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**Title**

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**Abstract**

The persistence of the social class gap in higher education (HE) participation presents one of the biggest challenges for the English HE sector at the start of the 21st century. This paper considers the evidence collected by the Aimhigher partnerships in the South West of England to assess the progress towards closing the social class gap in HE participation within their region. Since Aimhigher is a complex, long-term initiative, these partnerships have adopted a multi-strand approach to evaluation through a combination of secondary data, activity and quality indicators, and a longitudinal tracking study. Encouragingly, the social class gap is beginning to narrow as the number of applicants from upper social groups has fallen slightly while those from other social groups increased by 25 per cent between 2000 and 2004. HE awareness, aspirations, attainment and educational progression are also increasing. The paper raises three policy issues concerning targeting, sustainability and vocational progression. Engaging the 'right' beneficiaries remains a key concern. The tracking study indicates

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that, although over 80 per cent of Aimhigher beneficiaries have the ability to progress to HE and would be first-generation entrants, only one in three comes from a manual background. The findings, however, indicate that compared with their peers whose parents have HE experience, these first-generation entrants were less well informed about HE, less likely to aspire to HE by year 11, to progress to level 3 or to study A-levels. These findings suggest that the focus on first-generation entrants remains appropriate. Second, although wider participation in HE is beginning to happen, there is still a long way to go. Sustaining the Aimhigher programme into at least the medium term is essential if it is to complete the work it has begun and maintain the trust of the communities within which it works. Finally, the paper finds that the Aimhigher cohort includes learners who want to take a vocational route into and through HE and who are at present less well served by current provision. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)