

# An All-Age Answer to Vocational Progression to Higher Education: the future role for Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks



# Kingston University London

## After Browne: An All Age Answer to Vocational Progression to Higher Education

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## **Executive Summary**

This discussion paper examines how vocational progression to Higher Education (HE) could be extended. It focuses on how the Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) initiatives can meet the key challenges of:

- **better Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for learners**
- **improved course provision that offers viable routes to HE.**

It is suggested in this paper that they can add significant value to the new government's policy agenda, by aiding the development of:

- **an 'all age careers strategy'**
- **a more flexible Higher Education system**

The Browne review will set the context for future vocational progression to HE, but the challenges here are deep-rooted, complex and cross different educational sector. There is no pure financial solution. What is necessary are bespoke vehicles to address fundamental challenges.

### **A. Aimhigher- An all age careers strategy and the 'matrix model'**

- Aimhigher is the only national vehicle to support progression to Higher Education (HE) for young people from disadvantaged groups. It delivered over 900,000 learner opportunities to approximately 30,000 young people in 2008-09. Present funding ends in July 2011.
- An 'all age' careers strategy would have to be based in England on a '**matrix model**' where a range of providers are matched with different groups of learners forming a network or 'matrix' of provision. This is the only way of equipping learners with the decision making skills to make future choices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – especially if the Browne review leads to greater variation in HE cost and support.
- Aimhigher is uniquely placed to enable the Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and vocational support for disadvantaged learners in the matrix to be delivered. Schools and colleges would have access to student mentoring, higher education learning experiences, impartial online and face-to-face information and guidance, activities illustrating apprenticeship routes to HE, and linkages for schools with the pupil premium.

## **B. Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and the flexible HE system**

- LLNs are the only bespoke partnership vehicle to address articulation and curriculum based barriers to vocational progression. They have developed over 1,000 progression agreements and over 5,000 education professionals have benefitted from their staff development activities.
- The significant challenge in moving English higher education away from the structural and cultural dominance of the academic full time 3 year model centred around the younger learner, to a more flexible system is formidable. The Browne review may usher in real change and a **genuine 'mixed economy'** in HE provision. This may include new private and not-for-profit providers, virtual as well as real universities, as well as far greater diversity between different existing HEIs and shorter more intensive degrees
- The future will intensify competition within and across sectors and make collaboration and dialogue crucial to more flexibility, less likely. This **'market failure'** needs addressing if vocational progression is not to suffer. LLNs are uniquely placed to do this.

## **C. Assessing the Browne Review**

This paper suggests three key questions to ask of the Browne review to help assess its' contribution to vocational progression to Higher Education.

- I. Do the recommendations of the review support the IAG provision essential to navigating a more flexible system and one potentially radically differentiated by price?**
- II. Can links be made between the recommendations and strategic developments in IAG: in particular an all age careers strategy based on the 'matrix model'?**
- III. How will any market failure in partnership and collaboration associated with more competition between Higher Education Institutions and also Further Education Colleges be addressed, to allow a more flexible HE system to be developed?**

## **D. Squaring the circle**

Building a more inclusive, flexible system, while making significant savings in expenditure, means the value of existing services where expertise and infrastructures are in place must be given serious consideration. There is no doubt that post the Browne review – Aimhigher and LLNs merit such attention.

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 Higher Education (HE) is at a crossroads in England, as it goes through the next stage in the difficult transition from elite, then mass, to a universal system. In the economic and policy environment of the 2010s, it is becoming clear that mass to universal HE will involve different courses, for different learners, delivered in more flexible ways, with a growing focus on skills, employment and the 'vocational'. A higher education system like this is essential to meet the needs of the 21st century economy, but creates major challenges for supporting progression to the right course and institutions: in particular for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.2 This discussion paper examines how vocational progression to Higher Education could be extended. It focuses on how the Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) initiatives can meet the two key challenges of:

- better Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for learners
- improved course provision that offers viable routes to HE.

1.3 What is most important is whether these existing services can evolve to be positioned in the new government's education strategy. It is suggested in this paper that they can, by adding significant value to the development of:

- an 'all age careers strategy'
- a more flexible Higher Education system

## **2. Beyond the Browne Review**

2.1 Central to the new government's higher education strategy will be the outcomes of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding chaired by Lord Browne. The funding settlement that follows the Review will be crucial in shaping the future of vocational progression to HE. However, the challenges that underlie this issue have long histories, and will remain whatever settlement emerges. This is a critical point. There is no pure financial solution to the issue of the position of vocational learning within the English education hierarchy.

2.2 The outcomes of the Browne review will not preclude the need for the services described here. They will set the context in which they are delivered – but the fundamental challenges are deep-rooted, complex and span the different educational sectors. Meeting them requires addressing the issues of aspiration, IAG and HE provision which underpin vocational progression. By reviewing these challenges and possible solutions, this paper will help identify the questions that should be asked in examining the Review, and identify how far it supports vocational HE progression.

### 3. The new government and HE vocational progression

3.1 The new government has laid down a clear challenge regarding higher education participation by vocational learners. As the Deputy Prime Minister stated in his speech to mark 100 days of the coalition government:

***‘There is evidence ... to suggest that – contrary to expectations – increased levels of attendance at university have not translated into higher levels of social mobility. This is for two important reasons: One: a disproportionate number of university students come from the middle and upper classes. Two: higher education remains the primary entry route to high-quality jobs.***

***This is why I feel so passionately that we need to attack the educational apartheid that currently exists between vocational and academic learning in general, and between Further Education and Higher Education in particular.’*** Cabinet Office (2010)

3.2 The Minister for Higher Education and Skills has argued that for this vocational and academic divide to be breached, the HE system of the 2010s and onward will have to be far more flexible:

***‘We are committed to ensuring young people have a wider range of options to choose from: apprenticeships, places at FE college; part time study; online learning; and ordinary degree first, and then honours – and not necessarily at 18 either. The bottom line is more options and better advice.’*** BIS (2010a)

3.3 The scale of the structural and cultural shifts needed to enable the visions above to be reached cannot be under-estimated. The academic and vocational hierarchy has been embedded in the English education system since its inception.

3.4 The commitment to addressing this division has been clearly illustrated by the announcement in September 2010 by the Department of Education of an independent review of 14-19 vocational education led by Professor Alison Wolf. This major study will report in spring 2011 and will examine amongst other things:

***‘progression from vocational education to work, higher education and higher level training’.*** Department of Education (2010)

3.5 The government’s concern to improve vocational progression to higher education appears truly cross departmental. The key question is however: how can this goal be achieved when the pressure on public resources is so intense?

## **4. Improving HE vocational progression**

4.1 The financial support package available to students does, in principle, influence higher education progression, but the evidence here is not conclusive. There is a clear inequity between the support available for part time learners and those who are in full time education – and the review needs to address this. However, changing the funding regime for Higher Education *alone* will not elicit significant improvements in vocational progression to higher education. Differences in progression between academic and vocational courses have deeper routes. The evidence suggests there are two areas to examine:

- i. The aspirations of Level 1-3 learners regarding vocational HE options and the IAG they receive.*

4.2 There appears a significant difference between the desire of young people following vocational routes to go onto higher education, and those following academic courses. The Longitudinal Study of Young People in England shows that around 46 per cent of young people exclusively studying vocational courses will apply to study in higher education, as compared with 90 per cent of those exclusively studying academic courses, and 82 per cent of those studying a combination of vocational and academic programmes (Bates et al 2009). Coupled with differences in aspirations are differences in knowledge. A series of studies suggest that young people need better IAG regarding vocational courses and what they offer (McCrone et al 2005, Payne 2003). Research by 'YouGov' for the Edge Foundation in 2009 based on a sample of 2,000 young people, found that only 14% at Key Stage 3 learners knew that there were vocational course options available in their school, as opposed to over 90% who knew that GCSE's existed (Edge Foundation 2009). Atherton et al in 2009, found that amongst 600 Year 7 pupils only 2% knew what an apprenticeship was, and less than 10% could name any actual vocational qualifications.

4.3 Looking at older learners, the evidence indicates that many would, in principle, be interested in higher education, but are unsure how to enter. Further, older learners would want a very different sort of experience from the 'traditional' 3 year full time model. Research from DIUS with over 1,000 adults in 2008 revealed that only 15% were totally opposed to the idea of going to university, but that only 18% had seriously considered it. For those from lower socio-economic groups the majority felt they knew nothing about how they would get gain entry to HE (DIUS 2008).

4.4 The evidence suggests that there is significant need to work with young and older learners, especially those with vocational qualifications, to either encourage them to consider higher education as a future option, or to inform them about what higher education options are available, and how to enter.

- ii. The course provision available to vocational learners at Level 1-3 that offers viable routes to HE.*

4.5 The nature of the actual 'supply' of higher education opportunities available for vocational learners is a distinct problem. Studies since the early 2000s have identified a number of issues. They point to the extreme complexity in the

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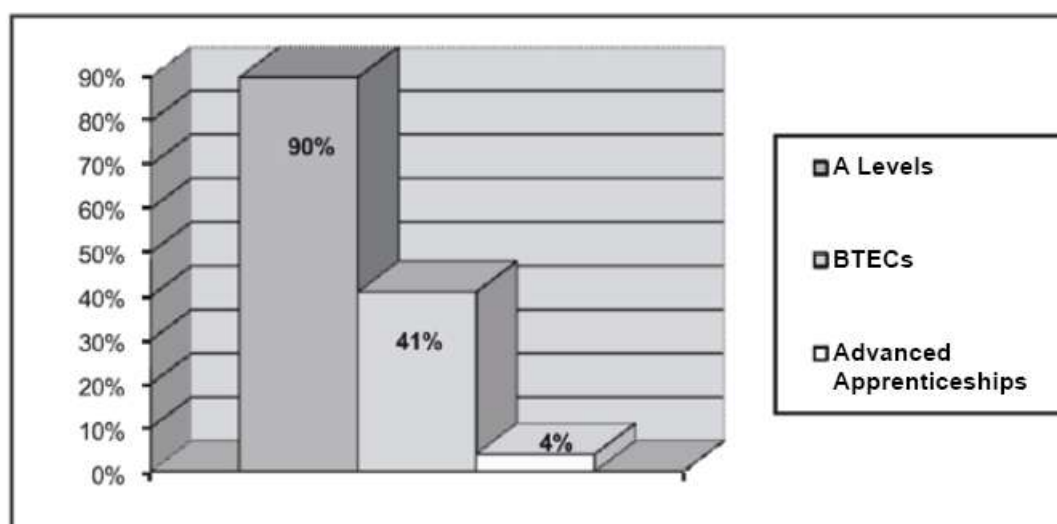
number and range of progression routes available to learners pursuing vocational qualifications, as opposed to the A-Level route. Blockages and mismatches exist where appropriately qualified students cannot enter higher education. Problems include low levels of awareness in higher education institutions about the range of vocational qualifications up to Level 3 (Carter 2009, UKCES 2010, Connor and Little 2004, Connor and Sinclair 2008).

4.6 Diagram 2 compares routes to higher education via the A-Level pathway with other vocational pathways. The diagram clearly shows the difference in perceived clarity. It is not only an issue of simplicity however. The evidence suggests that there is, perhaps not surprisingly, a far lower knowledge base amongst the key stakeholders as to how higher education progression can be facilitated for those with vocational qualifications. Research by the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) found that:

*'although statements on progression are a mandatory component of apprenticeship frameworks, many of those examined appear to pay only lip service to the requirements through brief, stock phrases. There was little evidence that progression opportunities to HE were incorporated into the delivery of apprenticeship programmes.'*

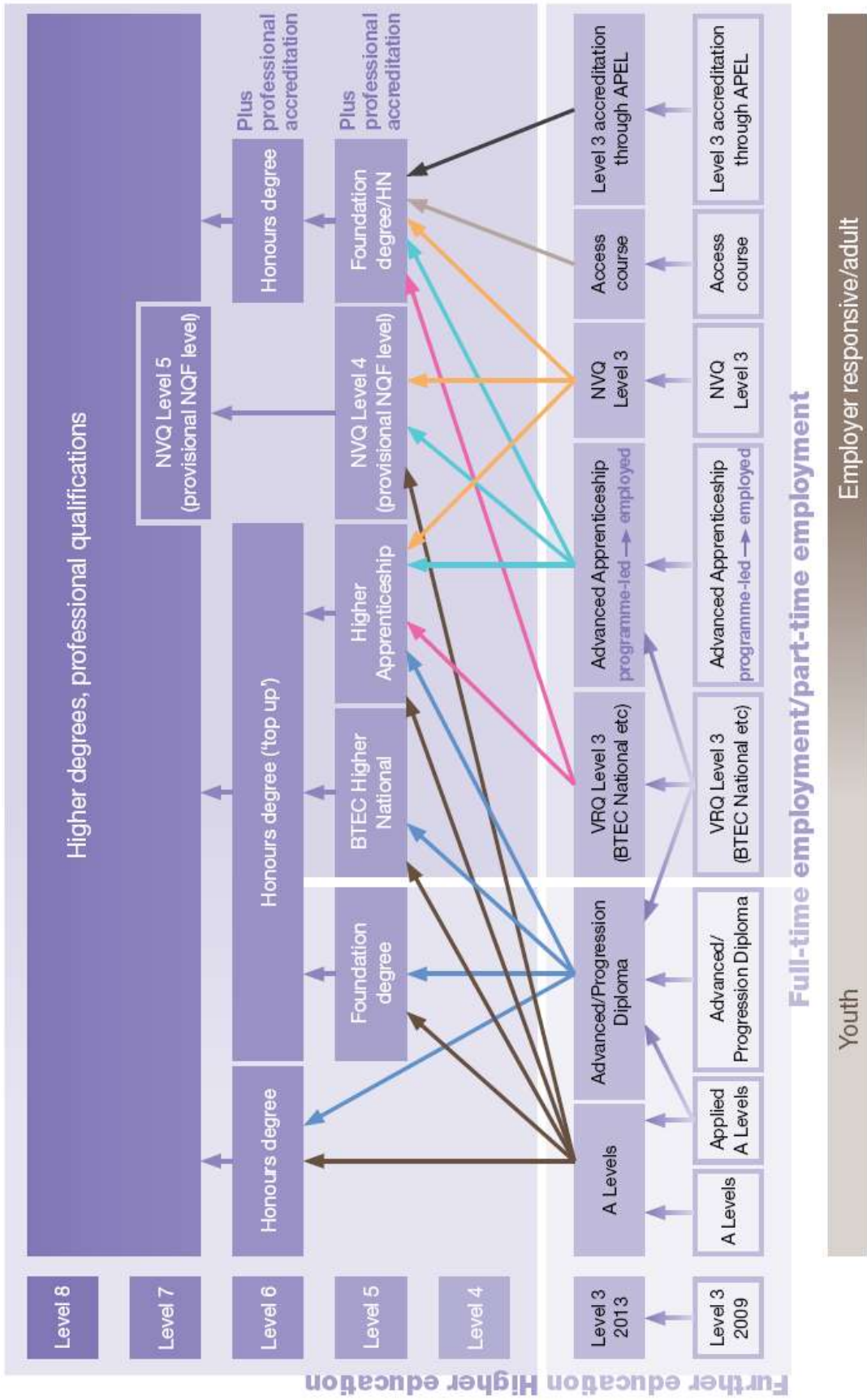
4.7 This endemic complexity coupled with low levels of awareness within institutions, reflects the historical divisions in status between 'academic' and 'vocational' qualifications. It leads to major differences in progression to higher education by pathway. As Diagram 1 shows, while progression to higher education amongst those achieving 2 A-Levels of more are at 90%, for those with the equivalent BTEC qualifications it is 41% and for advanced apprentices it is 4%.

**Diagram 1: Progression to Higher Education by Prior Qualification**



From: Carter (2009)

Diagram 2: Getting to HE by academic & vocational routes



## **5. The Aimhigher Programme**

5.1 The Aimhigher programme began in 2004, and was funded initially from 2004 to 2006, then 2006 to 2008 and its present funding round is from 2008 to 2011. It is managed by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) and co-funded by HEFCE and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Aimhigher is the only national delivery service in England that supports progression to HE for young people from disadvantaged groups. Each of its 42 area partnerships involve schools, HEIs, FECs and Local Authorities, but are of different sizes, with budgets ranging from around £600,000 to over £3.5million. The range of activities includes: HEI visits; summer schools; student mentoring; support for staff in schools; work with parents designed to change student aspirations regarding HE; improvement of awareness of HE through offering specialist Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG); and support in raising of attainment. A range of evidence exists supporting the impact of Aimhigher:

*i. A comprehensive national service*

Aimhigher has delivered a huge volume of activity. In 2008-09 over 950,000 interventions were delivered nationally in 2,250 schools and 300 colleges.

*ii. Dramatic increase in HE participation in disadvantaged areas*

Since the inception of Aimhigher in 2004-05, the cohort of students from the most disadvantaged section of the population in England has shown a dramatic increase in HE participation of 32%, as compared to the most advantaged areas where the increase has only been 4%. (HEFCE 2010)

*iii. Transformations in school culture*

A 2009-10 study of 250 Aimhigher schools in 42 Local Authority Areas found that: 90% of schools felt Aimhigher work increased aspirations; 75% felt it increased attainment; and in 70% of cases teachers' views of who had HE potential had changed. For over 70% of schools HE progression was a far more important priority now than before Aimhigher. (Aimhigher WECAN 2010a).

*iv. Aimhigher learners more likely to go to HE*

Research by HEFCE in 2009 shows that participation in Aimhigher summer school resulted in participants being twice as likely to apply for HE, and twice as likely to be accepted, compared those who did not attend a summer school.

*v. Aimhigher learners more knowledgeable about HE and better prepared*

Aimhigher WECAN research with over 2,000 learners in years 9-11 shows that those who have participated in 5 or more Aimhigher interventions are over twice as likely to know how to find out about university and how to apply, and 1.5 times as likely to do extra work at school of their own volition than those who have participated in 1-2 Aimhigher interventions. (Aimhigher WECAN 2010b).

## 6. Aimhigher and vocational progression

6.1 Aimhigher's primary focus is on learners from disadvantaged backgrounds –engaging in all types of courses. However, disadvantaged groups are hugely over-represented amongst vocational learners. Over twice as many young people from lower socio-economic groups choose vocational routes as compared to young people with parents in professional occupations. (Carter 2009) Hence, as shown in the example in Box 1, Aimhigher has worked extensively with learners pursuing vocational courses at Level 1-3 to provide IAG on vocational progression.

### Box 1: Supporting Vocational education in schools

*At Addington High School, Croydon year 10 BTEC 1<sup>st</sup> Diploma in Sport learners have benefited from the joint Aimhigher/LLN developed vocational progression programme. The programme provides an introduction to routes into Higher Education through vocational courses, a taster visit to St Mary's University College, and finishing with a summer school event held at Kingston University and Kingston Further Education College. All of the HE and FE institutions involved provide relevant progression routes from BTEC Vocational Sports courses onto degree provision.*

*As well as the learners being involved, activities also included all staff delivering BTEC 1<sup>st</sup> Sports and staff delivering the higher level courses that learners can progress to. The programme was supported by Aimhigher staff and LLN developed materials for BTEC Sport progression to Higher Education. The activities and information leaflets provide learners with an insight into the careers that they can progress into having completed a choice of level 4 and above programmes. Learners are also able to gain an understanding of individual course content.*

*As a result of these activities, 84% of young people participating indicated that they were more likely to go onto university, 64.2% stated that their involvement had encouraged them to work harder, 62% confirmed that the activity had made them think about what they would like to do in the future, and 93% stated that they would like to be involved in similar events again.*



## **7. Aimhigher - An all age careers strategy and the 'matrix model'**

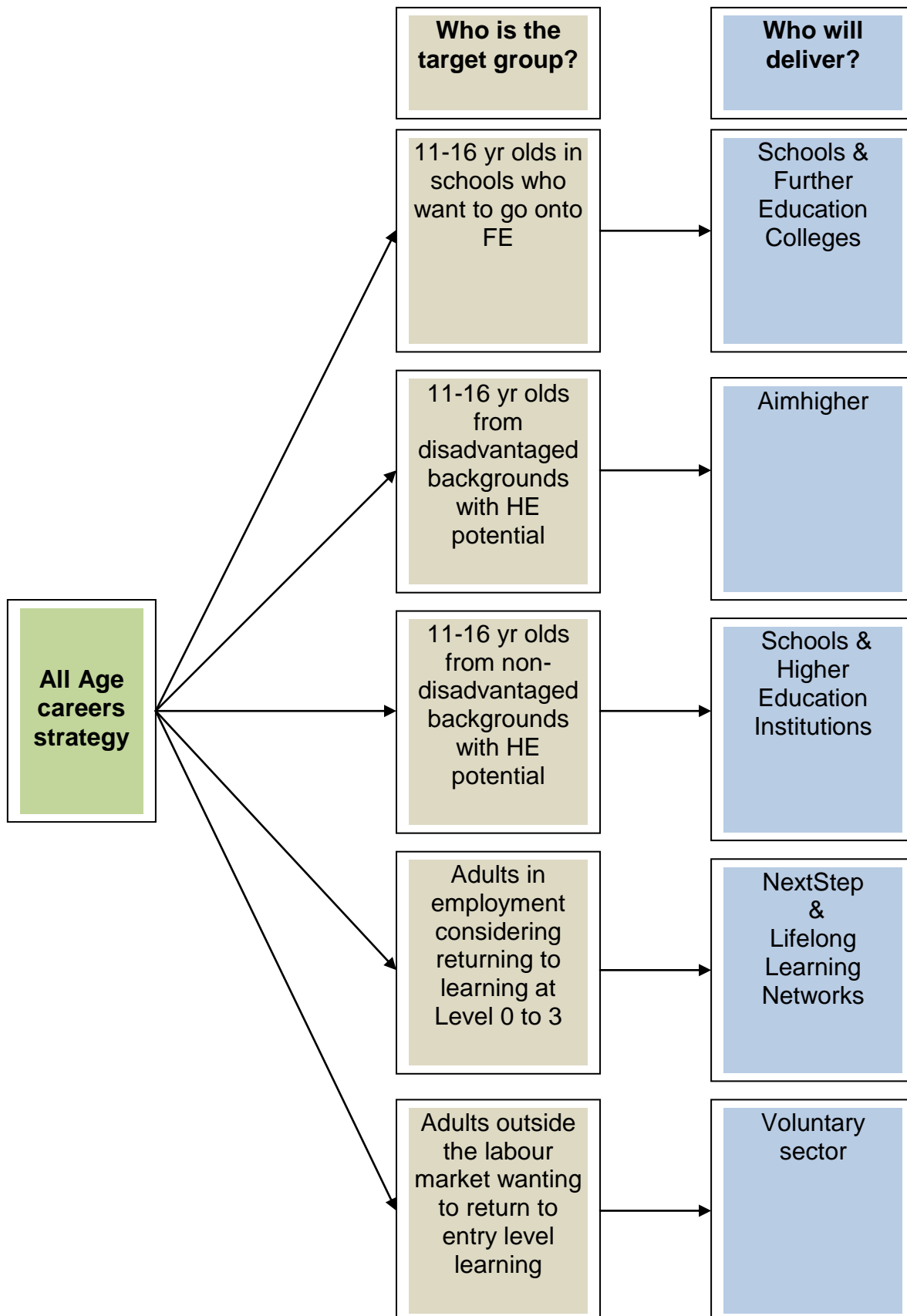
7.1 An all age approach to careers support appears to be very much on the government's agenda. All age careers services do exist in other countries – in particular Wales, Scotland and New Zealand and work well. However, these are much smaller countries with economies of scale. What may be more appropriate in England is, Watts (2009) argues, an **all age strategy** rather than one all age service. This would be based around a 'professional spine' where partnership arrangements are put in place with the main providers of guidance support – schools, colleges, job-centres, etc. It would build on the cross-sector partnership history of careers guidance in England. This approach could be described as a '**matrix model**' where a range of providers are matched with different groups of learners forming a network or 'matrix' of provision.

7.2 Diagram 3 shows the '**matrix model**' – which is illustrative not exhaustive in terms of learners and providers. The diagram shows how different learner groups require specialist focused support. There will always be an important place in careers for IAG with young people, and for the knowledgeable professionals who can offer one-to-one advice and support. However, they alone cannot meet the needs of all learners today. It is when careers professionals have been unsupported, forced to rely on their own knowledge alone, that some negative perceptions of careers advice have originated as they face the almost impossible task of trying to predict what a young person will be doing in 10 or 20 years time.

7.3 The matrix model gives greater autonomy and power to both professionals and young people. It requires the professional to be able to manage a portfolio of activities and providers – which is how the role of the careers professional is evolving in many forward thinking schools and colleges. It provides advisors with the ability to better meet the needs of their individual students. From the perspective of the young person, if the provision offered is right, it should help them develop 'career decision making skills' which are essential to helping them navigate the choices they will face throughout education. These decision making skills are best developed by the experiential learning offered by programmes like Aimhigher, which give young people the opportunity to 'experience' different futures for themselves. In vocational progression in particular, faced with the kind of picture portrayed in Diagram 2 earlier, empowering learners to make their own individual decisions is even more important. If the Browne review introduces greater variability in costs associated with higher education options, then the decision making skills needed by learners take on another dimension. As in the USA, learners will need the ability to construct individualised financial solutions to affording the higher education which best meet their own preferences and situation.

7.4 Aimhigher has been filling the higher education support niche of the matrix in Diagram 3 since 2004. Research with schools in 47 different Local Authorities, shows that Aimhigher is 4 times more likely than Connexions to be seen as the main provider of Higher Education advice and support (Aimhigher WECAN 2010b). As the only national partnership infrastructure which involves the three different educational sectors, and with over 2,500 educational institutions as partners, it is in a strong position to continue to do so.

Diagram 3: The All Age Careers Strategy 'Matrix Model'



## 8. How Aimhigher can support vocational progression to HE

8.1 Central to what Aimhigher can do in its next phase, is the contribution to raising the status of vocational qualifications for learners, parents and schools. By showing that vocational options can offer a route to higher learning and skills, Aimhigher can illustrate that they are not a 'second best' choice. The unique selling point of Aimhigher is its cross-sector nature. Aimhigher produces impartial vocational support for learners by giving schools and colleges the ability to construct a vocational HE learning package to meet specific learner needs. The elements in such a package are outlined in Box 2 below:

### Box 2: The Aimhigher Vocational Offer

- **Linkage with the pupil premium:** Aimhigher can build on an existing infrastructure targeted at disadvantaged learners to support schools in providing additional support via the 'pupil premium'.
- **Information and advice for teachers in schools and staff in FE to allow them to develop HE related vocational IAG programmes.** Aimhigher will act as a support network (physical and online) for staff implementing this element of the matrix model.
- **Impartial HE information workshops.** These will be delivered in-school, at HEIs or virtually, focusing on what HE vocational student life entails and how to get there and be delivered at key choice points for young people of 14, 16 and 18.
- **Specialist workshops, information and events on how the apprenticeship offers a route to higher learning.** Aimhigher will work with universities, employers and LLNs to show learners that there are emerging opportunities to enter HE for apprentices.
- **Opportunities to experience subject learning at HEIs for Key Stage 3.** Learners taking vocational options can experience HE learning for themselves via a range of activities from 1 day master-classes to 5 day summer schools.
- **Students undertaking vocational courses in HE who can 'mentor' and advise Key Stage 3 and 4 students.** The student voice is crucial to young people, as are role models who can exemplify the value of vocational progression.
- **The delivery of on-line and face-to-face information for parents and carers.** Greater awareness and support for vocational learning is crucial here but will need a combination of activities tailored by gender, ethnicity and geography.

## **9. Lifelong Learning Networks**

9.1 Over £100m was invested in the creation of 30 Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) across England from 2006-2008 by HEFCE, with the key objectives of addressing the disparity between academic and vocational learners applications to Higher Education. LLNs were to develop strategies through collaborative partnerships to tackle the differential participation rates between social classes, some minority ethnic groups and disabled people, and to increase the number of work-based learners entering the system. All the LLNs will come to the end of their initial funding life by 2012, with the majority ending by the summer of 2011.

9.2 LLNs are locally based partnerships of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Further Education Colleges (FECs) and other stakeholders with an interest in vocational progression to higher education and higher levels study. Stakeholders include Learning and Skills Councils, employers, sector skills councils, Health Authorities and Trusts and Local Authorities. As cross-sector partnerships LLNs aim to identify and remove barriers to vocational learner progression by:

- Assisting HE admissions staff to better understand the vocational qualification structure, and appreciate the skills and contribution vocational learners make to university life
- Creating 'Progression Agreements' i.e. written cross-sector accords which clarify HE entry requirements and admission conditions for vocational learners.
- Developing frameworks and agreements between FECs and HEIs to help partners create more places for vocational learners by providing targeted Additional Student Numbers (ASN) funding.
- Supporting the development of new curriculum including Bridging Modules, Study Support Materials, Continuing Professional Development Modules and Foundation Degrees.

9.3 The impact of LLNs has been clear:

*i. Step-changes in staff understanding of vocational HE progression*

Over 5,000 education professionals have undertaken staff development activities

*ii. Making institutional commitment to vocational learning concrete*

Over 1,000 progression agreements have been signed to clarify entry requirements into HE, with many more in development and more than 250 higher level courses developed or adapted.

*iii. Move vocational learners through Higher Education*

Over 74,000 additional student places have been allocated through partnership work with more than 400 academic partners.

## **10. The work of the LLNs**

10.1 The partnerships established by the LLNs have created the mechanisms for increasing the numbers and successes of vocational learners entering higher education. LLN work has acted as a 'catalyst' for addressing directly the structural supply side issues which are so obvious from Diagram 2. LLNs have been innovative in finding ways to develop vocational progression, as illustrated in examples below. New tools have been developed that ensure the benefits of flexible progression to higher level programmes are maintained, and offer vocational learners and adults in already in the work place, a choice of options. The 'many routes' approach has been central the LLN work, providing inclusive strategies to meet the higher level learning needs of individuals from all areas of society.

### **Box 3: Enabling vocational HE progression in South London**

*The partnerships with universities, colleges, employers, local authorities and other stakeholders have led to the development of Progression Agreements which make clear the entry requirements for university programmes and support the parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications.*

*In South London 8 universities and 10 colleges have signed up to Progression Agreements for Sport, Travel and Tourism, Sports Education, Early Years, Nursing and Midwifery, Health and Social Care, Social Work and Biomedical Sciences. Local arrangements between Kingston University and Kingston College has enabled vocational learners from such areas as engineering and computing to progress from level 3 to Foundation Degrees and honours provision, with staff in both institutions working closely to support learner progression. Workshops for level 3 students have been run to prepare them for the transition to higher education, including developing understanding of the demands of level 4 and 5 assessment.*

*Work based learning has been supported by Kingston University in partnership with Richmond College, where a successful Higher Apprenticeship in E-Business has been running for several years. Places are sought after by not only learners completing Advanced Apprenticeships, but also learners with A levels. Employers value the skills and knowledge the apprentices gain, with many apprentices also benefitting from rapid career development.*

10.2 The Lifelong Learning Networks have also supported access to higher levels knowledge and skills for a broad section of the population, including those studying specific subject areas and from particularly under-represented groups as can be seen in Box 4 below:

**Box 4: Creating partnerships in West London**

*In 2007, West London LLN took the lead in establishing the Pan London LLN Health Collaboration, to pool the London LLNs' resources to avoid duplication of effort and help develop the workforce. The Collaboration successfully made a bid to become a national Skills for Health HE Demonstration Site and developed 7 work-based learning projects to identify specific needs for London's healthcare workforce. These projects enabled employers to design competence-based learning programmes with Universities and other stakeholders. The Collaboration attracted additional funds and resources from the Department of Health, NHS London, HEI partners and NHS trusts.*

*Looked after children have poor experiences of education and a low level of achievement compared to the average 7, 11, 14 and 16 year old with few progressing to Higher Education. In 2008, only 14% of children in care achieved 5 A\*-C grade GCSEs – the level increasingly seen as the basic threshold for employability (Improving the Educational Attainment of Children in Care, DCSF 2009). This compares unfavourably with 65% of all children.*

*West London funded Changing Futures, a 3 day blended learning programme to explore and challenge barriers to learning and progression for care leavers at the University of Westminster. The programme is delivered through two face-to-face sessions and one online session. The whole programme is supported by an interactive online environment developed specifically for the learners.*

*The programme also incorporates a mentoring scheme. All mentors are current Higher Education students with experience of residential and/or foster care homes. The mentors are positive role models and give young people the opportunity to share experiences and gain a real insight into Higher Education and future possibilities.*



## **11. Lifelong Learning Networks and the flexible HE system**

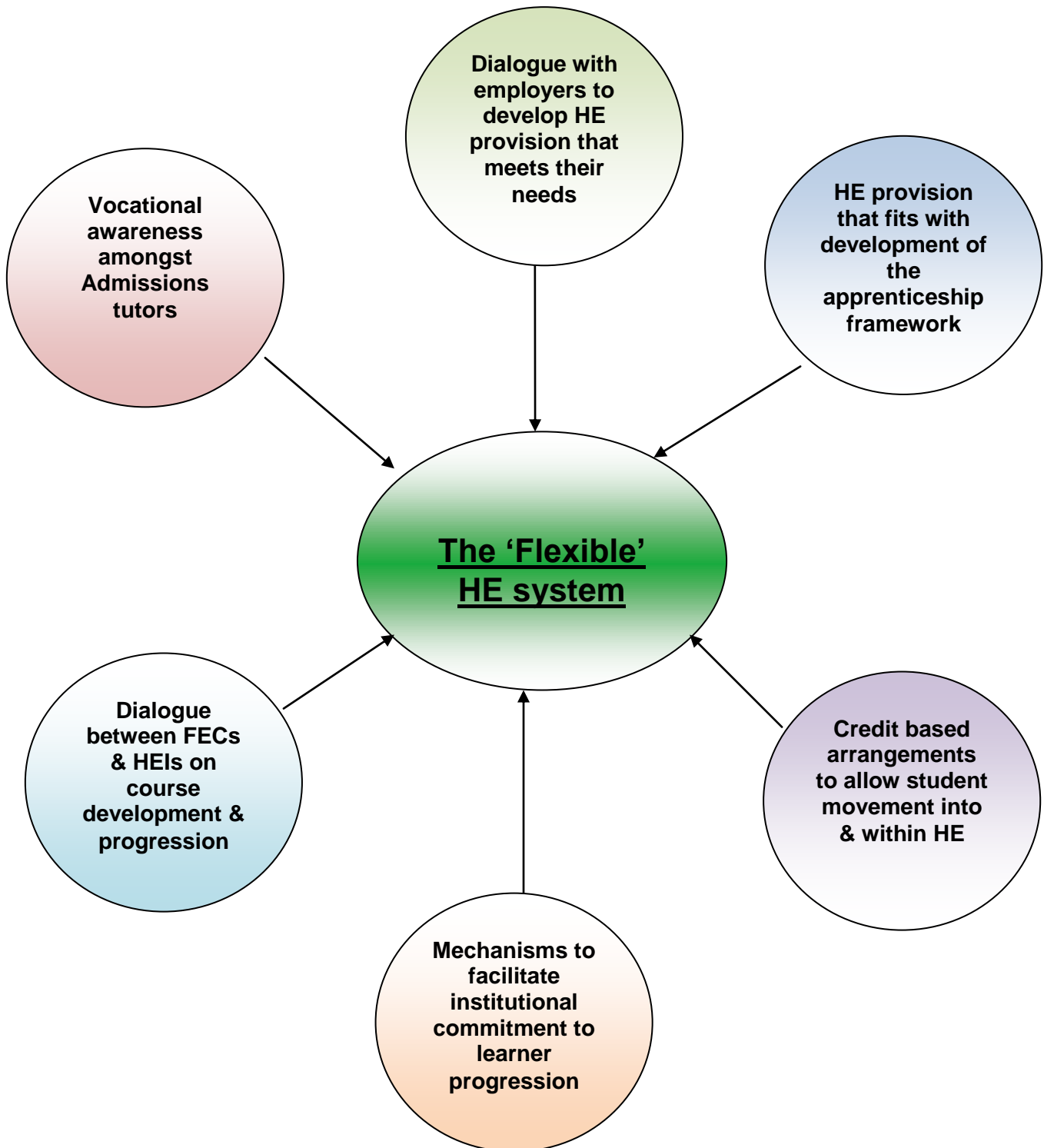
11.1 The scale of the challenge in moving English Higher Education from the cultural and structural dominance of the full time, 3 year 18 year old student to the sort of system that the Minister described in his speech to UUK in September 2010 is immense. Diagram 4 describes the key challenges that need to be addressed to facilitate different sorts of learners accessing HE study in different ways.

11.2 There is a general consensus about these challenges but less confidence regarding whether institutions can meet them unaided. The present a combination of unprecedented demand for HE study and significant reductions in funding, may in one way incentivise innovation, as institutions seek new ways of admitting more students (at a lower cost). However, in other ways (or more accurately for other institutions), less money and more students implies less need or ability to change. The Browne review may, in the medium term, ameliorate some of the financial pressure, but it will not reduce the need for change. Forecasts from the OECD up to 2025 predict continued increases in participation in Higher Education across countries including the UK (OECD 2008).

11.3 The Browne review may accelerate the trend toward a more **genuine 'mixed economy'** in HE provision in England, especially where there may be significant variations in course/institutional costs for learners. This would imply going beyond the present understanding of the 'mixed economy' in HE provision. New variations may include new private and not-for-profit providers, and virtual as well as real universities. Far greater diversity may develop between different existing HEIs, as well as within individual institutions (as some courses charge far more than others), and many offer shorter more intensive degrees. In such a landscape, competition between institutions may intensify as will competition across sectors. The dialogue and partnership that underpins all 6 challenges in Diagram 4 is an existing challenge even with LLN support, but would be amplified without a network to support collaboration and communication in the face of competitive pressures.

11.4 A service like the one provided by the LLNs could be even more important in this kind of future. It would require a more focused role for LLNs and, therefore, a step change in working practices to take this role forward with lower levels of resources. Attention would be placed on helping institutions embed and sustain the changes in practices, and to develop the provision vital to increasing vocational HE learner progression. The unique LLN role would be to address directly, the potential market failures of a more diverse, competitive and flexible system. The cross-sector partnership working and innovation in curriculum and delivery crucial to ensuring that vocational progression can be improved, may be lost without the bespoke LLN vehicle to make them happen. The consequences will be entrenchment rather than demolition of the academic versus vocational divide.

Diagram 4: The 6 challenges of a flexible HE system



## 12. How LLNs can support vocational progression to HE

12.1 LLNs can meet each of the 6 challenges above. As partnerships they will be able to ensure that institutional, local geographic and demographic factors are addressed to serve the broader interests of learners and employers.

### Box 5: The LLN service in the 2010s

- **Maintain cross sector dialogue through local FE/HE partnerships.** Via LLNs, partners will be better able to identify the implications across sectors of the new policy and funding landscape, and hence improve their own institutional responses and reforms.
- **Target the critical change points in the new policy context.** Institutional CPD, admissions IAG, curriculum matching and the reform of delivery and assessment methods, including the Accreditation of Prior Learning are likely to be vital. LLNs will concentrate resources on partnership work in these areas.
- **Produce Information Advice and Guidance materials for learners across the age range.** Materials which provide the clarity and currency of information in response to the challenges of the new Qualifications and Credit Framework are essential. LLNs have the impartiality and expertise to produce them.
- **Facilitate the development of new curriculum.** This process requires the bringing together of a number of elements: development, validation, funding and employability. As a cross-sector vehicle LLNs can make this happen in a responsive and timely way.
- **Facilitate the development of new and innovative modes of curriculum deliver.** On-line access to materials and distance learning models should be the norm in a more flexible HE system and LLNs can broker their development.
- **Act as a key conduit for the development of frameworks including those for Higher Apprenticeships** The LLN National Forum is already working with UVAC and the Mixed Economy Group of FE Colleges, to develop a suitable curriculum framework for Higher Level Apprenticeships. This will complement the work of Aimhigher directly with potential/existing apprentices
- **Enable vocational access to all types of institution:** As partnerships LLNs can have the dialogue with more selective institutions to achieve changes in attitudes towards vocational learners and admissions practices that individual institutions may find more challenging.

## **13. Summary**

### **Assessing the Browne Review**

13.1 In the introduction it was suggested that this paper would produce key questions to ask of the Browne review to help assess its contribution to vocational progression to Higher Education. There are three questions that have emerged:

- I. Do the recommendations of the review support the IAG provision essential to navigating a more flexible system and one potentially radically differentiated by price?**
- II. Can links be made between the recommendations and strategic developments in IAG: in particular an all age careers strategy based on the 'matrix model'?**
- III. How will any market failure in partnership and collaboration associated with more competition between Higher Education Institutions and also Further Education Colleges be addressed, to allow a more flexible HE system to be developed?**

13.2 The funding settlement that emerges from the Browne review must allow the challenges described in these questions to be answered. Mechanisms to meet these challenges already exist and have been described in this paper.

### **Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks**

13.3 To make a conclusive case for continuation, vital existing services must be able to fit with new policy priorities. This paper shows that, in different but complementary ways, Aimhigher and LLNs can do this:

- Aimhigher can offer a comprehensive IAG offer for disadvantaged learners that supports the delivery of a 'matrix' based all age careers strategy.
- LLNs can enable institutions to transform their curriculum and services to allow vocational learners to progress in a more flexible HE system and help meet the IAG deficit for adult learners.

13.4 The government has made a commitment to addressing historically entrenched divisions between academic and vocational progression in the education system that crosses departments. It has made this commitment when, by its own admission, the public finances are very limited. Squaring the circle of building a more inclusive, flexible system while making significant savings in expenditure means the value of existing services where expertise and infrastructures are in place must be given serious consideration. There is no doubt that post the Browne review – Aimhigher and LLNs merit such attention.

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