My doctoral research is in partnership with Aimhigher: a Labour government initiative concerned with raising the aspirations of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (DfES, 2006). To achieve this, Aimhigher provides young people with the opportunities to experience university life, to show that it is attainable for everyone (DfES, 2006).

One of the ways this is achieved is through summer schools, which are suggested to be the most successful Aimhigher programme to raise young people’s aspirations (DfES, 2005). This may be because summer schools consolidate young people’s exposure to a university environment, raise awareness and promote an aspiration to achieve (HEFCE, 2008). To explore whether summer schools may influence progression to higher education, Aimhigher Herefordshire and Worcestershire conducted a piece of tracking research, and I along with Val Yates, Head of Widening Participation, presented the findings at the FACE 2010 conference. Two hundred and forty one previous University of Worcester summer school attendees from 2004 to 2009 were sent a postal questionnaire, which included both open and closed questions so respondents could provide...
a descriptive account of their experiences.

Respondents were asked to report on their educational pathway (whether they had continued studying after compulsory education); from the respondents aged 18 or over (46.9%), 69.4% of them were either studying or had completed an undergraduate degree. When asked to explain how they had chosen their academic route, the majority of the respondents reported it was due to an interest in a subject or a long-term goal they wished to pursue. From the responses a minority wrote that attending a University of Worcester summer school had influenced their decisions to progress to higher education (“going to the summer school really influenced my decision in a positive way as it gave a first hand experience”), suggesting that summer schools can raise aspiration and progression to higher education (HEFCE, 2008). Supporting this, respondents reported how attending a summer school had “strengthened the view that university was right for me” and “I had no idea what university life was like but after attending I definitely wanted to go”.

The raising of young people’s aspirations may be due to summer schools providing young people with information about higher education and an experience of university life (HEFCE, 2008). The respondents suggested this was achieved through the ambassadors (“the uni representatives were supportive and well informed”) and lectures (“I found the lectures interesting, particularly being able to do some practical work which usually you wouldn’t do before uni”) thus supporting previous research that university ambassadors are key messengers in widening participation activities such as summer schools (Pennell, West and Hind, 2005; Austin and Hatt, 2005). The respondents also reported how the residential and social activities were a key part of their experience; “I loved staying in the halls and the evening social activities, I still laugh looking back now! Ultimate Frisbee was awesome.” This may be due to the residential aspect of the summer school giving the attendees a taster of what it would be like to study away from home (HEFCE, 2008).

To conclude, the respondents positively rated their summer school experience (95.9%) because “it helps give you information about studying and uni life that can be influential in the future”. However, the research results are tentative due to the response rate (20.3%), which may affect whether the results are representative of the sample population (Barclay et al., 2002). Further tracking of previous summer school attendees is required to explore whether the findings presented are reflective of all Aimhigher summer school attendees.

Being accepted to present at the conference and being granted the ESCalate bursary surprised me as I have only been researching in the field of widening participation for less than a year, but I now know both organisations are keen to support early career researchers. I would like to thank ESCalate for providing me with the opportunity to attend the FACE conference, as the enthusiasm that ran through the thought provoking conference has spurred me on in my doctoral research.

References

Emma Jackson
University of Worcester

Emma is a second year doctoral research student at the University of Worcester. Her PhD is in partnership with Aimhigher Herefordshire and Worcestershire and she is evaluating their programme ‘ThinkSmart’. The programme aims to improve secondary school pupil’s motivation, self-esteem and engagement in school.