Innovative Practice

AccessHE: can collaborative outreach work continue in London after Aimhigher?

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Abstract The end of the Aimhigher programme in England in July 2011 combined with the change in the regulatory regime for access outreach work has fundamentally changed the landscape for practice. This paper examines an attempt to continue with collaborative outreach work in London through the development of a new organisation called AccessHE. It explores the challenges that this organisation will face in being sustainable in a context where higher education institutions (HEIs), not the state, control the funding. It argues that opportunities for collaboration in this area remain, but the nature of this work has to be re-positioned and a new, wider set of stakeholders engaged.

Key terms: outreach; Aimhigher; collaboration; partnership.

Introduction

The formation of the coalition government in the United Kingdom in May 2010 precipitated major transformations in the delivery of widening access and higher education (HE) outreach activity in England. This paper will examine a response by practitioners to the policy changes this government has introduced. It will focus on an attempt to re-position ‘collaborative’ outreach work from a scenario where it was funded by the state to one where it will be funded by higher education institutions themselves.

The fall of Aimhigher and the rise of Access Agreements

The Aimhigher programme was one of, if not the (in terms of funding per capita of population), biggest state-funded outreach activity initiatives in the world. It began in 2004 as the product of two antecedent initiatives that were funded by the government and aimed at HE and colleges, in the one case, and the school sector, in the other. Aimhigher was delivered through over 40 tri-sector area-based
partnerships that covered the whole of England (HEFCE, 2008). It focused attention mainly on those aged 14–19 (although it also did some valuable work at older and younger levels), supporting activities that would raise and consolidate aspirations, improve levels of information, advice and guidance (IAG) and increase attainment. In total, approximately £1 billion was invested in Aimhigher over seven years (Atherton, 2010). The coalition government announced in November 2010 that the programme would end in July 2011, citing the consequences of its changes in the regulatory access regime for universities as the main reason. These changes, it was argued, would mean universities themselves would take forward the work of Aimhigher (House of Commons Written Answers, 18 July 2011).

The Independent Review of Student Finance & Funding in England chaired by Lord Browne was set up prior to the general election of 2010, but did not report until October of that year when the government had, of course, changed. It recommended that there should be no ceiling on HE tuition fees and that state funding for the teaching of most academic subjects should be abolished. The government did not adopt the recommendations of the Browne review wholesale but did legislate to introduce a new system from 2012 where fees could be increased to £9000 per year and state funding for all but particular subjects was abolished. It also strengthened the role of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Founded in 2004, OFFA’s role is to monitor and administer HEI ‘Access Agreements’. These were meant to outline how HEIs would ensure that access would be protected when fees were increased. This purpose remains in the wake of the 2010 reforms, but the agreements now need to be more thorough and detailed and submitted/reviewed annually. They also now need to contain greater detail about outreach activities, including specified amounts of spend. The UK government’s 2011 White Paper on HE in England Higher education: students at the heart of the system, emphasised the central role that OFFA and Access Agreements would play in ensuring fairness in HE in the 2010s, stating that failure to deliver the commitments in an agreement would lead to possible sanctions for the offenders.

The national post-Aimhigher picture in mid-2011

After being told of their abolition in November 2010, Aimhigher partnerships were very much left to their own devices in terms of their futures. It was made clear by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) that a ‘phased decline’ facilitated by smoothing their remaining funding over 2012–2013, for example, was not an option the government was willing to consider. The fact that every partnership, while ostensibly ‘the same’, was in fact very different then became crucial. Each of the partnerships may have had the same objectives and delivered similar activities, but they differed considerably in size and number of HEIs and, inevitably after seven years, they had developed their own idiosyncratic sets of partner relations. These individualised factors are dictating what sort of, if any,
collaborative arrangements or vehicles are emerging in mid-2011 as Aimhigher ends. In many partnerships, one HEI may have had the major role in shaping Aimhigher in that area and leading strategically in that partnership. It is, therefore, the approach of this HEI that is dictating the collaboration developing after the end of the programme. In other partnerships, the relationships between the HEIs may be such that certain ones find it easier to collaborate but not all – possibly this may be a consequence of broader strategic and historical relationships between institutions. In mid-2011 it is still too early to discern any kind of accurate picture nationally. It appears that there will be partnerships/organisations or networks continuing the brand of tri-sector collaboration that Aimhigher initiated in some areas. But in many it seems less likely that there will be activity via common programmes or shared communication and facilitation structures as under Aimhigher and, at best, there may only be agreements to communicate what different institutions are doing separately.

AccessHE – a response to the end of Aimhigher in London

The Aimhigher West, Central and North (WECAN) London Partnership was faced with the same dilemmas as all other partnerships in late 2011. WECAN had the largest number of HEIs of any partnership with 14, the largest number of local authorities also at 14 and a sizeable budget of circa £3.5 million in 2010–2011. It was also the only new partnership to be formed since the beginning of the programme in 2004. WECAN was the product of the merger of the Central, North and West Aimhigher partnerships in 2009. WECAN decided very soon after the formal announcement of the end of Aimhigher that it was essential to attempt to continue with the tri-sector collaborative work that Aimhigher had pioneered but that this work now had to be positioned very differently. The policy driver for HE access outreach work in 2011 is the HEI Access Agreement. The focus therefore has to be on how collaboration enables HEIs to meet their strategic objectives, which underpin these agreements.

This represents a significant shift in thinking from Aimhigher. The learner remains paramount to this work, but the needs of the learner now have to be compatible with the HEI. It also means that the nature of the collaborative relationship changes significantly. Under Aimhigher the emphasis was on constructing and maintaining equitable governance structures that would reflect the equal claims that all stakeholders had to public monies. Much energy was therefore expended on the formation of the partnership steering committees and their related feeder groups. After Aimhigher, the approach taken by WECAN was that without these public funds such an approach was unrealistic. If a post-Aimhigher vehicle was to survive it would have to become financially sustainable by offering a set of services.
from which HEIs could choose to purchase. It was the bi-lateral relationship between the new organisation and the HEI – that is, between provider and client – that would be paramount and not the representativeness of a set of partnership governance committees.

In early 2011 WECAN initiated the formation of a new organisation called AccessHE. At this stage the use of the Aimhigher brand was not permitted by the government. In April 2011 that changed and the brand can now be used by organisations emerging from Aimhigher. However, it is not the intention to re-claim the Aimhigher name. While there is an argument that the Aimhigher brand has a particular credibility and resonance with schools and colleges, in the WECAN case the need to stress the new nature of the venture was more important. This need was such because AccessHE is an organisation that will look toward working beyond just the WECAN part of London, extending across the whole city. Reflecting again the client-driven nature of the new access environment, this decision sprang from the view expressed by some of AccessHE clients that there was a demand for pan-London access services. This approach has now become central to AccessHE as the initiative has become part of London Higher, the organisation that supports collaboration between HEIs operating in London across all their activities.

**What AccessHE will do**

By mid-2011 over 25 HEIs in London had expressed a commitment in principle to working with AccessHE, with the majority stating this in their Access Agreements. Several HEIs outside of the capital have also shown an interest in partnering with AccessHE to work in London, with one, the University of Liverpool, stating this in its Access Agreement. The intention is for AccessHE to focus on the services that lend themselves to delivery across a huge area like London. These will include:

- the establishment of a ‘one stop digital shop’ for information regarding HEI outreach activities in London for schools and colleges
- a continually updated database of school and college HE progression contacts post-Aimhigher
- a London Access Databank and tracking service that will allow HEIs to obtain background information on schools and colleges they work with and also to enter data on their outreach learners into a common database that will track them into HE
- a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development for those in all sectors where access is part of their remit, be it large or small – this programme will include offering schools/colleges the opportunity to nominate an ‘AccessHE Advocate’ who will receive training and become part of an electronic community of such Advocates across London
• facilitating ‘action groups’ in areas of common access challenges to HEIs, including working with looked-after children, those with disabilities and those with high potential; addressing transition to HE to support retention; communicating student finance information; and working with different ethnic communities. These groups will explore the formation of pan-London learner cohorts, the development of standardised suites of interventions based on best practice and building relationships with pan-London organisations with relevant cross-over responsibilities, such as the London Mayor’s office.

AccessHE will focus on facilitation. It will operate initially with a small staff and a budget that is less than 10% of the old WECAN allocation. Moreover, it will not necessarily aim to grow beyond this. The relationships that shape the delivery of widening access work have changed. Virtually all Aimhigher partnerships had staff whose responsibility it was to deliver outreach activities directly, coordinate projects or, in many cases, support work at the local authority level. The environment in which AccessHE works seems unlikely at this stage to invite such a model. Virtually all of the HEIs in London have their own outreach teams and all have the ability to deliver this work. AccessHE has to concentrate on enabling them to do this work better. It cannot, as WECAN did, look to shape it by disbursement of public funds.

The challenges facing AccessHE

Securing sufficient investment from the HEIs in London to make AccessHE sustainable will not be easy. This new initiative faces a number of challenges.

Engaging schools and colleges post-Aimhigher

The loss of Aimhigher funds in London will be felt most acutely by schools and colleges. The rationale for a pan-London communications hub flounders if there is nobody for HEIs to communicate information to! Preliminary research by AccessHE in the capital indicates that schools and colleges will take very contrasting approaches to working with HE. Some will continue to maintain link people and even put in their own monies. Some will treat this work like other ‘school trips’ and ask parents to contribute toward the cost. AccessHE, via programmes like the AccessHE Advocates, has to make it as easy as possible for schools in particular to engage with HE. The conduits to schools especially have also changed. Under Aimhigher in London the local authority tier had a pivotal role, with many experienced and able staff offering comprehensive advice and support to schools. The vast majority of these staff have gone, and there needs to be a more flexible approach adopted here. AccessHE has begun discussions with the Association of
School and Colleges Leaders (ASCL), TeachFirst and others to build relationships that will allow schools to engage with HE outreach activities.

**Building a pan-London vision among HEIs**

The funding changes described above have created a heightened set of pressures on universities to be strategic and carve out their own individual identities in the HE marketplace. At present this appears often to involve forging closer relationships with a smaller number of local, feeder or potential feeder institutions. The balance between outreach widening access work and school/college liaison and recruitment activity has become even finer, and in the case of many institutions the line is blurred to the point of being difficult to see. This approach can lead institutions to favour a localised approach to their access work. It also, of course, is consistent with many of the best practice messages coming out of Aimhigher that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds need consistent and continued support if they are to enter HE – not ‘hit and run’ activities. However, learners also need and deserve to be aware of the full range of HE options open to them. Hence, this consistent support must involve engagement with a range of HEIs, ideally from across the spectrum of institutions and certainly, in a place like London, from across the city. For HEIs also, there are significant risks with taking an overly narrow recruitment/outreach approach. The impact of drastically increased fees on patterns of HE participation is uncertain and students may be more willing to travel farther afield in London when equipped, as they may be, with greater knowledge regarding the consequences of their decisions. AccessHE offers HEIs the opportunity to spread risk by engaging with a greater diversity of learners.

**Keeping access on the political agenda**

One of the unintended (or possibly intended) consequences of the coalition’s approach has been to give access an even higher profile in the public policy discourse than under Labour. However, the public pronouncements of senior ministers need to be backed by real action to create a context for AccessHE to exist. The claim made by the government in November 2010 that university investment would replace that made in Aimhigher does not appear to be true. The figures released by OFFA in July 2011, taken from the Access Agreements, show that by 2015 the total investment in outreach via the Agreements will be just over £100 million (OFFA, 2011). In 2010–2011 the combined investment through the Agreements and Aimhigher was just over £150 million.

OFFA alone cannot increase this investment. It needs support in performing the difficult and challenging role of regulating access. AccessHE needs to engage with OFFA and give it the ability to support collaborative outreach work by providing evidence that such work is viable and valuable.
Collaboration after Aimhigher: where is the growth?

It would be easy to take a default view that AccessHE, or any collaborative endeavour growing out of Aimhigher, represents a backward step or some form of decline. The close and complex partnerships – and volume of work with learners – that Aimhigher enabled costs money. It cannot be reproduced ‘on the cheap’. However, lamenting the past is of no use to learners now and is not a sustainable business plan for any organisation. The coalition government’s approach has created some potential opportunities for access outreach work. The social composition of the student body is now an issue for the whole of the HEI. Each subject needs to understand where its future students are coming from, what their concerns are and how to support them. If any department or faculty does not do this, then it risks its very survival. The introduction of contestability for student places in the 2011 White Paper also ensures that this pressure extends across the whole of the sector. Such a common challenge is one that lends itself to being met by collaboration. The introduction of a statutory responsibility on schools and colleges to deliver impartial careers guidance together with a new measure of post-16 destination also create the potential for outreach work to become strategically central to the missions of these institutions. Finally, the need for the tri-sector collaboration in outreach activity pioneered by Aimhigher is not going to go away – if anything, it has increased. What is important is that those who are there to deliver it do not go away either and develop new vehicles, like AccessHE, to take this work forward.

References


