This paper evaluates the collaboration between policy makers, educational institutions, employers and communities to establish a learning environment that will provide opportunities in terms of personal, social and economic development in a deprived area of the United Kingdom.

The paper evaluates a project called University of the Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI) that is part of a Government transformation agenda for the Heads of the Valleys region and sits alongside other significant developments, designed to link regeneration with education. The Institute was officially launched in November 2010. The aim is to engage with those that may be intimidated by the thought of going to university and the UHOVI brand has been deliberately designed to be open, friendly and non-intimidating. This is an area which has been subject to a number of 'initiatives'. A critical success factor is that this work is seen as a long term commitment to the region and not a short-term intervention.

The Heads of the Valleys area in South East Wales is one of social and economic deprivation with a declining population. There are concerns about the education aspirations of its residents and the lack of quality employment opportunities. Participation in education post compulsory education is lower than anywhere else in Wales. More than half of the applicants taking traditional pathways in post compulsory education were from higher socio-economic groups (Foster 2009). The research team is using a theoretical framework, which will provide a robust collaborative platform to work with the learners and the stakeholders. The theory of constructive alignment is being used as it examines the 'goodness of fit' between the aims of a course, assessment approaches, the learning environment, the potential student groups, cultural questions, motivations and learning styles.

The methods are both quantitative and qualitative and will draw on statistical analysis of data relating to educational attainment and poverty and primary data collection with key stakeholders and learners. The mode of inquiry is a collaborative one working in partnership with learners to assess the impact of UHOVI on their lives.

A secondary analysis of projects and literature has focused on the challenges of raising aspiration. The research team itself has many years experience of teaching non-traditional students from disadvantaged backgrounds and this was important when considering ways of translating research into practice.