

# Riding the Storm: A NEON Report for the Lifelong Learning Network National Forum

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A perfect storm of policy change has fundamentally altered the landscape on which those delivering widening access work have had to work since 2010. The state has changed its role from the major funder of access work to enabling this work to be delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs). This report looks at how practitioners are attempting to retain a focus on impartial and even provision of support for learners from all under-represented groups to progress to HE, in particular those who wish to pursue vocational routes, through collaborative working across sectors. It is based on a national seminar for representatives of organisations working to support this collaboration and those from institutions facilitated by Higher York in summer 2012 and a follow-up piece of research in Autumn 2012 taking a snapshot view of the collaborative work in England producing the first 'Access Map'.

The key challenges facing the practitioners were:

- Making collaboration happen when contradictory policies and a lack of commitment to joined up thinking across government often mitigate against it.
- Proving the impact of access work. There is a role for policymakers in making it clearer what they see as impact in the field, but equally there is a responsibility on practitioners to build their capacity to evaluate access work effectively and build such work into what they do.
- Impartial Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is crucial. For HEIs there is a tension between access work and recruitment and a concern that they are being asked to fill a wider IAG gap in schools and colleges.
- 'Widening Participation Learners' are a heterogeneous group. There was a strong view that the present policy discourse was marginalising already marginalised groups such as those following vocational progression routes.

The main findings from the Access Map research were:

- Collaboration is concentrated in urban areas.
- The collaborative organisations displayed on the map are of very contrasting natures. They do not represent a uniform kind of service or

support in the field of widening access for institutions or learners. They often reflect their histories as Aimhigher partnerships/Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs).

- Over 80 HEIs are involved in a form of collaborative organisation but 12 of the 19 organisations listed have a budget of under £150,000.
- The combined annual budget of these organisations is between £2m to £3m. This compares to over £100m invested in LLNs and Aimhigher in 2010-11.
- Over 500 schools/colleges are engaged in these collaborative organisations.

The report argues that enabling greater collaboration in widening access work is fundamental if the significant investment of over £800m by mid 2010s in widening access enabled by the government is to have the maximum impact. The responsibility for making this collaboration does not lie totally with policymakers, although they have the essential role. Practitioners and institutions also have to be willing to commit to work in partnership and make the compromises and changes that requires. The report makes six recommendations for policymakers and practitioners:

### For policymakers

- Invest in a new widening access infrastructure via an Access Endowment
- Undertake a vocational audit of Access Agreements
- Improve school and further education college (FEC) understanding of what HE outreach work is
- Invest in a regular, informed dialogue with the access community

### For practitioners

- Establish a national Vocational Progression forum
- Establish a national forum for access collaborative organisations

# 1. Background

The widening access to higher education (HE) policy landscape has changed fundamentally since 2010. A 'perfect storm' of change has combined to lead to a shift from a scenario where the state was the main funder of such work, to the state acting increasingly as a regulator of an area that is coming to resemble as much of the education sector, a quasi-market, prone-like all such markets, to inconsistencies and failures.

The most important of the changes that make up this perfect storm are:

- Increased tuition fees and the increased importance of fee waivers and bursaries
- Reductions in teaching funds for HE institutions (HEIs)
- A new, stricter approach to student number controls for HEIs in the 'core and margin' approach
- Re-structuring of information, advice and guidance (IAG) provision and the introduction of the National Careers Service (NCS)
- Abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance
- Scaling down of the educational role of local authorities in many parts of the country
- Ending of the Aimhigher programme
- Ending of the Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) initiative
- Changes in the funding support for older learners at Level 3

Added to the changes above are a number of other changes whose impact is less direct but still relevant and possible future changes that could lead to another storm on the horizon:

- Local Education Partnerships (LEPs)
- The introduction of the English Baccalaureate
- Publication of destination measure data for schools and colleges that embeds Oxbridge and the Russell Group as success indicators
- A new 'joint strategy' for access between the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- Change (abolition) of GCSEs
- Change to the UCAS tariff
- Changes (reductions) in HE funding in a possible comprehensive spending review before the next election.

It was against this backdrop that the LLN National Forum, hosted by Higher York brought together a group of HEIs, further education colleges (FECs), voluntary sector organisations, policymakers and in particular representatives of new network/partnership based collaborative organisations working in access, for a seminar in late July 2012, entitled '*Vocational Progression in a new Partnership Landscape*'. The aim of the seminar was to examine the role of collaboration in the delivery of widening access work in the light of the perfect storm described above, particularly with regard to the progression of learners pursuing vocational courses. It was motivated by the concern that collaboration in access work and the importance placed on vocational progression in the present access discourse had both declined significantly since 2010.

Each of the changes highlighted above, especially the end of Aimhigher and LLNs, had the potential to seriously mitigate against collaboration. The emphasis being placed by policy-makers on a specific interpretation of social mobility i.e. long range progression of young people from low-income backgrounds to high status universities and occupations, was squeezing out attention and resources focused on the progression of learners, often older, in FE or the workplace, into a more diverse range of occupations from the discourse.

This report uses the discussions in this seminar as a springboard to outline the key challenges facing widening access practitioners in the early 2010s and ways to tackle them. It shows that collaboration in access work is far from dead, and its importance, rather than diminished, is in fact enhanced by the perfect storm outlined above. Nor is progression along vocational routes irrelevant, but potentially more attractive to many more learners. However, making collaboration happen is tougher in the 2010s than it ever was in the 2000s and making the case for vocational progression not as easy as it should be.

The seminar was followed by a short piece of research scoping out the nature and extent of organisations operating in England in late 2012 that focus on enabling collaboration between schools, colleges, HEIs and employers with the aim of widening access to HE from under-represented groups. This research produced an 'Access Map' of England reproduced in section 3, which shows that there are a number of new organisations working in this space alongside several who have continued after the end of state funding, finding support from

elsewhere. The existence of this varied range of organisations illustrate that while we may be 'post-LLNs' and 'post-Aimhigher' we are not 'post-collaboration'. However, while these organisations show the appetite for cross-sector collaborative vehicles remains, the research shows that the funding to sustain them is low and their survival in many cases is precarious. Moreover, while much of the country is covered by one of these organisations, the majority is not.

This report was commissioned by the Lifelong Learning Network National Forum. The Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) initiative brought together universities, colleges and other stakeholders around a particular sector, regional, or geographical location. The LLNs focus was on progression into and through education, particularly that which met the needs of the vocational learner. Their aim was to create new learning opportunities; forge agreement across institutions on how qualifications are valued; and help people understand how they can progress through the system. Networks have sought to clarify existing progression opportunities and engage in collaborative curriculum development in order to meet the needs of the vocational learner. Higher York, as one of the first LLNs to be granted funding through the HEFCE initiative in 2005, saw the value in bringing together practitioners working in networks across England. In conjunction with HEFCE, Higher York developed the LLN National Forum as a means to share practice in partnership working.

## 2. Vocational Progression in a new Partnership Landscape

The seminar was structured around three different presentations from:

- Clare Murphy (HEFCE) looking at how recent policy developments are trying to support collaboration and work in vocational progression to HE
- Peter Mulligan (UCAS) showcasing recent research that UCAS had undertaken into decision-making by prospective HE students which segmented users into different types, and the implications this had for IAG work.
- Ian McGregor Brown (HEART) looking at the needs of employers.

### 2.1 Collaboration matters

Both inter- and intra- sector collaboration between organisations continues to exist in the access sector and has a fundamental role to play in taking the work forward. A range of new collaborations have formed since 2010, but they have done so with little or no active support from the state. In fact, to a large extent they have done it despite what policymakers have done. While they have not discouraged collaboration some of the broader policy changes have created contexts within which access-focused collaboration is more difficult.

The group pointed to two examples of how policy is doing this:

- a) the clear divide between the Departments for Education and for Business, Innovation and Skills has made the joining up of initiatives designed to support progression for learners from lower socio-economic groups in schools (e.g. the pupil premium), with what HEIs are doing via their Access Agreements, much harder. It would be relatively straightforward for government to highlight to schools how they could use their pupil premia to work with HEIs, instead it is all left to HEIs or collaborative networks.
- b) the competition for funded student places between FECs and HEIs introduced by the attempts to expand provision at under £7,500 per year in 2012-13 via putting 20,000 funded student places in a bidding contest, did little to encourage collaboration. Indeed, there was a view that it had set previous partners against each other. The ramifications for collaboration between FECs and HEIs in access work are

further complicated, in the view of some of the delegates, by the desire of FECs to continually expand their provision while some HEIs may be taking a contrary view.

### 2.2 We have to prove impact

The need to improve the evidence base for all forms of access work to justify the continued investment the state is regulating into place, is a continual refrain from policymakers. It was understood and genuinely shared by the practitioners from across sectors at the seminar. However, there is also a frustration that continues from the 2000s as delegates felt there was still a lack of clarity from policymakers regarding what they see as constituting impact and how this should be measured. This is a worrying conclusion. It is encouraging that both policymakers and practitioners share a commitment here to putting the establishing of impact at the top of their priorities. But there was no evidence from the discussions that, despite this commitment and the lessons of the 2000s regarding what happens to access projects when the evidence base is not strong enough, significant progress was being made.

It is imperative that the quality of the dialogue between policymakers and practitioners themselves on how to establish impact, and what this means rapidly improves and examples of good practice (even if they are few) are captured and disseminated. A new set of toolkits designed to support practitioners with responsibility for access work in four different areas (targeting, evaluation, partnership working and delivering the learner progression framework), are being launched by HEFCE in Autumn 2012. It is vital that the Evaluation toolkit especially is disseminated effectively to practitioners in the sector and acts a springboard for rapid increase in the capacity of those practitioners to deliver the evidence needed. To do this, they will need clear guidance from policymakers and most importantly an active dialogue with them. It will not be enough for policymakers to issue guidance on an annual basis. Practitioners and policymakers need to be involved in a regular, iterative dialogue regarding what constitutes evidence of impact and how to obtain it.

What the above discussion points to is the importance again of collaboration as the catalyst in

terms of sharing practice, developing dialogue and increasing capacity.

### 2.3 Impartial IAG is crucial

Many of the delegates were either involved to some extent in delivering IAG directly to learners, or managing its delivery. There was a real concern amongst many of the delegates, from different types of organisations, that those delivering HE-related IAG were being increasingly asked to cover all forms of progression routes not just those leading to HE. The fragmentation in IAG provision in the schools sector was leading schools to try and maximise the value of whatever IAG they could obtain. Clearly, this was putting those delivering HE IAG under real pressure. There was less of a concern at the level of delivery around the impartiality of the HE IAG being delivered.

The delegates discussed how the end of Aimhigher and LLNs together with the shift in funding for HEIs from state to student could possibly steer HEIs away from delivering impartial IAG to a focus on their own institution. The delegates involved in IAG saw themselves as IAG professionals with an ethical commitment to impartiality. This was supported by some of their institutions having obtained the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 'Matrix' standard to re-affirm their impartiality. However, they were also sensitive to the commercial pressures that their senior managers and institutions experienced to ensure that enough students are recruited. It was felt that such pressures may be a factor in several HEIs for a bringing together of widening participation and recruitment activities (although it may be for other strategic reasons as well). Regardless of the motivation for the closer relationship, underpinned by organisational re-structuring in some cases, such developments have to be managed appropriately to ensure that impartiality is not compromised but also that work specifically to widen access to HE does not diminish.

As in points 2.2 and 2.3 above, there are things both policymakers and practitioners need to do here to protect the impartiality of IAG delivered by HEIs, and also to prevent HEI staff being put in untenable positions by those in schools and colleges. In the latter scenario, policymakers need to look carefully at why schools and colleges are being put in such positions and, if it indicates a gap in provision, then to explore urgently why this is the case. In terms of impartiality, it would again be very useful to see the forthcoming HEFCE and OFFA joint widening access strategy address directly how HEIs effectively balance their commitments to

widening access and recruitment. The strategy may for instance seek to commission some work that identifies examples of how HEIs are balancing these things effectively and initiate via such work a dialogue within the sector on this issue.

Practitioners themselves however, need to establish both intra- and inter- HEI dialogue between those with recruitment and those with access responsibilities (and those with both), supported by the appropriate continuous professional development. Such capacity building should not seek to build capacity to have a detailed knowledge of non-HE progression routes. Rather it should concentrate on how impartiality is maintained practically as the sector is evolving so rapidly. How much can staff at one HEI be reasonably expected to know about other HEIs; how many HEIs should they know something about; how do they deliver such information and crucially when they decide what knowledge they need and how much, where do they get it from? This is certainly an area where the new collaborative vehicles, some of which were represented at the seminar, have a key role in providing the support that practitioners need.

### 2.4 'Widening Participation Learners' are a heterogeneous group

Both the presentations by Peter Mulligan from UCAS and Ian McGregor Brown from the HEART partnership emphasised the need to develop as nuanced and dynamic an understanding as possible of the different groups of pre-HE students and the implications of these differences for widening participation work. Peter drew on excellent new research from UCAS that segmented their users into four groups:

- **Favourable** - probably always assumed that HE is a natural step and therefore social life is important to this group
- **Single Minded** - generally more mature, likely to stay at home so social life / cost of living less important than employment prospects
- **Subject Passion** - so focused on chosen area they are less concerned than average about most influential factors
- **Investor** - most likely to rate course, HEI reputation and employment factors highly, but also most likely group to use all information sources available to them.

Ian spoke in detail on the position facing those in employment and how HE itself can meet the needs of employers. Familiar issues regarding the participation of learners in the workplace were discussed including the limited amount of more flexible part-time and distance-learning courses available and also higher fees already adding to the financial barriers that older learners appear relatively more sensitive too. The strategic landscape surrounding those in employment entering HE is also quite different. The role that the LEPs as champions of higher level skills and therefore potential partners who can aid supporting participation in HE by those in the workplace was discussed. LEPs do have skills development as one of their aims but their primary focus is on enabling private sector led economic activity. It is debatable the extent of practical support they can offer to those working in access to HE. They are a set of organisations with whom there may be worthwhile dialogue worth having however. This is another example of where collaborative vehicles have a unique role to play. They can facilitate a discussion in an efficient way between the LEPs and HEIs/FECs. Such discussion is not likely to occur without the existence of such vehicles.

The broader point of focusing on the segmented nature of what we describe as widening participation learners needs to be translated from research to practice. The 2000s did produce a body of work where practical widening access interventions was concerned, associated particularly with Aimhigher and LLNs with much of it now available via the Higher Education Academy at [www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-archives](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-archives). Aimhigher work is being archived by the Higher Education Academy and the whole range of materials should be available in Autumn 2012. However, this body of knowledge needs to inform practice in the 2010s and be updated by research such as that presented at this seminar. It is useful for practical intervention models etc. to be archived but they will rapidly lose their relevance if they do not reflect our advanced understanding of the nature of the learners we are working with. This presents the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that practice can keep pace with research. In keeping with the central arguments in this report, it is suggested here that this is a joint responsibility between practitioners and policymakers.

Where those in employment are concerned there may be another broader issue here. The early 2010s discourse where access to HE is concerned is not giving such learners the prominence that they enjoyed in the 2000s via LLNs, the work of many Aimhigher partnerships and the growth of

Foundation Degrees led by Foundation Degree Forward (another national collaborative vehicle that no longer exists). How the discourse begins to include again those in employment is discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

## **2.5 Where now for vocational progression?**

There was a view touched upon in the seminar that vocational progression is suffering from the same marginalisation that the issue of those in employment returning to HE is experiencing. This was not explored in the detail it could have been in the seminar but it is important to consider the implications of such marginalisation in this report. Section 3 attempts to map the 'collaborative landscape' in widening access practice in England in mid-2012. It shows, perhaps surprisingly given the lack of direct state funding for this work, quite a significant range of new collaborative organisations. Some of these are focused explicitly on more vocational forms of progression. These organisations though, while falling under a banner of 'widening access collaborations' differ greatly from each other in terms of size, the nature of their partners, funding models and what activities they do. Unlike the 2000s it is not possible to understand much of what they are by their name, each needs to be seen as an entity in its own right and examined individually. The implications of this greater diversity for vocational progression is that any kind of collective view, regarding the importance that it plays in a more rounded and realistic view of what social mobility is needs dedicated orchestrating.

The case for entering HE, to take what can be defined as a more vocational course, one which leads more directly perhaps to a specific area of employment, has not been diminished by the perfect storm described in the introduction. The more direct link to employment that often characterises such routes may make them more attractive, as this offers greater potential financial security for more indebted students. The desire of the government to try and encourage new providers into the HE marketplace also favours increases in the more vocational options available. There are few (with the high profile exception of the New College of the Humanities), examples of new providers being FECs or private, focusing their attention on the more 'traditional' academic subjects. The attention is firmly being centered on courses where the labour market pay-off is clearer and/or there is a fit with the capacity that already exists in FE and this is usually in specific vocational areas.



The kind of vocational progression described above may be favoured by certain policy developments, but potentially hindered by others. The contradictions in policy positions and their effects on access highlighted by the delegates are evident here as the struggle to establish vocational equivalences for high A-level grades continues and thus effectively limits both the courses and institutions that vocational learners at Level 3 can enter as uncapped recruitment at what will be ABB or equivalent in 2013-14, takes hold.

Positioning vocational progression in the social mobility discourse of the early 2010s will not be done by one of these collaborative networks alone, nor will it happen by any of these networks (or HEI/FEC) exhorting the government to 'do the right thing' and recognising that social mobility means more than changing the social composition of the judiciary. If it can be done it requires collaboration between the regional partnerships that now exist and their members on a national basis working with other sympathetic national bodies e.g. the Association of Colleges, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the National Union of Students (NUS). It also requires those working specifically on vocational progression to develop their own agenda identifying exactly what policy change they would like to see with the evidence for their position and a method to affect change. This approach can work. In Spring 2012, the government softened its position on the extent to which learners over the age of 24 had to fund their own studies in the face of concerted lobbying from a number of other organisations.

### 3. The Access Map of England

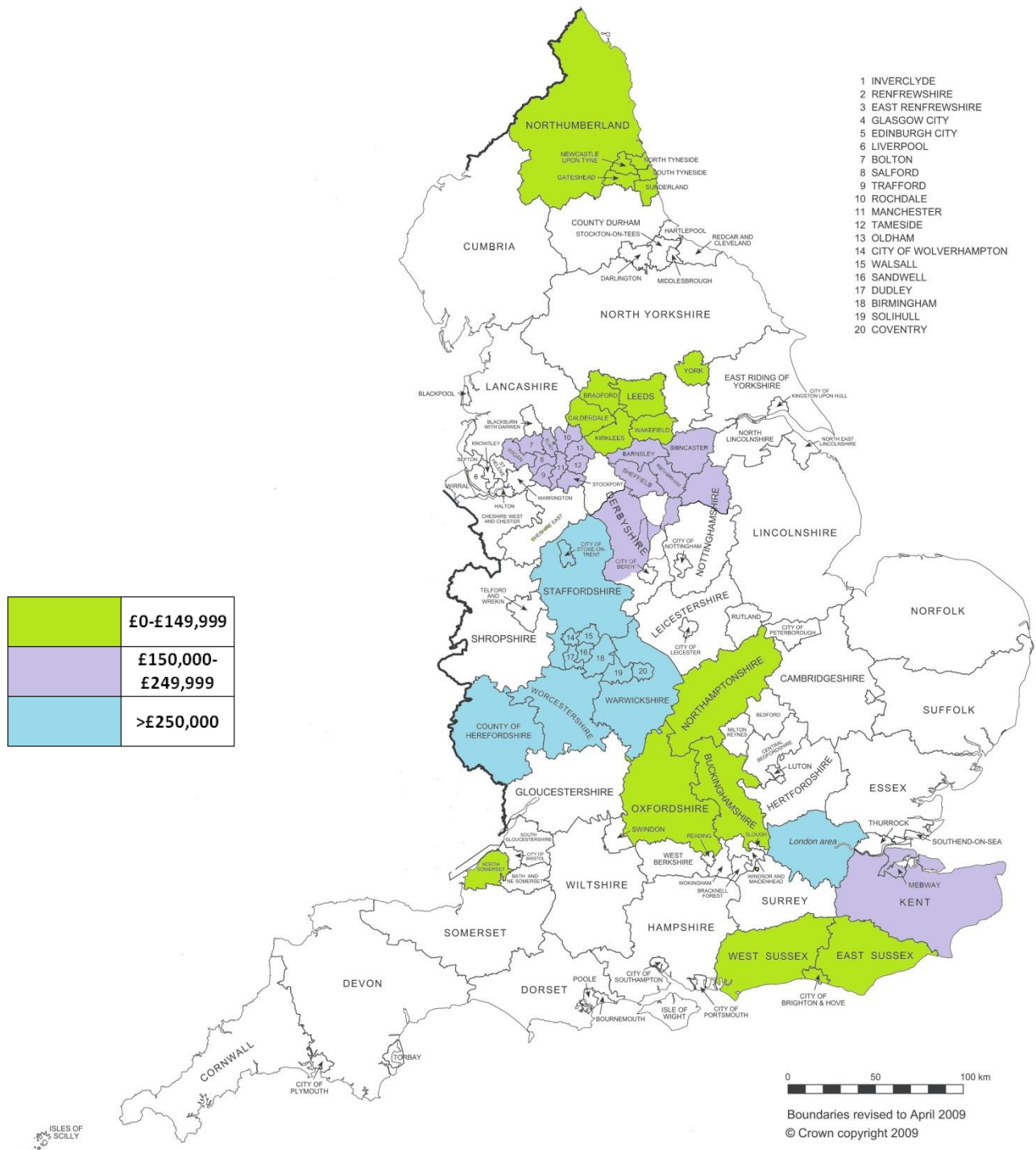
The map gives a 'snapshot' view of collaborative organisations operating in the widening access field in Autumn 2012. This is an evolving field with a degree of fluidity. There are new forms of organisation that were emerging as the research was being undertaken. The focus was on organisations that were enabling delivery with learners and those supporting them to be enabled. It was also on collaboration that was being managed by a named organisational entity with a separate identity from the institutions that funded it, or by an organisation that had its own status as a registered charity or private company. There is of course far more 'collaboration' taking place in widening access between HEIs themselves, and between HEIs, schools, colleges and employers. This also means the total invested in collaboration is higher than what we see here. However, bespoke collaboration vehicles offer something unique and vital to widening access. They provide the potential for a more equal distribution of power in the area between different stakeholders, a dedicated space to focus on how the tension between institutional concerns and those of learners can be managed to favour the latter and, in the case of vocational progression, the ability to push forward an agenda that despite the investment of the 2000s, remains at the risk of being marginalised.

Diagram 1 on page 11 shows the 'Access Map' of England. Table 1 on page 12 is very important to contextualise what the map shows. The key features of the new collaboration landscape are:

- Collaboration is concentrated in urban areas.
- The collaborative organisations displayed on the map are of very contrasting natures. They do not represent a uniform kind of service or support in the field of widening access for institutions or learners. They often reflect their histories as Aimhigher partnerships/Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs).
- Nearly 80 HEIs are involved in a form of collaborative organisation but 12 of the 19 organisations listed have a budget of under £150,000.
- The combined annual budget of these organisations is between £2m to £3m. This compares to over £100m invested in LLNs and Aimhigher in 2010-11.

- Over 500 schools/colleges are engaged in these collaborative organisations.

# Diagram 1 Access Collaboration in England



## Table 1 Access Collaboration in England

Name of organisation	Type	No of HEIs	Areas served	Focus of activities	Funding (£) per year
AccessHE	Third sector	24	Greater London	Broker HE/FE/schools collaboration via 10 different forums/projects.	>250,000
Aimhigher London South	Private company	11	South/South West London	Delivering a HE information, advice and guidance curriculum for partner schools from year 7 to 13.	<150,000
Aimhigher West Midlands	HE led	4	West Midlands	Build on work of Aimhigher supporting cross sector collaboration and organising summer schools, mentoring etc.	>250,000
Aimhigher Research and Consultancy	Private company	No direct partners	Greater Manchester	Staff development events and research/publications on a consultancy basis.	<150,000
Higher York	HE/FE/LA partnership	2	Yorkshire	A range of partnership activities including increasing choice and improving opportunities for people to access Higher Education and training.	<150,000
HEART (Higher Education Access Rewarding Transforming)	HE/FE led	5	South Yorkshire/western north Yorkshire	Organising widening participation activities for school/college learners and higher level skill work development for those in workforce.	<150,000
HEPP (Higher Education Progression Partnership)	HE led	2	Sheffield	Building on successful work of Aimhigher & Lifelong Learning Networks including CPD and collaborative learner events.	150,000 – 250,000
Linking London	HE led	8	London	Staff development, events and publications focused on vocational progression to HE.	>250,000
Western Vocational Progression Consortium	HE led	7	North Somerset	Online information portals for young people and adults.	<150,000
West London Fair Access Network	HE led	4	West London	Networking and practice sharing after end of LLN.	<150,000
Sussex Learning Network	HE led	2	Sussex	Supporting institutional collaboration to enable progression to HE of vocational learners.	<150,000
Raising Aspirations partnership	HE led	3	North East	Staff development and campus based events including focus on looked after children and those with disabilities.	<150,000
University of Manchester/Manchester Metropolitan University	HE led	2	Manchester	Targeted programme of university visits and in school support and guidance for young people and influencers up to age 16.	150,000 – 250,000
Kent and Medway Progression Federation	HE led	4	Kent	Targeted activities delivered by universities in partner schools.	150,000 – 250,000
Realising Opportunities	HE led	12	National	A coherent programme of activities designed to support progress to research intensive universities.	>250,000
Study Higher	HE led	3	Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes	Delivery of HE led outreach work to schools/colleges in the area and sharing of best practice across HEIs.	<150,000
Aimhigher Northamptonshire	Third Sector	1	Northamptonshire	Learner focused events and support of progression routes to HE.	<150,000
Black Country Partnership For Learning	FE led	3	Black Country	Focuses on FE:HE collaboration and capacity building/knowledge exchange	<150,000
Widening Participation Partnership for Leicester and Leicestershire	HE led	3	Leicester City/County	Outreach activities with learners building on the foundations of Aimhigher	<150,000

## 4. Conclusion

HE participation in 2012 appears to have held up reasonably well amongst those from lower socio-economic groups, if less well amongst older learners, although it is still too early to really say<sup>1</sup>. It is vital though for widening access practice and policy that these results are interpreted in a broader context. The lack of a collapse in participation has been interpreted by some as vindication of higher fees and equally dangerously, as vindication of the 'success' of the new access regime. In doing this, there is an either implicit or explicit, argument that collaboration in access work is not needed and the more free market approach appropriate. While it is obviously welcome that there have not been bigger reductions in participation amongst younger, disadvantaged learners this should not deflect attention away from the huge disparities that continue to exist in participation by different social groups. The argument for collaboration in access work is in no way diminished by one year's set of progression data which shows that huge inequalities in HE participation by social background have not got any worse! The positive spin placed on the participation data is of special concern where mature learners are concerned, as it explicitly ignores the importance of larger falls in participation amongst this group, many of whom will have been taking vocational courses.

Building the case for collaboration and as part of this, paying particular attention to the case for vocational progression, requires engaging with the realities of widening access in the 2010s. Access has become increasingly politicised both at the macro level of government and media, but also the micro level of institutions and partnerships. The relationships forged in the 2000s are invaluable but the arguments and approaches used both with learners and policymakers have to be updated.

The key thing about this seminar is that despite the upheavals of 2011 and 2012 it shows that 'the access community' still exists, and contains in it new and innovative organisations seeking to enhance collaboration within the community. Diagram 1 supports this view. It is an initial attempt to map the state of widening access collaboration

in England. It shows that a significant amount of the country is supported by some form of collaboration. However, digging deeper also shows that the depth of this coverage varies and the vehicles that are delivering it are often based on fragile foundations. The map shows that there is still an appetite for a collaborative infrastructure to support widening access work in England but at present it is uneven and variable. Central to the recommendations below, is that if government is going to maximise the value of the record levels of investment in widening access of which it is proud, it needs to invest a tiny fraction of this to kick-start the formation of a new infrastructure for widening access work based on collaboration.

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1

Thompson, J and Bekhradnia, B (2012) The Impact of Demand on the Government's Reforms to Higher Education Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute

## 5. Recommendations for Policymakers

### **Invest in an 'Access Endowment'**

Widening access practitioners to make the case with government for investment in a regional widening access infrastructure, supported by a level of national co-ordination and service in the form of an 'Access Endowment'. The objective would be for the infrastructure to be self-sustaining, primarily via Access Agreement spend from HEIs, but also contributions from schools/colleges, in the longer term. The focus would be on constructing the framework to enable learners from all areas, and under-represented groups to reach an even level of support from HEIs, FECs, schools and employers to enter HE.

### **Undertake a vocational audit of Access Agreements**

As part of the new joint strategy OFFA and HEFCE to commission more in-depth analysis of Access Agreements to establish the extent of activity that focuses on vocational progression. This work could be supported by analysis of Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSAs) and consultation with HEIs and FECs directly on the issue.

### **Establish a national Vocational Progression network/forum**

Collaborative organisations working on vocational progression specifically, should initiate a national forum to take collective responsibility for practice in this area and identify other partner organisations with an stake in the field. The forum should identify areas of desired policy change and strategies to affect it. The forum needs to connect with other groups with specific concerns in areas of access practice as part of the access community. The new professional organisation for those working in widening access the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) would provide an ideal framework for the forum.

### **Invest in building regular, informed dialogue with the access community**

As part of the new joint strategy OFFA and HEFCE to invest resources in active dialogue with the access community on all issues, but with specific evidence and impact especially. This dialogue should go beyond the discrete, command approach of the 2000s based solely on consultative groups or events to include a more continuous approach based around social media. A social media driven approach is increasingly common amongst policymakers in other fields and OFFA/HEFCE need to follow suit in access.

### **Improve school and FEC understanding of HE outreach**

The Department for Education to deliver clearer messages to schools regarding access work and the benefits but also limitations regarding what HEIs can do in this area, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to do likewise with FECs. This would not take a significant resource investment but could have a tangible positive benefit for those delivering IAG on the ground across sectors.

### **Establish a network/forum for access collaborative organisations**

Collaborative organisations working in access should initiate a national forum to take collective responsibility for practice in this area. As above, NEON provides an ideal mechanism to ensure the forum connects with the whole access community and does not become isolated. Its first objective should be to produce an evidence based case for the state to fund collaborative networks in a way that fits with the policy context of the 2010s.