Aurora: Formative Evaluation of Year One
A response to the Aurora formative evaluation by Ginnie Willis, Aurora Programme Director

The Aurora programme was established by the Leadership Foundation in 2013 in response to its research into the numbers of women reaching senior positions in higher education. From the outset it was intended that it should be a partnership between the Leadership Foundation and the sector to start to address the complex reasons why there are fewer women than men in such senior positions. In this spirit, we are sharing the outcomes from the independent, formative evaluation of Aurora that was undertaken by Kate Beresford Associates. The executive summary from the Beresford report and the list of recommendations are attached to this document as appendices.

Here we contextualise the comments contained in the appendices and outline the actions we intend to take in the light of these recommendations and other feedback we have received from Aurora champions, role models, mentors, participants and their institutions. We are enormously grateful to all who partnered with us during Aurora’s first year. We have found the feedback deeply informative and are pleased to have received such positive encouragement. We have no doubt that, having got off to a very good start, Aurora will continue to improve throughout its lifetime and meet the needs of institutions and all its participants.

Evaluation overview
The Aurora evaluators commended much of the programme's networking opportunities, the action learning sets, the speakers, the self-directed learning materials, the use of role models and the engagement of institutions with the mentoring process. They did also highlight that issues had been raised by participants about the level of the content, the connectedness or direction of the programme and the balance of activities at the development days.

The Aurora initiative began in November 2013 with the London launch, followed by Glasgow in December then Bristol in January and Manchester in February, and most of the evidence gathering for the evaluation was done in London as this venue provided the first run of each development day. By front-ending the evaluation process in this way we were able to make some modifications during the course of Aurora’s first year. We are making other changes to the programme for year two. More specific details of these are given under each recommendation.

As a result, we are confident that we have responded to the evaluators’ comment that “the programme comprises an effective combination of components but many of the individual components justify a degree of modification in order to improve the programme’s impact on the target market”.

Development days and pre-work
Overall, the programme team believe that much of the content of the development days (which are intended as introductory sessions to the content, to be deepened by participants’ use of the self-directed materials available online) is pitched at the right level for the intended audience. In year one we deliberately designed each development day to be entirely standalone so that women who chose to do the days in a non-standard order wouldn’t feel disadvantaged. This did impact on the sense of flow through the programme and will be something we address this year. We also did not assume that everyone attending had read the pre-work or undertaken the associated activities. This meant that some participants felt that there was an amount of

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duplication whereas those who had not done the preparation felt that there was a lack of time to consider and discuss the activities undertaken on the day.

As a result this year we are encouraging all participants to undertake the development days in the given order and will assume that all participants will do the pre-work. We have also decided to alter the balance of activities on the days themselves so that there is more time for table discussion and plenary input and slightly less feedback from the cohort as a whole. However, we will still gather some of this feedback and use it as conversation starters on our Aurora jiscmail list which is an ongoing support for participants in alumni.

Cohort composition
We are aware that in its first year Aurora attracted cohorts that were both at the top end of our seniority range and also older than our expectations. This meant that not only were more than half of our participants at senior lecturer or equivalent professional service level and over the age of 40, among the cohorts were large numbers of women already in substantive leadership roles and who had undertaken leadership and management development interventions previously. This may have been a result of the Leadership Foundation not making it clear enough that this programme was for those yet to step up to a substantive leadership role or simply the fact that these women were attracted to a women-only programme and Aurora is the only one of its type dedicated to higher education. As a result we are reviewing our marketing and briefing material. We will be encouraging women who are more experienced than the target audience to participate as role models.

Cohort size
Some queries were raised about the size of the cohorts, although we found that many of these related to the challenge of speaking across large "cabaret" tables and the issue of background noise generally. The large cohort size is a deliberate feature of the Aurora initiative, intended to highlight the numbers of potential women leaders in the sector and to ensure that those women feeling isolated in their own institutions appreciate the potential support network of like-minded women. We also wanted to ensure that we offered the best possible networking experience for participants and to provide it in a higher education-type way. Our conference-style development days definitely deliver on this. However, in 2014-2015 we are taking some logistical steps to improve communication at these events, including choosing quieter venues and smaller tables. Role models will receive better briefing in order to manage the activities and communications on the tables, and we will be inviting participants to share their experiences more widely than just in their table groups, which will be restricted to seven participants and one role model.

Action learning sets
As the action learning sets (ALS) were always intended to be un-facilitated we did have a concern over how effective these would be. For the most part, the feedback has been extremely positive and indeed many of the role models chose to engage with the groups on the ALS days, although there was no expectation they should do this. However, we will be making more information about action learning sets available much earlier in the Aurora process so that those keen to come prepared to the Power and Politics day (at which action learning sets are allocated) can do some additional reading. It did prove difficult last year to allocate individuals to sets close to their regional home base, and many participants needed to travel. We are hoping that with more institutions signing up this year the regional groups will be easier to arrange. Some participants would have preferred to be in a group consisting of only academics or only professional service colleagues, however where there was a balance of both in a set they worked particularly well. So this year we will be making every effort to ensure a proper mix from both sides of the camp as this provides not just good networking opportunities but also grows an understanding of the difficulties and challenges of the specific roles.
Mentorship

Another issue raised by the evaluators was the uneven experience of participants with their mentors. It had been our expectation that most institutions would have mentoring schemes in place, or at least experience of running them, but this turned out to be incorrect. Those institutions with schemes into which they were able to slot Aurora participants were few and far between. In some cases participants were expected to find their own mentors without any institutional support, while some institutions wanted to set up schemes but were not sure about how to go about it. We will be increasing the information and links available and we have also commissioned a Leadership Foundation associate to design a short programme for those wishing to set up coaching and mentoring schemes to support Aurorans. This service is available to institutions through the Leadership Foundation's consultancy team. We are identifying some institutions who have undertaken this particularly well and will be sharing their experience through case studies on the Aurora website.

Aurora: the future

The Leadership Foundation always understood that running an innovative programme like Aurora would present challenges, particularly as it is quite different from the small group, highly focused and intensive programmes for which we are known. This year we have a refreshed delivery team, new venues, new content, new activities but a continuing enthusiasm to work with the potential we know exists in our sector.

Aurora is intended to run for five years and during that time we will be tracking participants in a longitudinal study to see not only how and whether they progress to more senior positions in their careers but also whether they are more or less engaged in leadership activities generally. All participants taking part will be encouraged to engage with the study and this is likely to provide a unique and detailed record of a substantial sample of women working in higher education today. The research will be published as a paper by the Leadership Foundation in due course.

Aurora evaluation: the recommendations

Below are the 13 recommendations made by the evaluators along with details of how we are already or planning to address them. Our responses also take account of feedback we have received directly from institutions.

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<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Development day content and order needs to be reviewed with attention paid to the feedback provided about usefulness of individual sessions in the post-development day surveys. The suggestion related to content and order should also be carefully considered when the development day reviews are undertaken. The content has been reviewed and the less successful sessions replaced along the lines of feedback received. The new order of the sessions/days - Identity, Impact and Voice; Power and Politics; Core Leadership Skills; Adaptive Leadership Skills - was chosen to take the participants from a focus on the individual through the organisational context to a graded approach to leadership skills (with the last day dealing with risk and challenge). The programme team believe this provides the best sense of growth and flow.</td>
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<td>At the development days more time should be allocated for table discussion and less time to feedback. The programmes have been adjusted accordingly.</td>
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Appendix One: Evaluation of the Aurora programme for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education undertaken by Kate Beresford and Jeff Biggin of Kate Beresford Associates

Executive Summary – July 2014

Executive Summary
The Aurora programme was established in 2013 by the Leadership Foundation with an ambitious and explicit long term aim of increasing significantly the number of women reaching senior leadership positions within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The programme was designed to be suitable for a wide range of women in academic and professional roles within UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), aiming to assist them in thinking of themselves as future leaders, and to develop skills and strategies to become leaders. The programme is aimed at women in positions up to and including senior lecturer (or equivalent in professional services) and the purpose is to enable these women to start to take the steps needed to ultimately reach their full leadership potential.

The Leadership Foundation recognised at the outset that a training programme alone would not be sufficient to achieve radical change. Research commissioned by the Leadership Foundation demonstrated that there are complex reasons why fewer women than men currently achieve senior leadership positions within HEIs, and some of these relate to ingrained institutional cultures. For this reason the programme incorporated a partnership approach, with institutions engaged from the outset and encouraged to continue to take steps to maximise opportunities for participants after the end of programme delivery.

In recognition of the experimental nature of Aurora and the importance of ensuring that the programme was as effective as possible from the outset, independent evaluators were appointed to work with the Leadership Foundation throughout the first year of delivery. This approach meant that immediate feedback could be provided and acted upon and that the full evaluation findings from the first year of delivery could be used to inform changes for the second and subsequent years of the anticipated five years of delivery.

The programme was designed to incorporate the following components:
1. Four one day development days
2. One scheduled Action Learning Set
3. Self-directed learning materials (available online) for pre-reading before the development days and further reading around the topics discussed
4. An identified institutional Aurora Champion (in some cases more than one)
5. Mentoring within the participants’ institutions
6. Access to Role Models (at the development days)

There were four cohorts that ran between November 2013 and June 2014 in London, Bristol, Glasgow and Manchester. In total 594 individuals from 95 institutions enrolled on the programme and attended all or part of the programme. 478 of these individuals attended all four development days. Approximately two thirds of participants were in academic roles while the remaining third were in professional roles. Just under half were under 40 in age and around two thirds were in roles up to and including senior lecturer or equivalent.

Each development day was led by an experienced co-facilitator and comprised a mix of plenary presentations of concepts and subjects to stimulate discussion and debate, small group discussions, table discussions and feedback following table discussions. There was also a keynote speaker at each development day whose contribution was designed to inspire participants as well as providing key lessons based on their own experiences of reaching senior leadership positions.

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A mixed methodology was used for the evaluation and comprised observation at development days, design and analysis of pre-programme and post-programme surveys, analysis of post-development day surveys, telephone interviews with participants and institutional representatives and focus group discussions with participants.

An evaluator’s attendance at eight of the sixteen development days provided a first-hand opportunity to observe and provide swift feedback in order to influence future delivery. It was also notable that there was a real ‘buzz’ in the room with a large number of intelligent, ambitious women engaged with the programme and networking enthusiastically with each other from the outset.

Participants provided feedback to the evaluators in a variety of ways but the messages received have been consistent: the programme comprises an effective combination of components but many of the individual components justify a degree of modification in order to improve the programme’s impact on the target market.

The development days themselves received mixed and in some cases rather disappointing feedback. Early feedback about too many activities in a day and too little time to discuss subjects in sufficient depth were partly addressed by adjusting content and timings after the early sessions but there remain further adjustments to take forward during the second year of delivery. Issues raised have related to a general lack of direction, lack of depth, lack of direct relevance and lack of ‘take-away’ learning and actions. The keynote speakers were extremely well received as were the opportunities to explore subjects in detail with Role Models acting as facilitators at table groups. However the overall cohort sizes (94 to 184) were challenging as were the table group sizes (8 to 10) with many participants reporting frustration at not being able to explore issues in sufficient depth due to large groups and high levels of background noise.

Action Learning Sets are frequently reported as being of good value, often surprisingly significantly so. Where these have worked well they are often cited as the most useful aspect of the programme but many have commented that they have worked well despite poor preparation and others have reported that they have not worked well and perhaps would have done with better preparation.

There were consistently positive comments made about the self-directed learning materials available online and a perception that these had improved over the course of the programme. Where pre-reading was set prior to development days it was not always adequately referred to during the development days although it was noted that this did improve over the course of the programme.

The network of like-minded women generated by the first year of Aurora is extremely positive and the benefit of this is already significant but could be increased if participants were enabled to link up via social media such as LinkedIn.

Institutional engagement with the programme has varied with some demonstrating a high level of commitment to build on and maximise the impact of the programme in the future. For example mentoring, where handled well within the institution, is recognised to be a very important element but there is wide variation in how well it has been approached and implemented with some participants still having no mentor at the end of the programme. Aurora Champions have been well engaged at the outset but the level of engagement does not seem to have been maintained throughout the programme and the input of some of these important institutional ‘lynch pins’ has therefore not been as good as it might have been.

One purpose of the pre and post programme surveys was to attempt to measure changes to participants’ aspirations, attitudes, skills, and perceived behaviours as a result of participating in the programme. Participants were asked about their skills and abilities and certain relevant behaviours. Rather disappointingly no statistically significant changes were measured although it should be noted that a programme such as this is designed to bring about long term rather than short term change.

The post programme survey also asked some overarching questions about the programme and it was encouraging to note that 49% of respondents reported that Aurora had met, almost met or exceeded their expectations and a further 48% had had their expectations partially met. 42% of respondents would recommend Aurora without hesitation and a further 53% would recommend with some qualifying remarks.
A set of 13 recommendations, designed to assist the Leadership Foundation to build upon the first year of delivery, is included in the final section of this report. Recommendations include adjustments to development day content, format and order, more effective preparation and use of Role Models, continuation of the use of high quality keynote speakers, an additional Action Learning Set with improved preparation for this activity, enhanced institutional guidance and engagement, better targeting of marketing messages, increased use of social media and a reduction in overall cohort and individual group sizes.

Overall, this ambitious programme has made a very good start and shows enormous potential for improving the prospects of women in HE in the future.

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Appendix Two: Evaluation of the Aurora programme for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education undertaken by Kate Beresford and Jeff Biggin
Recommendations – July 2014

**Recommendations**

1. Development day content and order needs to be reviewed with attention paid to the feedback provided about usefulness of individual sessions in the post development day surveys. The suggestions included in section 11 above related to content and order should also be carefully considered when the development day reviews are undertaken.
2. At the development days, more time should be allocated for table discussions and less time to feedback.
3. The option to attend different venues should be retained but there should be a requirement to attend the development days in the prescribed order. This will enable a clearer developmental pathway to be defined and better linkages to be created between the development days.
4. More reference should be made during the development days to the pre-reading and there should be an expectation that pre-reading will have been completed. This will avoid time being wasted covering ground that should have already have been covered prior to the day.
5. Role Models should be better prepared so that they are clear what their role is at each development day. This could be achieved through provision of a concise Role Model learning pack.
6. High quality, inspirational keynote speakers should continue to be engaged. The mix of HE and non-HE has been appropriate but it would be better if some of the HE speakers were in non-academic posts.
7. Two Action Learning Sets should be scheduled; the first in the same position that it has been in year one (ie after development day two) and the second, one month after the final development day.
8. Preparation for Action Learning Sets should be improved. The groups should be identified before the start of development day two (perhaps by email) and on day two, the format and approach should be introduced more thoroughly.
9. More guidance should be provided to institutions related to mentoring and the ongoing commitments of Aurora Champions. Contact should be maintained throughout the programme with Champions to ensure that the value of the programme is maximised within institutions.
10. High quality additional resources should continue to be provided via the Aurora web pages and consideration should be given to extending the period of availability of these resources beyond the current 12 month period.
11. Marketing materials and activity should be reviewed to ensure that there is clarity about the target audience. Consideration should be given to rejecting applications from women who are more senior than senior lecturer or equivalent.
12. Consideration should be given to reducing the maximum cohort size to around 100 women. Discussion groups should also be reduced in size to around 6 per group rather than the current 8-10.
13. Social media (probably LinkedIn) should be used to enable participants to seek out those with whom they would benefit from connecting.

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