

ASTON CAREERS IN RESEARCH ON-LINE SURVEY 2009

Analysis of Aston University Outcomes (with comparison to aggregated UK results where appropriate)

1 INTRODUCTION

CROS is an annual web-based questionnaire survey designed to gather the views of research staff in UK HEIs about their employment experiences and career development opportunities and aspirations. The intended target research population does not include staff in a research support role and lecturers. The administration, analysis and publication of the aggregated results of CROS are currently supported by Vitae.

Aston University last participated in CROS in 2006/2007. Aston's participation in 2009 relates to the review of the institution's performance in respect of The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (launched in June 2008). Unfortunately, as a result of an administrative error on the part of CROS (which delayed the institution's registration) and Aston University's inability to launch the survey by email direct to its research population, there was a very low response rate from Aston staff when the national survey was conducted in May/June 2009. In view of this, it was decided to rerun the survey internally; this was done, using a newly compiled data-base of research staff (with email addresses) from 3rd December 2009 to 25th January 2010. A £50 prize draw was offered as an incentive to participation.

2 THE ASTON SAMPLE

The survey was administered to ninety-two (92) research staff members; twenty-four (24) individuals participated, a response rate of 26%. This response rate is precisely comparable with the national survey, where the response rate for all 51 participating HEIs was 21% and 26% for the 23 participating institutions not in the Russell or 1994 groups. This response rate is considered high for this type of survey.

The characteristics of Aston's sample are broadly comparable to the national sample except in relation to the following variables:

- Gender: female (Aston 29%; national 55%); male (Aston 71%; national 45%). This may be a reflection of subject mix.
- Age: 35 – 39 years (Aston 35%; national 19%); 45 – 59 years (Aston 0%; national 14%). Other age groups were broadly comparable.

The national sample is considered to be representative of the UK researcher population, but the representativeness of the Aston sample is unknown. In addition, the Aston sample is very small in absolute terms and, in view of this, numbers of responses are often too small to be statistically valid.

3 ENGAGEMENT OF RESEARCH STAFF WITH THEIR EMPLOYING HEI

3.1 Applying for a research post

In respect of finding out about available research posts, word-of-mouth was most common both in relation to Aston University and nationally, however this was more prominent at Aston (Aston 38%; national 30%).

Aston respondents also more often reported having been named on the research grant application (Aston 21%; national 12%). By contrast, Aston researchers less commonly reported learning of vacancies through e-communication of any kind (Aston 29%; national 45%) and also having a previous contract extended (Aston 13%; national 35%).

Concerning receiving information about vacant posts, overall Aston researchers reported less access to relevant documents (eg job description; person description) during the application process than was reported nationally, and more often said they had been offered none of these (Aston 21%; national 15%).

There are some similarities between Aston respondents and the national sample concerning interview arrangements for their current post; the most common reported by both was a face-to-face interview with the principal investigator or research leader (Aston 38%; national 38%). However, a considerably lower proportion at Aston had been interviewed by a panel of any kind (Aston 29%; national 41%) and a higher proportion had had no interview (Aston 33%; national 20%).

There is no correlation with subject specialism in respect of any of the variables concerning applying for research posts.

3.2 Starting work

Respondents were asked about the information they received and processes they experienced on commencing employment with their current employer (eg information about probationary requirements; induction; initial training experiences). Responses were in terms of 'useful', 'not useful' or 'not offered'.

Overall, Aston researchers' responses were very similar to researchers' nationally in the following areas:

- Information about their employment contract
- Statement about their rights and responsibilities
- Induction into their current role
- Departmental induction
- Cross-institutional induction
- Training or information about health and safety
- Information about other training or development opportunities

However, with the exception of 'information about their employment contract' (Aston 75%; national 74%), in all these areas only 50% or less of Aston respondents considered the information/experience to have been useful and substantial proportions of Aston respondents (and nationally) reported that this information/experience had not been offered to them. The experiences/information respondents most commonly said had not been offered to them were 'cross-institutional induction' (Aston 58%; national 60%), 'departmental induction' (Aston 33%; national 47%), 'training or information about equality and diversity' (Aston 29%; national 45%), 'training or information about health and safety' (Aston 25%; national 22%) and 'information about other training and development opportunities' (Aston 25%; national 23%).

By contrast, substantially higher proportions of Aston researchers than nationally reported as 'useful' the information/training they received in the following areas:

| | Aston% | National% |
|---|--------|-----------|
| Information about their probationary requirements | 71 | 46 |
| Copies of institutional policies and procedures (eg complaints procedure) | 57 | 43 |
| Copy of the institution's research strategy | 54 | 28 |
| Training or information about equality and diversity | 33 | 21 |

However, as can be seen, only in the area of 'information about probationary requirements' did high numbers of Aston respondents say 'useful', while in relation to 'policies and procedures' and 'research strategy' substantial minorities of respondents had either found the information/experience 'not useful' or 'not offered'. In relation to 'training or information about equality and diversity', broadly similar proportions of respondents reported 'useful' (33%), 'not useful' (29%) and 'not offered' (29%).

There is no correlation with subject specialism in respect of any of the variables concerning starting work.

3.3 Understanding the work environment

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their understanding of institutional policies and processes that relate to research staff (eg decision making structures; job evaluation processes) and national policies and initiatives (eg the Concordat; RAE/REF). Responses ranged from 'a good understanding' to 'never heard of this/these'.

In respect of all institutional policies and processes (sixteen areas), very few or no Aston respondents reported 'never heard of this/these', but in no area did the greatest proportion report having 'a good understanding'. The greatest proportion of Aston researchers reported having 'a partial understanding' in the following areas:

| | |
|---|-----|
| Fixed-term contracts | 50% |
| Terms and conditions of employment | 46% |
| Appraisal/performance review | 46% |
| Research codes of practice (research integrity/academic conduct/ethics) | 46% |
| Institutional research strategy | 46% |
| Redundancy and redeployment | 44% |
| Departmental decision-making structures | 42% |
| Equality and diversity policies | 38% |
| Job evaluation processes | 38% |

In relation to 'research codes of practice', while 70% respondents reported a good or partial understanding, 25% said they 'know these exist but don't know the detail', while one (1) respondent (whose subject specialism is biological sciences) said they had 'never heard of these'.

In the following areas, the greatest proportion of Aston respondents said they 'know these exist, but don't know the detail':

| | |
|---|-----|
| Complaints process | 58% |
| Bullying and harassment policies and procedures | 46% |
| Institutional decision making structures | 42% |
| Institutional research career pathways | 42% |
| Internal funding sources | 42% |
| Probation processes | 42% |
| Promotions criteria and processes | 33% |

However, in all areas, Aston responses were directly comparable to or compared favourably with those given by the national sample.

In respect of national policies and initiatives, Aston responses compare favourably to those given nationally in some areas. Concerning the RAE/REF, 44% of Aston respondents reported having ‘a good understanding’ of this, while 22% of national respondents did so. Concerning the Concordat, 44% of Aston respondents reported having ‘a partial understanding’ of this, while 25% of national respondents did so; however, ‘never heard of this/these’ is also high in this area (Aston 35%; national 42%). At Aston, as nationally, ‘never heard of this/these’ predominates in respect of the ‘Roberts’ agenda (Aston 83%; national 73%) and Vitae (Aston 57%; national 72%).

3.4 Feeling recognised and valued

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of their equal treatment with lecturing staff in a number of areas and about their perceptions of the value placed on their contributions to the institution in a number of areas. Responses were in terms of ‘agree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘don’t know/not applicable’.

In the following areas, 50% or more of Aston respondents agreed they are treated equally with lecturing staff:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Access to training and development opportunities | 88% |
| Opportunities to attend conferences/external meetings | 83% |
| Visibility on web-sites and staff directories | 75% |
| Requests for flexible working | 67% |
| Job evaluation | 54% |
| Terms and conditions of employment | 50% |
| Opportunities to participate in departmental decision making processes | 50% |

Conversely, 50% or more of Aston respondents disagreed they are treated equally with lecturing staff in the following areas:

| | |
|---|-----|
| Opportunities to participate in cross-institutional decision making processes | 52% |
| Opportunities for promotion and progression | 50% |

In both these areas, national responses showed a majority of researchers who consider they are not treated equally with lecturing staff. In relation to ‘eligibility for performance-related pay’, 42% Aston respondents agreed they are treated equally with lecturing staff, while 29% disagreed and 29% said they didn’t know. In many other areas, both at Aston and nationally, relatively large proportions of respondents indicated they did not know whether their treatment is equal. In all areas, Aston responses were directly comparable to or compared favourably with those given by the national sample.

In relation to the institution recognising and valuing researchers’ contributions, 50% or more of Aston respondents agreed in respect of the following areas:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Research culture within the department | 75% |
| Publication | 75% |
| External collaborations | 63% |
| Grant applications | 63% |
| World-class research | 63% |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Public engagement | 58% |
| Supervising students | 58% |
| Promoting the institution | 54% |
| Achieving the institution's research strategy | 52% |
| Knowledge transfer and commercialisation | 52% |
| Supporting others (eg informal mentoring) | 50% |

In relation to 'teaching and lecturing', 46% of Aston respondents agreed their contribution is recognised by the institution, while 29% disagreed and 25% didn't know or said 'not applicable'. In relation to 'managing resources' and 'managing staff' approximately one-third of the respondents fell into each of the broad response categories. When asked to provide additional information on how they consider they are recognised and valued by their institution, comments made by respondents included:

- "Not valued, not thanked for doing extra tasks. Here to produce papers and take up some teaching slack"
- "I have to admit that in my experience post-doc's contributions are not given any value/credit even though we work committedly to achieve the targets and deliverables relevant to the projects. Most of the time there is not much help given and additional responsibilities are pushed onto our shoulders in the little time we have on fixed term contracts"
- "With 28 papers I still didn't get an ARCHA post. Thought they wanted research-intensive applications"
- "I feel my area, pedagogical research, is struggling to be recognised by the institution, despite rhetoric to the contrary"

In all areas, Aston responses were directly comparable to or compared favourably with those given by the national sample.

Researchers were also asked to what extent they agree they are integrated into their various intellectual/working communities; responses were in terms of 'agree' or 'disagree'. Overall, a majority of Aston and national respondents indicated integration, however Aston's responses compare favourably with those from the national sample, as follows:

| | Aston% | National% |
|---|--------|-----------|
| Integrated into your department's research community | 88 | 71 |
| Integrated into your wider disciplinary community | 74 | 65 |
| Integrated into your institution's research community | 68 | 53 |

Finally, researchers were asked how far they consider the culture of their institution stimulates their work; responses were in terms of 'agree' or 'disagree'. Aston researchers' responses are directly comparable with those of the national sample, 75% of both agreeing that this is the case.

4 SUPPORT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Professional and career development review and planning

Respondents were asked some general questions on this topic; responses were in terms of 'agree' or 'disagree'. A majority of Aston respondents indicated agreement in relation to all areas as follows:

| | |
|---|------|
| Have considered career options | 100% |
| Have reflected on development needs | 88% |
| Are encouraged to engage in personal and career development | 75% |
| Have a clear development plan | 75% |

In all areas, Aston responses were directly comparable to or compared favourably with those given by the national sample.

Respondents were asked about their eligibility for appraisal and, where this had been experienced, were asked to rate the appraisal scheme's usefulness on a number of criteria; responses were in terms of 'useful' or 'not useful'. Twelve (12) Aston researchers completed this part of the survey. A majority of these respondents indicated the scheme was 'useful' to them in the following areas:

| | |
|---|-----|
| Overall | 92% |
| Leading to training or other development opportunities | 92% |
| Highlighting issues | 83% |
| Identifying your strengths and achievements | 83% |
| Helping focus on career aspirations in relation to current role | 83% |
| Reviewing personal progress | 83% |
| Finding solutions to problems | 67% |

Respondents were further asked about how often and who with they had had discussions concerning training needs and/or development opportunities in the past twelve months; responses ranged from 'very often' to 'never'. Overall, Aston respondents indicated that they most commonly had such discussions with their 'PI/line manager' (79%), followed by 'a mentor' (where this was applicable)(54%), then 'a staff developer' (38%); discussions with 'a careers advisor' were least common (13%).

A further set of questions were asked about who respondents had consulted or were likely to consult about career development; responses were in terms of 'have consulted', 'would consult' and 'would not consult'. In relation to who had been consulted, Aston respondents indicated that 'partner/family/friends' is most common (35%), followed by 'PI/line manager' (25%), then 'colleagues' (17%) and 'mentor' (13%). In relation to who respondents would be likely to consult in future, they indicated the following:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Colleagues | 74% |
| PI/line manager | 63% |
| Appraiser | 61% |
| Mentor | 52% |
| Partner/family/friends | 48% |
| Careers service resources | 36% |
| Professional body/learned society | 33% |
| Staff developer | 32% |
| Funding organisation | 32% |
| Careers advisor | 27% |

However, when respondents were asked 'If Aston University were to offer centralised careers advice to its employees, how likely would you be to access this?', 50% respondents indicated they would be 'likely' or 'very likely' to do so.

In respect of career decision-making, Aston respondents indicated they would find information, advice and guidance in a number of areas particularly helpful as follows:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Job application processes in academia | 79% |
| Careers in academia | 79% |
| Careers outside academia | 46% |
| International job opportunities | 33% |
| Secondment/placement opportunities | 25% |
| Job application processes outside academia | 21% |

Aston respondents indicated little interest in 'business skills and enterprise' (12%) and 'self-employment and freelance consultancy' (8%). Aston responses are broadly similar to those given nationally, however Aston respondents generally show less interest in information that does not relate to jobs/careers in academia. This is consistent with responses to further questions about career aspirations, where 79% Aston respondents indicated that in the immediate future they expected to be employed in HE, 'primarily research', while, in five years time, they hoped/intended to be working in HE, 'primarily researching and teaching'.

4.2 Professional and career development activities

Some general questions were asked about the frequency of respondents' participation in training and development activities; responses ranged from 'very often' to 'never'. Aston and national responses were generally very similar in respect of these. 50% Aston respondents indicated they had 'participated in external training activities or courses' to some extent, while 71% Aston respondents indicated they had 'participated in internal institutional training activities or courses' to some extent. Explanations given for non-participation in internal training opportunities (offered by the Centre for Staff Development) were largely because the respondent had been in post for only a short time, however one participant commented "Did not know about such a resource". The most commonly reported number of days spent participating in such opportunities in the previous 12 months is 3 - 5 (Aston 26%; national 27%), while 6 - 10 days is also common (Aston 22%; national 25%).

Further questions were asked about specific professional and career development topics; responses ranged from 'undertaken and found useful' to 'no interest to me currently'. A substantial proportion of Aston respondents, although not a majority, indicated that they had 'undertaken and found useful' 'research skills and techniques' (41%) and 'teaching' (33%). However, substantial proportions of Aston respondents also indicated that they 'would like to do' the following:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Career management | 64% |
| Leadership and management | 57% |
| Teaching | 57% |
| Knowledge transfer and outreach activities | 55% |
| Personal effectiveness | 52% |
| Communication skills | 50% |
| Ethics and research governance | 48% |
| Research skills and techniques | 41% |

With the exception of research skills and techniques and teaching, however, almost as many indicated no interest in these. 'Teamworking' was the topic of least interest to Aston respondents, 70% indicating 'no interest to me currently' (51% nationally gave this response).

In relation to assessment of different modes of delivery of training and development opportunities, responses from Aston researchers were generally similar to those given nationally; responses were in terms of 'helpful', 'not helpful' and 'not experienced'. Respondents indicated they found the following modes 'helpful':

| | Aston% | National% |
|----------------------------|--------|-----------|
| Face-to-face presentations | 91 | 83 |
| One-to-one conversations | 83 | 87 |
| Interactive workshops | 78 | 74 |
| Self-reflection | 78 | 71 |
| In the workplace | 74 | 74 |
| Mentoring and coaching | 70 | 63 |

However, Aston respondents differed from the national sample in relation to 'on-line resources', only 46% indicating they find these 'helpful', while 61% did nationally. 'On-line discussion forums' were identified as the least 'helpful' mode (Aston 22%; national 23%).

Finally, respondents were asked about a wide range of activities relating to gaining experience outside their immediate research area, developing management and communications expertise and broadening their experience beyond research activity per se; responses were in terms of 'have done this', 'would like to do this' and 'no interest in this'. Aston responses are broadly similar to those given nationally; variance from the national picture is affected by institutional difference. In all areas substantial proportions of Aston respondents indicated either that they have experience or would like to gain experience, as follows:

| <i>In relation to 'acquiring experience outside immediate area'</i> | % 'have done this' | % 'would like to do this' |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Collaborate with industry | 57 | 26 |
| Collaborate with colleagues outside the UK | 50 | 46 |
| Work as part of a cross-disciplinary team | 50 | 46 |
| Undertake a placement in another sector | 5 | 32 |
| Undertake a secondment to another institution | 0 | 50 |
| | | |
| <i>In relation to 'developing management experience'</i> | % 'have done this' | % 'would like to do this' |
| Plan and manage a project | 46 | 36 |
| Participate in departmental decision-making | 36 | 46 |
| Manage a budget | 27 | 46 |
| Participate in institutional decision-making | 18 | 36 |
| | | |
| <i>In relation to 'developing a broader experience of research'</i> | % 'have done this' | % 'would like to do this' |
| Write for publication | 75 | 25 |
| Develop specialist research skills and techniques | 63 | 38 |
| Explain your work outside your field | 57 | 30 |
| Write a grant/funding proposal | 42 | 50 |
| Apply for a fellowship | 38 | 46 |
| Supervise a doctoral or masters student | 38 | 46 |
| Participate in knowledge transfer activities | 30 | 35 |
| | | |
| <i>In relation to 'improving skills of communication'</i> | % 'have done this' | % 'would like to do this' |
| Present work at a conference | 88 | 13 |
| Demonstrate | 75 | 13 |
| Teach or lecture | 63 | 33 |
| Participate in public engagement activities | 29 | 50 |
| | | |
| <i>In relation to 'personal development'</i> | % 'have done this' | % 'would like to do this' |
| Develop a personal development plan/career dev strategy | 21 | 63 |

| | | |
|--|----|----|
| Engage in coaching, mentoring or action planning | 13 | 58 |
| Maintain a personal development record | 13 | 54 |

5. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Respondents were asked a range of questions about issues relating to equality and diversity within their institution; responses were in terms of 'agree' and 'disagree'.

Aston respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the University is committed to equality and diversity and that staff members are treated fairly in a variety of activities/processes (eg recruitment and selection; access to training) regardless of ethnic background, gender, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability or age. The weakest area related to work/life balance, where 21% respondents disagreed that they were satisfied. In addition, in relation to participation in cross-institutional decision making processes and promotion and progression, substantial numbers of respondents consider they are not treated equally with lecturing staff.

91% respondents said 'no' when asked if they have felt discriminated against in their present role; the two (2) respondents who said 'yes' explained this is because they are a 'part time worker' and 'due to past qualifications, type and level'.

Aston responses were very similar to those given nationally.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

The findings of Aston CROS 2009 summarised here focus on those areas where responses suggest more work may need to be done to meet the University's obligations in respect of The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Relevant chapter headings of the Concordat are used in order to aid review.

6.1.1 Recruitment and Selection

- Respondents considered that this is an area where equality and diversity principles are observed by the University.
- However, given the reported high incidence of word-of-mouth communication about vacancies, lack of e-communication in this area and high incidence of appointment without interview, it is unclear whether vacancies are always appropriately promoted and advertised.
- Respondents had had relatively little access to relevant information about vacant posts prior to appointment and one-fifth indicated they had received no documents of this kind.
- While applicants for researcher posts had most commonly been interviewed by their prospective PI/line manager, only about one-third had experienced an interview panel and a similar proportion had had no interview for their post.

6.1.2 Recognition and Value

- Respondents indicated a general sense of feeling valued by Aston University in relation to a wide range of work activities, especially research-related. However there are some areas,

notably teaching and managing staff or resources, where they more often consider they lack recognition for their contributions.

- Respondents also indicated they feel a high level of integration into their various working/intellectual communities.
- While in most aspects of their employment research staff feel they are treated equally to lecturers, this is not so in relation to opportunities for career progression, eligibility for performance-related pay and opportunities for participation in institutional decision-making. Relatively large proportions of research staff indicated that they do not know if they are treated equally to lecturers in a variety of areas.
- A large majority of respondents who had participated in appraisal considered it had been useful in a number of areas relating to their professional development.

6.1.3 Support and Career Development

- The value to new employees of information they received and processes they experienced on starting work (including induction) is very uneven, with little of this/these having been considered useful.
- Most researchers appear to have considered their career options and development needs and believe they are encouraged to engage in personal and career development.
- However, a minority of respondents said they had actually consulted anyone about their career, the largest group indicating this had been a partner, family member or friend; only a quarter had consulted their research manager. Considerably more said they would consult, but here consultation with colleagues was most favoured, over and above consultation with their manager, careers staff or professional development staff. However, when asked specifically, half said they would be likely to access centralised careers advice provided by the University.
- Despite the shortage of relevant jobs, the overwhelming majority of Aston respondents have long-term aspirations to work in HE, combining teaching and researching, and this is reflected in the sorts of information, advice and guidance attractive to them.
- The aspiration to continue to work in HE is also reflected in the training and development activities undertaken by respondents and those they would like to take up. Those concerned with the most obviously transferable skills were often the least attractive. However, career management training was identified as an attractive option. Half of the respondents had done some external training, while nearly three-quarters had taken up internal opportunities.

6.1.4 Researchers' responsibilities

- The majority of respondents at least know of a wide range of institutional policies and processes that relate to them, with substantial proportions having some understanding of many of these, particularly those relating to their current employment and research activity.
- A minority of respondents had participated in either departmental or institutional processes, but more said they would like to do so.
- Few have made a career or personal development plan, but many more showed an interest in doing so.

- Many respondents indicated an interest in taking up a range of training and development opportunities, however, with the exception of research skills and techniques and teaching, almost as many indicated no interest in these.
- Very few had undertaken a placement in another sector and none had completed a secondment to another HEI; again, many more showed an interest in doing this.
- Very few indicated they were looking beyond researching and/or teaching in HE for career opportunities.

6.1.5 Diversity and Equality

- Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the University is committed to equality and diversity and that staff members are treated fairly in a wide variety of activities/processes; however, in relation to participation in cross-institutional decision making processes and promotion and progression substantial numbers of respondents consider they are not treated equally with lecturing staff.

6.2 Conclusion

While the survey indicates that the experience of research staff at Aston University is directly comparable to or compares favourably with that of research staff nationally in respect of many aspects of their employment, the University's obligations as outlined by The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers remain substantially unmet in several areas. Furthermore, selection and recruitment is a particularly weak area, in which Aston appears to perform less well than the national norm.

In addition, while the survey indicates that, generally, Aston research staff have an interest in their own personal and professional development, this does not always appear to translate into action. It is also evident that researchers do not always have a strong understanding of institutional and national policies and processes that relate to their role. Progress here is a joint concern of the HEI and individual staff members and the University may need to do more to assist research staff to fulfil their responsibilities in these areas.

Career management and planning is one specific area of personal and professional development which the survey suggests is of particular interest to research staff. The recent introduction of a careers guidance and support service through the Careers and Employability Centre may prove to be of particular value, therefore. It is a matter of some concern, however, that the majority of Aston researchers see their future in teaching and research in HE when such opportunities are limited.

Finally, the potential to engage research staff in their own career development is highlighted by one participant in the Aston Careers in Research On-line Survey 2009 who, when asked for further comments, stated "The survey has helped me reflect and refocus on my training and career development. Thank you".

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