

**Higher Education Academy
Business Management Accountancy and Finance Subject Centre
New Lecturers Development Project
Report on Aston University**

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1. Contextual profile

Aston Business School (ABS) is one of four existing academic schools and one emerging school (Interdisciplinary Studies) within Aston University, which was founded in 1895 and inaugurated as a university in 1966. Aston is a research-led university known for its world-class teaching quality and strong links to industry, government and commerce. Many programmes at ABS attract accreditation from professional bodies, and Aston is among just 1% of business schools worldwide with triple accreditation from AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS. It is also rated among the top 10 institutions teaching business in the UK National Student Survey. All of the School's activities are underpinned by rigorous and relevant research, over 98% of which is rated as internationally recognised or internationally excellent.

The Executive Dean of Aston Business School is assisted by a team consisting of the Deputy Dean and Associate Deans. Academic Group Heads are responsible for all academic appointments, while the Director of Planning and Resources or Programme Directors are responsible for non-academic appointments. There are five Academic Groups within the Business School, covering subject areas of Marketing; Operations and Information Management; Work & Organisational Psychology; Finance, Accounting & Law; and Economics & Strategy.

Aston University now has approximately 8,300 students, of which 1,800 (22%) are international students. Aston Business School has in the region of 4,100 students, including 1,000 postgraduate students and 100 PhD students. The Business School offers full-time undergraduate sandwich programmes (BSc and LLB), and postgraduate programmes (MBA and MSc) delivered in full-time, part-time or distance-learning modes, and doctoral programmes (PhD/MPhil and DBA), together with a range of Executive Education Programmes.

The Aston Business School's Vision is:

*To be a world-class research-based business school and the best in Europe for employability and global mobility
To be the most inspiring and innovative business school in Europe.*

The mission draws together the three important and integrated elements of teaching, research and community engagement. The Business School has adopted a number of core values and cultural characteristics. The core values are:

*People: welcoming, approachable, inclusive, supportive, valuing
Performance: relevant, transformational, having impact locally and globally*

Innovation: innovative, exciting, inspirational, responsive
Quality: intellectual depth, committed to excellence, rigorous, professional, consistent
Process: open, flexible, integrity in all, ethical, socially responsible

A focus on these core values forms part of the induction programme for new lecturing staff.

The Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP) has been established at Aston University to provide leadership, focus and co-ordination in pedagogical research, technical innovation and flexible and work-based curriculum delivery. The Head of Curriculum & Learner Development, based in CLIPP, takes the lead in running Aston's recently introduced Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice [PgCPP], and the ABS Head of Learning and Teaching and ABS Learning and Teaching Champions contribute to the delivery of this programme. The PgCPP is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework at Standard Descriptor 2 and will shortly be accredited by the HEA at Fellowship level.

In 2006/07 the 54 new lecturers¹ at ABS accounted for 56% of all teaching staff in the school. Of those whose background is known, 38% were from the UK, 32% from other EU countries and 30% were from non-EU countries, reflecting the global focus of the ABS mission. The majority (80%) of new lecturers were appointed on a fixed term contract initially, with appointments of part-time teaching staff rare.

The gender split of teaching staff at ABS is predominantly male (67%), although within the new lecturer category 37% of lecturers are female compared with 28% of lecturers who have worked at ABS for more than four years.

2. Data collection

Face-to-face interviews with 10 respondents took place over three days in late February/early March 2009 at Aston University. Four interviews were held with the Deputy Dean and Head of Faculty, the Head of the Marketing Group, the Head of the Operations & Information Management Group, and the Head of Curriculum and Learner Development. The remaining six face-to-face interviews and two telephone interviews were of new lecturers. These new lecturer interviews included academic staff from all five Academic Groups.

¹ A New Lecturer is defined as a person within the first four years of their first permanent appointment to a lecturing post.

3. Data/information from new lecturers

3.1 The roles carried out by new lecturers

The eight new lecturers interviewed had all been appointed between June 2005 and September 2008. However as it is common for lecturing appointments to follow completion of a PhD at Aston, many of the respondents did not feel like “new” lecturers. Only one respondent was a member of the HEA having completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching at Aston², and most of the new lecturers interviewed needed an explanation of the acronym ‘HEA’.

All respondents undertook a variety of lecturing and administrative roles such as lecturing, running seminars, marking assessments, supervising dissertations and visiting placement students. In some cases, new lecturers were delivering lectures to groups of up to 200 students in their first year. New lecturers commonly identified skills development, personal tutoring, and pastoral support as work they did not undertake because at Aston this type of work does not form part of the role of the academic lecturer.

When asked what other work new lecturers undertake, without exception the respondents identified research and research related activities (conference presentation, publishing etc) as a significant part of their work at Aston.

The new lecturers undertake a variety of administrative roles which, in the new lecturer’s early years, do not include student-facing roles such as course leadership. Instead the administrative roles tend to be research related, such as representing early career researchers on School-wide committees, organising research away-days, or planning research speakers. Two of the new lecturers had no administrative role in their first year at Aston.

3.2 Access to information

Information about university policies and practices, and staff handbooks was issued to all new lecturers as part of the induction process, in both hard copy and on a CD, and for one new lecturer on a memory stick. This information was also available on the university website. One new lecturer commented that there was too much information provided. New lecturers accessed teaching materials by meeting with previous module leaders, or by accessing teaching notes from the VLE. The VLE (Blackboard) is a teaching support resource, whilst another system MAP (My Aston Portal) is used for management of information. For some new lecturers MAP was a valuable source for information such as class lists of students, particularly if the new lecturer had previously been a PhD student at Aston and had experience as a tutor. However other new lecturers had experienced difficulties accessing MAP.

² The Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education was recently replaced by the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice

3.3 Meetings

There are regular meetings for members of each group at which attendance by all academic staff is expected. Occasional social events are arranged for each academic group, and the new lecturers are also members of a cross-disciplinary research group. New lecturers tended to meet frequently with other lecturers in the same subject discipline, often because they were co-located, however new lecturers sometimes felt isolated when they were given teaching on a cross-disciplinary programme such as the MBA; whereas subject group meetings are common, course team meetings are unusual.

New lecturers' contact with their line managers is variable. Formal meetings with the line manager are held twice each year. One meeting is a professional development review to reflect on the past year and set objectives for the next year. The second meeting focuses on a review of the student feedback on module teaching. Analysis of the feedback forms is carried out centrally, and the School Associate Dean Learning & Teaching identifies key points to inform the discussion between the Academic Head and the lecturer. Outputs from the discussion are fed back to the Associate Dean and may include particular staff development or other support, thus demonstrating effective closing of quality loops.

Some new lecturers have frequent informal contact with their line manager, in the form of daily coffee breaks for the whole group, or by a regular

“...gathering of all staff and their family members. So we have a very supportive environment with a homely feel.”

But others have little contact with their line manager and no social events and thus feel more isolated.

The new lecturers all felt they had the authority to determine the syllabus and teaching materials for the modules they delivered and could arrange for visiting speakers. Where costs were involved, approval was needed from the line manager, and where they wanted to make changes to module content, approval by the quality unit was required.

3.4 Most helpful features

When reflecting on factors that had helped them the most as new lecturers, there were five common areas identified: support from other lecturers; the opportunity to focus on research; the induction and staff development provided; the concept of the mentor; and the limited teaching in the first year.

3.4.1 Support from other lecturers

All eight new lecturers stated that they had been allocated suitable office space, near to colleagues with similar interests, and had access to the same facilities. In terms of support from other lecturers, respondents referred to “moral support” offered, and instruction on how to teach, and how to mark, sharing lecture materials and grading sheets, and noted the benefits of observation of teaching, and shadowing a visit to a placement student. Some had studied for their PhD at Aston, and they already knew and felt supported by the lecturers in their subject areas and the administrative staff. However this feeling of being supported was not restricted to those who had studied for a PhD at Aston; new appointees referred to the “friendly and supportive atmosphere” and that it was “easy to integrate” with other staff.

3.4.2 Research focus

Five respondents specifically mentioned the support they had been given to establish themselves in the research community. One respondent described the generous research budget that enabled the new lecturer to specify a computer and software to assist with research, and another made reference to the personal fund to “kick-start” research. Another respondent identified the research focus, and the opportunity, and support, to apply for research grants as helpful.

3.4.3 Staff development

The induction programme was noted as useful by two new lecturers, and a further interviewee (who had worked at Aston for almost four years) considered the postgraduate certificate had been helpful in developing teaching practices. Induction to the university appears to have changed over the period of the new lecturers’ appointments, judging by the lack of consistency in responses to questions asking how long induction lasted; answers ranged from two half-days, 2 days, or 3 one-day workshops.

The induction sessions were most effective for those lecturers who were new to Aston; those who had previously studied for a PhD at Aston found much of the information about the university culture, strategies and policies irrelevant. Two new lecturers, also new to Aston, were unable to attend the planned induction events, but had been inducted by an administrator and a mentor respectively.

All new lecturers were currently undertaking a mandatory postgraduate certificate, or had completed a mandatory programme in teaching and learning. Many new lecturers praised the content of the programme:

“In terms of teaching large classes I try to find more interactive ways to teach 200 students. [The PgC] is good in that it gives us some ideas of what techniques to try.”

Others appreciated the ability to meet other new lecturers, experience role play and appreciate cultural diversity. Ongoing internal CPD is publicised on the web. The new lecturers interviewed have attended sessions to support their teaching (eg presentation skills) and to support research (eg statistical packages). New lecturers also accessed research related CPD activities such as early career research seminars and grant-writing workshops.

3.4.4 Role of the Mentor

For three respondents it has been most useful to have a mentor for research. The role of the mentor has not been defined, but the mentoring function is often carried out by the academic who supervised the new lecturer’s PhD, or a senior lecturer in the same subject area. In many cases the mentor carried out informal peer review of teaching. Although there was no guidance provided to the new lecturer on the role of the mentor, when the new lecturers were asked about their experiences of mentoring they described a wide-ranging role which included providing:

- Guidance in the role of lecturer, such as help with marking to the correct standard, and help with dealing with problems such as how to change a module,
 - Information about the team, introduce to contacts, give informal advice
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- Advice on how to deal with pastoral problems, helping to settle in, meeting regularly,
- Help with research, acting as a 'sounding board'

Most new lecturers, but not all, thought that the mentor did not have any input into appraisal, except perhaps in an informal way.

3.4.5 Managed workload

Two interviewees found that being "protected from too much work" and having "limited teaching in the first year" very useful. However when asked about frustrations they experienced they both found the demands of teaching and administration difficult to manage.

3.5 Most frustrating aspects

3.5.1 The tension between teaching, research and administration

This balance between the teaching, administrative and research elements of the role of a new lecturer was the most common frustration expressed by interviewees. For one interviewee it was represented by the high level of impersonal bureaucracy, for example by being required to provide quantitative data on activities undertaken; for another the demands of attending meetings were encroaching on research time:

"I had never expected the administration meetings to be so time consuming. For example this year my teaching is all in the first semester, and in this semester I'm supposed to have a chunk of time to do my own research. But instead of teaching I have to come to my office three days each week just to attend all sorts of meetings which are not relevant to me."

Another interviewee commented on the conflicting demands, especially where for new lecturers teaching preparation is very time-consuming:

"In my first year it was hard for me to manage everything at the same time, because I had to work on my PhD, work on papers, attend conferences, teach, and it takes me a lot of time to prepare for lectures. I had 200 students and I had to do all the tutorials. The teaching was taking me three full days each week. After that I couldn't say "Let's go and do my PhD now", I just wanted to sleep!"

3.5.2 Help to enhance teaching activities

Despite the friendly atmosphere at Aston, and positive comments about the support from colleagues, several interviewees were unclear about how they should prepare for, and manage, module delivery, and did not find colleagues universally helpful:

"The culture is about being independent and thinking independently and finding things out by yourself"

"I wish I could have more support for teaching... People don't really care about teaching as much as they should"

This lack of support was felt particularly when the previous lecturer had left the University, and the new lecturer had to prepare entirely new teaching materials. In general the interviewees spent more time preparing teaching materials and worried about their teaching ability more than the experienced teachers and managers realised.

3.5.3 Administration and IT arrangements

Another pervasive frustration was the inefficiency of administrative arrangements and the IT infrastructure. New lecturers are given a generous budget to cover conference attendance and buy suitable computer equipment, but for some it took many months for the equipment to be delivered. Four of the eight new lecturers expressed irritation at some element of IT and administration. One new lecturer could not register on any staff development programmes because all communications were sent to an address the lecturer had not lived at for five years, and another new lecturer, while delighted by the start-up money, was annoyed because the IT equipment they wanted to buy did not arrive promptly:

"I ordered my IT equipment in September and I'm still waiting for it [six months later] and I send them two emails about it each week"

Two lecturers commented on the lack of easily available information. One because they had been omitted from the distribution list for 'all staff' emails, and the other had

"difficulty in finding information – when the deadlines are, when you are supposed to complete things. Nothing is put on the web, it's all in Word documents – it's a mess"

3.6 Summary

One interviewee described the feelings of being a new lecturer as follows:

"In the first year it can be emotionally intense. You can easily become nervous or anxious. The enthusiasm [of the new lecturer] can easily turn to frustration and stress if things don't go correctly. People can have problems from negative feedback from students, or logistic disasters in exams"

This underlines the need for effective support networks for new lecturers to enable them to develop in confidence, enjoy their work and make a full contribution to the university.

4. Data/information from Academic/Education Development specialist

The Head of Curriculum and Learner Development was recently appointed to lead a steering group consisting of senior staff and a cross-section of academic staff. The steering group had been charged with developing a revised postgraduate teaching certificate for new staff which would meet the UK Professional Standards at Descriptor 2 and be accredited by the HEA, such that staff who successfully completed the programme would be awarded fellowship of the HEA. The new programme, the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice (PgCPP) was advisory when first introduced but will become mandatory for all new staff from September 2009 for all new lecturers other than those who are already fellows of the HEA, or have been awarded an equivalent PgCert by another institution.

The Aston Certificate in Learning and Teaching (taken by several interviewees) is a 20CR Level 6 module, accredited at Standard Descriptor 1 by the HEA. This is now delivered primarily to PhD students and some graduate teaching assistants and those who have already completed the Aston Certificate on appointment as a lecturer can apply for APL against part of the first PgCPP module.

The PgCPP is delivered as a linear programme consisting of three 20 credit modules, over 3-4 semesters. The first two modules are delivered at a 2 day residential course, held off-campus. The residential courses, although costly, encourage the participants to network

beyond their subject disciplines and gain different perspectives; as a result of exploring and discovering the interests of other new lecturers, two participants on the PgCPP programme have submitted a joint bid for research funding.

The diversity of backgrounds of new lecturers (62% non-UK) is reflected in the programme design which emphasises the multi-cultural diversity of the student body and the inter-cultural diversity of staff. Challenges of cultural diversity are explored in first module: the learning background of participants; their educational experiences; differences between western- and eastern-European expectations; the way individual experiences of the lecturer influence their delivery styles. In the final module in the programme participants are expected to carry out a small research project, possibly using action-research methods. The programmes managers hope that this will develop interest in pedagogic research among lecturers.

The PgCPP programme is rooted in discipline specific practice, and assessed through work based learning. Other key elements of the PgCPP include the use of reflection in assessment, and an emphasis on using blended learning approaches, such as by the use of the PebblePad e-portfolio tool throughout the programme, and assessment to develop skills in utilising the functionality in VLE for example by developing an online quiz.

There are good links between the PgCPP and other staff development workshops offered by CLIPP. Within the individual schools, Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) run monthly lunchtime action learning sets for PgCPP participants. In this forum participants can identify further staff development needs. These optional workshops include topics such as Effective use of learner response systems, Using computer software to enhance delivery, Good supervision of PhD students.

Assessment for the first two modules of the PgCPP includes teaching observations. Four are carried out, two informally by the participant's school-based mentor and, to ensure consistency across the programme, two formal observations are carried out by the PgCPP programme manager who also acts as an external mentor and personal tutor to participants.

Despite being a research-led university, the V-C and PV-Cs strongly believe in good practice in learning and teaching. They have demonstrated their commitment by the appointment of an Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching in each of the five schools, by the direct involvement of one PV-C in the delivery of the PgCPP, and by the meetings all academics have with their Academic Head to discuss student feedback evaluations.

The opinion that one of the benefits of the PgCPP is its support for the promotion of good practice in learning and teaching is not uniformly shared by all participants on the PgCPP. According to the Head of Curriculum and Learner Development some participants have commented in feedback that as they have joined a research-focussed institution, and they have a PhD which demonstrates their subject knowledge, they do not need to be taught how to teach. However there are examples of participants changing their views, and in general the comments from the new lecturers in business suggested that they welcomed staff development focussed on improving their teaching.

A further concern raised by the Head of Curriculum and Learner Development, which may be related to the value participants perceive they gain from the PgCPP, is that the level of relief from other duties given to individual lecturers to attend the PgCPP is not consistent across academic groups.

5. Data/information from Head of School/Head of Department

5.1 Work undertaken by new lecturers

There was general agreement between the Heads that new lecturers would not be required to teach cohorts that might be seen as particularly challenging, such as MBA students or on executive development programmes. They would also not normally undertake corporate consultancy work or be the first supervisor for PhD students. The Heads believed that in their first 3 or 4 years, new lecturers would only provide a supporting role to other academics with administrative roles, but this differed from the administrative roles described by the new lecturers in their interviews.

These contrasting views may be caused by a difference understanding being placed on the concept of an administrative role. New lecturers were seeing administration as covering attendance at all meetings, whether related to module delivery, or activities of the research group, whereas Heads were only referring to course leadership as an example of an administrative role.

5.2 Work load and balance

It was clear from talking to the heads that they thought carefully about the work load and work balance of new lecturers. As one Head said:

“Part of my job is helping people develop their careers and therefore I need to treat each person as unique and look at their position in their career and allocate work accordingly, to make sure they get the experiences they need.”

5.3 Benefits of new lecturers

The Heads tended to think of new lecturers as young new lecturers, which is true if the sample of new lecturers interviewed is representative of all new lecturers at ABS.

Age	Number
25-30	3
31-45	4
46-55	1

Common attributes of new lecturers in the minds of the Heads were that they had new ideas, were up-to-date with research, had energy and were enthusiastic. There was a distinct feeling in the interviews with the Heads that they saw themselves as in a different generation from the new lecturers who have “a better understanding of what the iPod generation are like” and could bring new technologies into their teaching such as by using Podcasts.

There was a sense that the (relative) youth and enthusiasm of new lecturers also acted as a fillip for the school, not just in teaching activities, but also impacting on research:

“We’re very much a research driven school so [our new lecturers] are at the forefront of research. [They bring a] freshness and they’re ambitious and hungry to develop their careers..... We are a research-led school and we’re only interested in people who are ace researchers”

5.4 Challenges for Heads

The Heads are very aware of the stresses on new lecturers caused by high workloads, and see balancing the workload of new lecturers as their main challenge. It is both a challenge to the Head, and to the new lecturer. New lecturers in their first year undertake only half the teaching load of an experienced lecturer. The challenge to the Head is to find alternative teachers. For the new lecturer, as was confirmed by the interviews with new lecturers, the academic environment itself can be stressful because of the continuous measurements of excellence of research output and teaching quality. However one Head suggested that the stress levels were easier for new lecturers to manage because they

“are up to it on research, and they don’t know any other situation – they weren’t in this environment 10 years ago so they don’t know how it’s changed.”

5.5 Expectations of Heads

The importance of good teaching was emphasised by the Heads, but the extent to which the appointment process for new lecturers emphasised the equivalence of teaching ability and research output was unclear:

“We hope that their teaching is up to scratch. But that’s not always the case and there’s quite a lot of mentoring that has to go on when a new lecturer comes in who may be a brilliant researcher but not very good at teaching and we have to try to improve that.”

Another head described the expectations the university places on all lecturers. For new lecturers who joined the university imagining they would focus on research, the realisation of the additional expectations may be daunting:

“We expect them to be excellent in research, we expect them to be excellent in teaching, we expect them to get a teaching qualification, we expect them to take on an administrative role after three or four years, we expect them to get involved in something contributing to the wider vision of the university. [New lecturers] can feel very challenged.”

The same head described this as a “very tough challenge”, but believed that the friendly and supportive atmosphere at Aston (which has been confirmed by independent staff surveys) would ensure that the new lecturers received help from other colleagues to enable them to successfully meet the challenges.

6. Elements of good practice identified at Aston

- Closing the loops on module feedback by using module feedback scores to signal staff development and support needs. (3.3)
- Using social events to help new lecturers become integrated into the university community, (beyond what may be described as the community of scholars) shows a sensitivity to new lecturers who have a non-UK background. (3.3)
- The friendly and supportive environment for all staff, faculty and administrative. (3.4.1)
- The PgCPP emphasises the challenges of the cultural diversity of the faculty and the student body. (4)
- The PgCPP is rooted in discipline-specific practice through the use of work-based learning and work-based assessment. (4)
- The local involvement in delivering and supporting participants on the PgCPP, for example by the use of action learning sets. (4)

7. Recommendations for the university

- Provide guidance to new lecturers and heads to provide a shared understanding of the expectations of the role of mentor and the extent to which mentoring is expected to focus on research, on enhancing teaching or on general integration. (3.4.4)
- Monitor the tension between the importance of excellence in teaching (through mandatory completion of the PgCPP, internal module feedback scores and NSS scores) and the research focus (3.5.1, 5.5)
- Consider developing the mentor role, or providing other support arrangements, that would help the new lecturers to become more efficient in their teaching and administration, and could work with them to resolve problems they may experience with IT and administrative systems (3.5.2, 3.5.3)
- Resolve apparent inconsistencies in the amount of relief given to new lecturers to enable them to complete the PgCPP (4)
- Provide guidance to heads to resolve apparent inconsistencies in teaching and administrative responsibilities of new lecturers (5.1)
- Routinely share good practice in pedagogic practice across all faculty to encourage established lecturers to benefit from the new ideas introduced by new lecturers (5.3)

8. Recommendations for BMAF

- Work towards making the activities of BMAF more relevant for discipline-based researchers in research-led or research-focussed universities. (4)