

**THE IMPACT OF AIMHIGHER KENT & MEDWAY ON FEELINGS, BELIEFS AND ASPIRATIONS OF SCHOOL STUDENTS**



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**Δimhigher...**  
**KENT & MEDWAY**

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## CONTENT

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Research aim</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. Methods</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Findings</b>	<b>7</b>
Level of awareness	7
Key influencers	11
Aimhigher activities	13
Learning	15
Desire to progress	17
Suggestions for improvement	18
<b>5. Conclusion</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>6. Recommendations</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>7. References</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>8. Acknowledgements</b>	<b>24</b>

## Executive Summary

This research was undertaken by Aimhigher Kent & Medway (AHKM). Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) from under represented groups, by raising levels of awareness of HE, and aspirations to enter HE. The aim of this research has been to ascertain the impact of AHKM interventions upon the feelings, beliefs and aspirations of students and staff after the first three years of Aimhigher activities.

In order to achieve this aim, the research sought to address the following research questions:

- How much do students and staff know about higher education?
- What/who are the key influencers in the decision making process?
- What do students recall about AHKM following participation in activities?
- What is learnt from participation?
- How has participation in AHKM activities affected a student's desire to progress into further and higher education?
- How could the interventions be improved?

The research gathered information on a very small number of the total pool of students engaged by the project, but nevertheless provided an insight into the views, attitudes, feelings, opinions and beliefs of a set of AHKM school students. Selected students were involved in a number of awareness and aspiration-raising activities over a period of time and/or they had received one-to-one mentoring from, or been involved in group mentoring activities delivered by, a designated school Aimhigher Learning Mentor (School LM).

Through a combination of focus group sessions, paired and individual interviews, the research obtained the views of students, learning mentors and teachers. The findings were based around the research questions, a summary of which is presented below:

- ***Students tend to plan for the short term rather than the long term.*** They generally perceived getting a better job and the social life as advantages of HE, and financial debt, continuing education and moving away from home to be disadvantages of HE.
- ***Parents were regarded as the main, supportive influencers*** on AHKM students, whereas teachers were thought to be only concerned with their own subject. Students felt that their parents would support them in whatever *choice* they made. Peers who did not consider going on to HE were considered by some to be a negative influence.
- ***Students were most positive about activities that offered them some autonomy and opportunity to actively participate.*** Where students were mentored by a school LM, students benefited from one-to-one sessions or small groups.
- ***Staff highlighted their concern about taking students out of lessons*** for Aimhigher activities. The challenge is to ensure that students benefit from Aimhigher intervention without comprising taught input via lessons.

- ***Evidence showed that students were learning from Aimhigher***, especially how to access the information about progression and Higher Education independently. In addition, students commented on feeling more confident with increased self esteem. Older students were also more aware of the financial considerations of going to HE and managing student loans. However, there was limited evidence to show that students were better motivated in terms of their school work as a result of Aimhigher.
- ***Suggested improvements included improving communication among mentors and increased awareness of Aimhigher among school staff***. Other staff also expressed concern that a change in funding might disrupt support for students and negatively impact the programme.

## 1. Introduction

Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in higher education (HE) of young people from under-represented groups by raising the awareness and aspirations. The project commenced in 2003 and in August 2004, an integrated Aimhigher project was developed as a result of the integration of two previously existing programmes, namely, Aimhigher Excellence Challenge and Aimhigher: Partnerships for Progression. The target set by the Government is that by the year 2010, 50 per cent of those aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from HE (Aimhigher, 2006). The role of Aimhigher is thus to:

- raise aspirations and motivation to enter HE among young people in schools, further education and workplace learning, who are from under-represented groups
- raise the attainment of potential HE students from under-represented groups so that they gain the academic or vocational qualifications and learning skills that will enable them to enter HE
- strengthen progression routes into HE via vocational courses, including Apprenticeships, whether they are delivered in schools, colleges or the workplace
- raise students' aspirations to enter HE and to apply to the institution and/or course best suited to their abilities
- improve the attainment, aspirations, motivation and self-esteem of gifted and talented young people aged 14-19
- improve the quality of identification, provision and support for those students in schools and colleges. (Aimhigher, 2006)

Most Aimhigher activities take place at a Regional and Area level, which allows them to be tailored to the needs of specific communities. As a result the range of Aimhigher activities is extremely broad. However, the types of activities listed below are common to many Aimhigher projects:

- Offering information, advice and guidance to potential HE students, and their teachers and families, so that learners are well advised about their future
- Organising summer schools, taster days, master classes and mentoring schemes to raise the aspirations and attainment of young people who have the potential to enter HE
- Working with employers and training providers to progress students onto vocational routes to HE
- Working to encourage those already in the workplace to become full-time, part-time or distance learning students. (Aimhigher, 2006)

Designated school based Aimhigher Learning Mentors have been working across a number of target schools in Kent & Medway. Mentoring originated as one of the three main strands of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative and is a key national Aimhigher activity. Learning Mentors are salaried staff working with college students and school pupils to help them to address barriers to learning. They bridge academic and pastoral support roles with the aim of ensuring that individual pupils and students engage more effectively in learning and achieve appropriately. Pupils of all ability levels can underachieve, and Learning Mentors target these pupils and help them to identify and address what it is that is getting in the way of their learning. These barriers can be wide ranging and often very personal to the individual pupil. They include the need to develop better learning and study skills, personal organisation, difficulties at home, behaviour, bullying, or just general disaffection and disengagement from learning. Learning Mentors work with caseloads of pupils, largely on a 1:1 or small group basis, and they also run clubs and "drop ins". They liaise closely with teachers and other support professionals, and often act as a supportive link between the family and school (DfES, 2006). As expressed in 2003,

*'Learning mentors are making a significant effect on the attendance, behaviour, self-esteem and progress of the pupils they support... the most successful and highly valued strand of the EiC programme... In 95% of the survey schools, inspectors judged that the mentoring programme made a positive contribution to the mainstream provision of the School Programmes a whole, and had a beneficial effect on the behaviour of individual pupils and on their ability to learn and make progress.'* (Ofsted, 2003: 46)

In target schools without Learning Mentors, AHKM has delivered a menu of activities for year groups 9 through to 13. These activities include: school talks delivered by HE undergraduates (Ambassador programme); HE campus visits; Subject Tasters and Masterclasses.

## **2. Research aim**

The aim of the research was to obtain an insight into the impact that AHKM interventions have had upon the feelings, beliefs and aspirations of students and staff. The research focussed on students who had a) participated in at least 3 AHKM activities including a School Talk, a Subject Taster, and at least one HEI visit, or b) been mentored by a school Learning Mentor.

In order to achieve this aim, the research sought to address the following research questions:

- What is the general level of awareness about HE? See earlier comments in Exec Summary
- What/who are the key influencers in the decision making process?
- What do participants remember about Aimhigher Kent & Medway activities?
- What is learnt from participation in these activities?
- How has participation in Aimhigher Kent & Medway activities affected a student's desire to progress into further and higher education?
- How could the interventions be improved?

## **3. Methods**

In order to gather the most relevant data and to accommodate the research aim, focus group sessions, paired and individual interviews were conducted with a wide range of participants who had engaged in various types of Aimhigher Kent & Medway interventions. These included the following groups:

1. **Mentees** who had worked with an Aimhigher school based Learning Mentor. These mentees will have participated in one-to-one mentoring, school talks, tasters and HEI visits.

School A, School Mentor Programme	- two girls (Year 11)
School B, School Mentor Programme	- two girls (Year 9)
	- one girl and one boy (Year 11)

2. **Mentors** who worked with the mentees in 1. above.

School A, School Mentor Programme	- one female
School B, School Mentor Programme	- one female

3. **Students (non mentees)** who participated in tasters/school talks/HEI visits – **referred to as the Ambassador Programme**

School C, Ambassador Programme	- two girls and one boy (Year 10)
	- two boys (Year 10)

#### 4. Teachers involved with AHKM students: mentees and non mentees

School A, School Mentor Programme - Assistant Principal of Key Stage 4 and Aimhigher Coordinator

School C, Ambassador Programme - Head of Year 10 Learning

The focus group and paired interview setting provided a forum in which the students could build upon, and challenge each others' perspectives (Morgan, 1997), whilst allowing the researcher to assess the extent to which there was a consistent and shared view (Robson, 2002). In addition to this, individual interviews were carried out with AHKM Learning Mentors and teachers to obtain their perspectives on the Aimhigher interventions.

One of the interviews with a teacher (School C, Ambassador Programme) had to be conducted via email. All other interview sessions were semi-structured so as to provide an opportunity for the researcher to explore a number of areas of interest whilst at the same time allowing themes that were considered important to the interviewee themselves to be explored.

Data was collected over an academic term in the offices of Learning Mentors and teachers. All participants were asked for their consent to tape record the conversations. These tapes were then transcribed and analysed according to themes that emerged from the data. Although this process does inevitably involve some loss of information, it enabled simple description of the data.

#### 4. Findings

The research explored the impact of Aimhigher on feelings, beliefs and aspirations and focused upon specific research questions. The resulting data can be presented according to themes closely relating to these questions, namely, the level of awareness of HE; key influencers; AHKM activities; learning, the desire to progress and suggestions for improvement.

##### Level of awareness

###### Key findings:

- The students had not planned beyond the subject they might like to study post 16 years.**
- HE was seen as taking up too much time, specifically the length of the Degree course**
- Students believed that HE offered them a better chance in life**
- Students awareness of finance and HE was very good**
- Students believed that financing HE was a big drawback and were concerned about debt**

In order to encourage conversation and to ascertain the students' awareness of HE, students were asked about their future plans. A small proportion of students appeared to have chosen their subjects with a view to a particular career. For instance, one student stated that he wished to pursue Sports Science or, '*something that can get me into sport and physiotherapy*' (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme). Similarly, another student stated that, '*I really want to go into acting because that is what I live to do, but it is such a tight industry to get in to, that I want to go into linguistics or the army if I can't*' (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee). Interestingly, in this example the student showed a realistic idea of the types of jobs it might be possible to secure whilst demonstrating an awareness of the existing alternatives.

Many students however, had not planned beyond the subject that they wished to pursue at 6<sup>th</sup> form level. For example, in answer to what they wished to do when they left school, a boy in Year 10 answered that they wanted to do, *'some kind of science degree. I'm not really sure though. I just want to do some sort of science in higher education'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme). This outlook was reflected on by a teacher, who pointed out that, *'I think that probably the majority of them are just thinking about after Year 11 and not particularly University as it still seems very distant'* (Teacher, School C, Ambassador Programme). A general opinion was that in schools which did not have a 6<sup>th</sup> form, it would be much harder to raise awareness of HE (Learning mentor, School B, School Mentor Programme).

Arguably, what might warrant concern is that for some students, the HE path was seen as something which should not take up too much time. For instance, although this Year 9 girl wanted to go to University, she wanted to complete it in as little time as possible: *'I might just like, if it possible, do a year at college and go straight to Uni, because I don't want to waste too much time off taking a gap year and working because I get a bit carried away. I just want to get it over and done with'* (School B, School Mentor Programme). The reasons for this type of attitude were discussed in another interview whereby a learning mentor said that a lot of students, *'want the fast cars and the big house, but I think TV has taught them there is a quick fix. There is an easy way to get it so they don't need school, they don't need education, they don't need help'* (Learning mentor, School B, School Mentor Programme).

### ***Advantages of HE***

When asked about the advantages HE offered, most students shared the view that HE provided them with, *'a better chance in life'* (Year 11 boy, School B, School Mentor Programme). The most common benefits associated with HE were generally considered to be, as one student summed up, *'a better job and more money...'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme). Indeed, another boy observed that, *'you get more grades and you have got a better chance of getting a better job'* (Year 11, boy, School B, School Mentor Programme). Likewise, another girl wanted to go on to HE, *'to get a decent job afterwards, with decent money, a decent lifestyle'* (Year 11 girl, School A, School Mentor Programme). Some students expressed their views in the context of today's job market, or as this Year 9 girl said, *'It is getting harder and harder to find jobs now, so if you have more education on your CV and that, then you can get better pay'* (Year 9 girl, School B, School Mentor Programme).

Another advantage of HE highlighted in a number of schools was the promise of a good social life:

*'I think the social life is better. I mean, the people have talked to us about the social life being good and you've got the sports and that. There are different societies and things like that...it's not as strict as it is here and I think the education is probably a bit better.'*

(Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme)

At the same time, one student was aware that a balance had to be kept and knew that,

*'It is really good, that's it is always fun and you can never get too weighed down with the work but you still have to focus on it. You get to have a good time and balance it all.'*

(Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

Despite the fact that many students were sometimes wary of leaving home for University, a younger girl recognised that this could also be a positive change, by explaining that,

*'You are on your own so you meet more people, get more grown up.... You meet people with the same qualities and learn with everyone.'*

(Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

### ***Disadvantages of HE***

Finance was considered by most students to be a drawback to HE. According to one learning mentor, one of the first things that students learn is that they can do a full time course and still work *'a good amount of hours to support themselves'* (Learning mentor, School B, School Mentor Programme). Certainly, it seems that Aimhigher had informed many students about the ways to repay the loans, as the next extract shows:

Boy: *You have to pay for it, but you don't until you are earning more than 15 grand.*

Interviewer: *Are you concerned about the financial arrangements?*

Boy: *Well, no because there are ways of paying it back.*

(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

For some, despite their knowledge of paying back student loans, they were still concerned about the sheer size of the debt:

*'In some ways it is alright but as soon as you come out of University you have got to get a loan straight away that you have got to pay back and that is probably quite bad, even if it is just a little bit it is still a large sum'.*

(Year 11 girl, School B, Mentee)

Interestingly, students differed on how debt could be avoided. One student considered that if, *'you work beforehand so you build up money and then you would be able to pay off your school fees and stay out of debt if you can'* (Year 9 girl, School B, School Mentor Programme). Another student reasoned that,

*'If I didn't have enough money I wouldn't be able to get anything so I would try and get a scholarship or something. But if I couldn't get a scholarship and I wouldn't have money to get in then I wouldn't be able to go.'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

When asked about the drawbacks of HE, other students cited the extended time spent in education and studying. For instance, in one group, while one girl mentioned *'more of your time, more time studying'*, a boy added, *'basically more time in school'* (Year 11, School B, Mentee). One girl stated that the only disadvantage about HE was, *'the fact that you have to carry on education'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee). The interesting point here is that education was seen as something which got in the way of their lives rather than that which could be enjoyed.

During the discussions, it was evident that students were sometimes put off by the courses themselves. For instance, when asked whether they had looked at the courses they might like to do, one boy answered, *'Some of them, like the catering courses. They look a lot harder than I really thought'* (Year 11 boy, School B, Mentee). There were instances whereby students were also put off by the length of the course. For example, one student was enthused by a trip to a University which had organised a taster day in pharmacy. In this example, the girl did not want to study for as long as it took if it meant delaying their own plans:

Girl: *Well, it was really good and then after that I wanted to become a pharmacist and then I found out you had to have 7 or 8 years at Uni.*

Interviewer: *Why did you not want to do 7 or 8 years at University?*

Girl: *Because I want kids.*

(Year 11, School B, Mentee)

Likewise, a boy in the group exclaimed, *'I would do forensic if it was like 3 years but it's not, it's like 8 or 9. I have had enough of school!'* (Year 11 boy, School B, Mentee)

For some students, the idea of leaving home was unsettling and they were wary of *'being away from your family - that might make you unhappy'* (Year 10 girl, School C, Ambassador Programme). However, for many students, the option of attending a HE institution in their locality was preferable. As one teacher commented,

*'I think they think they are going to fall off the end of the earth if they go out of Canterbury. You know I actually say to people, there is a big world out there. You can go further. It is this comfort zone'* (Teacher in school with Mentor, School A).

As this conversation shows, some students had already formed opinions about where they would like to go:

Interviewer: *Where do you want to go to University?*

Girl: *I want to go nearer home, but it depends what they offer.*

Boy: *If it has got that, I don't know, that x factor, I would probably go a bit further. I would like to stay here though. I wouldn't want to go too far. I want to be able to keep in touch with people around here.*

Interviewer: *So you would want to stay around here?*

Girl: *Or the other extreme and live really far away. Either really close or really far away. Not in the middle.*

Boy: *I would go anywhere really I suppose. I would rather stay here.*

Interviewer: *Why would you not want to stay in the middle?*

Girl: *I don't know, I can't really explain it. I just wouldn't want to be in the middle. Just far away or really close.*

(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

## Key influencers

### Key findings:

- Parents were seen as the main influence for students going on to HE**
- Students felt that it was their own decision but valued support from their parents**
- Students did not feel that their teachers influenced their decision to stay on at school**
- Peer perceptions of HE can encourage or discourage students' participation in AHKM activities**

According to one member of staff, parents were the main influence for students going on to HE, *'because they can create the impression for some that education doesn't matter or they will be very supportive of it'* (Teacher, School C, Ambassador Programme). Another teacher attributed parents' support to the fact that, *'they are quite surprised that somebody in their family might be good enough'* (Teacher in school with Mentor, School A). Indeed, many of the students felt encouraged and supported by their parents to go on to HE, even it was not expected of them. For example, one girl said that, *'No, they don't expect me to go to Uni but if that is what I want to do then they'll support me'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee). Other students recognised that it was their own decision but appeared to feel more secure knowing support was available if needed:

Girl: *My parents encourage me.*

Boy: *Yeah, they definitely encourage me. I think they trust me to make my own decision but they would help me if I asked for help.*  
(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

Likewise, as another student who was planning to go on to College explained,

*'Well, my mum says as long as I get the grades at school that I want then I can get whatever job I want when I get out of school. So if I wanted to go to college then she would stand by my decision.'*  
(Year 11 boy, School B, Mentee)

Some students were intent on making their own decisions about their future. For instance, one student expressed their desire to make their own decisions and not to rely on others to influence his future: *'It has got to be what I want to do really. That has to be the main factor.'* (Year 10 boy, C, Ambassador Programme) Another younger student explained that,

*'They have just kind of said to me, you know, 'whatever you want to do, you know, I support you'. But they haven't given me much input because, you know, I want to do it myself. I just want to make my own decisions about what I want to do.'*  
(Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

Similarly another girl in the group stated that even if her parents did not want her to go on to HE, she would still want to experience it herself,

*'...you have to experience what they went through as well. So, you have to like, see for yourself and how different it is compared to what they went through. So if they were trying to stop you then I don't think that would stop me. I would still want to go and see for myself.'*

(Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

However, as a learning mentor pointed out, the parents could often prove to be a negative as well as positive influence. As she explained this is particularly difficult, *'if the parents say, 'just get a job, you'll earn more money'. Money at 16, when they say that you can earn £30 a week, the kids think 'fantastic''*

(Learning Mentor, School B).

In general, students did not feel that teachers influenced their decision to stay on at HE. For instance, as one pair of girls explained:

Girl A: *Some teachers we do. My science teacher is one that we talk to.*

Girl B: *Yeah we talk to him a lot because he is very like open about it all.*

Girl A: *But some teachers you wouldn't want to talk to about it.*

Girl B: *Some of them are not approachable.*

Girl A: *You wouldn't like, you couldn't really go up to them and just say, 'I need to talk to you about my options'.*

Girl B: *Most of them try to like get you to take the subject that they are teaching (laughs).*

(Year 9 girls, School B, Mentee)

Similarly a girl in another school, despite acknowledging that it does depend upon the teacher and the student's relationship with that teacher, *'sometimes you can't stand the subject and they try and make you like carry it on.'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

According to a learning mentor, teachers were not as influential as they might be because, *'the focus is really on just achieve targets, get the kids to get their grades and it's short term goals...'* (Learning mentor, School B)

Although students did talk about HE with their friends, they were often careful about who they talked to and were aware that some of their peers would never consider the options simply because of the jobs they wanted:

Boy: *We talk about it from time to time, but it's like, you will do what you want to do. I think that that is the way that we look at it really. I think that quite a few my mates do want to go on to higher education and some don't.*

Girl: *Some of them, for what they want to do, they don't need it.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Girl: *Because um, they don't want to further their education. They are happy to get not as good jobs.*

Interviewer: *What would you say would be the jobs they would be looking to get?*

Girl: *Like a builder, something like that. It might be in the family.*

(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

In one school, a student estimated that in their year probably 25% would consider going on to university whilst, *'the other 75% would struggle to work at McDonalds'*. Whilst they believed that some of them might want to go to college and perhaps do an apprenticeship to get, *'some sort of education so they can still get a decent job... some of them will just be going straight out to work, like shop work or something'* (Year 11 girl, School A, School Mentor Programme). When asked how they got on with the other 75%, the student revealed that, *'It could be said they isolate you...or they just give you grief outside of lessons as well and like, tease you and stuff'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee).

Another student was of the opinion that many of his peers simply did not have enough knowledge of HE to make an informed decision. As he explained:

*'There is not much talk about it. So like, some people don't know HE exists, coz they just shrug their shoulders and say, 'I'm just gonna to go straight to college'. But if they actually come in and listen to Miss then they would know about it, if you know what I mean, and they'd think different. Like I couldn't give a damn about HE and then Miss like spoke to me and it's just so easy to get into it.'* (Year 11, School B, Mentee)

This issue of peer culture was also raised by a teacher who was of the opinion that, *'a few students don't like attending as they get seen as 'boffs' by other students'* (Teacher, School C, Ambassador Programme). A similar view was held by a learning mentor who related a situation whereby two girls,

*'were both doing quite well independently. Now they have become best friends they are completely de-motivating each other which is really frustrating to see...(in general) if one of them says something that they are not interested in, it is uncool for the rest of them to say that they are.'*

(Learning mentor, School B)

Perhaps in relation to this point, one boy was aware of rumours that circulated around school pertaining to University and claimed that, *'All sorts go around, like it can be really hard and some of the people aren't nice, but I don't believe that really.'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme)

### Aimhigher activities

#### Key findings:

- Students enjoy visits to universities**
- Students enjoyed activities which encourage participation and involvement**
- Students enjoyed activities with small, rather than large groups including 1 to 1 mentoring with School mentor**
- Scheduling AHKM activities around the school timetable for minimal disruption is critical**
- Where possible, students should not be taken out of the same subject lessons repeatedly in an academic year**

A broad range of Aimhigher activities were offered across the schools. Some Year 11 students were planning to go on summer schools and were looking forward particularly to meeting people (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee).

In School C, Ambassador Programme students participated in three talks each year starting in Year 9. Therefore, when asked about their personal experiences, students described that,

*'...there was a few in Year 9 and there have been probably 3 or 4 this year. But a lot of them are just like open conversations really – you discuss what you think and they tell you what it is like. They ask you questions.'*

(Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme)

During a separate conversation, the students elaborated on the topics that might be introduced during these school talks:

Interviewer: *What does the presentation cover?*

Girl B: *Tips.*

- Boy: *Topics of whatever they are talking about because it changes sometimes. The intention is that it would cover different things.*
- Interviewer: *Can you give me an example?*
- Girl B: *It could be like life, what it is like for your life, social life, or what the courses are like, things like that.*
- Girl A: *Last time they had one on what lectures are like.*
- Boy: *They talk about the presentation and then we have a discussion.*  
(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

Many of the students enjoyed trips to local Universities. One group had recently been to a taster session which involved a Spanish lecture. As a student explained,

*‘Considering I do French and I don’t do Spanish I felt it was quite difficult, but it was still interesting and she was a bit more practical in the lecture...rather than just sitting there and talking, there was some, like, participation’* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

Not all activities were favoured by all students and one such activity was on a trip to a University. As this girl described:

*‘They thought that like they put all the girls on the dance one and all the guys in the drama one. It was like, no I don’t do dance. I want to do drama and they wouldn’t let you swap...’*  
(Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

Other students were engaged in group activities with an Aimhigher learning mentor. During these discussions, it seemed that the group activities that worked best were ones in which a small number of students were able to take some control and responsibility for the way the sessions ran. Indeed, as a learning mentor observed,

*‘because it is led by them, it is more relaxed, they can get on with it, they can be more independent and all the research and information is there for them to kind of digest in their own way and ask me questions so they are developing their own knowledge...’*  
(Learning mentor, School B, Mentee)

In this way, the Year 9 girls enjoyed activities where, *‘we get to interact and share our ideas on what we would like to put on the game’*, whilst another added, *‘you kind of go off and do the research to find out what questions to do and then you come back and put that into the board game’* (Year 9 girls, School B, Mentee).

Likewise, the one-to-one sessions were valued by students, who regarded it as time to focus upon their own personal planning and research. As one boy elaborated,

*‘I have one-to-ones with Miss in here and we just go over like HE and what I want to be when I’m older and she helps me to look on the internet for places and jobs and that and numbers and that, that I need to know.’*  
(Year 11 boy, School B, Mentee)

Many of the staff interviewed discussed the difficulty in trying to provide Aimhigher support for the students during the school day. As one teacher summed up, *‘If you take children out to give them experiences all the time, you take them out of the education they need to get there in the first place. So you have to be careful’* (Teacher, School A, School Mentor Programme). For another teacher, the Aimhigher activities worked because, *‘the timing is good as we have a two week timetable which means they don’t keep missing the same lesson’* (Teacher, School C, Ambassador

Programme). Ensuring students do not miss the same lessons for mentoring appears to be more difficult, as one member of staff explained:

*'...there aren't enough lessons that I actually see the students, so it is trying to slot them all in and to make it a different lesson and a different time and a lesson where they are not behind and a lesson that they haven't been out of for a long time. It is really difficult.'*

(Learning mentor, School B, Mentee)

Not surprisingly, the problem normally escalates as the students progress to Year 11. One learning mentor reported that, *'I have had some letters from parents and things saying we are really concerned about them missing GCSE lessons and such, so we are trying to sort of reshuffle it a little bit to give everyone what they need out of the situation'* (Learning mentor, School B)

## Learning

### Key findings:

- Participation in AHKM has provided students with new knowledge about their options, post 16 and post school**
- AHKM students know where to find information about HE**
- AHKM have changed student perceptions of HE**
- AHKM has increased student self-esteem**

Whether working one-to-one or in groups, there was evidence that students were learning. In answer to what they thought about Aimhigher, a boy stated that, *'I think it is a good opportunity to come up here and actually listen to Miss because it helped me a lot'* (Year 11 boy, School B, Mentee).

When asked how they would find out about the courses, another student claimed that *'...you would like get the prospectuses from Universities and things like that. I think, on the Aimhigher website they have got all these courses and I would look at that'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme). Another girl claimed that above all they had learnt,

*'that there is always something you can look up, there's always information there if you need it. I always used to think that there was just a dead end when it came to University and College and I really didn't know what was what, but now I know that I can branch off. So I can speak to Miss, I can get information off the internet...just learning that I can get more information on what I want to do.'* (Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

Other students appeared to have learnt in other ways, for instance, increasing confidence, as one girl explained,

*‘For me it was more or less confidence. I am not much of, I don’t like talking in front of people, but I have kind of learnt how to do that where it is a small group. It is better for you too - well it was better for me to talk there so I don’t feel as intimidated as I would have been before. So I am definitely slightly more confident.’* (Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

Likewise in another school, a Year 11 student asserted that Aimhigher, *‘...has made me realise that it isn’t such a hard thing to do and stuff, so like you can do it if you really put your mind to it and stuff like that’* (Year 11 girl, School A, School Mentor Programme). These views were shared by a teacher who recognised that, *‘the confidence is the thing that changes. The self esteem is the one thing that we notice more than anything’* (Teacher, School A, School Mentor Programme). The low self esteem of students was in part explained by the education system in Kent which includes Grammar schools and that, *‘an awful lot of children consider themselves when they come to us, they have already failed at the Kent test’* (Teacher in school with Learning Mentor, School A).

In general, students were informed of the financial issues of HE in Year 10. At Year 10, students appeared to have some knowledge of how the loans and repayment system worked:

Interviewer: *You mentioned the student loan? How would you deal with that?*

Girl: *Because you pay monthly or whatever. Or you can pay at the end when you have a secure job.*

Boy: *I don’t think they start taking the money until you’ve got a secure job or something like that.* (Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

Not many of the students mentioned the information that they had learnt in relation to the courses except for one girl when answering what was the most useful thing learnt in an Aimhigher activity, she replied, *‘what course suits me really and like what courses would I be interested in to carry on and like do’* (Year 11 girl, School A, School Mentor Programme). Overall, a teacher claimed that participating in Aimhigher activities led to students having, *‘a greater understanding of the reasons for education’* (Teacher in school with Learning Mentor, School A).

## Desire to progress

### Key findings:

- Students were more aware of the progression opportunities available to them**
- Students appreciated that AHKM activities had helped them to make an informed decision about progression**
- There was a mixed response about whether AHKM had actually changed students mind about entering HE**
- AHKM had encouraged students to think more about entering HE and for some individuals, had confirmed that HE was the best option for them**

For many of the students, Aimhigher had succeeded in making clear the opportunities open to them in HE. For these two Year 9 girls:

Girl A: *It has kind of opened up my eyes to what is out there because before I started the groups, I was a bit like, you know, I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. I wasn't really thinking very much at all about any of the other HE that I am learning more about every time I go now.*

Girl B: *I knew I wanted to go into psychology but before the sessions I wasn't sure what it was about. I just knew that it was interesting and I liked it but now I have got more of an idea because I actually bothered.*

(Year 9, School B, Mentee)

Older students too appreciated the impact that mentoring and group activities had had upon their outlook on HE. For example, one girl said that, *'this is something that I always wanted to do. This has just helped me decide that even more so'*

(Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee).

There was a mixed response concerning the impact that Aimhigher activities had upon the students' desire to progress in school. In one case, where students were working in an especially dynamic group, said:

*'It has, it has motivated me to try my hardest in lessons coz I haven't got, um, some lessons I am not very good at concentrating and it has reminded me to knuckle down and what to work for, so I can get my GCSEs... it makes you think further than you thought. It is going through your head because every session that we have we talk more and more about what is going to happen so we think more about it.'* (Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

Likewise a student from the same group added that,

*'It makes you look forward to the future actually because normally you don't know what the future holds, but you can get an idea of what it is going to be like from talking about it.'* (Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

One of the older students also claimed that the emphasis on HE encouraged her to, *'focus more on getting my grades up and like trying to maintain my grades as high as I can'* (Year 11 girl, School A, School Mentor Programme). When asked whether this was only in relation to the subjects they might pursue, another girl replied that they were focusing on, *'all of the subjects really, to get all our good grades and then go to a good 6<sup>th</sup> form and then go to Uni'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee).

However, other students did not consider their motivation to have changed as a result of Aimhigher, as the following extract reveals:

- Interviewer: *Have the Aimhigher activities had an impact upon your motivation at all – motivation to do school work?*
- Boy: *Not really. I'm quite, I'm competitive so like, I'll always set myself targets and try not to be beaten.*
- Girl A: *I just try my best and that.*
- Girl B: *I would still be the same without the activities.*
- Interviewer: *So it hasn't made you work harder?*
- Girl B: *Not really.*
- Interviewer: *Do you think the activities have had an impact on your choosing college or university?*
- Boy: *I think I would probably research it more and really think about it.*  
(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

As this conversation revealed, although the students may not have responded to Aimhigher by working harder in class, they may have responded by showing more initiative in finding out about HE independently. Likewise in another group, two students were very positive about the impact of Aimhigher:

- Boy: *I would probably do what I want to do, but I wouldn't know so much about going to college and HE and what I can do with it.*
- Girl: *I probably wouldn't have got to where I am going to.*  
(Year 11, School B, Mentee)

In response to whether they would have considered going on to HE without participating in Aimhigher, one student replied, *'No, I don't think so. It's given me a lot more information about what it is like, so yeah I want to go now.'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme)

### Suggestions for improvement

All participants were invited to make suggestions on how they would wish to improve Aimhigher. The discussions revolved around the time allocated to Aimhigher, the activities themselves, the learning mentor role and finance.

#### Key findings:

- There was a mixed response about the number of activities an individual student should be involved in (including length of time)**
- Students would prefer activities to be varied, participatory and appropriate and flexible to individual needs.**
- School support is critical to the success of the school Learning Mentor**
- School and teacher awareness of Aimhigher and its activities should be increased further**
- School learning mentors would benefit from specific training e.g. motivating students**
- Communication between school Learning Mentors should be actively encouraged to ensure sharing of information and best practice, and to provide support**

## ***Time***

A conversation with some younger students revealed that they would have wanted more Aimhigher activities even though,

*'It might be too much work for Miss but I think what we are doing at the moment is nice because you can choose what you are doing but you are guided as well, so it is not really a case of you know, 'we tell you what to do and you do it'. It is more open.'*

(Year 9 girl, School B, Mentee)

Some of the students, often the older ones, considered that the amount they participated in Aimhigher was enough.

Girl: *I don't think I would change it.*

Interviewer: *Would you have the activities more often?*

Girl: *No because we have got all our other work to do as well. I think the amount we get is just enough isn't it?*

Boy: *Yeah, just to fit into our like timetable with everything else we have got to do.*

(Year 11, School B, Mentee)

However, as another student pointed out, whilst they did not want to miss too much time out of lessons, *'you still want it often enough to give you enough information. Once every half term, like the outings and things and then mentoring in between'* (Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee).

## ***Activities***

Some students did suggest improving certain Aimhigher activities. For instance, one boy involved in school talks suggested making the activities more varied:

Interviewer: *Do you think it has been successful?*

Boy: *I think so, I mean, there have a couple of them that have been the same, which has been a bit...*

Interviewer: *So they need to be bit more varied?*

Boy: *Yeah, I think so.*

(Year 10, School C, Ambassador Programme)

Another student suggested, *'It would be nice to say about what you want to talk about really I suppose. It would be nice to have more time to talk. You don't always have a lot of time to talk. It might be nice to have someone different, someone else other than a student'* (Year 10 boy, School C, Ambassador Programme).

Another observation made by a student was that mentoring worked well if it continued alongside group activities. In her words,

*'I mean it is good having the activities and getting a wider set of information yet it is still good having the mentoring to discuss it more personally rather than just in a class.'*

(Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

In terms of the activities, both students and staff mentioned that the activities might be more active. For example, as one girl explained,

*'I think make the activities more full on, like hands on, rather than sitting around listening for a bit and then doing questions and answering sort of activities. You could make it so that it's like practical workshops and stuff.'*

(Year 11 girl, School A, Mentee)

This view was shared by a teacher who also believed that, *'the ones that have worked well involved the students physically doing something rather than sitting and watching a powerpoint'* (Teacher, School C, Ambassador Programme). According to one learning mentor, although the Aimhigher resources were useful, they were sometimes too structured. In order to appeal to the various needs of the students they often had to look further afield to locate appropriate resources and as one participant replied, *'to be quite honest, there are times I would like to have more ideas of what I am going to do with them'* (Learning mentor, School A, Mentee). In some cases, activities were not appropriate at all, as explained:

*'Sometimes they are too structured for what the activities actually want. It is finding that balance sometimes. A lot of the girls actually would much rather sit there and have a chat about something and it would be more informal, than actually play a game or do an activity.'*

(Learning Mentor, School B)

### ***The Learning Mentor***

Learning Mentors expressed specific ways in which improvements might be made to the programme. One Learning Mentor pointed out the need for more training, as beyond the national 5 day training, *'they have had no real input from Aimhigher in terms of training which is maybe something that does need to be addressed'* (Learning mentor, School B, School Mentor Programme). In particular, mentors required specific training in encouraging and motivating students to aspire to long term goals.

Despite there being good examples of successful sharing of experiences and expertise among clusters of schools (Teacher in school with Learning Mentor, School A), there was still a need for more frequent and structured communication between Learning Mentors. Instances of good communication were reliant on personal contacts and information concerning events on word of mouth. For one Learning Mentor, *'when I started...it was a case of ringing up (a friend) and that is it. If you can't you are stuck'* (Learning Mentor, School A).

From the Learning Mentors' point of view, it was also preferable to improve the level of understanding about Aimhigher among all school staff and that there was some frustration that,

*'I think the schools aim is for me to tell these students to work hard and get 5A\*-C and they think that is going to take a whole lesson...they don't see what I really do and the activities that you have to do to kind of get them thinking about getting 5A\*-Cs.'*

(Learning Mentor, School B)

At the time of data gathering, this member of staff was actively working to inform the staff of their role by writing and distributing a booklet. From additional comments, it appeared that a lack of school support for Aimhigher might also put a strain on the role of the Learning Mentor in school. For example, a Learning Mentor was expected to account for every moment in their day, *'to justify myself all the time'*, thereby restricting her role and the ways in which the job might be carried out (Learning Mentor, School B, School Mentor Programme). Also, the Learning Mentors might be expected to take on additional numbers of students, making it increasingly difficult to address individual needs. As one member of staff commented, *'it has been suggested that maybe I should*

*see them in big groups but then in my mind if you see them in a big group I am not necessarily helping them* (Learning Mentor, School A).

### **Funding**

Members of staff were also aware of an impending change in funding and there was concern that this may disrupt the students as they progressed. A teacher voicing their concern exclaimed that,

*'...it is very unstable...I don't want to stop when I have got Year 9 and 10 students on board...I just don't want to pull the plug on them next year because the money is not there.'*

(Teacher in school with Learning Mentor, School A)

A halt to funding was expected to have a direct impact on the mentoring as well, which would disrupt any students benefiting from one-to-one or group contact. For example, a recently appointed learning mentor was keen to remain in post because, *'all the students are getting used to where I am. They know I am here and interest is improving'* (Learning mentor, School A). Teachers also felt that they had to account for ways in which they spent Aimhigher money which created a huge amount of paper work so much so that, *'you wonder sometimes if there is not professional trust that you are going to spend it properly'*, despite the fact that they were committed to the Aimhigher budget (Teacher in school with Learning Mentor, School A).

### **5. Conclusion**

Although some students did have definite ideas about their future, many were not planning beyond School 6<sup>th</sup> form. Whilst this is understandable, a general opinion among staff was that it is students who focus on the long term goals that are most driven to enter HE. Indeed, the main point of HE, according to students was the long term advantage of getting a 'better' job, whilst the main disadvantage was perceived to be the financial debt accrued in the short term. Interestingly, the other major advantage of HE was thought to be the social life, whilst other disadvantages included continuing education and the idea of moving away from home.

In the main, parents were perceived as a positive, supportive influence, but not necessarily one which impinged upon students' own decision-making process. Teachers, in contrast, were not regarded as influencing students about HE, but focusing more upon short term targets with a view to impressing upon students the value of their own subjects. Aimhigher students intending to go on to HE were of the minority in schools, and as such, were at risk of being excluded by other peers. Although schools seemed aware of this, students seemed to feel most secure in the presence of other Aimhigher students and Learning Mentors.

Students were able to relate their experiences of participating in various Aimhigher activities, including school talks, taster sessions and mentoring. In general, the activities most positively described were taster sessions at HE institutions and other activities which gave students some autonomy and opportunity to actively participate.

It appeared that older students were more aware of their workload and therefore content with the amount of time spent participating in Aimhigher. However, staff expressed their frustration at ensuring that Aimhigher did not disrupt lessons whilst ensuring that the needs of students were met.

Despite the view of some staff that it was not easy to measure the impact of Aimhigher, this research did show that students were learning in many ways. Firstly, students were able to gain access to information about HE using a range of methods, including the internet and the Aimhigher

website, University prospectuses and through contact with their Learning Mentor. Beyond this, students felt more confident about themselves and their ability to communicate as a result of participating in Aimhigher. Finally, students demonstrated knowledge of managing their student loans. Since students described financial debt as one of the main disadvantages of progressing to HE, this shows that Aimhigher is working to address these concerns.

Overall, in providing students with knowledge of HE and access to information, evidence showed that Aimhigher has raised aspirations and encouraged students to progress. However, there was mixed response as to whether this in turn improved motivation in terms of school work.

There were a number of improvements suggested by members of staff. Learning mentors expressed their wish for more Aimhigher training and especially training that addressed the motivation of students. They also believed that they would benefit from more communication among Learning Mentors to enable the sharing of information and resources. They were also aware that if staff in school were more aware of Aimhigher and the role of the Learning Mentor, then this would improve the programme as a whole. Finally, staff voiced concern about the change in funding and the impact this might have upon the students' welfare.

## 6. Recommendations

As part of the research, a number of suggestions were made by various participants regarding the Aimhigher programme. These, as well as additional points are summarised below:

- Since the evidence suggests that parents are the most positive and supportive influence, the Aimhigher project should continue to form relationships with families and offer information and activities targeted at parents.
- Student concerns about debt and HE should be tackled - students should be encouraged to see HE as an investment. Activities should be developed to help show students how to control, reduce and manage debt.
- A greater awareness of Aimhigher needs to be developed among staff in school to enable students to look to teachers for additional support as well as ensuring that teachers support Learning Mentors as colleagues. This should be encouraged from the top down. Mentors who are integrated with the school system and staff structure will be more efficient and effective than mentors who are viewed as “outsiders” working on the premises. The availability of school resources will help mentors in their role e.g. access to print/copying, notice board facilities, designated room for one-to-one meetings.
- School Learning Mentors and AHKM school coordinators should work with teachers and school administrative staff to ensure that activities are scheduled to fit around the school timetable. Taking students out of the same subject lesson repeatedly will be counter productive.
- Given that AHKM students may suffer some negative responses from other peers, schools should ensure that a network of support exists in the form of supportive students and Learning Mentors or AHKM school coordinators.
- The most positive feedback of AHKM indicates that they work best where students have some autonomy, can actively participate in the sessions and work in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. Students enjoy sessions that are unlike lessons, and enjoy learning about other subjects. Students enjoy seeing new faces and experiencing different teaching and learning methods.
- It was clear that students in the study had learned information about HE from participating in AHKM activities. This information was making them start to think about, and consider, entering HE. However, students still felt that it was a long way off and so the project needs to ensure that the good work started in Year 9, 10 and 11 is followed through, and built upon until entry age.
- HE needs to be differentiated from school education. Students, even in year groups 11 and below want to finish education as quickly as possible, and 3 or more years study is perceived as a lifetime. Alternative study modes, and work based options should be marketed as well as traditional programmes. The project should also increase student awareness of the range of sub Degree options available to counter their negativity to long term options.
- It would be worthwhile if there was more specific AHKM training to assist Learning Mentors address issues such as motivating students. In addition, mentors requested general Aimhigher training on a local basis.
- A mentor support network should be established so that mentors can share, learn and support each other in their roles. Access to a blackboard type facility will enable and encourage this.

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