

front line

University
outreach officer

A regular column in
which people explain
how government
policy affects their
working lives

Interview by Mark Smulian

Funding has been cut for efforts to broaden student intakes. What now?

"I work in partnerships and outreach for a university, helping to encourage and motivate young people who have the capability to benefit from higher education, but who've never thought about it because they lack confidence, don't have any suitable role models or believe it's 'not for them'. This is not an idle exercise: for the UK to realise its economic potential, we must utilise our skills base by ensuring that those with the potential to succeed in higher education can do so.

For some years I worked on the 'Aimhigher' programme, a national scheme designed to raise the proportion of people from poorer backgrounds and other disadvantaged groups who got into university. In November 2010 we were told that funding would end in July 2011. It

wasn't too much of a surprise. The cuts imposed on the public sector, and the generally ominous tones of government announcements, had set a fairly depressing backdrop.

There were a few false dawns when it looked as though there might be a follow-up programme or a reprieve of some work strands. But there was a sense of finality after the hikes in student fees were announced that autumn, and we concluded that the government was not greatly interested in whether anyone went on to higher education or not.

Under the new fees regime, universities will run their own projects to broaden intakes – and there was talk of a 'bridging programme' designed to plug the gap between the end of AimHigher and their starting. However, this initiative became mired in detail and complexity.

As with all doomed programmes, the people running AimHigher projects are faced with a choice of carrying on to the bitter end, slacking

off, or jumping ship. We tried to keep cool heads, and hoped there was still a steady hand on the tiller. Like good public servants we carried on regardless; and we encouraged our partners in schools and colleges to do the same, although there was a strong desire to yell "every man for himself".

Nonetheless, attendance at partnership meetings became patchy. Meeting content and input was muted, and the enthusiasm exuded by partners waned as the agenda changed from 'development' to 'run-down'. There was an unavoidable impression that some people were only marking time before moving on to something/anything else.

So we attempted to salvage anything that might be of use in the future. Given the ephemeral nature of many web and printed materials, we made a determined effort to archive anything considered re-usable, updatable and of value to anyone who might want to carry such work forward. Curiously, there was no centralised instruction to do this. Was all the wealth of good practice and information to be forgotten? Was everything we'd done to be written off as outdated? The archiving became an act of faith in the quality of what we and others had produced. We had little faith that anyone would move this agenda forward anytime soon.

As we approached closure, some key national players who

had fought a brave but ultimately futile rearguard action left the stage. Closer to home, there was a creeping realisation that the partnership network was dissolving as staff were re-assigned. At my institution we made brave noises and carried the flag to the end, and the programme faded with a whimper in July 2011.

So where are we now? Well, I'm lucky. My institution had the foresight to maintain a small core of staff, and has allocated a small amount of finance to salvage a workable network. There are a few such survivor networks dotted around, and we try

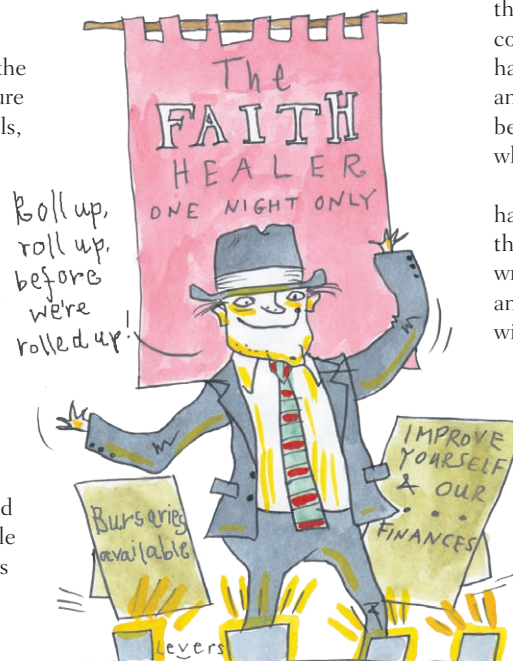
to maintain contact. We are aiming to take the programme forward with a much smaller resource base.

However, the regional network has faded. Many of our old contacts are no longer in post, and we are identifying substitutes who might have the time and enthusiasm to get involved. Schools see the need, but don't necessarily have the capacity to allocate staffing. Local authorities are under the cosh, and we are seeking engagement with whoever is left and has an interest in our objectives.

Our remaining partners, though, are all angling for financial input and 'supporting traded services' – meaning that somebody pays them the full cost of the work. Meanwhile, colleges have faced a tough financial round and many of their staff have left and been replaced by more junior people who need training and re-directing.

It's an uphill struggle, but we have the skills and patience to make the best of a bad job. We are re-writing the play and trying to select and stage-manage a new set of actors with a modified script.

We could be a short performance, but the play's theme has an important message, and we're getting ready to step once again into the spotlight to give it our best shot. It may just be that the changes in student finance mean that our audience is more sceptical and harder to win over than ever – but we will try." ■



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