“I’ve decided that I want more from my life than what the rest of my family had. I want to do better than just go straight into a job – a dead-end job where I’m not going to get anywhere. I want better for myself.” (Student, aged 16)

“I visited quite a few [universities] with my secondary school. They’d (sic) be students there; they talk about their courses and different things like uni life. It was really good. It made me think more about going. Like, I wanted to go.” (Student, aged 16)

This document is the short report of a unique three-stage longitudinal research project funded by Greenwich Excellence in Cities and started in 2002. The aim of the project was to look at factors that might be related to young people’s educational choices post-statutory education; specifically, their attitudes to higher education and how these may be influenced by participating in Aimhigher activities. Aimhigher is a government initiative aimed at increasing participation in higher education by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented groups.

The research was instigated by Linda Karlsen, in her then post of Aimhigher Co-ordinator. Linda’s commitment to working with, and increasing the opportunities of, young people from a whole range of diverse backgrounds was reflected in her commitment to facilitating data collection and providing expert advice throughout the project. Without Linda the project would not have progressed.

This report draws on data collected and analysed by Emmilie Aveling, Kirsty Carmichael and Jennifer Wills at stage three. It also relates to data collected and analysed in the earlier stages by Katie Maras, Stephanie Nash and Swatee Patel, all of whom made a significant contribution to the evaluation.

I would like to personally thank all of the schools, post-16 centres, Aimhigher co-ordinators, teachers and other staff who gave up their valuable time and support in collecting data. Most importantly I would like to thank the young people who participated in the research.

Professor Pam Maras
August 2006
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Introduction

Background
This document is a summary of the final report of the third stage of the Greenwich Excellence in Cities (EiC) and the University of Greenwich joint study of students’ attitudes to higher education.

The study was in three stages. In stage one, students in Years 9, 10 and 12 in secondary schools in the London Borough of Greenwich completed an especially designed measure of attitudes towards higher education, school and learning.

The second stage involved administering the same measure again a year later in 2004, so students who completed the measure in the first stage in Year 9 also completed the measure again when they were in Year 10. In stage three, the same measure was completed again two years later by the original students who were then in Year 12.

The evaluation
The evaluation involved quantitative and qualitative data collection in a three-year longitudinal study of Years 9, 10 and 12 students’ attitudes towards higher education in the London Borough of Greenwich. The quantitative data were obtained through the Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire (AHEQ), a self-report measure designed to elicit the students’ views about school and education, continuing to higher education, and the students’ perceptions of what their families’ and friends’ views were on education.

An additional section asked about participation in EiC-funded activities, including Aimhigher, offered through schools. These could be divided into three types of activity: (1) mentoring/support activities; (2) additional study/study-support activities; and (3) Widening Participation activities.

Students also had the option of providing additional comments. The qualitative data were obtained through focus groups which were conducted with 19 students in their first year of 6th form/college from a number of schools in the Borough of Greenwich.

Structure of the report
This report is in two sections. The first section summarises findings from the three-year survey in relation to key questions. The second section reports the findings from focus groups of young people in Year 12. In the report we refer to three types of data: (1) data from focus groups; (2) data from completion of a self-report questionnaire; and (3) data from the local authority.
Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire

This section reports the findings from the Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire (AHEQ) completed by students in Years 9, 10 and 12. The findings are discussed in relation to questions about the study from the local authority. The questionnaire is reproduced in appendix B.

Demographic profile of the students

How many students took part in the study and what evidence is there to show that they represent an average Aimhigher cohort in south London?

A total of 3,570 students completed the AHEQ. 2,042 students completed the AHEQ at stage one, 1,452 students at stage two and 76 students at stage three of the study. 679 students who completed the questionnaire received free school meals\(^1\). Figure 1 below shows the number of students who completed the AHEQ. Table 1 shows the ethnicity of students.

![Number and year of students](image)

**Figure 1**  Number of students at stages one, two, one and two, and three of the study

- At stage one of the study (2003), 640 Year 9 students, 1,074 Year 10 students and 328 Year 12 students completed the questionnaire.
- At stage two of the study (2004), 763 Year 10 students completed the questionnaire.
- At stage three of the study (2005), 76 Year 12 students completed the questionnaire.
- 689 students completed the questionnaire at stages one and two (2003–04), 38 students completed it at stages one and three, 52 completed it at stages two and three and 25 students completed it at all three stages.

\(^1\) Free school meals are available to students from low-income families and are used as a broad measure of socio-economic status.
Sex differences

Were there any imbalances between female and male students?

Yes, it was found that females were significantly more positive than males in respect of their: views on likelihood of attending university; likelihood of friends attending university; GCSE and A-level competence; school motivation; and school and peer identity.
However, at stage one of the study, males reported more take-up of mentoring-type activities than females, and, at stage two, males also reported more take-up of Aimhigher activities than female students.

Impact of Aimhigher activities

We are always being asked for evidence of impact. Does the survey show clear and measurable impact of Aimhigher activities?

Yes, the survey shows a clear and measurable impact of Aimhigher activities on students’ attitudes towards higher education. The findings indicate that Aimhigher activities are the main predictor of students’ views on likelihood of attending university; likelihood of friends attending university; family views on attending university; GCSE and A-level competence; school motivation; and school, peer and family identity. School identity was found to be particularly important.

Year 11 students receive their prizes at the Aimhigher Greenwich Achievement Project Awards evening which celebrates the success of students who took part in the Saturday revision programme

Does the survey show whether there is an impact on students’ aspirations when they participate in Aimhigher activities?

Yes, the findings show there were significant correlations between Aimhigher activities and attitude and identity measures. It was found that at stage one and two of the study, mentoring-type activities positively correlated with perceptions of family views on attending university but negatively correlated with GCSE and A-level competence.

A positive correlation means that when one variable increases, so does the other. For example, when a student's participation in an Aimhigher activity increases, so does his or her attitude and identity score. A negative correlation is when one variable increases, the other decreases. For example, when a student's participation in an Aimhigher activity increases, his or her attitude and identity score decreases.

At stage one and two of the study, study skills activities were positively correlated with students’ own views on: likelihood of attending university; likelihood of friends attending university; family views on attending university; GCSE and A-level competence; school motivation; school identity; and family and peer identity.
Aimhigher activities were positively correlated with six of the eight factors which are important for students going to higher education: views on attending university; perceptions of family and friends’ views on attending university; GCSE and A-level competence, school motivation; and school identity.

Are there clear and robust indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, of what are the most successful activities for increasing Widening Participation?

The data showed that study skills and Aimhigher activities positively correlated with more attitude and identity measures than mentoring-type activities. Students had more positive attitudes toward attending university if they had reported regularly using the school library, attending after-school clubs and visiting a university.

The focus groups also revealed that university visits had the strongest influence on students’ attitudes towards attending university.

Is there evidence from other sources to support any of the findings in the survey?

Yes, there is a great deal of evidence from other sources. For example, a national evaluation of Aimhigher (NFER, 2005) found that the proportion of young people in Year 11 who indicated that they intended to go on to higher education was greater in Aimhigher schools than in comparison schools.

The report also indicated that visits to universities, summer schools and individual discussions between staff and pupils at universities were found to be associated with improved attainment.

Does the survey have details on the number of activities each student took part in? If it does, is there a difference in attitude between students with more frequency of activity?

Yes, the survey does have details on the number of activities each student took part in (see appendix A). The majority of the attitude and identity measures positively correlate with increased take-up of Aimhigher activities. This means that students’ attitudes were more positive take-up of Aimhigher activities.
Were there any negative findings in the survey with regard to a) activities and b) attitudes?

The most negative finding with regard to activities was that students were mainly motivated to continue into higher education by “material advantage” rather than the value of education per se. The activities did not seem to effectively emphasise other positive aspects of education such as the pursuit of knowledge. With regard to students’ attitudes, the most negative findings were the low scores on the attitude and identity measures of the Year 10 students.

Differences between groups

Was there a significant difference between the attitudes of different groups, e.g. students who receive free school meals, ethnic groups?

Yes, there were significant differences between students who receive free school meals and students who do not. Students who receive free school meals scored significantly lower on: family views on attending university; GCSE and A-level competence; school motivation; own views on likelihood of attending university; and peer identity.

However, due to the small number of students within some defined ethnic groups, accurate statistical analyses were not possible for any of the attitude and identity measures in relation to the students’ ethnicity.
Age-related differences

Is there any robust evidence of whether changes in the students’ intentions are sustained over time?

Students in Year 10 at stage one had significantly more negative attitudes to higher education than students in years 9 and 12 for: own views on likelihood of attending university; likelihood of friends attending university; family views on attending university; GCSE and A-level competence; school motivation; school and family identity; study skills activity; and Widening Participation activity.

Students who participated in Aimhigher activities were more positive on most of the attitude and identity measures.

Are there any unexpected pieces of information coming from the survey?

The data found support for Aimhigher activities but also found that Year 10 students were more negative than students in Years 9 and 12 on most of the attitude measures. These findings are important when planning future activities and suggest a strong need for age-differentiated interventions.

Year 10 students preferred activities that took place outside of school, like visiting a university. Out-of-school activities may therefore be more successful in improving Year 10 students’ attitudes.

Self-esteem, motivation and self-competence

What does the survey tell us about student self-esteem? Is it stronger in students who took part in more activities?

The survey did not look at the students’ self-esteem per se. It looked at different aspects of their self-concept such as their motivation and self-competence in school work. Findings from past research have suggested that measuring self-esteem is not a useful way of looking at students’ learning, behaviour and attainment. We did find that motivation and self-competence in school were related to Aimhigher activities.

Differences between schools

Does the survey show differences between schools and can this be analysed to show what works best in schools?

There is a big difference between the schools. Our data show differences associated with Aimhigher activities, but from the data we cannot show what works best in which schools. This would need to be looked at by carrying out comparative case studies.

Does the survey show differences between Borough-planned activities and school activities, and can this be analysed to show what works best?

The survey cannot show this, but this would be something to think about in future research, although careful thought would need to be given to how one might differentiate between school and Borough activities, as there may well be overlap between the two.

Reliability of the questionnaire

How can we be sure that the questions were asked objectively and fairly without leading the students to the answer that would most benefit the project?

We cannot say, as no survey can be absolutely certain, but the survey was piloted and the students were asked questions over a period of time and at different ages and times. The study was carried out vigorously.

Students participated in schools, but analysis was carried out away from school and students knew that their teachers and schools would not see their individual responses. The survey is also supported by the number of students considering entering higher education, and by qualitative work.
Future Aimhigher work

What are the strong overall messages coming from the survey and what guidance could the survey results provide for future Aimhigher work?

The study shows that Aimhigher activities have a positive impact on students’ attitudes. Future interventions should focus on targeting activities to different age groups. Year 10 students (age 14–15) are at an age of dramatic developmental changes, both physical and psychological, they are also likely to be most resistant to main school interventions.

They have important educational choices to make at this age, as well as general life worries. These factors have an impact on students’ attitudes at this age (see Eisenburg et al. 2005). These findings clearly support the need for developmental changes to be taken into account when planning future interventions, which should be age differentiated.
Focus groups

This section reports the findings from three focus groups which were conducted with 19 students who were attending their first year of either a sixth-form college or a secondary school sixth form. The aim of the focus groups was to find out young people’s motivations for continuing to higher education and the key influences on their decisions to continue to higher education.

The main findings from the focus groups were:

- 17 of the 19 students intended to continue to university;
- the primary motivation for continuing to higher education was “material advantage”. A further motivation was “personal growth” resulting from the overall “university experience”;
- all the students believed that by going to university they would achieve better qualifications, leading to better jobs and a higher salary;
- the main disincentive for continuing to higher education was the financial burden of university fees, followed by associated cost of living;
- the value of an education per se did not arise as a motivation for any of the students.

The participants

The participants were all in full-time education, with the majority taking A-levels and the remainder studying for GNVQ or BTEC qualifications. 17 of the 19 students were intending to continue on to university once they had completed their sixth-form education. The two remaining students were considering going to university and thought they ‘probably’ would, but were at the time of the focus groups undecided.

Motivations for continuing to higher education

Most of the reasons given for continuing into higher education were positive, as almost all of the students had decided to apply to university. The students’ motivations for continuing to higher education can be divided into two main themes: material advantage and personal growth.

Material advantage

Material advantage was the most commonly cited reason for staying on at school and deciding to apply to university. All of the students believed that by going to university they would achieve better qualifications, leading to better jobs and a higher salary. This perception of the value of higher education clearly resonates with the discourse promoted by Aimhigher. There were three main aspects to this perceived material advantage:

1. Career

The first was having more career options due to higher-education qualifications. All of the students agreed that going to work straight from school would lead to a “dead-end job”. Below are a few examples of the many occasions on which students expressed this view:

“I want to do better than just go straight into a job – a dead-end job where I’m not going to get anywhere.”

“I want to] do qualifications leading to a better job or a more chosen job … better opportunities career-wise.”

“It’s not the best way to go into [a career] – start working now in retail and work in retail for the next 30/39 years.”

“Staying in education, you will have more career choices.”
2. Money

The second aspect was money. All of the students believed they would be able to earn more if they completed a degree at university before starting to work. For example:

“If you go to university you get 25 per cent more money than someone who didn’t go.”

“I think if you’ve done it, you’re going to come out ahead anyway. You’ll get paid higher because of your qualifications.”

“You can get more qualifications that look good on your CV, go to university [and] get even more, and then when you get a job you get a lot more money.”

3. Safety and stability

The third aspect, voiced by a smaller proportion of students, was safety and stability, rather than career or financial ambition. For these students, higher education offered the potential for peace of mind – they felt it was a safer option that would secure financial stability:

“It just seems like a safer way to get into something.”

“I want a stable life in the future.”

Interestingly, the value of an education per se did not arise as a motivation for any of the participants. However, the opportunity for personal development facilitated by the “university experience” did.

Personal growth

The second theme in motivations for continuing to higher education was the perception that the “university experience” supports a kind of personal development. This is not related to the course or qualifications. Rather, it’s about trying “to get the most out of life that you can.” There were three main aspects to this.

For some, going to university offered the potential for a greater variety of life experiences and, simply put, fun. For example:

“I just think it will be quite fun.”

“I’d rather come out after 25 with loads of experiences behind me and ready to start work, than jump in from when I’m 18 into work.”

“It’s a really good time.”

In addition, some students thought that going to university would help them become more independent and, thirdly, encourage maturity. For example:

“You’re more independent in yourself.”

S1: People change, you become independent, you don’t rely on your parents so much, therefore you change as a person as well.

S2: You mature.

S3: It’s like the next chapter when you are setting out on your own.”

While this theme was not such a significant motivating factor as material advantage, it was nonetheless an important part of their understanding, particularly for the students most enthusiastic about going to university.

S1, S2 and S3 refer to three different students a similar convention is used elsewhere in this report.
Disincentives for continuing to higher education

The main disincentive to higher education was the financial burden of university fees and, to a lesser extent, associated cost of living. This was a concern to all students, though evidently not sufficient to deter them from applying to higher-education institutions. Importantly, students seemed to lack clear information about either the costs involved or sources of financial assistance. The dialogue between four students (S1, S2, S3 and S4) below reflects the concerns common to all the students:

S1: I’d like to go, but it’s the financial strain of things.
Interviewer: Of what, going to university?
S1: Yeah.
Interviewer: What kind of things do you worry about?
S2: Just the financial side.
S1: Yeah, just fees.
S3: Living, renting, anything.
S4: Just the fees and the total cost of going to university.

A further disincentive for a small minority was concern about moving into an unfamiliar environment, away from family and friends. Therefore it is important that students have information about their local universities.

The diagram below (figure 2) illustrates the results of thematic analysis of students’ motivations and disincentives for continuing to higher education. It shows the two motivation themes, personal growth and material advantage, and the two disincentives, leaving home and financial burden.

![Figure 2: Thematic analysis of students’ motivations and disincentives for continuing on to higher education](image)

Interestingly, none of the participants seems to value education per se, nor the generic skills and intellectual development that higher education facilitates. It is perhaps not unrelated that some students appear to have a relatively unrealistic perception that a higher-education qualification will lead them straight into a good career with a high salary.
Sources of influence on students’ attitudes to higher education

The main sources of influence on the “material advantage” motivation were family members, followed by peers and teachers. Family members functioned as both role models and anti-role models. That is, for students who would be the first in the family to go to university (anti-role model), and students whose family did go to university (role model), the influence was the same: students were encouraged by their family to believe that going to university would lead to a “better life”.

The following quotes illustrate family members functioning as both role models and anti-role models:

“I’ve been told, encouraged, but when you see others being successful, you think, yeah, I can do that.”

“My dad’s a police officer, my mum an air hostess. From what they experienced, they wished they had gone to university. They want me to do better than what they did.”

Students rarely mentioned peers as a source of influence on their attitudes to higher education. However, they were asked directly about their peers – whether their friends were continuing to higher education or not. For all students, all or most of their peers were continuing to higher education.

For those who have friends who left school at 16 to work, the friends also functioned as “anti-role models”, as the following quote illustrates:

“Someone in [a well-known supermarket] actually put me off, they’ve been working there since they left school and they have no opportunities. I don’t want to work in a supermarket.”

The main source of influence on the “personal growth” motivation was direct experience of university life. This included university visits, siblings or cousins already at university and visits to the school by university students. Visits to university encouraged students to think about the reality of moving away from home.

For some, this was reflected in excitement about increased independence. For others it was reflected in anxiety about leaving family and friends. This is clearly important and will help students make more informed decisions about where they want to go to university.
Conclusions

This project was unique. We know of no other survey of such a large number of students over a sustained time. Findings from the study have important implications on future interventions.

We found clear evidence that Aimhigher activities had a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward higher education.

Aimhigher was also linked to the students’ motivation and academic self-concept.

We also found that the students’ attitudes were related to how strongly they identified with their peers, families and schools.

Findings that Year 10 students had more negative attitudes than Years 9 and 12 suggest an important need for age-differentiated interventions which take developmental changes into account.

Focus groups revealed that students seemed to lack clear information about either the costs involved or sources of financial assistance when continuing to higher education. We would therefore recommend that future interventions focus on targeting this issue.

Students had more positive attitudes toward attending university if they had reported regularly using the school library, attending after-school clubs and visiting a university.

Focus groups revealed that university visits had the strongest influence on students’ attitudes towards attending university. These activities play an important role in improving students’ attitudes and should therefore continue. Students should also be encouraged to attend them.

Analysis of the data from focus groups also found that the main reason for young people wanting to go on to higher education was financial. Two related themes were (1) the desire of the students’ “to better themselves” and (2) “increased opportunities”, both of which were related to a third theme: “earning higher salaries”.

This suggests that the days of wanting to learn for learning’s sake may have passed and raises a question about higher education: are academics teaching in higher education aware of this focus on earning rather than learning?

Universities are delivering curricula to an increasingly diverse student body that may have very different motives from the academics teaching them. Findings from this study show that interventions aimed at encouraging young people to go to university are effective. The challenge now is for higher education to meet their needs when they get there.
References


Maras, P. (In press) “No One in My Family Has Been to University”: School Students’ Attitudes to Higher Education. Australian Educational Researcher

Appendix A

Tables showing number of students who participated in Aimhigher activities

Table 1  Number of students who participated in study skills activities

<table>
<thead>
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<th>No. of activities</th>
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Table 2  Number of students who participated in mentoring-type activities

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Table 3  Number of students who participated in Widening Participation activities

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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Attitudes to Higher Education Questionnaire (AHEQ)

1. I really like school a lot
2. Most of my friends will go to university or college after they leave school
3. Most of my family went to university or college after they left school
4. I think that going to university or college is an important thing to do
5. I want to go to university or college
6. My friends think I will go to university or college after I leave school
7. I think I will be able to go to university or college
8. Most of my family believe that they were able to go to university
9. My friends think that it is important to go to university or college
10. Most of my friends want to go to university or college
11. Most of my friends really like school a lot
12. Most of my friends intend to go to university or college after they leave school
13. My family think I will go to university or college after I leave school
14. My family think it is important to go to university or college after leaving school
15. Most of my friends think that they will be able to go to university or college
16. Most of my family enjoyed being at school
17. I will go to university or college after I leave school
18. Most of my family really wanted to go to university or college
19. I really do not like going to school
20. I think I will go to university or college after I leave school
21. Most of my family intended to go to university or college
22. Most of my family did not like going to school at all
23. When there is an opportunity I always get involved in doing things with my school
24. I think it is a waste of time working hard at school
25. I am very similar from the rest of my family
26. My friends are very like me
27. I want to do well in school
28. My family want me to do well in school
29. I am very different from the rest of my family
30. Whenever I can, I tell people which school I go to
31. I love reading when I am not in school
32. My school work is good
33. Other members of my family are very like me
34. My school work in English is very good
35. I like my school very much
36. I am very similar to other students in my school
37. I am very different from my friends
38. I would describe myself as an important member of my group of friends
39. Other students in my school are very like me
40. I would describe myself as member of my school
41. Whenever I can, I tell people who my group of friends are
42. When I do maths I try very hard
43. I feel a very important member of my group of friends
44. My friends think school is a waste of time
45. I would describe myself as member of my family
46. My school work in maths is very good
47. Whenever I can I tell people I am a member of my family
48. I find reading when I am not at school very boring
49. I like my friends very much
50. I am very similar to the rest of my family
51. When I do school-work I try very hard
52. When there is an opportunity I always get involved in doing things with my family
53. I am very similar to my friends
54. When I do English I try very hard
55. My friends think it is important to do well in school
56. When there is an opportunity I always get involved in doing things with my friends
57. I think I will complete A-levels
58. My friends think I will complete A-levels
59. My family thinks I will complete A-levels
60. I expect to gain at least level C in English and maths in my GCSE
61. My friends think I will gain at least level C in English and maths in my GCSE
62. My family thinks I will gain at least level C in English and maths in my GCSE