

Aimhigher - Key Messages

To learn more about how Aimhigher might benefit your school visit

www.aimhigherwest.org.uk

1. Background Briefing

Early in 2006, the DfES commissioned research to help develop a 'core script' of messages to use in all interactions and communications under the Aimhigher banner. A draft set of messages was given to the researchers (Appendix 1) to test amongst young people, their parents, mature returners and teachers.

This document is split into two sections: a Background Briefing, and description of the Core Messages and how they should be used.

1.1. Knowledge of Higher Education (HE)

Across the board this was very poor indeed : either they had very little idea at all about what it meant, or they had a very strong stereotyped idea of HE

- assume HE is university, studying from books, 3 years full time
- are not interested in finding out about HE : ask why it would be relevant for them
- need to have HE distilled down to one career/ study/ training path which makes sense to them
- ANY messages that **surprise** them about HE get their attention (e.g. 'There are different ways to achieve the best qualifications such as degrees, you don't have to study full time at uni')
- some awareness that HE is changing - but care needs to be taken when using the argument that 'all sorts of people go to uni nowadays' as this can devalue (what will be expensive) degrees

1.2. Personal ambition was crucial

Can they see a fairly seamless route from where they are currently to HE? Very few within the Aimhigher cohort, and few parents could see this. The exceptions were :

- those who are good at a subject and therefore can see themselves studying that subject in HE
- those who are interested in a particular profession and understand the route to qualifying for that specific job/ profession
- ... and who tend to have been noticed/ encouraged

	<p>For the others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HE is too big an idea, too much studying, too difficult, expensive and not something they enjoy - they see their strengths as lying in other areas (if they think positively about their education at all) - these 'other areas' are NOT associated with HE (i.e. jobs/ professions which have a practical training such as sports and leisure, or nursing) - not confident they'll get to the next stage of qualifications – never mind all the way to the top! <p>... but there is an underlying impetus to 'try to get the best qualifications you can'/'push yourself as far as you can'</p>
<p>1.3. Broadly two types of attitude</p>	<p>'Engaged' (with the idea of themselves going into HE, however tenuously) 'Disengaged'</p> <p>Parents will be led by their children and their attitudes (engaged or disengaged)</p> <p>Older adults tend to be per se engaged – they're interested in HE – but may have disengaged because of lack of confidence/ knock-backs</p>
<p>1.3.1. 'Engaged'</p>	<p>The engaged within the Aimhigher cohort - almost always had some personal intervention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teachers : from throw-away comments to consistent support - from good exam results (often combined with teachers' support) - older friends/ friends of the family who'd gone into HE - and from 'official' sources : Aimhigher Roadshows/ Summer Schools & Connexions <p>Or had a particular interest/ career in mind which made the route from where they were through to HE clear/ comprehensible/ manageable</p> <p>Personal intervention is absolutely crucial and was nearly always cited as having been a trigger to consider HE amongst the 'engaged'</p>

Parents with children who were engaged were happy to support/ encourage them – since they had made the decision to go for HE themselves – but their issue was almost always access to reliable information to help them support that decision/ hope

Older potential returners also tended to be ‘engaged’, but absolutely clueless about

- a) where to get more information
- b) a ‘structured’ study/ training path leading to something specific
- c) courses, what they meant/ led on to i.e. what’s the next step, and towards what?

So, for most of the ‘engaged’ the messages can be fed in without worrying about

- order : they all are of a piece and don’t contradict each other
- language used : ‘study’/ ‘uni’/ degree isn’t off-putting, as it is to the disengaged
- for ‘engaged’ students and their parents, it is important to reinforce and repeat what they suspect/ hope about their chances of success in and via HE

But crucially, the **practicalities** of where to get more information and how to follow it up need to be emphasised

- particularly for parents
- particularly for older potential returners

1.3.2. 'Disengaged'

Tended to be two types, or a mix of the two

1. 'Attitude'

- take issue with everything that's said about HE (which they understand as full time study, at uni, for 3 years, studying in a library)
- because they don't think it's relevant for them, don't believe anything positive that's said
- consistently argue that other career routes are just as good
- or that HE messages are a government/ university conspiracy to rip off young people and get them into significant debt
- don't want to end up as burger flippers (often in FE unsure of what to do, or at 6th Form College trying to sit 'A' levels that they don't feel confident about/ interested in)
- but can't see a clear path that involves working and continuing learning/ training/ studying
- although even this group have an ambition to take qualifications as far as they can – 'you want to make the best of yourself, don't you'?
- Aimhigher messages NOT using their language
- a degree/ uni are SUCH a long way from their experience and ambition – they can't make the leap without someone (personal intervention) tracing the route from where they are and what they're good at/ interested in to a degree

2. 'Nervous'

- can't/ won't engage with the Aimhigher messages too, but for this group it's not a defensive 'attitude', but because they don't think they're good enough
 - Aimhigher/ HE messages are NOT written in their language
 - like the 'Attitude' disengaged, where they are now and uni/ degrees are two different planets
 - don't have anyone supporting/ encouraging/ directing them
 - so HE is just too confusing, irrelevant/ not personalised for them
 - and they definitely don't have the confidence to self-start
- very likely to include older potential returners who are trying out a few courses they happen to have come across

	<p>BOTH groups need two things :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a 'personalised' plan through the HE 'system' so they don't have to think about HE in general (they'll default to what they know about HE, i.e. uni, academic, difficult, full time, i.e. not me) - a clear idea of what the next step to aim for is (e.g. for the disengaged – BTEC, National Diploma, FE/ Apprenticeship, (and then possibly moving on to a more achievable 'Higher Level', such as a Foundation Degree); for the more engaged – 'A' levels, Foundation Degrees, or Degrees) <p>.. as well as a stable, unchanging HE system which they can understand and have confidence in (confusion is widespread and language used very confusion - FE/ HE/ Foundation courses/ degrees?; and they also need to feel that they can rely on the long term value of their qualifications)</p>
<p>1.4. Language issues</p>	<p>Because both groups are ignorant/ unsure of what HE is, language is crucial</p> <p>Uni, study = traditional HE (library, books, difficult, full time, away from home, expensive, elitist)</p> <p>BUT</p> <p>Words such as training, learning, qualifications, college, workplace, work, flexible, step by step, part time, modular were all felt to be much closer to their thinking, language, experience and expectations</p> <p>This language is very necessary when talking with the disengaged</p> <p>The engaged are daring to hope they can study in HE, so are not nearly so alienated by the traditional language of HE – however it does stretch their confidence in a way the second set of words don't</p>

However, care still needs to be taken with language : pushing yourself, doing the best for yourself, having more to offer, better qualifications, better jobs and salary, pride in what you've achieved, fulfilling are close to how they're daring to hope at this stage.

Certainly once they start to become engaged with the idea of HE, they need access to support, someone to talk with, in order to start to plan and make a plan for their further training/ qualifications

For all but the most actively engaged (a tiny proportion of the Aimhigher cohort), emphasising the benefits of HE are problematic

- they devalue all other routes/ qualifications
- they don't build confidence on a step by step basis
- they try to encourage students to 'aim for the highest level' which many – even of the engaged – will be worried they can't
- require a guarantee to be really effective : and that 'guarantee' isn't believed

Words to avoid : academic, study, aspiration, vocational, HE/ FE, guarantee

2. Core Script Messages

<p>2.1. The draft messages tested in the research were split into 4 headings</p>	<p>The full list is given in Appendix 1</p> <p>'Inclusion' messages : principally about the wide social demographic of students nowadays</p> <p>'Benefits' messages : principally about the advantages a degree can give graduates in terms of jobs and salary and how enjoyable/ fulfilling studying for a degree can be</p> <p>'Options' messages : outline the various ways students can study for different qualifications in HE and the flexibility that the current HE system has</p> <p>'Practicalities' messages : detailing the various information, guidance and intervention initiatives which are part of the Aimhigher programme</p>
<p>2.2. Research identified that the messages need to correspond to the stage of interest in HE, rather than the four 'types' above</p>	<p>To summarise, there are roughly 3 stages which emerge when thinking about HE</p> <p>Stage 1 – getting them thinking about training/ learning at a higher level Getting engaged with the idea of HE : being able to link up where they are now and HE (in the form of the next stage – which may be FE), starting map out a personal route which makes sense to them, step by step, that promises recognised and achievable valuable qualifications, and learning/ training in a practical way, whilst they work if they like ... push themselves as far as they can, but in their terms</p> <p>Stage 2 – have a vision of themselves in HE Reinforce the message about HE being for them, flexible, valuable but build information about the how/ what/ where/ when – particularly when dealing with non-traditional degrees/ studying</p> <p>Stage 3 – start to plan actively for HE/ the next steps</p> <p>These stages should be seen as typically chronological, although those who had some personal intervention tended to have already reached Stage 2, and the time-frame to move stages varied enormously</p>

2.2.1. Stage 1 – Principally aimed at the ‘disengaged’

Get them thinking/ get them engaged

Description :

- to set potential students thinking about HE as a possibility for them, no matter how vague or in the future, simply to make sure it’s something that they include whenever they’re considering their future
- ‘think about studying at a higher level’
- and from a negative point of view – don’t reject studying at a higher level without thinking about it

Target :

- principally young people
- parents will not intervene/ support until they feel their child is passed this stage
- potential returners are almost per se passed this stage – they want to hope they can return to study

Recognise this set of attitudes by

- ‘attitude’
- ‘nervous’
- not asking questions/ engaging in a conversation

Types of messages which are effective

1. Messages which question/ contradict their assumptions and stereotype of HE are effective
2. As are messages which encourage them to think about HE in a much broader way, more as a set of flexible options
3. As are messages which emphasise that learning/ training at a higher level will be enjoyable, and they can be successful because they’re training in subjects they’ve chosen, they enjoy

Appropriate language : training, work, college, practical, flexible, qualify/ qualifications/ learn, step by step

Key messages for Stage 1 – the disengaged

1. Questioning their assumptions

- all kinds of people go on to study or train in HE – at uni, at college, and in work

2. Emphasising flexibility

- you don't have to have 'A' levels to study or train in HE, other qualifications count (also give examples, and explain more about what qualifications allow you to study/ train in what – presume they don't really understand)

- there are different ways to achieve the best qualifications such as degrees, you don't have to study full time at uni

- whether you want to study or train whilst on the job or full time, you can go on to achieve a degree

- if you want to start working, think about training for a qualification at the same time, you can take it as far as you want to

- you can stay at home or move away to study (also – don't forget that there is usually a good choice of places to study near where you live to reassure that they can have a choice of good quality courses and still stay at home)

3. Study what you enjoy/ you're good at in a way you enjoy

- it's not all book-based learning in a library – many courses have hands-on, practical training

- you can follow a course which will qualify you for a particular job or you can study a subject you're really interested in

- further study/ training in HE is not like school

- you're not forced to learn specific subjects, you can choose what you're interested in

- you can study when it suits you best

Specific examples of non-academic courses are needed

- Apprenticeship, BTEC, National Diploma, FE

- Foundation Degrees (if they're in/ thinking about FE, they tend to be very confused about 'Foundation' and unsure of what 'level' this course might be)

	<p>Executorial Guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Aimhigher Roadshow approach – light touch, responsive, start from where the individual is thinking, don't look for commitment just acknowledgement that HE is now not rejected/ might be on their list when thinking about their future- emphasise flexibility, you can learn more about what you're interested in, good at- emphasise serial achievement – take it as far as you can/ want- emphasise the potential for success and enjoyment by choosing a subject they're good at
--	--

- Aimhigher Roadshow approach – light touch, responsive, start from where the individual is thinking, don't look for commitment just acknowledgement that HE is now not rejected/ might be on their list when thinking about their future
- emphasise flexibility, you can learn more about what you're interested in, good at
- emphasise serial achievement – take it as far as you can/ want
- emphasise the potential for success and enjoyment by choosing a subject they're good at

<p>2.2.2. Stage 2 – Principally aimed at those who have started to engage with the idea of themselves/ their child going into HE</p> <p>Relevant once they've see a personal 'route' to HE/ see their child expressing interest in HE</p> <p>Reinforce/ have a vision</p>	<p>Description :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to consolidate a personal vision of themselves in HE - see the connection between where they are now and where they could be in HE - key motivational stage : move from 'I could possibly' to 'I want to' <p>Target :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - young people - parents - potential returners <p>Recognise this set of attitudes by :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of 'attitude', not disagreeing/ arguing with statements about HE - begin to use first person singular in relation to HE – starting to relate to the idea of themselves studying in HE - starting to want a conversation, have questions - sounding more confident – as if they can believe they might be able to do it <p>Key language : pushing yourself, doing the best for yourself, more to offer, qualifications, better jobs and salary, proud/ achievement, fulfilling, support, talk, plan</p> <p>Types of messages which are most effective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - reinforce their personal ambition to go into HE - fulfilling their potential/ pushing themselves - likely outcomes from having achieved a degree/ benefits <p>Key Messages for Stage 2 - engaged :</p> <p>N.B. Although 'engaged' by now, it will still be necessary and appropriate to use all of the messages identified in Stage 1 with this group – repetition of the message and familiarity with it is important to keep them engaging with the idea of themselves at HE</p>
---	--

1. Reinforcing their personal ambition, their personal route (i.e. re-emphasising flexibility from Stage 1)

- *there are different ways to achieve the best qualifications such as degrees, you don't have to study full time at uni*
- *whether you want to study or train whilst on the job or full time, you can go on to achieve a degree*

2. Emphasise pride/ achievement

- *studying or training at a higher level means you're getting the best for yourself/ maximising your potential*

3. Likely benefits from going on to HE

- *if you go as far as you can to get the best qualifications you can, you're likely to earn more and have a far better choice of jobs/ careers*
- *studying or training at a higher level means you'll have greater independence and learn to make your own decisions*

Some might be interested in practicalities at this stage – however they are likely to be putting that off until they're forced to!

Executional Guidelines

- emphasise the 'taking it further', 'be the best' rather than an end point
- emphasise what they're interested in and the options for taking that to a higher level
- encourage them to ask questions : this needs a personal plan for their own individual circumstances
- bring in self-fulfilment, achievement, 'owe it to yourself' to do your best/ be the best you can
- avoid statistics, 'promises' and guarantees

<p>2.2.3. Stage 3 – Principally aimed at those engaged potential students who now want to make concrete plans for HE/ the next step</p> <p>Make it happen/ make it a reality</p>	<p>Description :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- make sure they follow through hopes/ aspirations into real plans- make help, further information & support as accessible as possible- don't have to learn all about HE since they'll have an idea of their own personal path/ plan by this stage, so specific information/ support is required <p>Target :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- young people – but probably only when they're forced to make decisions- parents – this stage is where they feel they can be most helpful, when they feel they've got something to discuss with their children- potential returners <p>Recognise this stage by :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- questions about the specifics- push them to this stage – their impulse is to procrastinate, make them write it down/ make it concrete/ real/ simple/ personalised for them <p>All messages identified in Stage 1 and 2 are relevant at this stage, but they want to focus on the logistics and practicalities at this stage rather than general messages about HE.</p> <p>Interestingly, this stage's messages were least controversial, and were all under the original banner of 'Practicalities' (see Appendix 1)</p> <p>Key language : plan, talk, apply, next step, qualifications, 'what I'm interested in/ for me'</p>
--	--

Key Messages for Stage 3 - Planners

- *you can get more information about HE from www.aimhigher.ac.uk (website needs to offer a button for them, so that they can identify themselves and click through to targeted, simple, discrete information)*
- *young people can talk through their options with a Connexions personal adviser*
- *the Aimhigher roadshow visits schools and colleges all over the country to give young people a better idea of what HE is like and why they should consider going*
- *people who've left school and now want to go back to training/ learning/ studying should call 0800 xxxxxxxxx to talk it over with an adviser*
- *parents who want information about HE and the possible options for their child should call 0800 xxxx to talk it over with an adviser*

One additional practicality message for potential students aged 13-15 should be added to this list :

- *You may be able to get paid £30 a week if you decide to carry on studying full-time after your GCSEs, provided your attendance is good, and depending on your parents' income*

Executorial Guidelines

- *can be stronger in intervention at this stage – make real plans, appointments, important they feel they're in a process*
- *the more this is a personal conversation, the better*
- *avoid general HE messages – overwhelming at this stage*