



**Report of a feasibility study of the creation of a
Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance**

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Executive summary

Introduction and contexts

- (i) This is the report of a feasibility study of a proposal to create a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance of higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education and sixth form colleges. The proposal arose in the context of an already strong commitment among the higher and further education communities in the Greater Manchester sub-region to extending and widening opportunities for participation in higher education. The idea behind the concept of an Alliance was that more could be achieved by a greater harmonisation of approach and by greater collaboration between individual institutions.
- (ii) The issue of widening access to higher education has been a prominent driver for national policy within the UK during recent years and is linked closely to wider concerns about social justice and inclusion. Additionally, policy initiatives stress the importance of higher education providers having stronger links with business and regional economies.
- (iii) Collaboration between further and higher education institutions is a key element of widening participation strategy. The form which this collaboration takes varies considerably, reflecting the characteristics of the institutions concerned and the communities they serve.
- (iv) Manchester and Salford possess one of the largest concentrations of students in Europe. The higher education 'system' of Greater Manchester is roughly equivalent in size to higher education in a country like Denmark. Yet within the boundaries of Greater Manchester are to be found some of the lowest higher education participation rates in the UK.
- (v) Current collaborations and links between higher and further education institutions in the Greater Manchester area are both extensive and extremely varied. They also extend well beyond the geographical area currently defined as Greater Manchester.
- (vi) Relationships between higher and further education colleges embrace a range of functions. The main ones are about providing progression routes into HEIs, validation and quality assurance, curriculum (development and/or delivery) and staff development.
- (vii) These functions can be carried out in a variety of ways and many colleges work with several HE partners. There is considerable variation in local contexts, in the catchments from which individual colleges draw and in the local economic situations.

The consultation exercise

- (viii) The consultation exercise comprised face-to-face and telephone interviews with institutions and organisations, a half-day meeting (to which all colleges and higher education institutions in the sub-region were invited) and a follow-up postal consultation. In all, 23 colleges and higher education institutions in the sub-region, and 14 organisations have been involved in the consultation.

The proposals

- (ix) The consultations have indicated strong but uneven support for the concept of a Strategic Alliance. The conclusion of the project team is that the creation of a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance is feasible and, indeed, desirable. To be successful,

however, it will need to be sensitive to the range of views that exist about its form, functions and desirability.

(x) Our proposals take as their starting point the assumption that the ultimate and most important beneficiaries of the Alliance should be the people of Greater Manchester.

(xi) We recommend that the Alliance should have the following functions:

- To stimulate demand for all forms of higher education from groups in society who are currently under-represented in higher education.
- To better meet the learning needs of such groups by supporting collaboration between institutions of further and higher education in the sub-region.
- To increase the responsiveness of the education community to the social and economic development needs of the sub-region.

(xii) Five main types of activity are proposed for the Alliance: *Mapping and Monitoring; Direct Services to Students; Direct Services to Institutions; Co-ordination of Institutional Activities; Intelligence/Environmental Scanning*. There is a lot of work under each of these headings already being undertaken by institutions in the sub-region. The role of the Alliance in these cases would be to co-ordinate and enhance existing activities - rather than to replace or duplicate them – and to identify and fill gaps. Not all activities can be implemented immediately and we recommend their implementation in three phases over a five year period.

Phase 1 would focus on activities under *Mapping and Monitoring, External Awareness/Environmental Scanning* and *Direct Services to Students*. Much of this will be able to take account of Aimhigher and other existing initiatives. Clearly, Phase 1 will also need to establish the structures and ways of working of the Alliance (including building trust between members) and its ‘presence’ within the various Greater Manchester communities.

Phase 2 would see the introduction of direct services to institutions. We summarise these as ‘academic brokerage’ which includes validation services, APEL and dissemination of good practice (including some curriculum and staff development activities).

Phase 3 would be the implementation of a range of collaborative activities undertaken by institutions and co-ordinated by the Alliance. These may involve the greater sharing of facilities, the establishment of joint teaching teams and the introduction of common credit frameworks.

(xiii) Recognising the different views and circumstances of institutions in Greater Manchester, we believe it desirable for different levels of Alliance membership to be available.

(xiv) We propose that the Alliance be collectively owned by its institutional membership. All heads of member institutions would be part of an Alliance Council that would meet annually. Its Governing Board would consist of four heads of HEIs (to be elected by the HEI membership) and four heads of FE sector colleges (to be elected by the FE sector college membership) plus an independent chair.

(xv) The activities of the Alliance would in part be carried out by an Alliance office and in part collectively by the member institutions (the ‘distributed alliance’).

- (xvi) We believe that an Alliance office of around eight staff would be needed. We would not expect this to grow significantly as the activities envisaged for the later stages would be staffed from existing resources within institutions.

1. Introduction

This is the report of a feasibility study of a proposal to create a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance of higher education institutions and further education and sixth form colleges. The proposal arose in the context of an already strong commitment among the higher and further education communities in the Greater Manchester sub-region to extending and widening opportunities for participation in higher education. The idea behind the concept of an Alliance was that more could be achieved by a greater harmonisation of approach and by greater collaboration between individual institutions. Above all, the Alliance would offer a long-term strategic view that would help to maximise the success of a range of other initiatives to extend opportunities and aspirations. A Steering Group was established in spring 2003 to take forward the idea of a strategic alliance 'that would offer 'additionality' to the activity-based Aimhigher:P4P initiative, would meet the needs of adult learners, and would take account of the emerging national Skills Strategy'.

The Steering Group commissioned the feasibility study from a team led by the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI). The membership of the project team is contained in annex 1. The study has been carried out between July and November 2003 in three phases. The first phase, during July and August, entailed initial consultations and an attempt to undertake a rudimentary mapping of existing linkages/partnerships across the sub-region. The second phase addressed the strategic issues facing the proposed Alliance, grouped under six main themes: progression and credit frameworks; curriculum development and validation; contribution of employers; regional economy and skills strategy; links with Aimhigher:P4P; models of partnership and collaboration; funding and structure of the Alliance. Consultation on a series of propositions connected with these six themes took place during September and early October alongside a further series of interviews which included representatives of national and regional bodies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Learning and Skills Council, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the Northwest Development Agency. The final phase of the project has entailed the analysis of the information provided and the views expressed to us as the basis for the preparation of the present report and its recommendations. Annex 2 describes the fieldwork carried out and the organisations consulted as part of the study.

This report is structured as follows. A section on *Contexts* first describes the national and international contexts of the project from a policy perspective and then considers some of the special features and issues posed by the Greater Manchester sub-region. The next section reports the *Results of the consultation* in terms of the views that have been expressed to us about the themes and propositions set out in the consultation document. The remaining sections contain the project team's proposals. The section entitled the *Proposed Alliance* suggests the functions and areas of activity of the Alliance. The sections entitled *Phased Implementation*, *Levels of Membership* and *Structure and Funding* consider operational issues that will need to be addressed in setting up the Alliance.

2. Contexts

2.1. A policy perspective

The issue of widening access to higher education has been a prominent driver for national policy within the UK during recent years, and is linked closely to wider concerns about social justice and inclusion. However, as in other higher education systems in Europe, UK provision is under considerable financial stress, having suffered almost continuous reductions in funding over the past two decades (see European University Association (EUA) 2003). The questions of affordability and the relative roles of government and the individual in funding participation are therefore now prominent within public debate.

The ideology underpinning recent policies and practices are best understood within the context of the governmental vision of a learning society as described in the Green Papers published in 1998 (DfEE, 1998; Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), 1998; Welsh Office, 1998). To a large extent these were influenced and drew upon the thinking of the European Commission's paper *Teaching and Learning* (European Commission, 1995) and the later *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (European Commission 2001). The papers identified a number of challenges for education and training including, the impact of the information society, the impact of internationalisation and the impact of the scientific world.

These challenges were to be met by emphasising the merits of a broad base of knowledge and by building up employability. The focus in the European Commission's papers on both economic challenges and the need for both a socially cohesive and a socially inclusive society are echoed in a variety of British policy documents on post compulsory education and training, including the Dearing and Garrick reports (NCIHE, 1997), the Kennedy report (FEFC, 1997) and on the problem of social exclusion (Scottish Office, 1998). The Dearing report offered an inclusive vision of a learning society which embraces people at all levels of achievement, envisaging expansion of higher education provision with particular emphasis on sub-degree level and reiterated the need to address the under-representation in higher education of particular social groups. The Kennedy report *Learning Works* (FEFC, 1997) argued that the further education (FE) sector is the key to widening participation given its diversity and the potential progression opportunities it can offer.

In England at institutional level HEIs have been variously rewarded through earmarked funding (HEFCE 1995) and later, as Davies (2002) reports, by a 'combination of funding approaches: through mainstream formula funding, the allocation of additional student numbers, a special funding programme', with the balance of funds available lying 'more towards mainstream formula funding rather than special funding' (HEFCE 1999, p3). Mainstream funding mechanisms involve an adjustment in the block grant for teaching given to HEIs, essentially offering them extra funds for recruiting students from particular target groups; these include the disabled, part-time students, mature students, and those from areas with below average participation (the 'postcode' premium). Special funding of a developmental nature for 'widening provision' was initiated in 1995 as fall-out from the removal of historic funding streams for non-accredited liberal adult education in universities (Osborne 2003a). This has led to the development of a range of institutional practices for widening participation (UACE 1997). Many of these, as Field (2002) suggests, build upon initiatives already started in the early 1990s. However, it is significant to see that, as in other parts of the UK, a shift in emphasis from mature students to school pupils is evident. In terms of initiatives this has meant *inter alia* the development of a range of strategies to raise awareness of higher education amongst poorer school pupils as young as 12 and the creation of Access Summer Schools to give second chances to pupils who narrowly fail to achieve examination grades needed for entry to university.

Despite this shift in focus to younger age groups, FECs play a very significant role in overall strategy for widening participation across the lifespan. Broadly the activities of FECs in this area can be categorised in a four-fold typology. Firstly FECs provide students for first year HE courses through a range of forms of preparatory programme. Secondly they provide sub-degree level courses of HE that can be used in the labour market. Thirdly this and other provision can be used to enter HEIs with advanced standing. Fourthly, some provision extends to completion of a first degree, and postgraduate courses. *De facto*, these arrangements involve a good deal of collaboration between FECs and HEIs, and the creation of a range of systematic structural arrangements between the sectors based on negotiated flexibility of access, modularity of provision and credit accumulation and transfer.

The forms that such collaborations take are multi-faceted, and have been described and analysed in an international context in a number of recent publications (Thomas et al 2002, Woodrow 2002, Murphy et al 2002, Osborne 2003b). Woodrow and Thomas (2002) present a four-fold typology of collaboration, based on studies from Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the US, in which they describe vertical, longitudinal, all-embracing and integrated versions.

- The *vertical* model refers to strategies that better facilitate direct entry from a particular sector to HE, as is exemplified in the links between further education colleges and universities in the UK (Morgan-Klein and Murphy 2002) and various models of workplace learning (Brennan and Little 1996).
- The *longitudinal* model does not sharply focus solely on HE as an outcome, but seeks ‘to achieve for its target group a continuum of cross-sector learning opportunities stretching from primary education into employment’ (Woodrow and Thomas, 2002, p. 13). Eggink (2002) describes a regional strategy of this form in Holland to tackle the low participation rates of minority groups that is based on co-operation between three sectors around Utrecht. Here the *Regionale Opleidings Centrum Utrecht*, the *Hogeschool van Utrecht* and the *Universiteit van Utrecht* have created what is described as the ‘Utrecht Bridge’ to improve the educational infrastructure.
- Woodrow and Thomas’ *all-embracing* model, exemplified by Birmingham’s (2002) case study from Cork in Ireland, describes a regional strategy that encompasses multiple players and many dimensions from primary schools through to universities. It is distinguished from previous models not only by the breadth of partnership, but also by the extent of the involvement of all stakeholders, including those seeking access in the process itself and by seeking to change the nature of supply.
- *Integration* refers to those models where institutional barriers have (at least ostensibly) been dissolved, and most obviously these are evident in those countries where vocational education and training (VET) colleges and universities have been integrated to form a common post-16 dual-mode system as in certain states of Australia, such as Victoria and the Northern Territories (Wheelahan 2002). There are obvious advantages to such strategies since much evidence points to substantial barriers existing at points of institutional transition. Clearly the community colleges of Canada and the USA are also a significant international model within this tradition, and provide an example of part of a stratified system of HE within which various sectors have well-defined purposes.

Within the UK, both confederacy models (where institutions mutually agree to co-ordinate and combine some of their functions and services, as a way of achieving economies, increasing the range of provision and improving quality), and multiversity federations (whereby institutions are brought together into a common, co-operating structure to ensure a comprehensive response to the education and training needs of employers and individuals) can be seen as variations of the *vertical* model.

The UK government has also supported a number of structural initiatives, notably (Scotland excepted) the introduction of Foundation degrees. These are two year HE qualifications offered by partnerships of FECs, HEIs and employers and are best described as being akin to US associate degrees offered by community colleges. The emphasis on offering short-cycle HE is also reflected in the efforts being put into encouraging FECs more generally to play a stronger role in widening participation. In recent policy documents produced by HEFCE (2001), the focus has shifted further towards partnership between the FECs, schools and HEIs in order to meet the target of achieving 50 per cent participation of the 18 to 30 age group in higher education by 2010 as set out originally in the 1998 Green Paper (DfEE 1998). The focus of policy is to raise attainment at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) levels 2 and 3, and to encourage more and better-prepared students to stay on in education at age 16 and go on to HE. Indeed there may be little prospect of the 50 per cent target being met without FE playing a strong role in delivering short-cycle HE, although some recent work on higher education supply and demand suggests otherwise, in that overall higher numbers by 2010 will be largely determined by population increases and the attainment of young people in schools – especially the proportion of 18 year olds qualifying with two or more A levels (HEPI, 2003).

It should also be noted that strategies on widening participation, whilst the target of certain directed funding, have been paralleled by declining per capita investment in overall student numbers, and consequent declines in support for infrastructure and maintenance. In recognition of this situation, in the recent White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, the current Secretary for Education and Skills has signalled that the English HE sector faces some ‘hard choices on funding, quality and management’ (DfES 2003a, p. 4). In this White Paper, whilst a commitment to expanding the HE system and to narrowing the social class gap amongst those entering the system remains a commitment, the proposal to allow universities to charge ‘top-up’ fees has been controversial, and is seen by a number of commentators to be antithetical to improving access. Nonetheless the UK government is adamant that the only way for the HE system to receive further funding is through increasing the contribution of individuals whom it deems can afford to pay, using part of this funding to support those who can’t through a means-tested bursary system. This strategy as suggested by the Schwartz report of September 2003 appears to be the favoured solution (DfES 2003b), but is the subject of considerable dissent, not least amongst parliamentarians of the Labour party.

If, as seems inevitable, the burden of the costs of higher education is going to shift to the individual, then without doubt those targeted by widening participation policies will, despite the deferred nature of repayment and the availability of support, become averse to the financial risks of entering the system. This is suggested by a number of recent reports (Callender 2003; Davies et al 2002). One consequence is likely to be that potential students will seek cheaper solutions, and the prospect of being able to take HE level provision locally within FE may become more attractive, especially if linked to good progression or employment opportunities.

Government policy initiatives also stress the importance of higher education providers having stronger links with business and the economy. One aspect of this strengthening of links is government’s expectation that institutions should increasingly be embedded in their regional economies and closely linked with the emerging agendas of regional development agencies. It is also expected that the new Sector Skills Councils will develop stronger alliances between business in their sectors and relevant university and college departments to develop and market courses and involve employers in the delivery of learning. More specifically these same bodies are charged with defining national occupational standards for their sector – such standards could well inform the design and development of Foundation degrees. Many of these policy drivers can be viewed as reflecting, in part, the government view that any expansion of higher education provision should not mean ‘more of the same’ but should appeal to new groups of potential learners (for whom arguably the current curriculum offer is not seen as meeting their needs).

The Sector Skills Councils are also seen as having specific roles in delivering high quality analysis of international, national and regional trends in labour, skills and productivity in their sector, to

feed in to the cycle of planning and funding the supply of training at regional level (DfES, 2003c). At the local level, learning and skills councils are developing medium term skills strategies to ‘mesh’ with overall regional strategies for addressing the skills and employment needs of employers and individuals in the region. There is a clear view from government that skills training should be more demand-led than in the past.

This overview of national policy perspectives raises three important messages for the proposed activities of the Alliance:

- widening participation in higher education needs to embrace both young and mature adults
- higher education initiatives need to seek to meet both equity and employability agendas
- initiatives need to take account of regional and sub-regional agendas for economic regeneration.

UK policy perspectives on access to higher education and higher education’s contribution to economic development are undoubtedly influenced by larger debates about the effects of globalisation and the creation of so-called ‘knowledge economies’. Although disputed by some (Wolf, 2002), such conceptions of a new world economic order place considerable emphasis on the role of universities within new forms of ‘city regions’, referred to by some as the ‘ideopolis’. Will Hutton of the Work Foundation has described the ideopolis as ‘a twenty-first century version of what we first saw in Italian renaissance city states. The key elements are the airport, the university and the capacity to create new ideas – either within or outside existing companies – that buoyant demand, intellectual capital and business self-confidence help to sustain’¹. This economic agenda places great emphasis on the availability of ‘talent’ within an area as a key resource for the generation of wealth and opportunity.

While some would see a tension between the economic and equity agendas for education, others would see them as inter-dependent. However, a feature of the ideopolis that may be relevant to the Greater Manchester context is the possibility that ‘high-profile recovery of post-industrial city centres does not always spread outwards to nearby neighbourhoods’². This is a suitable point to turn to some of the distinctive features of the Greater Manchester sub-region.

2.2. Greater Manchester

Manchester and Salford possess one of the largest concentrations of students in Europe. The higher education ‘system’ of Greater Manchester is roughly equivalent in size to higher education in a country like Denmark. Yet within the boundaries of Greater Manchester are to be found some of the lowest higher education participation rates in the UK. Such apparent contradictions are fully recognised within the various boroughs and are being addressed in a wide variety of ways, many of which involve collaboration between further and higher education institutions.

The recent economic regeneration of central Manchester and certain other parts of the sub-region have not yet been matched by similar developments across the sub-region as a whole. Within Manchester itself, developments such as the merger between the University of Manchester and UMIST and the creation of Manchester Knowledge Capital could be regarded as examples of the ‘ideopolis’ concept described above. But it remains to be seen how such developments will impact on the rest of the sub-region.

¹ Speech to Core Cities Conference, April 2002, cited in *Welcome to the Ideopolis*, by Tom Cannon, Max Nathan and Andy Westwood, a working paper published by the Work Foundation, May 2003.

² Cannon et al, *ibid*

Current collaborations and links between higher and further education institutions in the Greater Manchester area are both extensive and extremely varied. They also extend well beyond the geographical area currently defined as Greater Manchester.

From a student perspective, the FE/HE interface embraces (i) 'traditional' FE students moving into HE by mainly standard routes, (ii) HE students within FE colleges, (possibly with an HE partner providing quality assurance and/or curriculum development support), (iii) HE in FE students aiming to progress to higher levels of HE study. We have found it difficult to obtain reliable information on the numbers and types of students in these various categories.

Institutions differ in the emphasis they place on these different interfaces. In particular, further education colleges differ considerably from each other, with the following dimensions of particular importance:

- the amount and proportion of HE provision within the college
- the location of the college, especially in relation to Manchester city centre
- the location of the college in relation to other HE providers.

The issue of location is of both symbolic and practical importance: symbolic in that local identities are strong and 'Greater Manchester' as a concept is rather weak and of quite recent origin; practical in that many people within the area do not go into central Manchester and would not, it is argued, readily do so for educational purposes. This raises questions of whether the Alliance will need to 'take higher education to students' rather than 'take students to higher education' in at least some parts of the sub-region.

Relationships between higher and further education colleges embrace a range of functions. The main ones are about providing

- progression routes into HEIs
- validation and quality assurance
- curriculum (development and/or delivery) and staff development.

These functions can be carried out in a variety of ways and many colleges work with several HE partners.

Above all, there is considerable variation in local contexts, in the catchments from which individual colleges draw and in the local economic situations. Colleges have to understand such things and make their plans accordingly.

It was not in the brief of the project team to evaluate current arrangements for collaboration but a number of observations can be made about them in the context of an assessment of the potential benefits that might be expected to come with the creation of an Alliance.

- First, as far as we could judge, most individual arrangements between FE and HE institutions are working well, but their variety is confusing to potential students and staff of institutions alike.
- Second, the *ad hoc* nature of many arrangements and their dependence on personal ties may be important to their success in the short-term but does not lay a firm foundation for sustainability in the long run. Some colleges did not appear to have a reliable overview of their various collaborative arrangements.
- Third, it was unclear what analysis of actual or potential student demand had been undertaken and it seemed that much collaborative activity was supply led. Many staff told us that they would welcome better intelligence on likely future patterns of demand.

- Fourth, colleges appear to find it difficult to rely on individual universities to meet their needs, whether because of limited subject provisions or because of lack of interest at departmental levels within the HE institution. Hence the need to develop ties with several institutions. That said, colleges reported considerable developmental benefits from the arrangements they had. HE links were universally valued.
- Fifth, there is at least a possibility that reliance on multiple HE partners and use of partners from outside the sub-region and region reflect a wish by colleges to maintain their independence and the fact that a sense of competition with local HEIs exists.
- Sixth, there remains the possibility of unnecessary duplication of provision, of failure to learn from the achievements and experiences of others across the region. There does not appear to be a strong sense of strategy at either local or sub-regional levels.

All of that said, the sheer amount and variety of the current arrangements is in many ways impressive. It reflects a commitment and an enthusiasm that should be nurtured. Yet to be successful, these links and collaborations need to be embraced by more than the enthusiasts. There are at least three categories of staff who need to be engaged: (i) institutional leaders, (ii) the various co-ordinators and ‘brokers’ of collaborative arrangements, (iii) the teaching staff. It is the latter group who may still need to be enthused. It is they who handle the admission arrangements in the HEIs, who supply the quality assurance and developmental support to colleges, who may even help teach on courses in the FE institution. In the colleges, it is they who can best advise, encourage and enthuse the students to raise their horizons, to think about previously unthinkable futures. But FE and HE staff are busy people with little or no spare time. The purposes of collaborative provisions need to be clear and supportable. The arrangements necessary to make them work need to be simple and readily understood.

3. Results of the consultation

As noted in the introduction, during the first phase of the feasibility study (July- August) initial consultations about the proposed Alliance were undertaken. Despite the fact that this coincided with the traditional leave period for many key stakeholders, interviews were conducted with key staff in thirteen (primarily further education) institutions in the sub-region. Additionally, interviews were held with eight key national and regional agencies (see Annex 2 for detail).

On the basis of this initial phase of consultations, and drawing on experience of collaborations between higher education providers elsewhere (particularly in relation to widening participation), a consultation document was prepared which set out a number of potential benefits that could be expected to be achieved from an Alliance, viz.

- better and simpler information for students about the different opportunities available to them
- independent advice and guidance
- stimulation of demand through better and more systematic marketing
- a much greater range of opportunities available to potential students, enhancing choice and options
- knowledgeable brokerage to assist institutions to find the most suitable partners (within and between the sectors)
- more consistent quality assurance arrangements
- knowledgeable brokerage to assist employers, regional and national agencies
- better articulation of supply and demand
- a mainstreaming of widening participation awareness among HEIs
- avoidance of unnecessary duplication of provision
- collaboration on funding bids, e.g. for Foundation degree numbers

To deliver these potential benefits, a series of propositions relating to the strategic issues facing the proposed Alliance were drafted, grouped under six main themes: progression and credit frameworks; curriculum development and validation; contribution of employers, the regional economy and the national skills strategy; links with AimHigher:P4P; partnership and collaboration; funding and structure of the Alliance.

During the second phase of the feasibility study (September – October) these potential benefits and the propositions were considered at a half-day consultation meeting in September, to which all further and higher education providers and other relevant stakeholders in the sub-region were invited. This was followed by an invitation to all institutions to submit written comments on the propositions, and to supply further information about the supply and demand for higher education in their locality, together with data relating to student data flows between further and higher education. (Annex 2 lists details of respondents). Also during the second phase, additional interviews were undertaken with further and higher education providers, and relevant national, regional and sub-regional bodies (Annex 2). In all, 23 colleges and higher education institutions in the sub-region, and 14 organisations have been involved in the consultation. In most cases, discussions have been held with more than one person in the institution or organisation. Feedback from these various consultation exercises tended to relate to the strategic issues raised in general, rather than to specific propositions. It was evident from the views expressed that many saw the potential benefits of the Alliance accruing to **both** further education and higher education institutions in the sub-region.

In the following sections, we set-out, under the six main strategic issues facing the proposed Alliance, the original propositions revised to take into account the comments raised during the

consultation exercises. We also provide a summary of points raised during the consultation exercises in respect of each of the strategic issues.

(i) Progression and credit frameworks

Proposition 1

To maximise progression opportunities tutors, student advisers and students need to be aware of the credit frameworks and about the range of opportunities open to students.

Proposition 2

The Alliance should ensure that there are progression opportunities for every award made within the ambit of the Alliance that enable students to maximise use of their credits.

Proposition 3

The Alliance should ensure that there is a clearly articulated framework of FE/HE credit systems which addresses the issue of *subject-based* as well as general credit. Such a framework will need to provide clear and fair ways of recognising educational achievements through forms of work-based learning, especially as a route for mature students.

Proposition 4

The framework should address the issue of progression from NVQs, including those gained through Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, to higher education programmes (including Foundation degrees).

Proposition 5

It is not proposed to undermine the authority of HEIs to determine admissions, but to provide them with better and clearer information on which to make decisions on admissions.

Proposition 5A

Members of the Alliance should seek as far as possible to enable students to transfer grade as well as credit. Procedures should take account of national developments on student transcripts and student profiles

Proposition 5B

The assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL), which is an essential component of any credit framework, is a specialised task and it would difficult for all members of the Alliance to develop a common approach and the necessary expertise in all areas of the curriculum.

Proposition 5C

The Alliance should establish centres of expertise that might assess experiential prior learning, and possibly assist in the assessment of certificated learning, on behalf of its members.

Generally, it was considered that unitisation of programmes (which might promote more flexible modes of delivery), systems of credit transfer, and progression agreements could, in different ways, help to increase participation in higher education, wherever located. In particular, a clearly articulated framework of FE/HE credit systems (which facilitated assignment of credit through the assessment of experiential or certificated learning) might ensure that students could utilise to

the maximum their prior learning achievements. This could be particularly important for adult, employed learners. It was also suggested that programmes of study might be designed within a common curriculum framework that crosses FE/HE so that students would be assured of equity in credit accumulation and transfer arrangements. At present there seems to be a multiplicity of programmes of study that formally are at a similar level but whose tariffs are respected in different ways by different institutions. Harmonisation of credit given to successful completion of 'Year 0' courses would provide greater clarity to both students and staff and thereby assist the process of progression. Also the potential for grading access courses might also assist the process of entry to higher education.

Further, it was felt that a common approach to student profiling and personal development planning across the higher and further education institutions in the sub-region could be a useful mechanism for enhancing continuity throughout an individual's learning experiences.

(ii) Curriculum development and validation

Proposition 6

The Alliance will need to establish a framework to facilitate and support collaborative curriculum development and delivery. Higher education providers need to draw on appropriate expertise (in terms of both curriculum development and delivery) wherever it exists within the Alliance.

Proposition 7

It is essential to distinguish between the development, delivery and quality assurance of curricula. In particular, it is important that quality assurance arrangements have a degree of independence from other forms of collaboration.

Proposition 8

The Alliance could help provide a curriculum development methodology that takes better account of demand-side factors and the features of the local context, e.g. widening participation, employer needs, community building.

More generally, there is a need to ensure that curriculum development reflects both the demands of students and the labour market (local, regional and national), and that such developments address Government's concerns that future expansion in higher education should not mean 'more of the same'. Further, partnerships should be used to help institutions develop programmes in a way that maximises quality, minimises resource needs and enhances opportunities for learners.

We suggest that detailed curriculum development and delivery should be undertaken within a transparent quality framework based on objective criteria and involving external review. But whilst acknowledging that several different validating bodies currently operate within the Alliance, they should, as far as possible, adopt a common assessment methodology.

(iii) Contribution of employers, the regional economy and the national skills strategy

Proposition 9

The Alliance should have a brokerage role in liaising with the range of local, regional and national agencies charged with ensuring a closer match between higher education and training provision and the needs of the region and sub-region.

Proposition 10

The Alliance should aim to promote ‘zones of expertise’ with employers in the sub-region, with a view to heightening awareness of the availability of higher education opportunities to meet workforce development needs.

Proposition 11

Where an employer (or group of employers) is seeking new curriculum provision, the Alliance should offer a brokerage service to bring together relevant expertise from a range of providers to help develop such provision.

Proposition 12

The Alliance should seek to work with other existing sub-regional bodies to ensure ongoing knowledge of each other’s activities and possible links to the widening participation agenda.

Proposition 13

The Alliance should seek to provide clear information and guidance to employers on the various government education and training initiatives which might impact on their own recruitment and staff development activities.

Proposition 14

In seeking to stimulate employer and local community demands for high level education and training, be it in terms of initial experiences of higher education or within the wider context of lifelong learning, the Alliance should promote flexibility of access and provision (e.g. APEL; workplace learning).

Proposition 15

The Alliance should seek to identify current and emerging areas of good practice of providers working with employers in the sub-region in the design and delivery of high level skills training (e.g. the existing Centres of Vocational Excellence may be possible sites of such good practices).

There are currently specific initiatives within the sub-region which are starting to address more closely the needs of local employers (for example, the New Technology Initiative; a range of Foundation degrees). However, these may have emerged in an ad-hoc way rather than as a planned response to predicted needs and demands. To an extent the local learning and skills council already operates a planning function in respect of provision in the further education colleges. Moreover, the newly-formed Alliance for Skills and Productivity which is focused on improving and linking business development and skills development in the region should provide further pointers to a planned approach, within the sub-region, to meeting employer needs. However, it was suggested that the issue of whether employers, particularly SMEs, know ‘where to go’ for high level training to meet workforce development needs was open to question. It was also questionable whether local (potential) learners, particularly those without a family tradition of higher education, were sufficiently aware of career routes and earning prospects available within the region and sub-region.

(iv) Links with Aimhigher

Proposition 16

It will be important to establish a clear division of labour between Aimhigher and the Alliance on areas of mutual interest. These areas will include advice and guidance and progression routes from work-based learning (including issues of credit/APEL, Foundation degree developments and progression accords).

Proposition 17

The Alliance should seek to provide the conditions necessary for the long-term sustainability and mainstreaming of some Aimhigher activities.

Proposition 18

The Alliance and Aimhigher should present 'one face' to learners, and the relationship between the Alliance and Aimhigher should be regarded as an integrated one.

From discussions during the consultation period it was evident that there are clear areas of congruence between the aims of the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance and the Aimhigher initiative. Insofar as these aims converge and may result in the same activities being identified by the Alliance and the Aimhigher Action Plan, it is proposed that the Alliance should undertake a leading strategic role and Aimhigher (as permitted by its funding conditions) should implement the agreed activities. In some instances, Aimhigher may be able to broaden the scope of its plans in order to achieve impact on a greater number of learners and consistency of their experience, whilst recognizing the value of small-scale, innovative and high-risk 'projects' which may have transferability potential in the longer term and are properly integrated into a larger strategic framework.

In reaching this conclusion we have noted the 'project' and time-limited nature of Aimhigher and the need for sustainability of activities; the constraint (for the Alliance) of the focus on the 18-30 age group within the widening participation agenda; and the likely shift of emphasis post-April 2004 when P4P formally merges with Aimhigher (Excellence Challenge).

Further, some overlaps in membership between steering and working groups of Aimhigher and the Alliance will be helpful to avoiding potential duplication and misunderstanding.

(v) Partnership and collaboration

Proposition 19

The Alliance should undertake a mapping of existing provision in order that a robust dataset can be established upon which to base policy decisions.

Proposition 20

The Alliance will need to monitor the effectiveness of different forms of provision, given the varied nature of existing and likely future partnerships.

Proposition 21

The Alliance should ensure that better data are available about student flows through existing arrangements and about possible demand for new arrangements.

Proposition 22

The Alliance should consider providing a framework within which cross-institutional ‘mixed’ design and delivery teams could be created. Such a framework would do much to bridge possible tensions between institutions by ensuring a common stake and sense of equality in collaboration.

Proposition 23

The Alliance should be enabling rather restrictive about the range and types of partnership that can be developed, both within Greater Manchester and beyond it. However being part of the Alliance would carry with it certain obligations.

Proposition 24

The Alliance should allow for the distribution of risk both within new ventures (involving collaborations between colleges, or between colleges and higher education institutions), and for the sustainability of provision which has strategic importance for the sub-region (even though its viability may fluctuate).

Proposition 25

Students of member institutions should be given, so far as it is practical, access to social facilities, libraries and other learning resources of other member institutions.

Proposition 25A

Members of the Alliance should explore the benefits of providing certain student services, such as medical and careers services, in partnership.

Little is known quantitatively about the current extent of collaboration across FE/HE in the sub-region. During the consultation phase, all institutions in the sub-region were requested to provide data relating to student progression. Although many of the colleges were able to submit data to the project team on current student numbers studying at HE/level 4 and numbers who had completed level 3, they were much less able to provide accurate data on numbers who had subsequently progressed to higher education, either within the same institution, to another institution within the sub-region, or to another institution outside the sub-region. Moreover, where there were institutional agreements in place (for progression to higher education) it seemed that only a very small proportion of students who had progressed did so under institutional agreements. Data submitted by the higher education institutions on entry to higher education from the colleges in the sub-region were much more accurate: this is not surprising given that such data have to be submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. As anticipated, there were differences between institutions. For example, in one university access course students accounted for 14 per cent of students entering undergraduate programmes from colleges in the sub-region, whilst students with A levels accounted for 73 per cent of the entering cohort. In another university, access course students accounted for only 1 per cent of the intake, whilst students with A levels accounted for 85 per cent of the entering cohort. The project team consulted with the Higher Education Funding Council for England about the possibility of obtaining systematic data on student progression between the further and higher education sectors in the sub-region. HEFCE is currently working on this activity which, given that there is currently no unique student identifier that allows individual students to be tracked across the

sectors will entail detailed matching of student records held in two separate datasets. The project team will forward the results of the HEFCE analysis once it becomes available. In the meantime, we attach (as Annex 4) a paper describing a model of mapping individuals across the FE/HE sectors that was recently undertaken in Scotland.

Alongside gaining a better understanding of student flows and progression in the sub-region, we suggest an important initial exercise will be to map the extent and effectiveness of current provision, particularly in relation to the objectives of national and regional widening participation imperatives and regional and sub-regional employer needs. Policy decisions cannot be rationally made without a much more robust and sophisticated dataset.

(vi) Funding and structure of the Alliance

Proposition 26

There should be total transparency in funding arrangements and these should include value for money and service level agreements between the member institutions.

Proposition 27

The Alliance should be owned collectively by its institutional membership.

Proposition 28

There might be different levels of membership of the Alliance to reflect different institutional circumstances and priorities.

Proposition 29

The Alliance will need to be seen, and to act, as a 'neutral broker' in its dealings with institutions and in its relationships with other organisations and agencies.

It is not intended that the creation of an Alliance should create an additional layer of bureaucracy. Rather the Alliance should seek to create the conditions under which better collaboration between institutions can lead to enhanced (and clearer) opportunities for learners. As such, the Alliance should be a member-led and member-owned body whose functions are carried out in part by a 'visible' Alliance office and in part by the member institutions.

4. The proposed Alliance

4.1. The feasibility of an Alliance

The consultations have indicated strong but uneven support for the concept of a Strategic Alliance. Objections have concerned worries about bureaucracy and duplication – both of which are real dangers that will need to be avoided. Support has focused on the opportunities for achieving more through collaboration than could be done separately by institutions. But supporters differed among themselves in the priorities they saw for the Alliance, variously emphasising progression pathways into HEIs, more HE development within FECs, issues of social equity or issues of regional regeneration, ‘supply-side’ agendas or the need for greater ‘demand-led’ development. One institution referred to the dilemma posed by ‘an alliance of competitors’.

The above issues are not unique to further and higher education in Greater Manchester. Nor are they unique to education as a field of activity. As we have noted elsewhere in this report, consortia and federations of institutions of post-school education are becoming increasingly commonplace in many parts of the world. Some would regard them as an inevitable feature of mass higher education. Indeed, the idea for a Strategic Alliance in Greater Manchester is a relatively modest proposal when set within a wider context that includes institutional mergers and increasing rationalisation of provision.

Thus, we have no doubts that the creation of a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance is feasible and, indeed, desirable. To be successful, however, it will need to be sensitive to the range of views that exist about its form, functions and desirability. In particular, we would endorse the view expressed to us on several occasions that the success of the Alliance will depend upon the establishment of trust between the various partners. For this reason, we shall propose a phased implementation of the Alliance which we hope will facilitate the building up of trust over a period of years. That said, our proposals take as their starting point the assumption that the ultimate and most important beneficiaries of the Alliance should be the people of Greater Manchester.

4.2. The functions of the Alliance

We recommend that the Alliance should have the following functions:

- To stimulate demand for all forms of higher education from groups in society who are currently under-represented in higher education.
- To better meet the learning needs of such groups by supporting collaboration between institutions of further and higher education in the sub-region.
- To increase the responsiveness of the education community to the social and economic development needs of the sub-region.

While some people have argued to us that the focus of the Alliance should be limited to the first of these, we believe that they are inter-connected in terms of the needs and demands of potential students. For students, gaining admission to higher education is but one step on a much longer journey of development and achievement through learning. For most students, study is seen as a route into worthwhile employment and, for Greater Manchester as a whole, the existence of a highly educated and skilled labour force is a key factor to continuing prosperity. We believe that the wider social benefits – as well as the benefits to individuals – should be stressed in the establishment of the Alliance. Moreover, the Alliance will provide a forum in which institutional

leaders can think creatively about the strategic development of learning opportunities across the sub-region.

4.3. The activities of the Alliance

Five main types of activity are proposed for the Alliance: *Mapping and Monitoring; Direct Services to Students; Direct Services to Institutions; Co-ordination of Institutional Activities; Intelligence/Environmental Scanning*. There is a lot of work under each of these headings already being undertaken by institutions in the sub-region. The role of the Alliance in these cases would be to co-ordinate and enhance existing activities - rather than to replace or duplicate them – and to identify and fill gaps. Further, there are other institutional partnerships operating in the sub-region and the region involving sub-sets of the Greater Manchester institutions (e.g. the Crescent partnership; the North West Universities Association). Some of the activities of these other organisations might complement the proposed Alliance activities. In these cases, the role of the Alliance would be to enhance existing relevant activities from a sub-regional perspective – rather than to replace or duplicate them – and to identify and fill in gaps. Not all activities can be implemented immediately and we go on to recommend their implementation in three phases over a five year period. In addressing these activities, priority should be given to those aspects which relate to new initiatives for which additional funding from central government is available.

Mapping and monitoring

We propose three types of activity under this heading:

- Map existing provision; identify existing partnerships and progression routes.
- Map existing (non A-level) student flows into and through higher education; establish mechanisms for tracking and monitoring future student flows.
- Establish indicators to determine effectiveness of institutional partnerships and progression routes.

There is already much that can be drawn on and consolidated in this area. Two mapping activities have been identified in Aimhigher:P4P, one concerning access and foundation year courses and another concerning Foundation degree provision and proposals. HEFCE is investigating methodologies of mapping student flows and the Alliance will be able to draw on this work, both the methodology and the centrally-held data. The final activity under this heading is an important but medium-term activity for the Alliance which will provide useful planning information to assist Alliance member institutions to achieve greater coherence and rationalisation of provision.

We believe that a much better picture of current opportunities and their take-up is essential both for educational providers and for users. It will be important to ensure that opportunities for mature students – and lifelong learning more generally – are included in the mapping. Such ‘better data’ should help inform policy across the sub-region, the ways in which future supply relates to demand, and the ways in which collaboration at the curricular level can enhance opportunities for learners.

Direct services to students

Four types of activity are proposed:

- Clarify and present, in simplified and usable form, information about opportunities for access to and progression through higher education; ensure effective ‘marketing’ of information.
- Provide informed and independent advice and guidance to students at all stages (pre-entry, on-course, and further progression).

- Provide guarantees for progression and respect for academic credit (wherever and however achieved).
- Provide advice and support on managing student transition (between levels of education, between locations, between modes of delivery).

On the first of these, we note the existence of ‘uni4me’ and ‘college4us’ and the planned further development of their web-sites. It would be desirable for the Alliance to encourage the development of a single web-site in collaboration with Aimhigher. However, we believe that the Alliance’s marketing efforts should extend well beyond electronic forms if they are to reach the key groups that the Alliance is intended to serve. For example, collaboration with a supermarket chain could provide visibility for the Alliance in places frequented by all.

We note the proposed establishment of an independent advice line by Aimhigher, and the intention to provide staff development on the range of HE options to ‘key influencers’. But we believe that the Alliance will need to make advice and guidance available on a much larger scale. This would include the institutions themselves and the relevant staff will need to be provided with a) comprehensive information about opportunities available across the Alliance as a whole, b) some training and staff development in their use, c) an agreed code of practice. The goal should be the provision of informed, independent and accessible advice. The Alliance will need to liaise with the local Connexions services across the sub-region to ensure advice and guidance to 13-19 year olds about higher education opportunities is also aligned to such comprehensive information. Returning to the possible supermarket connection referred to above, existing students at Alliance member institutions might be employed to regularly man ‘advice desks’ at selected stores, targeted to reach the most under-represented groups. Such students – and any other advisors – would require the same information, training and knowledge of codes of practice as would be used by institutions.

Again in association with Aimhigher, we believe it will be important to establish clear progression accords that will provide a much wider range of opportunities for students to enter higher education courses provided by Alliance members. We recommend that one-to-one links be replaced by more extensive progression opportunities wherever possible. Access and foundation courses should be graded on a common scale that would be clearly understood by university and college admissions staff and ‘key influencers’ and would provide admissions staff with sufficient information to make admissions decisions about individuals in the context of the nature and demands of the course. Transparency of admissions criteria and processes which take into account *all* potential routes into higher education should be expected. Although we note the emphasis that HEFCE places on guarantees of progression, we believe that the existence of a wide range of progression possibilities is a more important and achievable goal. It would, however, be highly desirable for the Alliance as a whole to provide guarantees of a higher education place in one of its member institutions, even if places on specific courses could not be guaranteed.

Aimhigher will be undertaking two activities in relation to managing the transition into higher education: the ‘Headstart’ preparation for HE programme and the ‘Bridging Scheme’ associated with Manchester Metropolitan University’s Foundation degree. Developments such as these should be built upon and extended but we note their ‘course delivery’ focus and suggest that they need to be complemented by additional activities that address the wider personal and social issues associated with transition into HE.

In all of the above activities, the Alliance will need to ensure that the needs of potential mature students are met and to complement where necessary Aimhigher activities directed towards younger age groups.

Direct services to institutions

Three types of activity are proposed:

- Provide an APEL service - standard processes through which individuals may compile evidence of learning and have their claims assessed for credit.
- Provide a validation and quality assurance service.
- Disseminate good practice (for example, on curriculum design and delivery, and including aspects that involve employers).

The accreditation of prior experiential learning is an expensive but important aspect of widening participation, particularly for older students. It is important that it is done credibly and fairly. We believe that this is an activity that could be undertaken cost-effectively for all Alliance members either by a central unit or –and preferably – by a limited number of existing experienced centres within Alliance institutions. We note that there is some budgeted activity related to APEL in Aimhigher (strand F) although it is not entirely clear what is intended.

An important problem with existing quality assurance arrangements is that, not only are they highly fragmented, but they are entangled with other relationships between institutions, especially concerning student numbers and funding. Quality assurance and validation are central to the development of HE provision within FECs and it is essential that there is widespread confidence in their effectiveness. This is also referred to in Aimhigher although again it is not entirely clear what is proposed and to what timescale. However, the Alliance should certainly take account of this work and also the opportunities afforded by Foundation Degrees Forward. In particular, alignment with FDF would enable validating universities to standardise their validation arrangements, would allow the adoption of a single ‘national’ rate for services provided and could entail an ongoing quality assurance and enhancement partnership that would be informed by good practice in the sector. (There could also be funding available from FDF to support GMSA activity in this area.) While it remains the case that validating authority must be vested in a single institution, we do not believe that there would be anything to prevent a group of higher education institutions from developing a shared validation and quality assurance service (with common procedures and a common pool of experts) through which they would discharge their individual institutional responsibilities. Unless a single institution in the sub-region is willing to develop a fully comprehensive quality assurance service, we believe that a shared Alliance service would be the best option.

The dissemination of good practice is to some extent an uncontentious issue but it is an important one for institutions which have relatively small amounts of HE activity. We note that Aimhigher has a budget for this and it would certainly be desirable if the Alliance could agree a set of priorities with Aimhigher. But it should also be noted that several national bodies are providing services in this area, and in particular the new Higher Education Academy. Thus, Alliance activities under this heading can probably be fairly modest and focused on ensuring the sharing of local experiences and good practice.

Co-ordination of institutional activities

This is potentially a large, complex and perhaps contentious set of activities. Some will no doubt fear that they threaten institutional autonomy in certain areas. Nevertheless, we believe that in the long run they will represent the heart of the Alliance’s activities in meeting changing needs and responding to new kinds of student demand. Eleven types of activity are identified below.

- Review existing curriculum provision with a view to enhancing choice for the student (including choice of location and mode of delivery) while maximising cost effectiveness for institutional providers.

- Review existing curriculum provision with a view to embedding transition strategies for learners.
- Review existing curriculum provision with a view to assessing the feasibility of common teaching materials and, for those courses that involve electronic delivery (in whole or in part) whether a common ICT platform might be used.
- Provide a sub-regional resource for new course development and quality assurance by identifying clusters of staff expertise and physical resources across institutions aligned to sector skills councils.
- Advise on new programme development to maximise effective use of existing resources and to provide evidence of demand.
- Establish a common credit framework (including defining course elements and helping institutions to assign credit ratings).
- Adopt common processes for recording credit (possibly through student profiles).
- Encourage the provision to students of shared access to learning resources (wherever located in the sub-region).
- Encourage the provision of shared student services between Alliance members.
- Encourage and facilitate the creation of cross-institutional teaching teams.
- Co-ordinate bids to funding bodies for student numbers on Foundation degrees.

The above activities constitute a long-term agenda for the Alliance. Addressing them will require the build-up of trust, not just between institutional leaders but between academic and support staff across institutions. There is already some collaboration between institutions in these areas and in the short term this should be built upon and supported. But to support the development of greater collaboration in the longer term, we believe that the Alliance should establish a series of cross institutional working parties or committees representing skills/subjects/employment sectors undergoing rapid development and change. The expertise within these working parties or committees could be drawn upon by individual institutions but also by external groups, such as employers and regional agencies. It is noted that other institutional partnerships in the region and sub-region may already have experience of promoting similar activities: the Alliance should seek to map those activities, identify those which might have relevance to its own activities in this area and seek to enhance existing activities for the benefit of the sub-region. The Alliance should also seek to draw on the experience of these other institutional partnerships in undertaking new activities for the Alliance. An ambitious goal in the long term might also be to transfer certain kinds of support function or service from the institutions to the Alliance and we noted that several institutional leaders expressed interest in such a possibility. In the immediate future, there is to be an Aimhigher co-ordinator post in each HEI and this might provide some resource to give consideration to the implementation of some of the above activities.

External awareness/environmental scanning

Six types of activity are listed under this heading.

- Synthesise labour market intelligence (drawing on information provided by the NWDA's Regional Intelligence Unit and other sources) to inform both curriculum providers and current and potential learners.
- Undertake a brokerage role for employers and community groups (which would include identifying clusters of expertise to ensure demands are met).
- Assess and monitor demand (from individuals and from employers) for different types of provision.
- Operate as a communication channel between Alliance members and other sub-regional, regional and national bodies on access and widening participation matters.
- Undertake lobbying functions on behalf of the Alliance members.
- Seek external sources of funding to sustain and enhance the Alliance's activities.

It will be important to make full use of existing resources in the region. These include the Northwest Development Agency in relation to the Regional Economic Strategy and its Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (and other associated action plans), the Sector Skills Councils, the Learning and Skills Council and the work done by individual sector networks. In relating to all of these bodies, the Alliance will need to focus on communicating implications for educational institutions and, in particular, to identifying long-term demand trends. But communications will be two-way and the Alliance should provide its member institutions with a more powerful voice in regional, national and possibly international forums.

5. Phased implementation

We propose that the above activities should be introduced in three phases over a five year period.

Phase 1 would focus on activities under *Mapping and Monitoring*, *External Awareness/Environmental Scanning* and *Direct Services to Students*. Much of this will be able to take account of Aimhigher and other existing initiatives. Clearly, Phase 1 will also need to entail establishing the structures and ways of working of the Alliance and in establishing its 'presence' within the various Greater Manchester communities. A beginning should also be made in establishing the more academic activities of the Alliance, and this should involve the establishment of the sector/subject working parties referred to above. Some Alliance members might also wish to submit combined bids for Foundation Degree student numbers. In summary, during phase 1 the Alliance would focus on the provision of information and marketing, advice and guidance, access/progression agreements, and environmental scanning.

Phase 2 would see the introduction of direct services to institutions. We summarise these as 'academic brokerage' which includes validation services, APEL and dissemination of good practice (including some curriculum and staff development activities).

Phase 3 would be the implementation of a range of collaborative activities undertaken by institutions and co-ordinated by the Alliance. These may involve the greater sharing of facilities, the establishment of joint teaching teams and the introduction of common credit frameworks. Such joint activities will need to be given time to develop as new relationships will need to be established and new forms of collaboration negotiated. During phase 3, responsibility for certain activities might move from individual institutions to the Alliance.

We estimate each phase lasting about two years, implying that the Alliance would be fully operational after five years.

6. Levels of membership

Recognising the different views and circumstances of institutions in Greater Manchester, we believe it desirable for different levels of membership to be available. We see no reason why all members should not contribute to and benefit from the activities listed under Mapping and Monitoring, Direct Services to Students, and External Awareness/Environmental Scanning. Participation in these activities would therefore constitute a basic level of membership.

Other activities – which imply greater levels of collaboration between institutions (mainly those listed under Direct Services to Institutions and Co-ordination of Institutional Activities) – might be undertaken by a smaller ‘core’ group. We note, and tend to agree with, the view expressed to us that institutions should not be given unlimited choices about the level of their involvement with the Alliance. Therefore, it is probably not desirable for institutions to pick and choose between this larger set of Alliance activities but commit either to the ‘basic’ or to the ‘extended’ set.

7. Structure and funding

Governance

We propose that the Alliance be collectively owned by its institutional membership. All heads of member institutions would be part of an Alliance Council that would meet annually. Its Governing Board would consist of four heads of HEIs (to be elected by the HEI membership) and four heads of FE sector colleges (to be elected by the FE sector college membership) plus an independent chair.

Structure

We propose that the activities of the Alliance be carried out in part by an Alliance office and in part collectively by the member institutions (the 'distributed alliance'). The responsibilities of the office would consist of those activities listed under 'Mapping and Monitoring' and 'External awareness/environmental scanning' and for certain 'Direct Services to Students', including the provision and marketing of information about access and progression opportunities.

The 'distributed alliance' would be responsible for advice and guidance to students, for an 'academic development service' that would include staff development, quality assurance and those activities listed under 'Co-ordination of Institutional Activities'. These activities – to be provided by the member institutions – would need to follow common standards and utilise a common information base that would be provided by the Alliance office. In order to avoid duplication and to ensure that student interests are given primacy in the services developed by the Alliance, it will be necessary to develop better ways of co-ordinating certain existing institutional activities. For some activities, subject or sector working groups would be established that would bring together relevant expertise from across the whole of Greater Manchester.

Resources

We believe that an Alliance office of around eight staff would be needed. We would not expect this to grow significantly as the activities envisaged for the later stages would be staffed from existing resources within institutions. An indicative establishment might look as follows:

Chief Executive/Director
Assistant Director (Information and Marketing)
Assistant Director (Academic Services)
Assistant Director (Research and Development)
Information officer
IT/webmaster
Senior administrator/business manager
Administrator/secretary

This would suggest a budget as follows:

	Year 1	Year 2
	£	£
Staffing (based on the establishment indicated above)	347,700	358,131
Accommodation and related costs (e.g. insurance, heat, light)	43,416	45,587
Set-up costs (e.g. computers, furniture)	37,000	
Operational costs (stationery, travel etc)	48,000	54,000
Total	476,116	457,718

It is envisaged that the above costs would be met from a mixture of institutional subscriptions (reflecting size) and support from bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Northwest Development Agency. However, the aim should be to offset these costs against savings made as a result of the anticipated growth in funded student numbers and from rationalisation of existing services.

8. Conclusion

This study concludes that the creation of a Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance is a feasible and desirable option. In many parts of the world, federations and other models of institutional partnerships have become common ways of organising expanded and diversified higher education provision. In an area the size of Greater Manchester – with its considerable range and diversity of higher education – the need for some strategic co-ordination is clear. And from a regional social and economic point of view, ensuring that the educational capacity contained in Greater Manchester’s universities and colleges is used to the greatest possible benefit of the people in the region also points in the direction of greater co-ordination and collaboration.

The focus of the Alliance would be upon widening participation in higher education. But we do not believe that institutional collaboration in pursuit of this goal can be completely divorced from collaboration in other areas. This may alarm some readers but we do not accept that collaboration and competition are necessarily in conflict. Insofar as the Alliance can achieve some voluntary regulation of both competition and collaboration in the area of widening participation, it will benefit both individual institutions and their users.

A number of people consulted as part of this study have expressed concern at the dangers of increased bureaucracy and duplication of activities. These dangers are real but we do not believe they are inherent in the concept of a Strategic Alliance. Not only can they be avoided, but we believe that the Alliance will be able to reduce unnecessary duplication and lend support to an expansion of provision to meet new demands from the diverse populations of Greater Manchester.

The Strategic Alliance will be collectively owned by the institutions of further and higher education in Greater Manchester. As such, its character and success will lie in the hands of the institutions. However, its success will also be dependent on the Alliance achieving an openness to the many and very different constituencies in the Greater Manchester sub-region and on its capacity to recognise and to meet their changing needs over the coming years.

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Annex 1

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Annex 2

Consultations carried out by the Project Team

Organisations/institutions interviewed

- Action on Access
- Association of Greater Manchester Metropolitan Authorities
- Bolton Community College
- Bolton Institute of Higher Education
- Bury College
- City College Manchester
- Excellence in Cities, Manchester
- Foundation Degrees Forward
- Greater Manchester Learning and Skills Council
- Greater Manchester Open College Network
- Higher Education Funding Council for England
- Holy Cross College (Bury)
- Hopwood Hall College
- Knowledge Capital
- Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT)
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- National Centre for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University
- North Trafford College
- Northwest Development Agency
- North West Universities Association
- Oldham College
- P4P Steering Group
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
- Royal Northern College of Music
- Salford College
- Stockport College of Further and Higher Education
- Tameside College
- Open University in the North West
- The University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST)
- University of Manchester
- University of Salford
- Wigan and Leigh College

Organisations/institutions represented at the Consultation Event, 22 September

- Ashton-Under-Lyne Sixth Form College
- Bolton Community College
- Bury College
- City College Manchester
- Excellence in Cities Manchester
- Greater Manchester Open College Network
- Greater Manchester Principal's Group
- Hopwood Hall College

- Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT)
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- North Trafford College
- Northwest Development Agency
- Royal Northern College of Music
- Salford College
- St John Rigby College
- Tameside College
- The Open University in the North West
- The University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST)
- University of Manchester
- University of Salford
- Wigan and Leigh College
- Winstanley College

Organisations/institutions that responded to postal consultation

- Ashton-Under-Lyne Sixth Form College
- Bolton Community College
- Bolton Institute of Higher Education
- Bury College
- City College Manchester
- Holy Cross College (Bury)
- Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT)
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- North Trafford College
- South Trafford College
- Stockport College of Further and Higher Education
- Tameside College
- University of Manchester
- The University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST)
- University of Salford
- Wigan and Leigh College
- Winstanley College
- Xaverian College

Annex 3

Basis of cost calculations shown in section 7

Staffing Costs

Post	Basic Salary	On costs @ 22%	Total Year 1	Total Year 2 (with 3% inflation)
	£	£	£	£
Director/Chief Executive	60,000	13200	73,200	75396
Assistant Director (Info and Marketing)	45,000	9900	54,900	56547
Assistant Director (Acad Services)	45,000	9900	54,900	56547
Assistant Director (R&D)	45,000	9900	54,900	56547
Information Officer	25,000	5500	30,500	31415
IT expert	25,000	5500	30,500	31415
Administrator/Office Manager	20,000	4400	24,400	25132
Administrator/PA	20,000	4400	24,400	25132
Total			347,700	358,131

Accommodation and Related Costs

This is based on advice from the Estates Division of the OU. Allowed 11 Sq metres for UAP level staff and 9 sq metres for sec and technical staff

Therefore, 5 staff at 11 sq metres and 3 staff at 9 sq metres = 82 sq metres

Meeting room and storage = 20 sq metres

Costed @ £20 per sq foot

	Year 1	Year 2 (with 5% inflation)
	£	£
102 Sq metres = 1098 sq feet @£20	21960	23058
Non-Domestic rates	7500	7875
Insurance	2000	2100
Running costs (heating, lighting, cleaning, waste disposal) @ £5 per Sq Ft x 1098	5490	5765
Total	36950	38798
VAT	6466	6790
Total	43416	45587

Set-up Costs

	£
Furniture @ £1500 x 9 persons	13500
Computers @ £1000 x 9 Persons	9000
Cabling/fit costs	2000
Equipment (fax, telephones)	3500
Acquisition (surveyor, legal, etc) costs	7000
Miscellaneous (security systems)	2000
Total	37000

Operational Costs

	Year 1	Year 2
	£	£
Travel and Subsistence	40000	45000
Stationery	8000	9000
Total	48000	54000

Annex 4

Mapping across sectors

One essential problem in mapping individuals across FE/HE is that no unique identifier is currently in use that allows an individual to be tracked. Whilst it is possible to obtain data on numbers of new enrolments and total students in both sectors, and information on qualifications on entry through Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) data sets, it has not been possible to map transfer from FECs to HEIs. Therefore up to this time little can be said about the profile of those who transfer, and of the profiles of transfer students by type of HEI they enter. Although of course, the most rationale long-term expedient would be to create a registration number for students at the point of their first entry to post-compulsory education, which then is used throughout their life time, short-term expedients may be required in order to carry out the sort of mapping exercise that should underpin policy.

It may therefore be instructive to consider a model of mapping that has been carried out in Scotland. As part of a wider study of the links between FECs and HEIs for the Scottish Executive by Osborne and Maclaurin (2002) have been able to undertake such a mapping for the first time in Scotland. In this exercise, they used data supplied by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC). An approach called Probability Matching was employed to estimate the proportion of former FE students within HEIs. This utilised the Further Education unadjusted data sets provided by SFEFC for the years 1994-95, 1995-96, 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99, and the 1999-2000 Higher Education data provided to SHEFC by HESA. These data sets contained many similar entries that could be used to decide whether a person in HE had studied in FE. The chosen entries were first initial, second initial, surname, date of birth and Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) number. The particular Probability Matching approach used the mathematical principles put forward by Felligi and Sunter (1969).

The basic principle of this record linkage theory is to create a vector of log odds relating to the probability of each component of a record being a match. For example, two records may have fields such as first name, surname, postcode and date of birth. A first name may match in a record comparison of records from each data set. This would provide one score or weight in the vector of weights. The surname, postcode and date of birth would also be scored as being a probability of match or not match.

Whilst the methodology used does generate absolute numbers for matches across the two sectors, these should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive. Probability matching is not completely safe as an estimator of total student numbers because overall totals in probability matching are very sensitive to where the cut point is made. In crude terms the amount of computing required to do sufficient matches to make the method completely reliable in absolute terms is enormous, and was not viable for the purposes of this piece of research. Nonetheless Osborne and Maclaurin view the figures as probably close to being correct on the basis of logic and expectancy. Most of those that the method has picked up as former FE students have gone on to study at New Universities, are older in HE than they were in FE, are older than other entrants to HE and study locally. Each of these four findings is logical and expected.

The method, however, has reasonably good reliability as an analysis tool for looking at proportions, and the method can therefore make comparisons of the subsets within the whole former FEC cohort and between the FEC cohort and the non-FEC cohort in HEIs with some confidence.