

Developing the progression of Islington students into further and higher education – through local partnerships

A report to HEFCE by City University London

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Executive summary

Developing the progression of Islington students into further and higher education – through local partnerships

A1 Purpose of this report

Successful partnerships between secondary schools, further education colleges and universities are essential to increase student progression and participation in higher education. The aim of this report was to ‘research, develop and evaluate the nature, scope and cost effectiveness of sustainable models of school-higher education relationships.’ This is one of a number of research reports on effective models in this area.

In this project we reviewed the effectiveness of the existing partnerships within a single London borough and assessed their potential for future development. In order to assess partnerships from both sides, a detailed consultation exercise was carried out with the secondary schools and academies in the borough. We interviewed a wide range of staff at the schools, and at other relevant organisations in Islington, as well as holding focus groups with school students aged 13 to 16.

A2 Islington

Islington, in north London, contains significant extremes of wealth and poverty. Statistically it is the sixth most deprived borough in the UK. The borough has high rates of unemployment, a large population of ethnic minorities and some severe social problems on its estates. Yet small parts of it are among the most desirable in London for middle class professionals or workers in the City of London.

The borough’s secondary schools have undergone a dramatic improvement over the past ten years, addressing problems of attendance, attainment and progression. This makes it a very appropriate location in which to conduct this kind of research, as the outcomes should be readily applicable to other metropolitan areas in the UK.

A3 School and university partnerships

There is a very mixed picture in the extent and scale of school-university partnerships in Islington. A number of schools are participating in very successful partnerships and working with a wide range of universities and colleges; others are currently doing very little in this area. Whilst there was widespread acknowledgement of the importance and value of collaboration, this was tempered by the recognition that such links require time and money to develop, and nobody expects the funding to increase.

Our research showed that collaborative work in Islington is characterised by:

- lack of overall central coordination;
- wide variety in the level of commitment that schools are able to give this area;
- some outstanding examples of good practice, such as the outreach programmes run by Arsenal Football Club;
- a number of real difficulties for both schools and universities in building and sustaining effective institutional partnerships.

The research also demonstrated the comparative lack of formal models within the secondary, higher and third sectors. The majority of partnerships operate through a

range of interesting and useful projects, rather than progressive models. The consultation with secondary schools also showed a gradual change in attitudes towards partnership and outreach work. The various activities offered through 'widening participation' programmes are both valued and effective. However, schools consistently stated a desire for more individually tailored programmes and for activities designed to meet the needs of particular student cohorts or social groups.

A4 Outcomes and conclusions

There are many factors critical to the success of partnerships, including:

- the need for greater innovation and flexibility;
- the importance of good communication and personal contact;
- the role that senior-level 'champions' can play in making partnerships succeed;
- making links between educational institutions sustainable in the long-term.

Similarly, there are also common challenges that must be overcome:

- there is intense pressure on staff time and resources, demonstrating the need for dedicated partnerships staff in schools;
- a lack of skills in this area prohibits collaboration in some schools;
- cultural barriers exist between secondary and higher education;
- there is often poor quality information and insufficient communication;
- there is an extremely complicated structure of funding and support agencies;
- the take-up of new technology has been very slow, meaning that opportunities are being missed to develop online links and projects;
- the lack of central coordination may mean that funding is not being used to maximum efficiency or effectiveness.

So, whilst there is widespread enthusiasm for increasing the links between secondary, further and higher education in Islington, in reality there are also significant cultural, political and financial barriers to be overcome.

A5 Recommendations

1) Consolidation and coordination

It should be a priority to find ways of coordinating the strategic development of educational links across Islington. In a small borough like Islington, this would bring long-term benefits. In particular, work is needed to strengthen the communication between institutions, to reduce barriers between levels and to explore how resources might be used more effectively. However, there are a number of political and institutional challenges that would need to be overcome and which make significant change in the short-term problematic.

2) Create the environment for dialogue and experimentation

There is strong demand in secondary schools for establishing direct links with academic staff in university faculties, but this is rarely happening. These links should be grown in a 'grass roots' way, starting at an informal level but with the potential to become more formal (e.g., to relate to career development). The benefits of increased links include: sharing of subject knowledge and pedagogy; the potential for reciprocal visits; and to tackle the real and perceived barriers between different educational levels. All of this could have a subsequent benefit on student progression. The most significant challenges to building these links are staff time (in both schools and universities) and the cultural barriers between educational levels.

3) Review successes and priorities to allocate funding

It is important to build on the momentum and success of existing widening participation work in Islington whilst recognising that there are unlikely to be any increases in funding to support this. Some difficult decisions may need to be taken about the targeting and use of existing funds, and opportunities sought for savings through collaborative work (where feasible). In addition, there should be more joint activities designed for specific cohorts or social groups, with schools taking a more proactive role in working with universities.

1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose and objectives of this report

Schools play a crucial role at the centre of communities, a role which goes beyond simply the provision of primary and secondary education. A recent report from the Department for Children, Schools and Families noted that “schools build community cohesion by promoting equality of opportunity and inclusion for different groups of pupils within a school. But alongside this focus on inequalities and a strong respect for diversity, they also have a role in promoting shared values and encouraging their pupils to actively engage with others to understand what they all hold in common. All schools, whatever the mix of pupils they serve, are responsible for equipping those pupils to live and thrive alongside people from many different backgrounds.”¹

Successful schools need to be supported by a network of other organisations that can offer assistance, provide opportunities for students and promote the strength and development of the school. Most secondary schools now operate in a network of different partnerships, which may be local, regional or national. Links with further and higher education are crucial for both the success of the school and to ensure that the UK continues to have a highly trained and skilful workforce. In addition, schools can play a significant role in the quality of life in an area and contribute to regeneration.

This report is the result of research conducted by City University London, evaluating the extent and effectiveness of links between secondary education and further/higher education within Islington. The objectives of the project were as follows:

- to review the effectiveness of existing partnerships and links between schools, academies, colleges and universities across the London Borough of Islington;
- to undertake a thorough consultation exercise with the secondary schools in Islington in order to explore their ideas about how they would like links and partnerships to develop;
- to consider how best practice can be developed and extended across the borough (and surrounding localities);
- to build on previous work done in this area – in particular, the ‘Building stronger school-university partnerships in London: The School-Higher Education Links in London Delivery Plan 2009-11’ report published in April 2009, the recommendations made by the National Council for Educational Excellence [see section 6], and other recent reports such as ‘Unleashing Aspiration: the final report of the panel on Fair Access to the Professions’;
- to propose how current links, partnerships and structures in the local area can be strengthened to increase rates of participation in further and higher education, both within the borough and beyond.

1.2 Why partnerships are essential for student progression

Recent reports by the National Council for Educational Excellence, the Sutton Trust, Universities UK and by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions have all highlighted the need for increased links between educational levels, particularly between secondary schools and universities. This is seen as one of the most important and effective actions that can be taken to increase the staying-on rate in secondary and further education, and raise participation in higher education.²

Due to its sheer size and the number and diversity of its schools, London is one of the key areas for this work. One of the aims of the London Challenge Vision is that by 2011 “every maintained secondary school in London will have a partnership with a Higher Education Institution”, as part of a network of partnerships linking together secondary schools, post-16 institutions and higher education institutions across London.³ The feasibility of this action was examined in detail in the report ‘Building stronger school-university partnerships in London: The School-Higher Education Links in London Delivery Plan 2009-11’. This report made a series of detailed recommendations and emphasised the importance of the word ‘partnership’, noting that school-university relationships must be “strongly bi-directional” (noting that this has not always been the case in the past).⁴

Higher education progression frameworks now feature in all Aimhigher partnership plans for 2008-11. A strategic/operational plan was being finalised during summer 2009 for the new Aimhigher London West Central and North Partnership, and this will help to give a strategic framework for higher education collaboration with secondary schools and further education colleges across 14 London boroughs, including Islington. One of the most useful analyses of the potential for school-university partnerships is the ‘Higher Education Progression Framework Feasibility Study’ completed in June 2008 by Action on Access and Aimhigher.⁵ This contains extensive and detailed evaluation of this area, and makes a number of recommendations that are strongly supported by the findings of the research conducted in Islington.

1.3 Research methodology

It was decided that the main focus of the research would be on the secondary schools in Islington and involve face-to-face interviews and consultation. This would gather and analyse their feedback on their existing links with further and higher education and, crucially, find out what kind of service or activities they would like in the future. The research involved:

- interviews with headteachers, principals and other senior managers in education providers at all levels in the borough;
- questionnaire-led interviews with teachers, heads of year, heads of department, careers officers and Connexions staff in secondary schools;
- small focus groups with students in Years 9, 10 and 11 (facilitated by trained student ambassadors from City University London).
- interviews with staff in other relevant organisations and institutions (including Connexions, Aimhigher and education services at Islington Borough Council);

In total, seven out of the ten secondary schools in Islington took part in the consultation, resulting in 40 meetings and interviews being conducted with teachers, headteachers, principals, careers advisers and staff at other organisations that contribute to the provision of education in Islington. Focus groups were held with 40 students in two schools, spread across Years 9, 10, and 11, who were selected to represent a range of abilities and backgrounds. Detailed information on partnerships programmes in Islington was provided City University London, London Metropolitan University, Aimhigher, Arsenal Football Club and individual schools themselves. In addition, a thorough quantitative analysis of trends in Islington was undertaken, drawing on statistical information provided by City and Islington College, City

University London, education services at Islington Borough Council, the Office for National Statistics and the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

This project was also designed to explore the four areas identified by the Higher Education Funding Council for England as national priorities in the development of links between universities and schools⁶. These are:

- 1) shared governance and strategic planning;
- 2) cooperation between universities and secondary education providers on curriculum development;
- 3) the provision of enhanced information, advice and guidance for students in secondary schools;
- 4) the extent of the progress in implementing the recommendations for universities made by the National Council for Educational Excellence in October 2008.⁷

These areas are all addressed within the various sections of this report and have been incorporated into the recommendations in section 7.

1.4 Why Islington?

Islington is a small, densely populated borough with significant differences in social conditions and living standards. More than some other London boroughs, Islington has a very sharp delineation in terms of wealth and deprivation. It has a small number of very affluent areas and yet some wards that are ranked amongst the most challenging in the country. For example, Bunhill Ward in south Islington is in the top 10% of deprived wards nationally, and Islington as a whole is the 6th most deprived borough in the UK. The general health of the population is poor compared to the statistical average and unemployment rates are much higher than the UK average.

Islington has a slightly unusual educational structure. It has a range of secondary schools with and without sixth forms and one large, successful college of further education. In addition, the borough council was the first in the UK to contract much of its educational provision to a private company (Cambridge Education @ Islington). Like many inner-city boroughs, Islington also has a highly mobile student population, with large numbers of students going out of the borough to attend school or college and many from neighbouring boroughs coming in.

It also has many of the social problems common to urban areas in London and in other large cities, resulting in the complex challenges and issues facing educational providers both nationally and internationally. These include:

- providing appropriate educational opportunities for areas with extensive social deprivation and low levels of literacy and numeracy;
- providing support for students whose first language is not English;
- facilitating student progression between levels and institutions;
- the political challenge of making different institutions work together effectively.

The existing partnerships work undertaken across Islington offers a platform for meaningful analysis of effective practice and for identification of improvements in approach. Arising from this, the recommendations are intended to address local challenges, whilst at the same time having wider relevance, and to demonstrate how Islington can be seen as a case study for this area of work.

1.5 City University London

The university has a number of strong existing partnerships, national and international, including links with the main feeder schools and colleges, which are predominantly in Greater London. However, the university also has an increasing commitment to undertaking more community and outreach work, as stated in the 'Widening Participation Strategic Assessment' submitted in June 2009.⁸ In addition, The University's 'Widening Participation Strategy 2008-12' contains the following three goals:

- *“to develop and strengthen our work with local schools, colleges, other London higher education institutions and partners to deliver a range of effective outreach and engagement activities – informed by our own and sector best practice;”*
- *“through approaches based on the establishment of successful partnerships we seek to be recognised as a leading player – locally, across London, and nationally – for our engagement with the pre-tertiary sector and for developing practice relating to the progression of students through to higher education;”*
- *“to develop our engagement and sponsorship of our Academy – the City of London Academy, Islington – as a model of university support for improving attainment, guidance and school/higher education interactions.”*

Therefore, this project has provided a useful opportunity for the university to review its own partnerships with institutions in Islington. It has also enabled us to explore the changing requirements of schools, academies and colleges, and to consider how universities might adapt their practices and policies to meet these needs.

1.6 About this report

The university has undertaken this report in the role of an independent auditor. All of the findings and recommendations are directed towards the single goal of increasing the opportunities for students in Islington to progress to further and higher education, and the role that partnership work has in this aim. The report is intended to be as accessible as possible and assumes no prior specialist knowledge of either Islington or of secondary, further and higher education. Acronyms and educational jargon have been avoided wherever possible.

The only specialist term that it has been necessary – and sensible – to use throughout is '**widening participation**'. This is an established initiative in the UK, in which specific funding is directed to institutions to increase the opportunities for people from social groups that are under-represented in further and higher education. Throughout the report the word '**school**' is used as a generic term referring to any secondary-level school, academy or college (except further education colleges). Where a specific type or level of school is being discussed, this is indicated. At all other times we have used the term 'school' simply for ease of reading and with no intention of excluding any type of institution from the discussion.

2 Contextual information

2.1 Islington – demography

The borough of Islington is in north London and is bordered by Camden to the west, Haringey to the north, Hackney to the east and the City of London to the south. Islington is third smallest local authority in the UK, but the second most densely populated, with a population of 187,800.⁹ This is fairly evenly divided between males and females, with 73% of the population of working age.

Like many London boroughs, Islington differs from national averages with a significantly higher proportion of its population located in the 20-44 age groups. The borough has the third highest percentage of single-person households, and 24.7% of the population belong to an ethnic minority group. Unemployment rates are high, particularly for the long-term unemployed (approximately double the national rate). Over a third of Islington residents live in local authority accommodation, the third highest proportion in the country. Based on the 2001 census, London Borough of Islington Council has identified the following characteristics of the borough:

- a high proportion of single people and many one-person households;
- highly qualified residents;
- a very low level of car ownership;
- many residents who travel to work by public transport;
- many residents who were born outside the UK and EU;
- many residents who are non-Christians;
- a population where general health is not good;
- high levels of current and long-term unemployment;
- few vacant properties;
- a low level of owner occupation;
- a high level of overcrowding;
- many households that share a bath/shower or toilet.¹⁰

2.2 Economic and social contexts

Islington has an unemployment figure of 7.9% (8,500 people), significantly higher than the national average (although recent figures for the borough taking account of the economic downturn are not yet available). By occupation, the majority of working residents are employed in the social group 'Managers and senior officials; professional occupations; associate professional & technical', and the average weekly wage for full-time workers is £626.10, much higher than the national average of £479.30.¹¹

However, by most indicators, Islington is ranked as a deprived area, with some wards amongst the most deprived nationally. Data presented by the Greater London Authority's report on 'Children in Benefit Claiming Families' (Data Management and Analysis Group Briefing 2008-29)¹² shows that Islington is the second worst authority out of 406 in England, with 46% of all children aged 18 and under being in families claiming benefit. The contrast in wealth and social conditions is one of the most unusual features of the borough and is largely explained by the migrant nature of London's workforce. There is a significant annual movement of people in and out of the borough, the majority of whom are of working age and likely to be in employment.

2.3 Student mobility

Large numbers of students opt to travel between London boroughs for their education. Large numbers of students whose homes are in Islington choose to study in Hackney, Camden, Haringey or even further away; whilst similarly there are large numbers of students from neighbouring boroughs coming to school in Islington. One secondary school reports that 45% of its students come from outside the borough. Another secondary school reported that in a typical year of 130 students leaving aged 16, those staying in education go on to 30 or more different sixth form destinations.

The reasons for this mobility might include choosing a school or college for geographical proximity, for a subject specialism or religious affiliation, or simply as a result of peer-group drift. Whilst this reflects the willingness of some students to travel (for both positive and negative reasons), it also demonstrates the comparative choice and accessibility of services in London, at all levels of education. It also reflects one particularly difficult aspect of life for young people in London: the gang culture that is evident on some inner-city estates. This is a distinct problem in some parts of Islington. A number of schools reported that students opted to continue their education in unlikely destinations or at sixth form colleges some distance from the borough (and not necessarily the best choice of academic destination for them).

2.4 Overview of education provision in Islington

Islington currently has 44 primary schools, 10 secondary schools, three special schools and five pupil referral units, which together provide education for more than 22,500 pupils. In addition, there is one independent school (specialising in performing arts), one college of further education, two universities and one teaching hospital. Islington's student population is extremely diverse. Sixty-four percent of primary and 71% of secondary pupils in Islington are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and 43% of pupils in Islington are eligible for free school meals. Annual secondary-age cohorts currently comprise approximately 8,000 students.

<p>Secondary schools (11-16) Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College Holloway School Islington Arts & Media School of Creativity Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls St Aloysius College</p> <p>Secondary schools (with 6th forms) Central Foundation Boys' School The City of London Academy – Islington Highbury Fields School Highbury Grove School St Mary Magdalene Academy</p> <p>Special schools The Bridge School Richard Cloudesley School Samuel Rhodes School</p>	<p>Independent schools The Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts</p> <p>Further Education Colleges City and Islington College</p> <p>Universities City University London London Metropolitan University The Whittington Hospital, Archway Campus (University College London/Middlesex University)</p> <p>Pupil Referral Units New River College Key Stage 3 New River College Key Stage 4 Paradise Park Virtual School (for Looked After Children) Whittington Hospital Tuition Unit</p>
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Figure 1: Summary of the secondary, further and higher education providers in Islington

Since April 2000, the school services provided in Islington have been managed by **Cambridge Education @ Islington** on behalf of London Borough of Islington

Council following a direction from the Secretary of State. This was the first time in the UK that a public authority has given management of education services, including the delivery of statutory functions, to a private company in this way.¹³

There are also two national organisations in Islington that provide essential support to both student progression between levels and links between institutions:

a) Connexions is a national service established in 2001 with the aim of providing a comprehensive service to meet young people's needs for information, advice and support. Connexions is designed to help all young people aged 13 to 19 regardless of need, and those aged up to 24 with a learning difficulty or disability, with a particular focus on those at risk of not being in education, employment or training, or of being socially excluded. Since April 2008, London Borough of Islington Council assumed responsibility for the Connexions service in Islington (a national change proposed in 'Every child matters: next steps').¹⁴

b) Aimhigher is the national partnership programme across secondary, further and higher education. It is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and works to raise students' aspirations, attainment and awareness, to increase the progression to higher education of young people from groups under-represented at this level of study. The programme particularly focuses on young people from lower socio-economic groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in higher education is low. For each region, Aimhigher activity and staff are coordinated by a 'lead' higher education institution; for Islington, this is the University of Westminster, which coordinates Aimhigher activities for West, Central and North London areas.¹⁵

2.5 Compulsory education

The profiles of the secondary schools and academies in Islington are as follows:

School	Age range	Type	Student numbers
Central Foundation Boys' School	11-19	Boys' voluntary-aided comprehensive	900
City of London Academy – Islington*	11-19	Academy	845
Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College	11-16	Girls' community school	1,190
Highbury Fields School	11-19	Girls' community school	777
Highbury Grove School	11-19	Mixed community school	1,150
Holloway School	11-16	Mixed community school	900
Islington Arts & Media School of Creativity	11-16	Mixed community school	900
Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls	11-16	Voluntary-aided Roman Catholic technology college for Girls	700
St Aloysius College	11-16	Boys' voluntary aided Roman Catholic school	900
St Mary Magdalene Academy*	5-19	Church of England voluntary-aided school	1,360 [predicted]

Figure 2: Profile of secondary schools and academies [*see note below on sixth forms]

In 2000, several of Islington's secondary schools were rated amongst the lowest performing in the country, with severe problems in attainment and attendance. In 1999, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) had rated the education authority as 'failing' and in 2000 just 26.5% of students achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (and at one school the figure was as low as 5%). The borough average had improved to 46% by 2004, making Islington the most improved borough in London, and then reached 50% for the first time in 2007. Also by September 2004 there were no schools in Ofsted's 'special measures' category for the first time in Islington's history. Islington secondary school attendance is now above the national average and exclusion rates are below the national average.¹⁶

Therefore, in the past ten years, secondary education in Islington has undergone a steady transformation. Work has been carried out to raise standards, refurbish or rebuild schools and increase vocational opportunities, and this is still in progress. As a result there have been significant improvements across all of Islington's secondary schools and two new academies have been developed with the full support of London Borough of Islington Council.

2.6 Sixth form provision

The sixth form provision in Islington is currently increasing, mainly as a result of the development of two new academies. Students now have the following options:

- City and Islington College, which is the largest provider of sixth form education in the borough;
- Islington Consortium¹⁷ – a partnership between Central Foundation Boys' School, Highbury Grove School and Highbury Fields School, to provide a combined sixth form service across the borough drawing on the combined subject specialisms and facilities of the three schools;
- St Mary Magdalene Academy, where the sixth form enrolled its first intake for September 2009 and will expand over the next three to five years;
- City of London Academy – Islington, where the development of the sixth form will be completed during 2009/10 and which will enrol its first intake in September 2010.

2.7 Further education

City and Islington College is the only further education institution in Islington and has up to 1,100 students each year progressing into higher education. The college offers a significant range of both traditional and vocational courses, as well as adult education and higher education programmes (in partnership). The college operates five centres, located across the borough:

- Centre for Applied Sciences
- Centre for Business, Arts and Technology
- Centre for Health, Social and Child Care
- Centre for Lifelong Learning
- City and Islington Sixth Form College

The college was rated 'Outstanding' in every area at its last Ofsted inspection in 2008, and the A-level pass rate for 2008 was 97.6%, well above the national average, with 100% achieved in 22 subjects. The college won the Queen's Anniversary Prize in 2007 for its education provision in the sciences.

There are three particular ways relevant to this report in which City and Islington College is very successful. Firstly, it achieves very good retention rates, with a student profile where this has, traditionally, been a significant challenge. Secondly, it achieves very good results in terms of students fulfilling and, at times, exceeding their potential upon admission. This is a considerable achievement, given the difficulties many students face in terms of their social background or prior educational experiences. Thirdly, the college maintains a number of partnerships and relationships with other institutions, which all contribute to its ongoing success.

2.8 Higher education

City University London is located in Northampton Square, and has over 20,000 students, of whom 27% are international and 39% are studying postgraduate courses. London Metropolitan University has two campuses, the North Campus primarily on Holloway Road and Highbury Grove in Islington, and the City Campus (located in neighbouring boroughs). The university was created on 1 August 2002 through the merger of London Guildhall University and the University of North London, and has over 30,000 students, making it the largest single university in London. Of these, 25% are international and 24% are postgraduate students.¹⁸

Both universities recruit significant numbers of students from Islington and undertake outreach activities with schools in the borough. However, City University's location at the southern tip of the borough means that historically much of its outreach activity has been targeted in the City of London and eastwards in Hackney and Tower Hamlets. London Metropolitan University has carried out the most extensive outreach work in Islington of any higher education institution, work that is also central to its mission; as a result, the university has a strong reputation for innovation and commitment in the field of widening participation.

The Whittington Hospital is a teaching hospital of the University of London. It provides undergraduate teaching in association with University College London Medical School and Middlesex University, which jointly manage the Archway Campus. The campus serves as a focus for initiatives in multi-professional education, informatics, clinical research and health services research. These are being developed and integrated with the aim of improving clinical education, supporting clinical practice and benefiting local communities.¹⁹ Imperial College, University College London, Queen Mary, University of London and Middlesex University also have programmes of outreach work in Islington. It is important to remember that there are a large number of higher education institutions in London, the majority of which are within easy reach of Islington students, and student perceptions may differ over which they consider to be their local university.

2.9 Other organisations

A number of other organisations contribute to the provision of education in Islington, including charitable foundations such as the Dame Alice Owen Foundation, which both donates significant levels of funding for educational projects in the borough and is supported by the Brewers' Company. Sir John Cass's Foundation also supports a wide number of projects and institutions.

One of the most important contributions comes from Arsenal Football Club. For many years, the club has been funding and running a series of successful, innovative and high-impact programmes contributing to educational development, through the initiative 'Arsenal in the Community'. The work that these organisations do has

tremendous importance for student success and progression in Islington, and they are discussed in subsequent sections of the report.

2.10 Student profiles

Social conditions in Islington, with areas of significant deprivation and low participation in education, have a direct effect on the attainment and progression of some students. Many current students in Islington aged 11 to 19 are the first members of their family to progress in education beyond the age of 16 and schools must tackle problems with attendance, punctuality and engagement. It is not unusual for a secondary school in Islington to have up to 60% of students eligible for free school meals, with more than 40 different first languages spoken and a student body where 75% of the students come from ethnic minority backgrounds. The social background of a student was identified by nearly all of the participants in this project as the most influential factor on their participation and attainment in education, and one of the main areas that could benefit from increased partnership work.

Islington also has a number of large estates with very challenging social conditions; students coming from this background often have very low expectations. Within this, there are also particular social groups that are more or less disaffected. For all the recent success stories – for example, the high educational attainment of Bengali girls; or the potential now being shown by Somali girls – there are also groups that remain severely alienated from education. All of the schools in Islington identified white working class students as the most disengaged social group and the hardest to motivate and inspire. Whether more could be done to support these particular groups is discussed later in the report.

3 Evaluation of existing links and partnerships

3.1 Diversity of activities

There are already many strong and well-established links between the schools, academies and colleges in Islington, and further and higher education, and so for the purposes of this report, a very loose definition of 'partnership' has been assumed. The main types of link or partnership are:

- joint outreach work through widening participation projects;
- compacts and progression agreements;
- strategic alliances (both formal and informal);
- university sponsorship of an academy;
- joint delivery of foundation degrees.

This list is not definitive. There are many small-scale, informal activities, often managed and delivered at a very local level, which are very successful and difficult to formally categorise. Indeed, their success may be due to their comparative informality and flexibility – meaning that one of the challenges for both schools and universities is to encourage the conditions in which these kinds of projects will develop.

3.2 Formal arrangements

a) Compacts and progression agreements

There are no compacts or guaranteed student progression agreements between either of the two universities and secondary schools in Islington, although to some extent this is compensated for by various outreach activities. The only progression agreements that are in place with universities take the form of articulation arrangements for foundation degrees. It should also be remembered that with the exception of City and Islington College, none of the other schools with sixth forms in Islington supply significant numbers of students to City University London.

City and Islington College has been very active in developing formal links with both the secondary sector and with a range of higher education providers, and is an example of how a successful college of further education can play a significant linking role between educational levels, for the benefit of local students. The college has formal partnership agreements with the five secondary schools in Islington that do not have sixth forms (Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College, Holloway School, Islington Arts & Media School of Creativity, Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls and St Aloysius' College), through which students from these schools can have a guaranteed place at the college. The college also has formal strategic partnerships with University College London and City University London, and other partnership arrangements with London Metropolitan University and Queen Mary, University of London (for the delivery of foundation degrees). As progression from City and Islington College to both London Metropolitan University and City University London is already substantial, this suggests there is potential in Islington for compact agreements for entry between the two universities and the schools with sixth forms, if supported by a range of aspiration-raising activities.

b) Strategic alliances

Within Islington there is only one high-profile institutional partnership, backed by a memorandum of understanding, which is between City University London and City and Islington College. This has been very successful and is currently being renegotiated to further increase and strengthen links between the two institutions. London Metropolitan University works extremely closely with London Borough of Islington Council, in an arrangement that enables the education services to contribute to the targeting of the university's widening participation activities and resources. City and Islington College also works with the council to plan courses that meet the needs of local residents, run in community venues throughout the borough; works with Islington Connexions Service to provide information, advice and guidance to students aged 16-19; and has a partnership with the Corporation of London to deliver its adult education programme in community venues in the City. Therefore, the potential for strategic alliances is not being fully exploited. There are clear potential benefits and efficiencies that might arise from institutions working together in specific areas, such as coordinating the provision of support services such as careers advice and sharing strategic data for more coordinated planning.

c) Joint programmes and articulation agreements

Partnerships to deliver foundation degrees are in place between City and Islington College and City University London, London Metropolitan University and Queen Mary, University of London. These have increased the educational opportunities in the borough, particularly in vocational areas, and assist students from non-traditional backgrounds to enter higher education. It is difficult to judge the potential for more joint programmes beyond the existing arrangements (i.e., between one of the universities and a secondary school). However, there are examples elsewhere of joint programmes delivered with employers and charitable organisations that could be copied in Islington. For example, City University London runs a foundation degree in creative industries with the Camden Roundhouse, an arts and performance venue. London Metropolitan University, City and Islington College and Arsenal Football Club are also developing foundation degrees in areas of sports science.

d) Curriculum links

There are very few curriculum links between institutions that promote dialogue across academic levels, or that facilitate communication between staff in secondary schools and universities. Most of the schools expressed a strong desire to increase links to academic departments in universities – ranging from requests for informal dialogue, to suggestions that a university could run career development sessions for school staff to enhance knowledge of their discipline. This suggests that the UK education system is not maximising the potential of secondary school teaching staff. Beyond the obvious benefits of sharing subject knowledge expertise in pedagogy, academic links bring many indirect benefits to student attainment and progression (for example, through shared projects) and would begin to increase links between the national curriculum and degree subjects. There are obvious problems regarding the availability of staff time, which is the main resource requirement for such activity, but these are outweighed by the many benefits. More problematic – and probably a greater factor inhibiting the development of these kind of academic links – are the cultural and historical barriers between educational levels. These are discussed in section 5, below.

e) Sponsorship of academies

Islington has two new academies. The City of London Academy – Islington is sponsored jointly by City University London and by The City of London Corporation,

and is the result of the redevelopment of one of the most challenged schools in the borough, Islington Green School. Although the academy has only been open for a short time there have already been improvements in levels of attendance, behaviour, and assessment results. St Mary Magdalene Academy was established around a successful existing primary school and is sponsored by the London Diocesan Board for Schools (the education arm of the Church of England in London). The academy completed its building programme in early 2009 and the first intake of students for the new sixth form enrolled in September 2009. The academy is extremely ambitious and is actively seeking to build links and relationships to other institutions and employers. It is one of the few secondary institutions in Islington where a senior member of staff has specific responsibility for collaborative work, with a director of learning – external links.

It is still too early to judge the effectiveness of university sponsorship, particularly with only one example in Islington. However, launching the academy has already begun to build strong links between the two institutions, particularly at the level of senior management, and aspiration-raising activities are being delivered with the school. Further plans include:

- support for the professional development of staff;
- a programme of activities to boost attainment and aspiration;
- progression opportunities to City University's degree programmes;
- governance and strategic development;
- input into curriculum development, so that academic departments at the university begin to engage more fully with the academy.²⁰

One of the most significant developments in the partnership is the proposed 'Step Up to the City' programme, based on the successful 'Step Up' programme pioneered at the University of Ulster. This is a series of co-ordinated 'interventions' for talented young people who live in areas of social and economic deprivation, and aims to raise pupil's aspirations, expectations and academic performance. This will be delivered jointly by the Academy and the university to increase the opportunities for Islington students to progress into professional careers in business and finance.²¹

f) Governance links

Increasing the links between schools and universities at governance level, mainly through having members of staff serving as governors, is one of the key recommendations proposed by the National Council for Educational Excellence.²² There are comparatively few such links in Islington. As part of the sponsorship arrangements, City University London has a governance role with the City of London Academy – Islington; and as part of their partnership arrangement a member of staff from University College London is also represented on the board of governors for City and Islington College. But although both London Metropolitan University and City University London do have some staff serving as governors at schools in Islington and other boroughs, it is more common for university staff to serve as school governors in or near the community near where they live, reflecting a personal commitment rather than a professional responsibility.

This area needs extensive development in partnership with the borough council, which manages the appointment of governors to secondary schools. Given the comparatively small number of schools, it should be possible to gradually appoint academic staff from both universities to serve as governors at each secondary school, and, ideally, at a selection of the primary schools. Staff governors should be tasked with promoting institutional links and partnerships, preferably with central

institutional oversight and opportunities for governors to meet to discuss and coordinate their work. There should also be representation from the primary and secondary sectors on the universities' governing bodies, and a useful step would be to appoint a senior member of staff from education services at the borough council.

3.4 Links through widening participation activity

Inevitably, many partnerships and links exist in the borough to support activities carried out through widening participation funding [see section 1.6 for a definition of this term]. The number, extent and nature of the links varies between schools and universities. However, the research shows that there are no secondary schools that do not have some existing links with universities through widening participation activities, through which students benefit accordingly.

a) Brief survey of current activity

Both London Metropolitan University and City University London carry out extensive widening participation activities in the borough, much of which is coordinated, supported and funded by the Aimhigher organisation. Other universities undertaking work with schools in Islington include University College London, Kings College, Imperial College, Middlesex University, Queen Mary, University of London, Brunel University and Thames Valley University. Outside London, the universities cited most regularly by schools were University of Sussex [see section 3, below], University of Cambridge and University of Oxford. The extensive programmes and activities offered by universities in close geographical proximity to the borough are to be expected. However, some of the activities most valued by schools, particularly for aspiration raising, are those taking place with universities outside the capital (in particular with University of Cambridge).

Islington students also participate in a range of summer schools. One of the most notable is the UCL/Dick Whittington Summer School for Year 11 pupils who are thinking of studying medicine. This is a non-residential work experience week held at the Archway Campus, within the Whittington Hospital. Students work in small groups with medical students and are taught by doctors and academics from the UCL Medical School. It includes sessions on applying to medical school, volunteering, writing personal statements and interview techniques.

Finally, City and Islington College undertakes outreach work with local schools, but also benefits from schemes offered by universities, particularly its two formal partners:

- University College London provides challenging enhancement programmes for students at City and Islington Sixth Form College who demonstrate exceptional ability and enthusiasm for their studies, careers guidance and support to prepare our students for studying at university level and opportunities for teachers at the sixth form college to engage in educational research projects at the university.
- City University London provides additional opportunities for students on vocational courses, including master classes, visits and mentoring schemes, which are intended to increase students' skills and attainment.

b) London Metropolitan University – 'Impact in Islington'

The programmes that reach the largest number of Islington secondary school students are run by London Metropolitan University under the umbrella title 'Impact in Islington'. It is delivered through a partnership with the borough's education service and Islington's secondary schools, with support from the Dame Alice Owen

Foundation. This is a three-year series of interventions that deliver a systematic, intensive and targeted top-up and curriculum enrichment programme, and supports learner attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4 across schools in Islington. The programme also aims to raise aspirations, stimulate engagement in school and increase progression to level 3 studies. All participants are actively encouraged to extend their studies by taking the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness, a personal development programme that is the equivalent to a GCSE grade B. The programme is voluntary, intended for participants with no history of higher education, and parents are actively encouraged to become involved.

Components of 'Impact in Islington' include:²³

- Upward Bound – a 52-week programme for students across Years 10 and 11, delivered on Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons, providing English, maths and science enrichment and review classes. It also includes two one-week residential experiences to build group cohesion, consolidate and reward progress, and contribute to the development of social and cultural capacity.
- the Aimhigher Saturday Club – a 16-week voluntary Saturday morning project for Year 9 students, providing key skills development using ICT, media, drama and dance as the medium for delivery.
- The Year 10 Liverpool/Lille Exchange – a reciprocal three to four-day exchange programme that looks at identity, leadership and widening horizons outside hometown environments. It includes five weeks of Saturday morning preparation sessions prior to the visits taking place.

London Metropolitan University also delivers and hosts the 'Islington Summer University', which is attended by hundreds of children and adults from Islington each year, and coordinates the Aimhigher Associates mentoring programme for Islington, which is discussed in the next section. By working in partnership with a range of institutions, and with the support of funding from charitable organisations, the university is delivering programmes in Islington that have a tremendous impact on the progression of students into further and higher education. The recent funding crisis at the university obviously raises inevitable concerns about the long-term prospects of these important activities.²⁴ This provision would appear to be secure for the immediate future. However, it is questionable to what extent the university will be able to develop and deliver any significant new programmes in the short-term.

c) Feedback from schools on widening participation work

All of the schools that participated in the research for this project were enthusiastic about developing more links and partnerships through widening participation work. Yet the question remains of how to develop it further, when there is little prospect of increasing resources.

Feedback also demonstrates the importance attached to different activities. Mentoring by student ambassadors appears to be the most valued and effective activity, particularly at the crucial Year 11 transition point (Key Stage 4), as it is often the most direct and powerful intervention. However, this does depend strongly on ambassadors being very well trained and supported in order to fulfil their roles effectively. The importance of ambassadors and mentoring is now being recognised and addressed through the Aimhigher Associates scheme, a nationally-funded scheme to provide long-term mentoring arrangements for students in Years 9 to 13. Schools also highlighted the need to work more with parents and carers, identifying

parental attitudes and support as the most important factor in a student's achievement, particularly when the student comes from a deprived background.

There is also some evidence to suggest that many schools are making intelligent strategic use of widening participation links. Many use visits to Oxford, Cambridge or 'Russell Group'²⁵ universities to raise aspiration, particularly for high-achieving students, whilst utilising links to their local universities for the more day-to-day package of activities that bring wider benefits across year-groups and cohorts.²⁶

Finally, several schools praised the enhanced admissions schemes that some universities are now operating, which facilitate the progression of widening participation students by contextualising achievement. These procedures formally identify widening participation students at an early stage of the application process, normally through nomination by their school or college. Their applications are then reviewed to take into account additional factors to academic performance when assessing the student's potential to succeed in higher education. This may include the profile of the school or college they attended, their social background, any extra responsibilities they may have had (for example, as carers) and other personal challenges they may have overcome. An example of this is an initiative by the University of Sussex called the 'Sussex Education Access Scheme'²⁷, which has benefited a number of students from Islington. As well as enabling the university to consider extra information about applicants, this scheme also ensures that applicants are fully informed about the university and supported during the application process.

These schemes are an important step in addressing a genuine inequality in the educational system. The need for them was also recognised in the recent report 'Unleashing Aspiration', which recommends: "that higher education institutions should be supported to take into account the social and educational context of pupils' achievement. We believe the evidence from data on relative pupil performance and on predicted grades clearly supports a shift to more context-based admission procedures."²⁸

d) Widening participation and partnerships – some conclusions

This report is not an audit of widening participation programmes in Islington and the different activities that are delivered. However, it has been necessary to consider them in some detail because of their obvious significance to partnerships and collaborative work. Outreach and widening participation schemes have had a very positive impact, helping to increase student aspiration and achievement and build links between institutions. Significant effort, time and resources go into delivering these schemes. However, school feedback in Islington also suggests that there is now an established menu of mainstream activities that varies little between institutions. This has been accompanied by the professionalisation of widening participation with increasingly skilled practitioners and a growing body of academic research in the area.²⁹

As such, it may now be time for widening participation activity to evolve to a further stage. If the existing activities were to be seen as the basic minimum offered by any university to local schools, the likely future development would be towards stronger partnership operation between schools and universities in which bespoke activities are designed for specific, targeted groups.³⁰ Whilst this is already starting to happen, it is likely that progress may be slow whilst the majority of resources continue to be directed towards maintaining important established activities.

This raises a further question over whether the division of widening participation funding between institutions and national agencies is the best system for London. This structure needs strong central coordination to be fully effective, and with the diminishing profile of Aimhigher it is not clear where this could be provided, not just in Islington but across the capital. There are obvious reasons why this funding model has evolved, to provide a balance between institutional aims and local/regional needs; but there is also obvious potential for inefficiency and overlaps in a comparatively uncoordinated system. This problem is exacerbated in London by the sheer number and geographical spread of institutions, which is not the situation in other regions or towns, where there is perhaps only one university that can fulfil a central coordinating role.

3.5 Informal partnership arrangements

The research in Islington, particularly in comments from secondary schools, showed that less formal partnership arrangements often have significant impact on the student experience and are some of the links most valued by teachers. In this instance, 'informal' refers to links or partnership activities that may be one-off (although they are usually part of an ongoing relationship), unique to a specific school, small scale (often delivered for a particular cohort or social group), and which are not necessarily the result of detailed agreements or contracts. Instead, such links are often the result of personal contacts or opportunities that arise for two institutions, or people, to work together.

Some examples illustrate how this type of informal link can develop into an interesting collaborative project or institutional relationship:

- Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls is running a scheme with Middlesex University, in which small numbers of undergraduate or postgraduate ICT students, particularly those interested in teacher training, are able to work in the school on a regular, part-time basis as ICT demonstrators and tutors;
- Central Foundation Boys' School benefits from a link to the Mosaic Network, which provides mentoring primarily (although not exclusively) for Muslim students, through a scheme intended to raise the aspirations of young people growing up in deprived areas;³¹
- Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College has developed a strong link with Corpus Christie College at the University of Cambridge, through a regular contact and consultation with the college's admissions tutor, which is leading to the development of a number of projects to raise awareness and aspirations with the school's 'Young Gifted & Talented' students.³²

The success of small-scale projects like these suggests how effective it could be to begin encouraging more links at grass roots level. Such projects have low set-up costs, are an obvious way to begin linking curricula, do not require significant administration in the early stages and can lead to long-term benefits on student progression. They would also enable schools and universities to pilot lightweight or portable activities: short projects that can be tried on an experimental basis, where the arrangements are flexible, and perhaps have no further initial aim than to increase communication and the sharing of ideas. This does, of course, depend entirely on the enthusiasm of the staff involved. The challenge for both universities and schools is to identify the right staff and create the conditions for this to happen.

3.6 Islington 14-19 Partnership

The Islington 14-19 Partnership Team works with all the borough's secondary schools and training providers, together with other relevant organisations, to improve educational opportunities and ensure there is a broad range of high quality educational provision for young people aged 14-19 in Islington. This includes:

- developing and coordinating the delivery of the new Diplomas at 14-19;
- work-related options for young people aged 14-16 as part of the curriculum (the Specialised Programme);
- programmes for young people disengaged or at risk of becoming disengaged with education (the Individualised Programme);
- work-related learning opportunities and mentoring (the Islington Education Business Partnership);
- career and work experience opportunities for care leavers (the Career Start programme).

Inevitably, the focus of the 14-19 Partnership is on implementing the new Diploma qualifications, to promote comprehensive take-up across the borough. However, there is potential for the 14-19 Partnership to play a significant role across Islington as the central forum that coordinates links between educational levels – although to do this the membership and remit of the 14-19 Partnership would have to be expanded.

An example of a successful partnership for developing the 14-19 agenda that works across educational levels and organisations can be seen in 'The Learning Hub', run in Tower Hamlets.³³ This partnership comprises all of the organisations that offer 14–19 learning in Tower Hamlets, including secondary schools, Tower Hamlets College, training providers, the universities and support services. It is possible that a similar model could be piloted in Islington, using the existing structure as a starting point.

3.7 Links with primary education

Although the focus of this project was on secondary education, a brief survey of the primary schools in Islington was conducted. This yielded a low level of feedback, probably due to the awkward timing of the survey. However, a very thorough response was received from one school that is actively seeking to increase partnership and progression work. This school already does the following work relevant to this area:

- encouraging parental attendance at a weekly coffee morning (at which eventual progression to higher education could be discussed, particularly with student ambassadors);
- whenever possible taking parents along on visits to universities (including, recently, to the University of Cambridge);
- involving universities in areas of the curriculum such as thinking skills and languages.

In addition, it wants to provide:

- better use and sharing of progression information at all levels (i.e., from primary to secondary, secondary to further/higher), to track student progress;
- enhanced publicity for primary schools, including more activities that showcase the work of Year 6 students;

It also seeks to generate extra income from hiring out facilities for weekend parking – income that can be used to support school or university visits, for example. These demonstrate how one school is working very pro-actively in this area, in ways that are innovative and flexible, so that activities can be tried to see what works.

So there is some evidence of universities engaging with primary schools in Islington, with both London Metropolitan University and City University London running outreach schemes (including taster days and reading programmes). However, these activities are delivered to a comparatively small number of schools and there is still some way to go in meeting the aspiration of linking all primary schools to a local university. Appointing university staff as primary school governors would be an obvious first step, as a way to begin building links. The challenge is the sheer numbers involved: in Islington, two universities would need to be working with and supporting 44 primary schools. This would be true for many metropolitan areas.

3.8 Partnerships with other organisations

The most important partnership work carried out in the borough by a non-educational institution, and which the majority of schools are participating in and benefiting from, is the work done by Arsenal Football Club. Through the initiative 'Arsenal in the Community', the club delivers an outstanding range of football-related community and education programmes. These include:³⁴

- Youth Training Programme – this provides training and education opportunities for 16-19-year-olds who are not in employment to work within the sports industry, and can lead to an NVQ level 2 qualification. Over 350 young people have taken part and benefited from this programme.
- Sport and Learning – this offers a full-time alternative to school to Year 11 students who have become disengaged with education through poor attendance and leads to a range of qualifications, such as GCSEs, Sports Leaders awards, ICT and Citizenship.
- BTEC National Certificate in Sport – this is offered in partnership with City of Westminster College and is a two-year course for students aged 16-18.
- Gap Year Programme – this enables young people aged 18 or over to work in Arsenal Soccer Schools and gain recognised qualifications.
- 'Double Club' – this programme combines football and education and is currently running in more than 70 schools. It raises confidence and ability levels, combining football coaching with a parallel programme of academic modules in literacy, numeracy, science, ICT, geography, nutrition, history, German, French, Spanish and business studies aimed at Key Stages 2 and 3.
- Study Support – based at Holloway School, this programme is a joint venture between Arsenal, Islington borough council and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. It offers after-school courses in literacy, numeracy and ICT for local primary and secondary schools. Over 7,000 children have attended since the centre opened in 2000.
- Arsenal Learning Centre – based at the Emirates Stadium, this provides courses and facilities for local children and adults, including free computer training, as well as literacy and numeracy skills, family support, dyslexia support programmes and English as a second language programmes.

This is just a selection of the many activities that the club undertakes, and the importance of these programmes and their contribution to the local community and to

education must be emphasised. As a result of the club's profile and reputation, and thanks to the enthusiasm of the community team, it is able to access some of the most deprived areas of Islington and offer activities that are extremely effective, cleverly combining football with educational skills. The club also works in a range of partnerships with different institutions.

However, feedback from schools in Islington showed that with the exception of Arsenal, there was comparatively little partnership work with other organisations. Few schools have any really significant links with local employers, beyond attendance at careers fairs and the occasional joint project. This is an area that needs urgent development, in which universities could contribute existing links and expertise.

3.9 Distinctive features of partnerships in Islington

It is possible to identify and summarise some of the common features of this area:

a) Increasing demand for bespoke activities

Widening participation programmes are now established as a mainstream activity (or menu) that schools expect to be able to access selectively. As noted earlier, these activities are extremely important and must be maintained, although feedback from secondary schools suggests that there are increasing requests for more tailored activities specific to a certain school or to individual cohorts/social groups.

b) Lack of strategic oversight

There is currently no organisation or forum in Islington that provides strong strategic oversight for the specific area of links between secondary schools, further education colleges and universities. Aimhigher would be the obvious candidate for this role, as it already has the necessary network of contacts. However, Aimhigher simply does not have the resources to undertake this, in addition to coordinating widening participation and outreach activities. Aimhigher will also receive reduced funding for Central London boroughs for the next few years, as a result of the method used to calculate levels of educational attainment in the borough.³⁵ This results in a funding profile for Islington that may not be fully representative of the social conditions and which Aimhigher has raised as a serious concern. Finally, it is also likely that Aimhigher will no longer be funded after 2011, as there are strong indications that the money will be used in different ways. The only scheme that appears to have long-term backing is Aimhigher Associates [see section 3].

None of the other existing networks run centrally by the borough council – including Connexions and the 14-19 Partnership – have a remit that includes school and higher education links, and some may not even have representatives from all of the local higher education institutions. As there are few governance arrangements, the majority of the primary and secondary schools in Islington are not able to participate in strategic planning specifically in regard to further and higher education. Given the size and educational structure of Islington as a borough, there is clear potential for the two universities to work more closely together, in partnership with the borough council, City and Islington College and Arsenal Football Club. The Universities UK report 'Higher education engagement with schools and colleges: partnership development' provides examples of such schemes that are running elsewhere in the UK, and these could be consulted if the feasibility of a similar scheme for Islington was being investigated.³⁶

c) Not enough communication

Communication between educational levels could be significantly improved in Islington, as in many cases it became clear that there is a lack of knowledge between educational levels. Feedback from schools indicates that the priority here would be to increase academic links through communication between staff in different institutions. In addition, it would appear that despite the overwhelming demand for online information, the majority of the schools, the borough council and both of the universities, are still not making the most of their websites to provide clear information about partnership opportunities and contacts.

d) The strength and position of City and Islington College

One of the most striking aspects of the educational provision in Islington is the presence of a very strong and successful college of further education. City and Islington College is in the ideal position to be at the centre of a student progression framework for the borough, as it would provide a bridge between secondary education and higher education. However, this would need careful coordination with the borough council and with the other sixth form providers, notably the Islington Consortium, which are in competition with City and Islington College for the best students.

e) Importance of charitable funding

The importance of the provision of significant amounts of funding for outreach projects cannot be overemphasised. Some of the most successful outreach programmes in Islington, run by London Metropolitan University in partnership with various schools and institutions (including the borough council and Arsenal Football Club), are funded by donations from charitable organisations – in particular the Dame Alice Owen Foundation. Arsenal Football Club also directs funding towards a wide range of programmes through the 'Arsenal in the Community' initiative. There are also subject-specific initiatives, such as the Royal Institution masterclasses in mathematics, delivered on Saturday mornings at Queen Mary, University of London, which a number of Islington students have benefited from attending. These donations and the programmes they support make a dramatic difference to student progression and aspiration. It is also important to note that some of the programmes mentioned are well established and have been delivered for a number of years, helping to create in strong links between institutions.

f) Few links with employers

Except for one-off activities or careers events, and despite the work done by the Islington Education Business Partnership, schools reported surprisingly few links, partnerships or joint projects with employers. Several schools suggested that universities could help schools to increase links with employers, using the expertise of their careers services, their experience of developing employability skills and the existing links they have with business and industry.

g) Inequality of vocational provision

There has been a slow uptake of the new Diploma across the borough, with only two schools delivering the full range of subjects during the 2008/09 academic year. However, more problematic is the perceived inequality of vocational programmes, particularly their lack of parity for university progression compared to GCSEs and A-levels. In addition to this, there is evidence of a lack of information for school staff about the full range of vocational options available to students. It was also suggested that some universities could do more to clarify their requirements for vocational qualifications, and it is noticeable there have been recent projects to address this.³⁷

h) Special schools feel left out

There are three special schools in Islington. Meetings and interviews with staff showed that there is comparatively little work undertaken with these schools by further and higher education providers, particularly by universities. Whilst the majority of the students at these schools are not likely to progress to higher education, there is still a role that universities could play in supporting these schools – particularly through activities/projects that enrich the student experience and would help with broadening student horizons. This would also go some way to address the perceived inequality that these schools feel.

This also emphasises the broader point about widening participation activities – which is that the engagement of universities with schools and colleges also helps the students who are not likely to progress to university, not least through strengthening the curriculum and seeding ideas about what universities are for, which might generate future interest among returners to education.

i) Inadequate support for information, advice and guidance

The quality of the careers information, advice and guidance in schools is currently an issue of national debate, with recommendations from the National Council for Educational Excellence and Unleashing Aspiration. The provision and quality of information, advice and guidance varies enormously across Islington. Many schools have excellent careers advice, with Connexions staff who are both knowledgeable and dedicated. For example, the quality of information and advice provided by the Careers Centre in the City and Islington Sixth Form College is essential to the college's success in progressing students into higher education and the leading universities.

The problem, therefore, is not that the provision of advice and guidance is failing, but that its importance in helping students make the right choice at different stages of their education has not been sufficiently acknowledged. As a result, it has been under-resourced for some time. This is not specific to Islington. A large secondary school may have one full-time Connexions personal advisor and another member of staff responsible for careers advice, who may or may not have dedicated time to attend to this work. It was quite evident from the student focus groups that although the value of education is widely accepted, many students lacked the necessary information to make appropriate decisions. Some students might not be fulfilling their potential purely because they are not pursuing the best option for them, whether that is further study, employment, an apprenticeship, etc.

Several schools suggested that advice and guidance was an obvious area that would benefit from greater involvement, or even integration, with the equivalent services at universities. Suggestions included joint careers fairs, more information sessions for parents and more briefing sessions for school staff, who are often giving the most advice to pupils simply because they see them more frequently than anyone else. The Connexions service has recently been transferred to the management of local authorities and this would suggest an opportunity to begin linking the service in Islington more closely to the careers services at City and Islington College (which already has staff funded by Connexions), London Metropolitan University and City University London.

j) Negative perceptions of higher education

Feedback from teaching staff and from student focus groups confirmed that universities still have work to do in deprived urban areas such as Islington to improve negative perceptions of higher education. Despite the success of widening participation programmes, universities themselves can still be seen as inaccessible and remote, not doing enough to reach out to schools and communities, which in part reflects a general slowness, or reluctance, in many UK universities to embrace a changing role in society.

Perceptions may be anecdotal or peer-influenced, but that does not diminish their impact – and this may have a direct link to student aspiration. Islington is a useful example here because of very different profiles of City University London (largely seen as inaccessible) and London Metropolitan University (seen as the local option and more easily accessible). Feedback from teachers suggests that this is a difficult balance between the aspiration-raising aspect of going to university (as an achievement to strive for, with real worth) whilst being accessible and not deterring any student with realistic ambitions from applying. Several schools noted that joint projects in particular are an ideal way of making a university more accessible to secondary school students, whilst also managing expectations.

The student focus groups also revealed the two most negative factors associated with going to university:

- *funding* – they found the high level of fees and loans off-putting, although many were unclear of the exact cost of going to university;
- *stress* – all of the students believed that university would be much harder work than school, both in terms of the academic level and the amount of work they would be required to do. None of them saw going to university as an easy option.

There are no straightforward answers to this problem. There is still much that universities can do to make themselves more accessible to communities and, in particular, there needs to be more outreach work with parents in deprived areas.

k) Insufficient publicity

Many of the partnership activities in Islington suffer from a lack of publicity celebrating their importance and significance. This is essential to demonstrate how effective and powerful collaborations can be, and to encourage other schools to become involved. Even Arsenal Football Club recognises that it has not fully publicised the extent, depth and impact of its community programmes, when there is plenty of evidence that this is one of the leading initiatives of its kind in the UK, and is used as a model for other football clubs seeking to develop their community engagement. This can be attributed directly to a lack of resources and expertise in publicity, as state schools do not normally have or use professional public relations services; therefore, this is one obvious area in which the expertise of universities – and potentially of local employers – could benefit the work of secondary schools.

3.11 Conclusion

The evidence shows, overwhelmingly, that partnerships make a considerable difference to student aspiration and progression, and that this has an impact on students from some of the lowest socio-economic backgrounds in the borough. The long-established programme of widening participation activities run by London Metropolitan University demonstrates how effective this can be, particularly when it is coordinated with the assistance of the borough council.

Similarly, the impact of the various schemes run by Arsenal Football Club shows the importance of innovative programmes delivered by organisations that may not have any formal connection to the education system, but with cultural presence that enables them to operate very effectively in environments where there may be low expectations, and little or no engagement with education.

Widening participation initiatives, which are now established and a part of mainstream activity, must now evolve if they are to continue to meet the requirements of schools and colleges. There is a clear need for greater strategic coordination across educational levels in the borough. There is tremendous potential for more collaboration and cooperation between institutions at all levels. Lastly, some innovative and pragmatic thinking is required if activities are to be increased without matching increases in funding, which is unlikely. This means that all institutions might need to review how they allocate funding to partnership working, and whether efficiencies and savings can be found through sharing resources.

4 Critical success factors – what makes an effective partnership?

4.1 Making partnerships work

From the research carried out in Islington, it has been possible to identify some of the factors that are critical to making partnerships and links between institutions work. This section, in particular, reflects the feedback provided by teachers in Islington's secondary schools on their experience of working in partnerships. These also match the findings of other research in this area.

4.2 Innovation

Innovation helps all stages of collaborative work, from the initial idea of setting one up, through to maintaining the growth and development of a partnership. This was emphasised by a number of the teachers who took part in this project, many of whom felt that they had ideas for new projects and links that could not be developed (normally because of a lack of money and time).

4.3 Flexibility

Successful partnerships must have the capacity to evolve over time; they are unlikely to last or be successful if they cannot develop, and the evidence from Islington shows, overwhelmingly, that it is long-term partnerships that are the most effective in terms of raising student aspiration and increasing progression. However, this may require a commitment to flexibility that is likely to challenge the institutional culture in universities and many schools. Partnerships may be subject to a very wide range of factors, many of which will be external to the participating institutions and thus beyond their control – there is no one-size-fits-all model. This was also one of the key findings by Universities UK in its recent national survey of school-university partnerships.³⁸

4.4 Communication

It is very noticeable in Islington that many of the most successful partnerships and links between institutions have developed as a result of, or are sustained by, strong professional relationships between key individuals. Individual contacts between a school and a university are often the impetus for developing new partnership activity, and a number of teachers and schools expressed a desire for increased interaction directly with university lecturers. As this activity would require comparatively little administration and would have low costs, it is not occurring mainly because the opportunities for dialogue are not being created or exploited.³⁹ The importance of good communication becomes particularly clear when it enables outreach activities to be tailored for individual schools and year-groups. St Mary Magdalene Academy takes its Year 8 students to Brunel University for a taster day. This is very successful because of effort the university takes to make the day effective and relevant for the students, which in turn is a result of regular, sustained communication between the two institutions.

There is also the question of how accessible schools and universities are in terms of external information. A number of the schools reported that they found it difficult when approaching universities to locate the right person to contact, or to find the information they required. The experience of researching this report revealed the same problem with a small number of Islington secondary schools, where persistence

was needed to locate and contact the right person to participate in the research. A number of other reports have identified the need for schools to have dedicated staff working in the area of higher education partnerships, but the question remains of how to support this with appropriate resources.

4.5 Transparency

There must be a common understanding of aims, responsibilities and outcomes, to ensure that each institution involved in the partnership is clear of what they can expect to contribute to and gain from the relationship. Part of this also involves the importance of equality: a number of schools reported a perception of inequality in university partnerships. This could be addressed by giving schools greater involvement in the design of partnership and outreach activity, although this would require an equal commitment from schools to participate when invited. A further step is to move away from the model of universities offering services or links to schools, in order to encourage schools to approach universities to request the specific services, activities or support that they require.

4.6 Champions

Given the structural and political complexity of educational institutions, and of many potential partnerships (particularly where there is a significant commitment of time or resources), there is a clear need for champions in senior positions to provide leadership and support. The majority of the schools in Islington cited this as an essential factor. Although there are examples of teachers undertaking such work independently, it is greatly assisted if the headteacher or principal is involved and supportive from the outset. Similarly, university partnership work benefits from the support of the vice-chancellor.⁴⁰ Two examples of effective leaders, or champions, in Islington include Frank McLoughlin, principal of City and Islington College, and Alan Sefton, the director of Arsenal in the Community, whose leadership of this department over many years has been one of the most important factors in its ongoing success.

4.7 Sustainability

Programmes that are sustained and been able to grow have the greatest long-term impact on educational progression in the borough. Partly this is because these programmes become established and the staff in schools grow familiar with them; but of equal significance is the publicity and word-of-mouth reputation that successful programmes generate. This is clearly shown by the evidence from Islington – particularly the ‘Impact in Islington’ initiative delivered by London Metropolitan University and Aimhigher, and the numerous programmes run by Arsenal Football Club. Schools reported that the most effective programmes were those that engaged and then developed student interest over a number of activities, rather than one-off events. For example, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College hosts up to 40 student ambassadors from University College London in Year 11, who visit the school regularly over a 12-week programme.

The length of the programme is crucial to its effectiveness and value to the school, and emphasises the need for continuity. Several teachers pointed out that many students have lives or come from backgrounds that lack any continuity – meaning that engagement with long-term programmes can give them something to engage with over time that brings benefits to other areas of their education. Continuity can also be a problem for institutions, particularly in terms of staffing. The success of London Metropolitan University’s activities has been helped by the stability of staffing in its Widening Participation office, which over time has enabled the staff to develop

strong working relationships and professional connections with schools and other organisations throughout the borough.

4.8 Oversight

Strong oversight is essential for partnership work, to ensure coordinated or strategic development, the allocation of adequate funding and that success is recognised and celebrated, and ideally promoted at champion level. However, oversight must be appropriate. Many of the teachers and organisations involved in this project were wary of increasing bureaucracy in partnerships. Therefore, the challenge is to find a structure or mechanism that will provide oversight in a way that is meaningful and effective, but which is essentially lightweight, to achieve an appropriate balance between leadership and management.

4.9 Resources

Much of the current collaborative work in Islington – particularly the small scale or informal links between schools and universities – has been achieved with low levels of funding, or through funding that could be termed ‘indirect’ (i.e., collaboration was one aspect of another activity). The majority of the widening participation funding available in the borough is used, inevitably, to deliver very specific outreach and aspiration-raising activities. This means that actual partnership work is likely to be absorbed as part of strategic, outreach or operating costs incurred by an institution.

4.10 Conclusions

There are, of course, many other factors that can be important to a successful partnership. However, this section explores the ones that the research in Islington identified as the most critical to success or failure. These factors are also closely inter-related, particularly the question of resources, which has a direct or indirect bearing on nearly all of the others. There is one further issue that is not mentioned above: the internal cultures that exist at schools and universities. If an institution actively encourages innovative external and partnership programmes, this can mitigate many of the restraints and limitations that institutions encounter. Similarly, if the culture deters innovation and external links, that can overwhelm many attempts to initiate partnership work. This is considered in more detail in the next section.

5 What are the barriers to successful partnerships?

5.1 Lack of dedicated time

All of the institutions in Islington that participated in this research reported that lack of time was the single greatest limitation to developing partnerships and links. It is a particular problem for schools and academies, where all of the teachers interviewed reported a lack of dedicated time for this kind of activity. This was not a criticism of their institution. For inevitable and practical reasons, the majority of school staff time is prioritised for teaching, with very little left for supplementary activities. Nearly all of the teachers interviewed expressed frustration with this situation, as the research also revealed the deep enthusiasm and the wide range of ideas for creating potential links and partnerships. This kind of activity is valued for the benefit and enrichment of their students' experience.

However, in the reality of the average teaching burden, any such work would normally need to be in addition to their full-time commitments. Very few institutions are able to support an individual teacher – or teachers – to be released from teaching duties to undertake this specific kind of work. If the activity is off-site, the Health & Safety regulations that require a proportion of staff to be involved in a ratio to student numbers can make some activities unfeasible. Although all of the schools have a teacher with responsibility for careers provision and Aimhigher activities, this might be in addition to a full teaching load or given a minimal allowance of time. This makes it difficult to fulfil such a broad and demanding role, which is likely to require constant updating of information and contacts. All of the schools in Islington have Connexions staff working in them, but the limitations to their effectiveness in developing links with universities are discussed below. For the schools without sixth forms, the focus is inevitably on the immediate progression after Year 11, despite the fact that these decisions will have an impact later on their higher education and career prospects.

Similarly, other organisations (including the universities) reported that the change that would make the most difference for them in building and sustaining partnerships with schools would be to have a person in each school with dedicated time for this activity. Implicit in this, from both schools and universities, is the fundamental recognition that collaboration is important, but requires an ongoing investment of time if it is to be developed and maintained, with inevitable implications for resources.⁴¹

There is also the question of finding time within the curriculum for partnerships work and collaborative projects. Such activities need careful planning and delivery if they are either to complement the curriculum or be embedded within it, which is preferable. Many of the teachers interviewed stated a desire to do more external work, but felt that there was rather a lack of activities on offer that could be embedded as part of the syllabus.

5.2 Low level of funding

After time constraints, a low level of funding to support partnership activities was cited as the single biggest restraint or deterrent. Although primarily this relates to the funding of staff time to develop links and deliver the activities that arise from them, there are also costs to be met in terms of administration, transport and materials. In some cases, the activities that universities offer are not free to schools and have a cost-per-student implication.⁴² Confusingly for schools, the costs differ according to

the university, normally to reflect either the levels of Aimhigher funding available in the region or the way that the university chooses to use internal funds for widening participation.

5.3 Less experienced staff

One of the less obvious barriers to partnership work is the potential lack of skills and experience in this area, which is applicable to some teaching staff. This is not a criticism: it is highly unlikely that many secondary school teachers would have had any opportunity to learn these specific skills and, if they have, it will usually have been informal. Developing and managing partnerships is rarely simple, and it is probably underestimated how a lack of experience – and therefore confidence – might inhibit schools from engaging in this area. This particularly true for collaborations that require complicated negotiation or insurance, or might have legal ramifications.

Universities are in a strong position to address this, utilising their staff who are experienced in partnership work. In Islington, the two universities could collaborate to offer an innovative professional development programme for local schools. There are obvious and problematic cost implications in this, both for the provider institution and for the school or academy releasing their staff to attend, and it can be assumed that without some kind of financial support there would be limited participation by secondary school staff. A more feasible option might be that university staff with experience in negotiating partnerships could provide support and guidance (through informal mentoring arrangements) to schools developing this area of activity.

5.4 Barriers between educational levels

The significant cultural and communication barriers between educational levels should not be underestimated. Whether justified or not, there is a widespread perceived inequality of secondary school teachers in comparison to university academics (interestingly, further education lecturers fall somewhere between the two). Several teachers in Islington secondary schools commented that “We’re academics too.” This demonstrates the comparative absence of knowledge and awareness of the reality of different educational levels. Many secondary school teachers and university lecturers lack a detailed understanding of the requirements and demands of the level and educational environment that the other works in.

Obvious problems arise from this, particularly for students making the transition between educational levels, who will encounter changes in the style of learning and teaching. Staff in both schools and universities in Islington identified the lack of consistency between educational levels as a real challenge. Learning styles change at different levels and the curricula may not integrate. The transitions from secondary to further to higher education are particularly difficult. Although this is, obviously, a national problem, it is one that links and partnerships between schools and universities could begin to address. Even if the respective curricula were unlikely to change, creating dialogue between staff at different levels would have significant benefits for student progression to further and higher education.

5.5 Cultural and institutional differences

The challenge of overcoming competing or conflicting institutional agendas in forming successful partnerships should not be underestimated. The following are some examples of this in Islington, based on the findings of the research:

- it is inconclusive whether the contracting of educational services to a private company enables the borough council and that company to work in full harmony and cooperation;

- there are some schools that are strongly independently-minded and reluctant to participate in some borough-wide initiatives (as seen, for example, in the varying development and uptake of the 14-19 Diploma);
- there will always be rivalry and competition between institutions (particularly to recruit the strongest students) and cultural differences, which combine to inhibit communication and links;
- there is sometimes a lack of coordination in similar projects because the delivering institutions prefer not to work together (for example, there are currently two 'Upward Bound' schemes running in Islington, one delivered by London Metropolitan University and one by City and Islington College, but they operate discretely);
- City University London and London Metropolitan University have not, recently, been working in close partnership in the borough, except when involved in specific projects delivered through Aimhigher or in occasional, discrete initiatives;
- there are the inevitable divisions and changes in local politics (to which schools, like all public institutions, are not immune);
- there is uncertainty over future changes to national policy in education (for example, the likely increase in undergraduate tuition fees);
- a widespread perception remains, particularly amongst middle-class residents in Islington, that their local schools are poor quality, resulting in some children being sent out of the borough – despite the substantial recent improvements in Islington's schools.

5.6 Widening participation policies

London Metropolitan University is widely recognised as one of the leading universities in the UK for widening participation. The university has a strong community profile and very high levels of participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds and in adult education. The recent report 'Unleashing Aspiration' notes that the university has more students from an Afro-Caribbean background than the entire Russell Group institutions.⁴³ City University London has a less clearly defined profile, and significantly less of a local presence in Islington. However, it has been successful in recruiting students from social groups – particularly ethnic minority groups – that are traditionally under-represented in higher education. This may have been helped by a cultural bias in some of these minority groups towards the university's emphasis on education and training for the professions.

Both City University London and London Metropolitan University operate widening participation departments that are discrete from recruitment or marketing operations, which is a common model across the sector. Whilst there are many good reasons for this – and for keeping widening participation activity separate in this way – there are also problems that may arise. A particular risk is that widening participation activity becomes a centralised silo within an institution, making it difficult to maintain sustained, widespread involvement by academic staff. Both London Metropolitan University and City University London reported this problem to some extent, and it probably exists in many other UK universities.⁴⁴

5.7 Insufficient or poor quality information

One of the most surprising aspects of the research with secondary schools was the lack of information that some staff seemed to have in regard to progression to higher education, and local opportunities. This seems to point to a number of factors:

- poor quality or inadequate information being sent out by potential partners, including universities;
- the information that is sent out might not be reaching the correct person, even when the school or college has someone responsible for this area;
- there is a lack of strong, central organisation to coordinate multiple proposals or projects, or coordinate projects across institutions or across the borough;
- secondary schools receive so much information that they can be simply overwhelmed by requests or potential projects/partnerships.

At the same time, some university teaching staff (particularly if they are not involved in admissions procedures) might have limited knowledge of the secondary education system and the national curriculum, or have a little awareness of local schools and academies.

5.8 Structural complexities and inconsistencies

A particular problem highlighted by the secondary schools is the bewildering variety of potential links and collaborations that they are offered, and the difficulty of selecting from numerous projects to become involved with. Partly this reflects the multiple local, regional and national organisations that exist to undertake or support work in this area. For example, the potential list of external agencies and organisations a school in Islington could be working with includes Connexions, Aimhigher partnerships, the Linking London Lifelong Learning Network, the 14-19 Partnership, the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the Young Gifted & Talented Network, Action on Access, local universities and local charities.

All of these organisations are doing important work. However, the structure has developed unilaterally, without an appropriate structure of top-level oversight being developed at the same time. Potentially it would be simpler (for schools) if some of these initiatives and organisations could be integrated into a single agency that supports school-to-university progression. However, it is beyond the remit of this report to recommend this step and there are likely to be compelling reasons why this has not or could not happen for which extensive further national research would be required. However, it is clear that for school staff there is a daunting and confusing range of potential organisations to collaborate with, and that this may in fact be deterring some valuable partnership work.

Similarly, the extent to which not knowing whom to contact can be a deterrent to forming external links should not be underestimated. A significant number of the secondary school staff interviewed for this project stated that although there were universities that they would like to link to, they were deterred by the difficulty of finding out who to contact, which differs completely from university to university. The experience of researching this project demonstrated that the same was true in reverse – that it is not necessarily straightforward for a university to make contact with the relevant individual in a school.

5.9 Insufficient use of new technology

New technology, particularly the use of online virtual learning environments, is an obvious area where institutions at all educational levels could collaborate and cooperate, technological challenges notwithstanding. It is surprising that comparatively little use is being made of this, given the potential opportunities for online and shared modules, etc. A number of teachers in schools identified this as an obvious and important area for future development.⁴⁵

5.10 Conclusion: responding to the challenges

It is encouraging to note that many institutions are actively finding ways to overcome the challenges described in this section. Whilst some of these can be powerful barriers and even deterrents to partnership activity, there are many committed staff in schools and universities seeking innovative ways to overcome them.

As significant increases in funding or staffing for partnership work seem unlikely in the short-term, finding ways to innovate and use resources more efficiently becomes essential. Many partnerships exist and thrive because of the personal commitment or ideas of one or two individuals. Yet the research for this project revealed that nearly all teaching staff had ideas for new links they would like to be developing, but they lacked the time, resources, personal commitment or experience to develop them. Capturing the enthusiasm and ideas that school and university staff have for partnerships is essential. Failing to do this may mean that staff become disillusioned, and it is essential to work against any sense of a culture of disincentive in what is already a difficult area of work. It is worth remembering that working in inner-city education is rewarding, but also challenging, personally and professionally.

The challenge of tackling the multiple factors that prohibit the development of partnerships or limit their success should not be underestimated. Overcoming these barriers, some of which are significant, will require imagination and commitment. However, there is also enough evidence from Islington to show that where this commitment exists, ways can often be found to solve the problems.

6 Conclusions

6.1 The value of partnership activity

Partnerships that bridge educational levels are one of the most important mechanisms for increasing the progression of students into further and higher education. There is ample evidence to suggest that there are many successful links between institutions across Islington, supporting projects that promote student progression and have a positive impact on families and communities. This should be recognised and celebrated as part of the improvement and progress that has occurred in Islington over the past five to ten years.

However, it is also clear that partnerships and links are often reliant on the work and energy of individual teachers or schools. They might lack formal support or sufficient acknowledgement of their value, and stronger coordination across the borough would further develop and sustain this work in the long-term. The comparatively small number of institutions involved means it should be possible to increase coordination and cooperation in partnerships work, without threatening the autonomy of individual institutions or creating additional bureaucracy.

6.2 Priorities and challenges

The key findings and factors for Islington are:

- the success of a partnership is highly dependent on the will of the school and/or an individual, particularly if it is driven by a senior champion;
- there is no one-size-fits-all model for links between schools and universities, which may be limiting the effectiveness of some widening participation initiatives – much greater flexibility is needed in arrangements so that they can be negotiated individually with each school;⁴⁶
- the strength and ambition of the local authority is crucial, but they are influenced inevitably by the local and national political situation;
- there is scope for increasing the number of formal partnerships that support shared projects, and for more ‘compact’ arrangements that would guarantee progression between institutions;
- some of the collaborative work that has greatest impact on the student experience is small-scale or informal – this should be nurtured and encouraged;
- some institutions prefer to work independently, but this should not prohibit a more joined-up approach across the borough that would benefit the majority;
- the absence of significant academic/curriculum links between institutions in Islington makes this a priority for development;
- more research is needed into maximising the advantages of geographical proximity in a small borough like Islington – for example, a new model of engagement between further and higher education could see shared sites and facilities (this is already being pioneered elsewhere in the UK);⁴⁷
- without an increase in funding, or a significant review of existing funding to find efficiencies, some initiatives will be hard to implement.

6.3 Changing student perceptions

It is encouraging to have found evidence that attitudes to higher education are changing. Universities are becoming more accessible and more students believe that they can go to university if they choose. This does suggest that the traditional class barriers to university are slowly diminishing, which is encouraging after a decade of widening participation and outreach work. What is unknown is the extent to which this may be attributable to the introduction of variable tuition fees – for although there is still clear evidence that the notion of ‘student debt’ is a powerful deterrent to many students from low socio-economic backgrounds, it is also possible that the more a university is seen as a service that can be accessed through purchasing, the more willing people may be to take advantage of it (money permitting).

There were also many positives from the focus groups that were run with students in Years 9, 10 and 11. All of the students understood and believed in the value of education, both for employment prospects and quality of life, even if some of them did not see university as a realistic ambition for themselves. Others saw progression to university as achievable through hard work, meaning that they linked academic progression to merit rather than social background. When the students were asked to list the most off-putting factors about going to university, fees/debt came second to stress. They perceived that university would be very hard work.

It remains essential, however, that schools and universities become more closely linked and that curriculums are made more harmonious. For all the undoubted progress, there still remain real barriers to education for many social and ethnic groups, and there are still unacceptably high numbers of young people who are not able to fulfil their potential.⁴⁸ Partnerships between schools and universities are a very powerful tool for overcoming these barriers, and Islington demonstrates both what it is possible to achieve and how much more work there is still to do.

6.4 Progressing the NCEE recommendations

The National Council of Educational Excellence made a number of detailed recommendations in regard to school and university links.⁴⁹ These can be summarised as follows:

- the need for improvements in information, advice and guidance in schools – specifically more input from universities at an earlier age (primary onwards), more dedicated guidance staff in schools, training for teaching staff, and with information, advice and guidance included in the remit for Ofsted inspections;
- more national publicity campaigns targeted at encouraging under-represented groups towards higher education;
- more links between primary schools and higher education;
- more activities to promote the priority subjects – science, technology, engineering, mathematics and languages;
- universities should develop more comprehensive widening participation strategies and ensure they publish clear admissions policies.

Some real progress is being made: there is increasing engagement between the universities and primary schools; ‘Widening Participation Strategic Assessments’ have been undertaken and submitted; there are projects promoting the priority subjects (for example, ‘Routes into Languages’); and there are multiple activities going on through outreach work that provide information and inspiration to students in secondary schools.

However, it is also clear that a lot more work is required to enhance information, advice and guidance, and that this should be another priority for partnership work in the borough. Many students in Years 9, 10 and 11 are enthusiastic about continuing in education, but lack the knowledge to make fully informed choices. This is not to suggest a failing of provision, simply to identify a key area that requires further work and resources. The quality of advice and guidance varies greatly between institutions and levels, and needs to be enhanced not just for students and their parents/carers, but also for teaching staff at all levels. Knowledge of vocational qualifications and pathways seems to be a particular weakness. Staff in schools and Connexions services are doing their best with limited resources, but universities could contribute significantly to this area. The provision of activities to support information, advice and guidance must be reviewed to ensure that they are targeted primarily at the key moments of transition in secondary and further education, when students are making important decisions that may have long-term consequences.

6.5 The London Challenge pledges

Although universities will probably contribute to all of the pledges in the London Challenge 'Vision',⁵⁰ which is aimed at raising standards in London schools, there are two particular pledges that relate directly to higher education:

- *Every maintained secondary school in London will have a partnership with a higher education institution.*
- *A higher proportion of young Londoners will go on to higher education, including the more competitive universities.*

Although all of the secondary schools in Islington participate in university-led activities, not all of them have formal partnerships. This should be achievable, given the small number of schools in Islington and as some existing relationships could be developed into more formal agreements. The extent to which university activities are contributing to progress on the second pledge is harder to judge.

6.6 What next?

A number of priorities for Islington identified in this report also reflect issues that have been identified nationally:

- there needs to be much more support for the provision of information, advice and guidance – whilst there is no compelling evidence that there are significant numbers of children in Islington missing out on the opportunity to progress to further or higher education, not all are necessarily able to make fully informed decisions and as a result may not always be attaining their full potential;
- there needs to be greater recognition of role that non-traditional organisations can play in education and community support;
- there need to more innovative programmes developed jointly between schools, universities and employers;
- the importance of student mentors and ambassadors to support teachers and careers advisers was highlighted by schools and is now being recognised through the national Aimhigher Associates programme;
- there is potential to develop more university-led extracurricular activities, which would be delivered in afternoons, weekends or during the holidays to make use of facilities outside term-time;

- there needs to be stronger central oversight of partnerships work in the borough, to provide representation and leaderships for all relevant institutions and organisations – this must have a clear purpose and avoid bureaucracy;
- there must be a careful balance between promoting high-profile cross-borough partnerships, which are important to generate publicity, whilst at the same time encouraging multiple smaller local level partnerships.

The findings in this report closely match those of the Action on Access ‘Higher education progression framework feasibility study’, which calls for “planned, integrated, sequential and progressive approach to raising aspirations and attainment.” It concludes that:

“Learner progression models provide benefits for the learner, the institutions (schools, colleges and higher education), and Aimhigher through the coherence they bring to programmes. This can be achieved irrespective of the organisational and operating structures adopted by individual partnerships because the quality and depth of the relationship between key stakeholders is a much more important factor in the success of a progression model than the structure. This has been one of the key findings of this study and is the strength of many developing models. Other key findings central to the development of a successful progression model include giving particular attention to learner needs and learner outcomes, and understanding the wider educational context at both the local and the national level.”⁵¹

The ‘Feasibility Study’ also contains a detailed framework, demonstrating the kind of activities and outcomes that would be sought from partnership work at different stages of secondary education. This model could provide a very useful starting point to developing a more coordinated approach to progression partnerships in the borough. The new strategic/operational plan developed by the Aimhigher West, Central and North London Partnership will also refer to learner progression.

6.7 Costs and implications

As most of the partnerships work in Islington is linked, either directly or indirectly, to widening participation, it is impossible to predict how this will change as the national or government policy changes. The future of Aimhigher seems particularly uncertain. At a more local level, the financial problems at London Metropolitan University do raise a question of whether the very successful outreach and aspiration-raising programmes they deliver in Islington will continue to be developed in the long-term.

There is plenty of evidence that making better use of resources might bring widespread benefits, but this would require a significant commitment from a wide range of institutions and even in a small borough like Islington there are serious doubts over whether this is feasible. Charitable funding remains an essential source to support many important programmes, but there are no indications that this could be significantly extended in the short-term. In the reality of ongoing limitations – or even reductions – to funding, finding efficiencies and sharing resources might become the only feasible options, unless schools and universities decide that it is more effective for them to pursue individual agendas. Despite the dangers of bureaucracy (and the way that targets can sometimes become limitations), if a more strategic and coordinated approach were adopted in Islington it would have to set clear, specific targets for the borough. These would link partnership work with student progression, whilst also relating to regional and national targets.

6.8 Outcomes for City University London

Whilst conducting the research for this project, City University London has initiated a number of links with schools for potential projects. With so many requests from secondary schools for individually tailored outreach packages, the challenge for the university is how to respond to this demand. This is likely to require some kind of review to identify the most effective models for engaging with local secondary schools, and to consider how this work is funded and delivered. The university's sponsorship of the City of London Academy – Islington provides a model for how the university might engage with an individual school. A further model is being discussed with St Mary Magdalene Academy, in which the university hopes to support the delivery of the International Baccalaureate by offering library access for students, links with faculties and academic members of staff, and subject mentoring by undergraduate or postgraduate students. At the same time, the strategic alliance between City University London and City and Islington College is being strengthened. These form part of the university's long-term aim of developing individual and sustainable links with all of the secondary schools in Islington.

6.9 Looking ahead: some ideas for the future

One of the most positive aspects of the consultation with schools and universities in Islington was the enthusiasm shown for increasing partnership work and the range of ideas that people had. To conclude the report, here is a selection of these ideas:

- universities could run an accreditation/training programme for administrative and support staff in schools (similar to the qualification offered by the Association of University Administrators);⁵²
- universities could offer more work experience placements for local students in their professional and administrative departments;
- there should be more local support and professional development programmes for ambitious teachers and headteachers;
- a local university could support increased links between schools and employers by acting as a sort of bridge organisation or broker, based on their extensive experience of working with employers and existing links;
- universities and schools should collaborate on more international projects that involve students and staff from both levels;
- there could be more scholarship programmes, so that students are nominated by schools to receive extra support during Years 10 and 11;
- there should be more innovative programmes, for example, a joint project with a business school based on the format of the television programme 'The Apprentice', to teach students entrepreneurial skills in an exciting way;
- universities could make greater use of local authority mailing lists and registers, or work in partnership with social exclusion units, to ensure that information reaches particular households and social groups.

Creating the time for increased communication and dialogue should, in itself, begin to yield ideas for new projects and activities, but the challenge this represents should not underestimated. There is no shortage of enthusiastic, dedicated staff who would like the opportunity to try out their ideas and work with other organisations. Schools and universities must work together to find ways of making this happen, if they are to translate the enthusiasm and energy of their staff into real projects that will bring benefits for all of Islington's students.

7 Recommendations

Structure of the recommendations

The recommendations in this section are organised into three stages:

- firstly, to consolidate existing strengths and increase coordination across the borough;
- secondly, to create the environment in which more links and partnerships are piloted and developed at grass roots level;
- finally, to review funding for the efficiency/effectiveness of activities, to ensure continued support for successful projects and repeat these models elsewhere.

Within each of these stages, there are recommendations that address the specific themes of shared governance and strategic planning; curriculum development and academic links; and information, advice and guidance.

Stage 1: Consolidation and co-ordination

It should be a priority to find ways of coordinating the strategic development of educational links across Islington. In a small borough such as Islington, this would bring long-term benefits. In particular, work is needed to strengthen the communication between institutions, to reduce barriers between levels and to explore how resources might be used more effectively. However, there are a number of political and institutional challenges that would need to be overcome and which make significant change in the short-term problematic.

- 1) A simple progression framework should be developed for the borough – this would clarify activities and services for secondary schools, and match resources to key points of transition in the secondary curriculum when students make important decisions.
- 2) Islington Connexions service should enter into a formal strategic partnership with the careers services at City and Islington College, London Metropolitan University, City University London and Aimhigher. This expanded service would support partnerships and progression, increase collaborative opportunities and facilitate the sharing of knowledge (including regular forums/briefings for academic staff at all levels). Ultimately, it could continue the role and remit of Aimhigher, assuming that Aimhigher will no longer be funded as a separate entity after 2011.
- 3) City University London and London Metropolitan University should ensure that they are represented at a senior level on all borough-wide planning groups and committees, where this is not in place already.
- 4) Reciprocal governing arrangements should be implemented wherever possible, with governors given a specific remit to initiate links and partnerships.

Stage 2: Create the environment for dialogue and experimentation

There is strong demand in secondary schools for establishing direct links with academic staff in university faculties, but this is rarely happening. These links should be grown in a grass roots way, starting at an informal level, but with the potential to become more formal (e.g., to relate to career development). The benefits of increased links include: sharing of subject knowledge and pedagogy; the potential for reciprocal visits; and to tackle the real and perceived barriers between different educational levels. All of this could have a subsequent benefit on student progression. The most significant challenges to building these links are staff time (in both schools and universities) and the cultural barriers between educational levels.

- 5) Expanded subject forums facilitated by the subject advisers in the borough council and which bring together teaching staff from all educational levels should be piloted in sciences, technology, mathematics and languages, and then implemented across all subjects if effective.
- 6) City University London should promote informal links between its academic departments and each of the secondary schools and academies in Islington, as well as with City and Islington College. Initially, these links should support dialogue between staff, curriculum links and shared student projects. Successful projects could then be used as models to be developed either into more formal arrangements or to promote similar projects with other partners. Effectively, links would be grown from the grass-roots upwards, leading to strong formal partnerships as a long-term outcome.
- 7) Secondary schools and academies must be willing to make a commitment to developing academic links, primarily through enabling teaching staff to have the time to participate regularly in this activity.
- 8) Increased use should be made of online resources to link institutions at different levels, so that online content/projects/modules can be piloted. This would also facilitate the provision of enhance information, advice and guidance. This would require a review of existing IT links to see how these can be used to share online modules and information, particularly making university resources available to schools.
- 9) Greater innovation is required to involve other organisations with a strong presence in the borough that could contribute directly or indirectly to educational activities (following the example of what has been achieved by Arsenal Football Club).

Stage 3: Review successes and priorities to allocate funding

It is important to build on the momentum and success of existing widening participation work in Islington, whilst recognising that there are unlikely to be any increases in funding to support this. Some difficult decisions might need to be taken about the targeting and use of existing funds, and opportunities sought for savings through collaborative work (where feasible). In addition, there should be more joint activities designed for specific cohorts or social groups, with schools taking a more proactive role in working with universities.

- 10) Outreach activities with schools must be designed more collaboratively, to meet the needs of specific schools, which might necessitate a review of the funding and effectiveness of some current activities (which universities have started to do as part of the 'Widening Participation Strategic Assessments' they must complete).
- 11) City University London should seek to develop much closer collaborative arrangements with schools and other organisations in Islington, particularly through increasing dialogue and consultation with schools (which might necessitate an internal review of the funding and structure of partnership/outreach activities);
- 12) Specific activities are needed to raise awareness in Islington's schools of the variety of vocational courses and qualifications, and how these function as possible routes into higher education.
- 13) Both of the universities should develop greater links/activities with primary schools and increase their engagement with Islington's special schools.

Participants and acknowledgements

About this report

This report has been produced by City University London. The research and writing of the project was carried out by Eamon Martin (Director, Educational Relationships), George Olden (Project Manager, Educational Relationships) and John Hall (Project Consultant). The school focus groups were conducted by three undergraduate student ambassadors from City University London: Stefan Marseglia, Rebecca Chambers and Alesha Price.

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Participants

The following institutions and organisations were consulted during the research for the project, or their staff participated in interviews and focus groups:

- City and Islington College
- The City of London Academy – Islington
- Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls
- Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College
- Islington Arts & Media School of Creativity
- St Mary Magdalene Academy
- Central Foundation Boys' School
- Highbury Fields School
- The Bridge School
- Grafton Primary School
- London Metropolitan University
- University of Westminster
- Education Services, London Borough of Islington Council
- Cambridge Education @ Islington
- Aimhigher: West, Central and North London Partnership
- Aimhigher: London East Thames Gateway Partnership
- Connexions Islington
- Arsenal Football Club
- Linking London Lifelong Learning Network
- Young Gifted & Talented in London
- Action on Access
- Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

Steering Group

The project was overseen by a Steering Group with the following membership:

Eamon Martin	Director of Educational Relationships, City University London (Chair)
Eleanor Schooling	Director of Children's Services, London Borough of Islington Council
Keren Abse	Director, City and Islington Sixth Form College
Sally Ann Panter	Coordinator, Aimhigher Islington
Paul Kehoe	Principal, Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls
John Hall	Project Consultant (School-Higher Education links adviser at London Higher)
Wilma Martinelli	Director of the Centre for Career and Skills Development, City University London
David Styles	Lecturer, School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences, City University London
George Olden	Project Manager, Educational Relationships, City University London

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion', published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2007, is available from: <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/>
- ² The recent report from Universities UK entitled 'Higher education engagement with schools and colleges: partnership development' provides a useful survey of the different types of partnerships that universities are developing – www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications
- ³ Further information about the London Challenge Vision is available from: www.dcsf.gov.uk/citychallenge/london.shtml
- ⁴ p.5, 'Building stronger school-university partnerships in London: The School-Higher Education Links in London Delivery Plan 2009-11'. See: www.londonhigher.ac.uk/shell.html
- ⁵ The 'Higher education progression framework feasibility study' is can be downloaded from the higher education page of the Action on Access website: www.actiononaccess.org
- ⁶ For more information, see: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circllets/2009/cl01_09/
- ⁷ More information about the recommendations made by the National Council for Educational Excellence is available at: www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee
- ⁸ All UK higher education institutions, and some further education institutions that deliver higher education programmes, were required to submit 'Widening Participation Strategic Assessments' to the Higher Education Funding Council for England in July 2009.
- ⁹ Total population figure from the Office for National Statistics 2001 census information. All other figures from 2007, taken from the Islington London Borough Council website: www.islington.gov.uk
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ Figures from NOMIS, a service that supplies labour market statistics from the Office for National Statistics – www.nomisweb.co.uk
- ¹² Further information: <http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/factsandfigures.jsp>
- ¹³ The Cambridge Education @ Islington website is: www.islingtonschools.net
- ¹⁴ See: www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters
- ¹⁵ Description taken from the website: www.hefce.ac.uk/Widen/aimhigh/
- ¹⁶ Statistics and information taken from the 'Islington Vision and Education Strategy', which is available in full at: <http://www.islington.gov.uk/Education/SchoolYears/SchoolsforFuture/vision/>
- ¹⁷ See: www.islingtonconsortium.org.uk
- ¹⁸ Statistics from: www.unistats.ac.uk
- ¹⁹ Further information: www.archway.ac.uk
- ²⁰ A useful overview of university and academy engagement is provided in the recent report by Universities UK entitled 'Academies and trust schools: where do universities fit in?' – this is available from their website: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications
- ²¹ Further information: www.ulster.ac.uk/stepup
- ²² See footnote 4, above.
- ²³ Information provided by the Widening Participation Office at London Metropolitan University.

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- ²⁴ Further information about the funding crisis at London Metropolitan University is available at the Higher Education Funding Council for England website: www.hefce.ac.uk/news
- ²⁵ The term 'Russell Group' refers to a group of UK universities that are research-intensive and selective in their student recruitment, with high entry requirements for admission to their programmes. See: <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/>
- ²⁶ This raises the rather controversial question of whether national funding for widening participation could be coordinated in the same way, to differentiate the activities offered between the profiles of different universities, serving either local or national needs.
- ²⁷ See: www.sussex.ac.uk/studentrecruitment
- ²⁸ p.94, 'Unleashing Aspiration', a report published by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, July 2009. This report is available from the Cabinet Office website: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/accessprofessions.aspx
- ²⁹ For example, there are now a number of university research centres dedicated to widening participation, such as those at Edge Hill University, Lancaster University, Liverpool Hope University, Staffordshire University, York University (Higher Education Academy), and the Open University. The Higher Education Policy Institute has also done research in this area.
- ³⁰ The need for outreach activities more closely designed with individual schools has been recognised in a number of the reports cited here, including 'Unleashing Aspiration' and the recommendations made by the National Council for Educational Excellence.
- ³¹ For more information about Mosaic, see: www.mosaicnetwork.co.uk/mentoring
- ³² For more information about the 'Young Gifted & Talented' programme, see: ygt.dcsf.gov.uk
- ³³ See: www.thelearninghub.org
- ³⁴ Information provided by Arsenal Football Club.
- ³⁵ The allocation of funding for Aimhigher is based on an a mathematical formula used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England called "POLAR2", which is based on the participation rates of people who were aged 18 between 2000 and 2004 and entered a higher education course in a UK higher education institution or further education college, aged 18 or 19, between academic years 2000-01 and 2005-06. There is some disagreement about whether this leads to a funding allocation that is genuinely representative of the needs of Central London boroughs, including Islington, as this formula has led to a substantial reduction of Aimhigher funding for some boroughs through for 2008-2011. For further information see: www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/polar/polar2/
- ³⁶ See: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications
- ³⁷ For example, with support from the Linking London Lifelong Learning Network, City University London is updating its entry profiles to reflect recent developments in vocational education (including the 14-19 Diplomas). This is to ensure that clear information about the University's requirements is available for future Diploma candidates, and to raise staff awareness of vocational qualifications.
- ³⁸ 'Higher education engagement with schools and college: partnership development.' See: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications
- ³⁹ One possible model for this area already exists at City University London, which operates system of 'link tutors' for the partnership work with other higher education institutions (for joint programmes or validation/accreditation arrangements). The 'link tutor' is normally a senior academic who is involved in the programmes and who contributes to the management and maintenance of the partnership with support and guidance from specialist staff in the university's Academic Development Unit.
- ⁴⁰ The importance of university vice-chancellors acting as champions for partnership work was also demonstrated by the two former vice-chancellors in Islington, Brian Roper at London Metropolitan

University and Malcolm Gillies at City University London. The departure of these two leaders leaves inevitable questions over the extent to which widening participation and partnership work in the borough will continue to be supported at the most senior level. Professor Gillies had the additional role of 'Champion for Higher Education Partnerships in London', and again the future of this role is not currently known.

⁴¹ The new schools white paper emphasises partnership working (particularly with groups of schools), whilst the related Department for Children, Schools and Families publication *A school report card: prospectus* (June 2009), para 124, states: 'We are committed to recognising partnership working as part of the proposed new School Report Card [to be introduced from 2011]. As the detail develops, we will consult further on whether this should be through a separate indicator for partnership working and whether or not this should be based on the Ofsted judgement on the impact of partnership working.' This will have implications for how schools manage and report their partnership work.

⁴² For example, a number of the schools in Islington reported that they were unable to benefit from all of the outreach activities on offer at City University London because of the higher cost of these activities compared to those offered by other universities.

⁴³ p.89, 'Unleashing Aspiration.' For the internet link, see footnote 19 above.

⁴⁴ For example, a recent survey of staff at University College London would seem to support this, as it showed that public engagement work – which could include work with schools and partners – was considered a low priority due to time pressures, although there was some enthusiasm for it. However, a surprisingly high number of both academic and administrative staff did not consider this area to be part of their daily responsibilities, and so one of the recommendations of the report was that the university could do more to support and promote public engagement work by its staff. The report 'Establishing a baseline for public engagement' (November 2008) is available from the University College London website: www.ucl.ac.uk/public-engagement/research

⁴⁵ A brief evaluation of increasing the use of information technology is provided in section 2.3, p.19, in the report: 'Building stronger school-university partnerships in London: The School-Higher Education Links in London Delivery Plan 2009-11'.

⁴⁶ This point is emphasised strongly in the Universities UK report, 'Higher education engagement with schools and colleges: partnership development'.

⁴⁷ The Universities UK report 'Academies and trust schools: where do universities fit in?' cites the example of the University of Sunderland, which has a City of Sunderland College Sixth-form Academy located on one of its campuses (p.8).

⁴⁸ For a more detailed analysis of this, see Chapter 6 in 'Unleashing Aspiration.'

⁴⁹ See the link in footnote 4, above.

⁵⁰ See the link in footnote 2, above.

⁵¹ Both quotations are from the executive summary of the 'Higher education progression framework feasibility study' (see internet link in footnote 5, above).

⁵² The Association of University Administrators offers a 'Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice', which is a portfolio-based scheme validated by the Open University; achievement of the Award demonstrates a knowledge of key areas within the higher education sector, transferable skills and evidence of the 'professional journey' undertaken.