



# **Empowering Learners Building Futures**

**Tackling Barriers to Educational Opportunity**

**Aimhigher**  
L o n d o n

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## A Message from our Director

National evidence shows that learners who face multiple disadvantages - such as being care-experienced, eligible for free school meals (FSM), or with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - are significantly less likely to progress to higher education without tailored support.

At Aimhigher London and through our UniConnect work, each year we see how overlapping barriers can limit opportunity - and how targeted interventions make the greatest difference.

In 2024-25, we relaunched our Finding Futures programme, strengthening our long-term commitment to following learners as they progress from Year 8 through to Year 13 and towards higher education.

This report celebrates the collective impact of our partners and communities over the past year. Together, we continue our commitment to advancing equity, engagement and progression for all, removing barriers, widening access, and focusing our impact where it's needed most.

**Suzanne Marchment - Director**

### Our Approach:

### What Makes Aimhigher London unique

We believe every learner has the right to a future shaped by **opportunity, not circumstance**

#### Our approach combines four core principles:



1. **Tailored** - **co-designed** with schools and learners through bespoke delivery in-school, on campus and online.



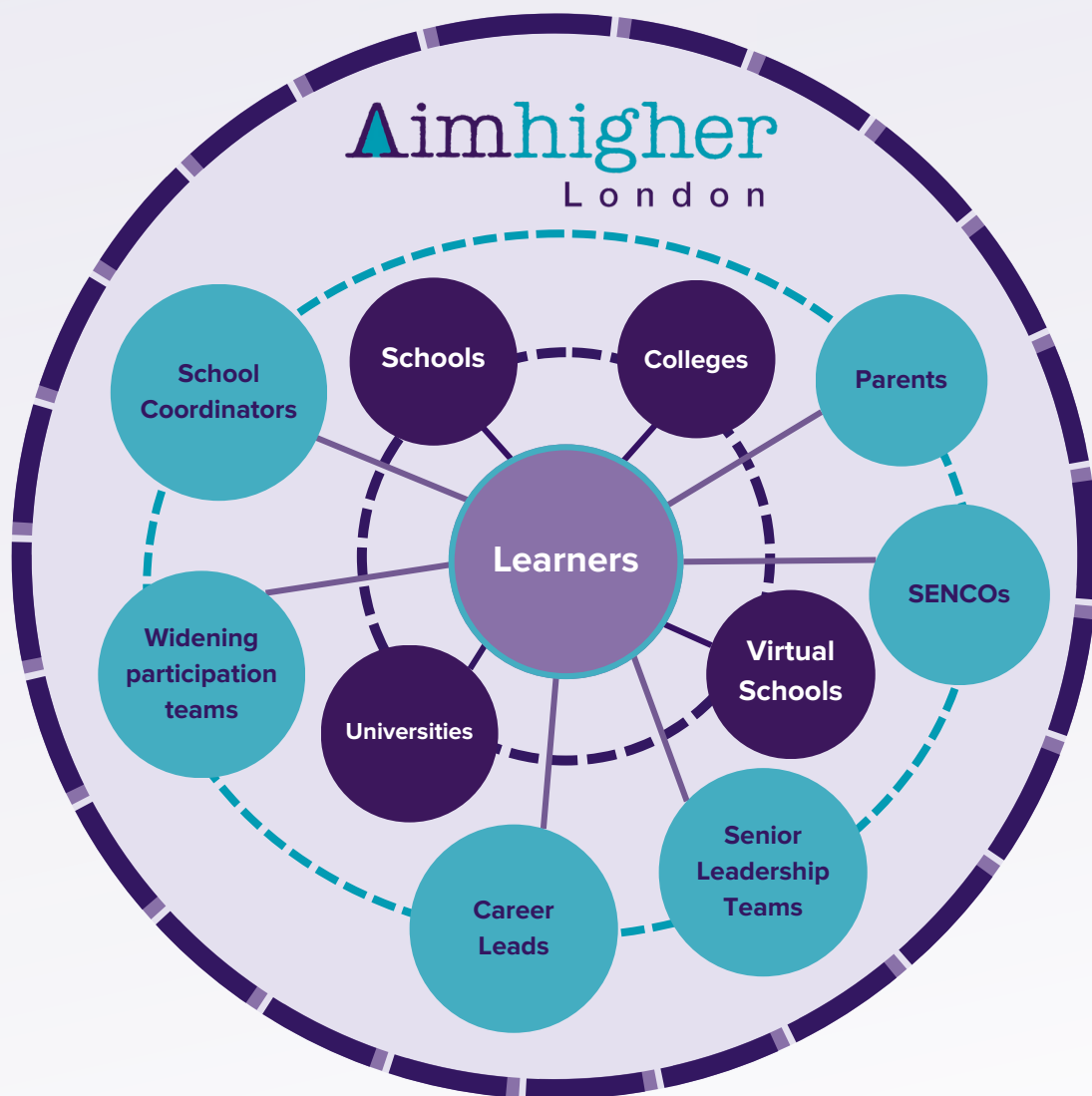
2. **Collaborative** - **co-produced** with schools, universities and practitioners to ensure delivery meets real needs.



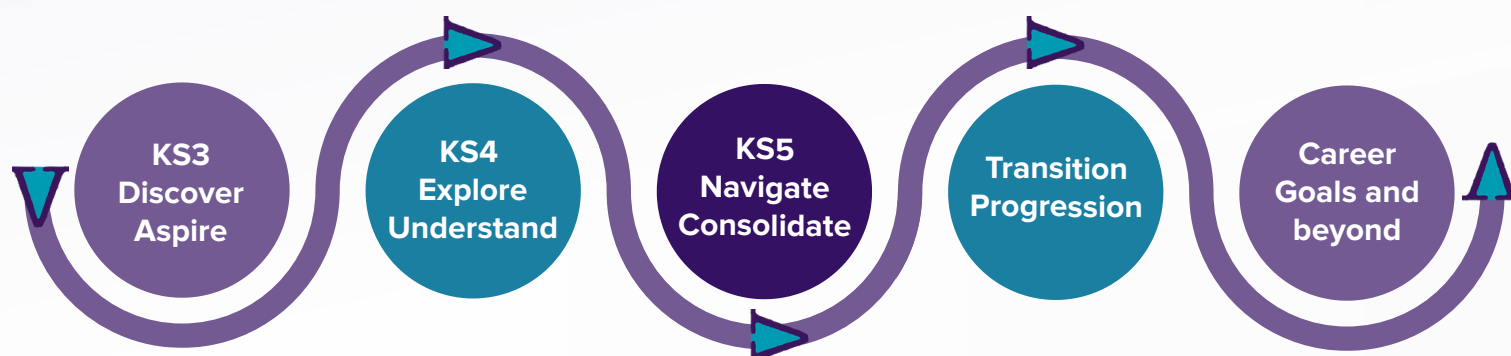
3. **Sustained** - **progressive** engagement from KS3 through to KS5, preparing learners for success in higher education and beyond.



4. **Targeted** - **focused** on learners with protected characteristics or those facing multiple barriers.



The learner journey and the learner voice is central to our work



“  
‘I’m inspired to try much harder! Thank you!’ - KS3 Learner  
”

“  
‘When I joined in Year 9, I didn’t know if university was for me. Now I feel ready and excited to start’  
- Year 13 Learner  
”



# Impact 2024-25 at a Glance

## The Big Picture

Aimhigher London's impact continues to grow, demonstrating measurable progress in self-belief, confidence and resilience for under-represented learners across the region.

Along with our partners, we remain committed to our mission of progression, engagement and equity.

## Progression

**56%** of Aimhigher learners on Free School Meals progressed to higher education in 2024 - compared to 29% nationally<sup>1</sup>

**↑95%** of our learners across key stages reported greater awareness, confidence and preparedness for higher education

## Equity

**67%**  
BAME

**49%**  
Free School Meals

**4%**  
Care-Experienced

**61%**  
First-generation

**21%**  
SEND

## Engagement



**2,266**  
learners



**39**  
events



**136**  
practitioners

<sup>1</sup> Widening participation in higher education, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

## Preparing to Progress - Finding Futures programme



Learners are at the heart of Finding Futures, helping them progress step by step towards higher education and beyond. The programme ensures learners are equipped to thrive and overcome barriers to progression through in-school, online and on-campus events.

### Raising Aspirations Among Under-Represented Learners

Our learners responded:

**95%**

have a stronger understanding how to choose their higher education

**97%**

feel confident they would belong and look forward to going to university

**98%**

understand what they must do to achieve their higher education goals

**KS3**  
**Building**  
**Awareness**

**KS4**  
**Growing**  
**Confidence**

**KS5**  
**Achieving**  
**Success**

**62%** of KS3 agreed they better understood the benefits of university

*'I'm inspired to try much harder! Thank you!' - Year 8*

**76%** KS4 learners agreed our events helped them identify subjects they'd enjoy studying beyond school

*'This has helped me to make decisions about my future' - Year 10*

**75%** of KS5 learners felt our events gave them confidence to make the right decisions about going to university

**86%** of KS5 felt they would be able to learn like university students

*'This has made it more believable that I see myself going to uni and I have a better insight into uni life' - Year 12*

**↑ 95%** of KS3 – KS4 learners believed university was an option for them following an Aimhigher London event

## Nurturing belonging and progression

Our data tells a consistent story of growth. Learners develop awareness and self-belief in KS3-4, which evolves into confidence and a strong sense of belonging by KS5.

### By KS5



**Resilience grows through consistent support, role models and real university experiences,** helping learners make informed, ambitious choices.

*I am going to aim higher than I was aiming before*

	Agree	Strongly Agree
KS3	53%	44%
KS4	37%	62%
KS5	10%	88%

*'It made me want to work harder to achieve my goals and ... it made me excited' - Year 8*

*'A great introduction to university!' - Year 10*

*'I now have a better understanding of how I can reach my goals, and this gives me more confidence to do it' - Year 12*

97%

were offered a  
university place  
in 2024

87%

accepted their  
place for university  
in 2024

## Parent / Carer Engagement

Alongside learner progress, we work closely with their parents, carers and the practitioners delivering their education to build support and positive reinforcement at home and at school.

Parent and carer engagement has grown significantly, strengthening the **home-school-university** link that underpins success. Since 2021, over 420 parents have engaged with Aimhigher London events.

Aimhigher  
London has  
maintained a  
track record of  
**over 95%**  
of learners  
receiving  
university offers  
annually



*'I feel 100% better about the direction that he could potentially take. I feel very informed ... and confident to explore options' - Parent of a KS4 learner*





# Collaborative Targets: Exceeding Benchmarks Year on Year

Having exceeded 73% of collaborative targets, Aimhigher London continues to drive equitable access to higher education.

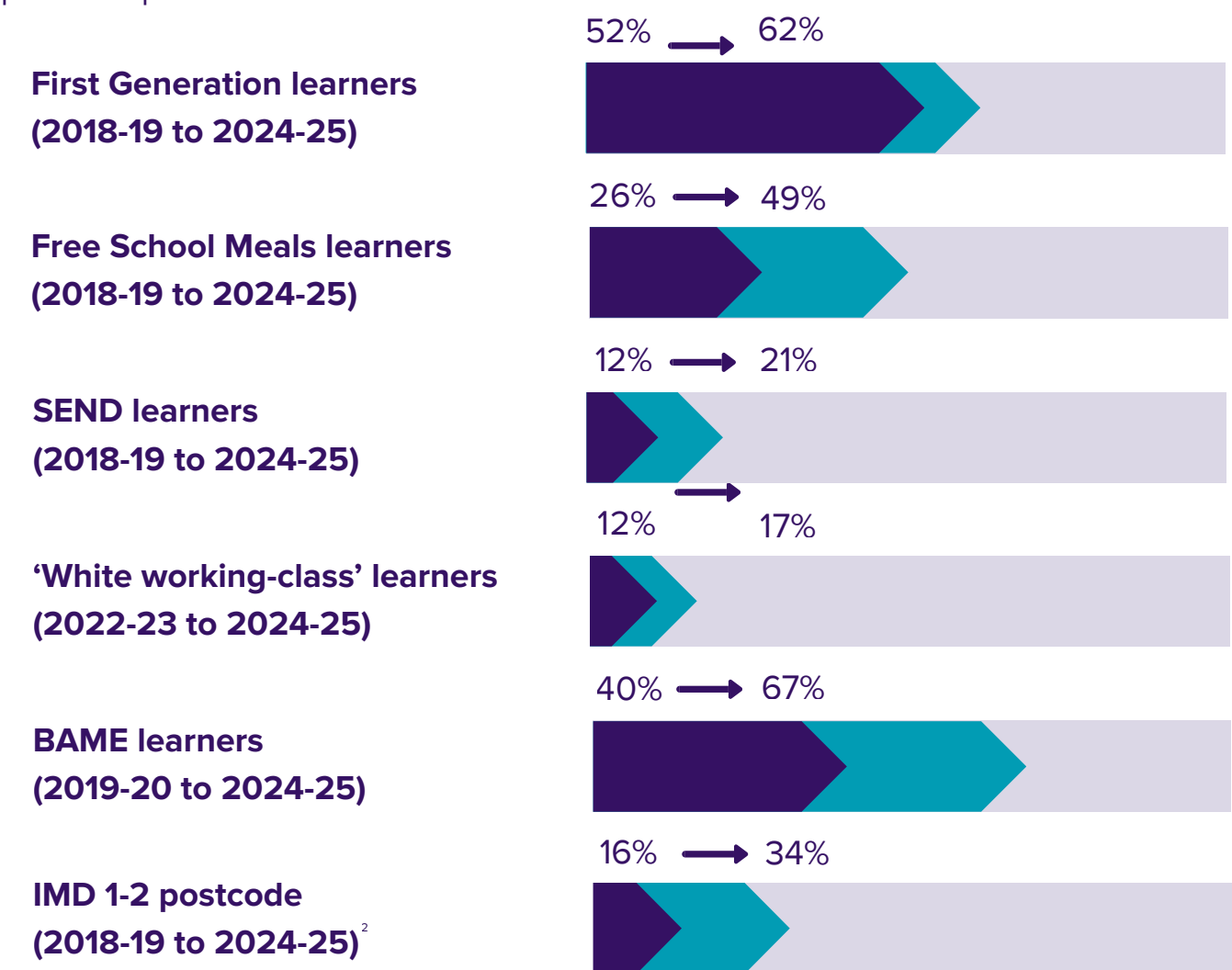
By aligning with the OfS Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR), we help universities map the local need and then target support where it can have the greatest impact.

These outcomes demonstrate a decade-long trend of exceeding local and national widening participation targets, confirming the strength and sustainability of the Aimhigher London model.

Since 2018, Aimhigher London has deepened its reach across all priority groups, with strongest growth among BAME and SEND learners.

Progression from the most deprived postcodes has doubled, and Free School Meal learners now progress at twice the national rate.

‘White working-class’ engagement continues to rise too, supported by our school partnerships.



<sup>2</sup> IMD – Indices of Multiple Deprivation, quintiles 1 and 2, A measure of relative deprivation in England, with quintiles 1 and 2 highest level of deprivation measures

## Our Partners' Priorities

### Schools

Our programmes align directly with Ofsted priorities and Gatsby Benchmarks, focusing on learners from low socio-economic backgrounds and those with protected characteristics.

This commitment is reflected across our delivery:

- ▶ targeted interventions
- ▶ inclusive activities
- ▶ opportunities to experience higher education
- ▶ personal development for learners
- ▶ professional development for staff

**68%** of KS5 learners felt confident in 2024-25 about choosing a university or apprenticeship course that would lead to a career

### Our school partners tell us that our work directly strengthens their CEIAG<sup>3</sup> offer



*'This was an excellent day that really catered for our year 8 students. It was pitched at the right pace so that they had enough knowledge about their option choices and which careers these lead to – often this comes too late and students have subjects they don't know what to do with afterwards' - Senior School Leader, Greenford High School*



### The parents we engage have shared their growth in awareness and knowledge:



*'After the parent webinar, it felt like less of a leap - both for me and my child' - Parent*



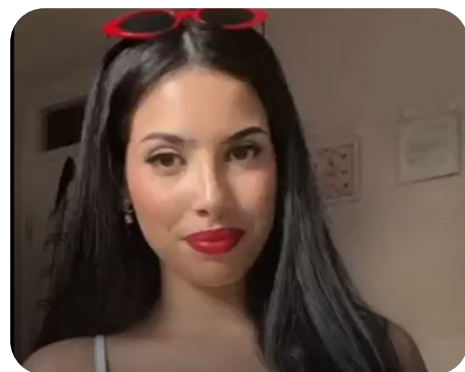
## Case Study - Student (Year 9)

I'm in Year 9 and I came along because I really like science and enjoy these kinds of days. It's good to find out about different universities and to visit new places, as it helps me think about my future.

So far, I've visited St Mary's and Roehampton and really enjoyed those visits. Today has been particularly interesting because it has made me think more seriously about working with animals and the environment. The day has opened my eyes to other careers I hadn't thought about before. Aimhigher London events really help me explore my options, and I definitely want to come to more in the future.

## Case Study - Yesmine, Quest Academy (Year 13)

I joined the Aimhigher London programme at Quest Academy, and it was pivotal in building my confidence and gaining clarity about university. I attended campus visits, lectures, ambassador talks and the Aimhigher staff came into school too. I particularly liked exploring lecture halls and engaging with student ambassadors, because it gave me an opportunity to understand first-hand what student life was like. I also got to ask my questions to the Aimhigher staff.



These experiences took away the uncertainty and nerves about higher education and helped me feel reassured about my decision to pursue university after sixth form. I definitely recommend the experiences and thank you to Aimhigher London and Quest for supporting me.



Scan here to  
watch Yesmine's  
story on YouTube



## Universities - Strengthening access and participation through partnership

Our university partnerships are integral to our success. Aimhigher London strengthens institutions' Access and Participation Plans (APPs) through robust evaluation and data, demonstrating evidence of what works.

### Partnership in Practice: measuring impact across the learner journey

*I can see myself  
at university*



**Over 95% of KS3 and KS4  
learners agreed / strongly agreed**

*I feel confident about making the  
right decision about university*



**74% of KS5 learners  
strongly agreed**



*'Working with Aimhigher ensures we reach learners who  
would otherwise be overlooked' - HE Partner*



### Building on the data and Impact

Our intersectional analysis provides clear evidence of what works for learners facing multiple disadvantages, helping universities refine outreach and strengthen APP commitments. Together, we're building a regional model of inclusive progression, where insight from schools and universities drives continuous improvement and greater accountability.

#### In 2024

**97%**

of Aimhigher London  
learners received university  
offers

#### Of these offers

**100%**

of White SEND, White FSM,  
BAME SEND, and BAME FSM  
learners accepted their offers<sup>4</sup>

#### Among learners applying to university

**64%**

of SEND learners were also  
eligible for FSM

**63%**

of FSM learners were also from  
BAME backgrounds

<sup>4</sup> UCAS data return for learners eligible for university in 2024 intake



## Case Study - Frankie Cummings, MA Forensics Psychology, Student Ambassador. University of Roehampton

At school I took part in Aimhigher events, which gave me invaluable opportunities to visit different universities and see first-hand what higher education was really like. These experiences opened my eyes to the possibilities available to me and showed me that people from my background - from places like Croydon - could not only access university but also choose any course that matched their ambitions.



Now at university myself, coming to the end of my Master's, I've come full circle, giving back as a student ambassador, sharing my journey with young people who are in the same position I once was. I enjoy helping them to picture themselves in higher education and showing students that university is not out of reach and that, regardless of background, they too can succeed.

Being able to inspire others, just as I was once inspired through Aimhigher, is both rewarding and motivating.



Scan here to  
watch Frankie's  
story on YouTube



## Virtual Schools

Supporting care-experienced learners remains a key priority. We deliver through collaboration with our member Virtual Schools and dedicated working group. Our programmes focus on removing barriers to progression by equipping practitioners and creating opportunities for learners to thrive.

We exceeded our engagement targets in 2024-25.

- **4% of our 2024-25 cohort were care-experienced, a 3% increase on the previous year.**

- In 2024, in collaboration with University of Roehampton, we brought together the Deputy CEO of TASO<sup>5</sup>, Executive Director of NNECL<sup>6</sup>, care-experienced role models Sophia Alexandra Hall and Gemma Creamer, and practitioners from across London, to share insights on supporting care-experienced learners into and through university.

**100%** of attendees reported increased knowledge, understanding and confidence in supporting care-experienced learners

This year also saw the launch of a pilot programme for care-experienced learners, including an overnight residential designed to build confidence, connection and a sense of belonging.

Evaluation feedback showed strong gains in learner confidence:

**Confidence in making informed university choices increased**

**64%** → **84%**

**Confidence in meeting and mixing with others, as they would at university, rose**

**60%** → **84%**

These findings demonstrate the positive impact of immersive, supportive experiences in helping care-experienced learners feel more ready for their next steps in higher education.



*All of the sessions taught me something new, I am going to research scholarship options now, I feel like the opportunity re-ignited my interest in university' - Care-experienced learner*



<sup>5</sup> TASO – Transforming Access and Student Outcomes

<sup>6</sup> NNECL - National Network for the Education of Care Leavers

# Community and Collaboration

Our network is more than the sum of its parts. It's a community that amplifies **impact**, invites **widening participation** and drives **meaningful change**.

Aimhigher London fosters inclusive communities, enabling learners, practitioners and partners to thrive.

Through our Disability (DWG) and Care Experience Working Groups (CEWG) we co-design practitioner professional development and create resources to support learners, teachers, SEND leads and Care Experience champions in schools and universities.

## Key highlights

### Get Ready for Success - March 2025

Our 8<sup>th</sup> annual conference for SEND learners and their carers

80%

said that they are more likely to disclose their disability at application stage

100%

felt better informed about DSA<sup>7</sup> and more confidence about finding future support in university with SEND



The DWG community also creates bespoke resources:

- **Learner Support Get Ready for Success** booklet
- **Unifish platform** London-wide SEND resources and university contacts
- **Joining the Dots** in-school SEND pre-entry guidance for learners



### Building Communities that Care - June 2025

Practitioner conference on supporting care-experienced learners

90%

of attendees said they now had greater awareness of care-experienced learners' needs

*'My key takeaway was the importance of creating and nurturing communities in every shape and form'*  
- Conference delegate



<sup>7</sup> DSA - Disabled Students' Allowance



## Removing Barriers Forging Paths - July 25

Practitioner conference on supporting SEND and neurodiverse learners, in collaboration with Access HE

87%

said the conference increased their confidence in supporting SEND learners to access and progress into Higher Education

93%

said the conference increased their knowledge about the barriers learners faced

### Removing Barriers, Forging Paths

Intersectional approaches to supporting students with a disability

***‘What a wealth of knowledge, expertise, experience and goodwill all concentrated in one place!’ - Delegate***

**Aimhigher London is the connector and the catalyst for innovation, bringing together practitioners and experts to co-create new approaches, share invaluable expertise and deliver measurable impact to many young people.**

We celebrate our partnerships’ achievements through the annual Aimhigher Practitioner Awards.

We thank all our partners for the impact achieved this year in driving social mobility and widening participation.

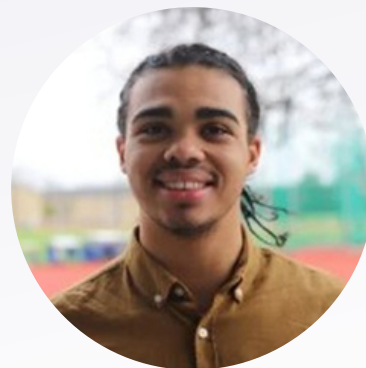
- ▶ Our collaborative approach amplifies impact and builds sustainable regional links
- ▶ Participation is embedded across local communities and educational ecosystems
- ▶ Specialist groups share their expertise and drive continuous improvement





## Working with SEND learners and practitioners

### Case study - Taylor, BSc (Hons) Education, Student Ambassador, St Mary's University, Twickenham



As a neurodiverse learner, I faced bullying and exclusion that affected my confidence and exam results in school, but supportive teachers helped me rebuild my self-belief, inspiring me to study Education and to one day support SEND learners myself. After finishing A Levels during the pandemic, I spent a year volunteering as a Sports Coach and Youth Worker with SEND young people. This experience was rewarding but I missed learning and, encouraged by a teacher, studied Education at St Mary's University (SMU) in Twickenham.

Aimhigher London was crucial in this journey. Through the Get Ready for Success conference and UniFish, I gained clarity on which universities could best support my needs, making my decision much easier.

Throughout my studies I worked with Aimhigher and SMU as a Student Ambassador and Inclusion Vice-President, and I am looking forward to building a future supporting SEND learners and advancing equity in education.



## Looking Ahead: 2025-26

Aimhigher London's strength lies in how we work - through genuine collaboration and shared purpose.

Our success reflects a community united by the belief that circumstance should never define a young person's future.

We're proud of what we've achieved together and remain committed to ensuring every learner has the chance to aim higher.

As we enter 2025–26, our priorities focus on:

- ▶ **Deepening engagement** with learners through sustained progression pathways and expanding our offer for parents and carers
- ▶ **Scaling impact** through data-led evaluation and regional collaboration
- ▶ **Strengthening evidence** to inform inclusive practice, across sectors and where gaps exist
- ▶ **Empowering partnerships** through stronger alignment with national Access and Participation priorities, a deeper regional understanding of need, and full integration of the updated Gatsby Benchmark guidance

We look forward to you joining us in shaping the next chapter - collaborating to empower learners, build futures, and remove barriers to opportunity.



## Glossary of Acronyms

- **APP** – Access & Participation Plan
- **BAME** – Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
- **CE** – Care Experienced
- **CEWG** – Care Experience Working Group
- **CEIAG** – Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance
- **DSA** – Disabled Students' Allowance
- **DWG** – Disability Working Group
- **EORR** – Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
- **FSM** – Free School Meals
- **HE** – Higher Education
- **KS** – Key Stage
- **KS3:** Years 7,8,9 (11-14-year-olds) **KS4:** Years 10,11 (15-16-year-olds)  
**KS5:** Years 12,13 (17-18-year-olds)
- **NNECL** – National Network for the Education of Care Leavers
- **NERUPI** – Network for Evaluating & Researching University  
Participation Interventions
- **OfS** – Office for Students
- **SENCO** – Special Educational Needs Coordinator
- **SEND** – Special Educational Needs & Disabilities