadership role by virtue of the human, physical or financial resources contributed. It is important to acknowledge this and not to pretend otherwise, but also to establish operational ground rules that ensure everybody's contribution is respected and equally valued.
- Weigh up the benefits of starting with people you know and those of starting a fresh partnership. Grafting new activity onto existing partnerships is attractive because new work can start quickly, there is already a level of trust, established management procedures and infrastructure, reputation and track record. However the mix of partners, their roles and contribution may not be as appropriate. Starting afresh takes longer and carries the risk of disregarding important history but also gives the opportunity to tailor arrangements precisely. A suggested test is if the balance of the agenda for meetings tips towards internal items, (such as accommodation, relationships, processes or staffing,) rather than concrete activities which benefit potential learners, then the partnership may need to examine why it exists.

(the last two above are taken from the insightful Action on Access publication, *Partnerships to widen participation in higher education: ideas for effective collaboration*)



## 10. References & resources

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## Action on Access publications

Working Together: Aimhigher Governance and Management – A guide for partnerships

Partnerships to Widen Participation in Higher Education: Ideas for Effective Collaboration

Aimhigher and the LSC: Approaches to Joint Working

All of the above available from the website [www.actiononaccess.org](http://www.actiononaccess.org)

## Web resources

<http://fivevital.educe.co.uk>

Interactive website designed for economic development partnerships involving the private sector but some really helpful tools particularly, under 'Toolkit'. The Partnership Lifecycle Interactive Tool makes suggestions of things you can do at each stage of the life-cycle. Also includes a Self-Assessment Tool to review the performance of strategic partnerships.

<http://www.greenleaf.org.uk> - The Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership UK

Promulgates an approach to leadership and organisational structure that emphasises increased service to others.

[www.lgpartnerships.com/partnerships](http://www.lgpartnerships.com/partnerships).

Toolkit designed to assist local authorities and their partners. Introduces some of the content from the site above.

[www.ourpartnership.org.uk](http://www.ourpartnership.org.uk)

Website promotes best practice for individuals and organisations working in partnerships between the voluntary and public sectors. Includes news, resources, e-learning and information about training and events. An NCVO project supported by the Home Office's Active Communities Unit.

<http://www.open2.net/systems/>

Joint BBC and Open University website provides an introduction to managing complexity through systems practice.

[www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Workingpartnershipsourcebook.pdf](http://www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Research/Workingpartnershipsourcebook.pdf)

Working in Partnership: A sourcebook - SQW Ltd, management consultancy. Comprehensive sourcebook based on 12 case studies of partnerships funded under New Opportunities Fund and on academic research. Structured around the partnership life-cycle and easy to dip into.

[www.paconsulting.com/insights/managing\\_complex\\_projects/edge\\_of\\_chaos](http://www.paconsulting.com/insights/managing_complex_projects/edge_of_chaos)

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