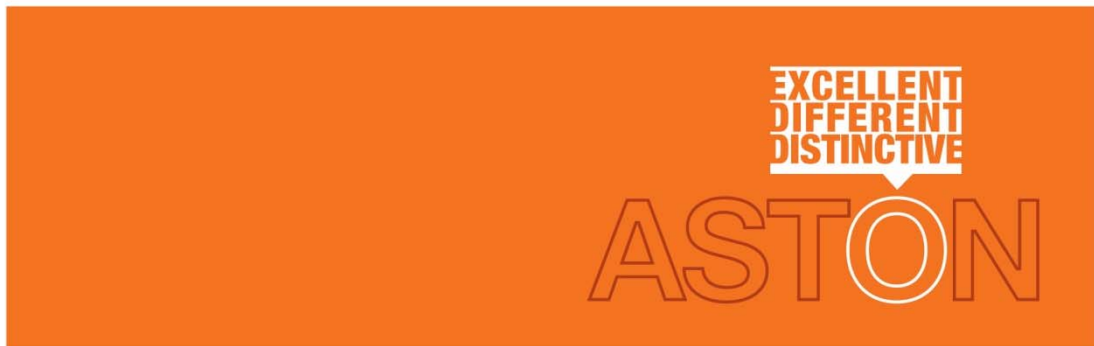




Human Resources Strategy



Background – Opportunities, Challenges and Drivers for Change

The Aston Forward 2020 strategy, published in 2011, outlined a vision and key goals for the University which would enhance our position as a global force within the higher education sector. At its heart this inspirational strategy is quite simple: the delivery of world-class research which benefits both local and global communities, and the delivery of an outstanding student experience which produces graduates who impact positively on the global economy.

The delivery of Aston Forward 2020 requires Aston to recruit and retain exceptional staff across all staff groups and this is particularly true of academic and learning support staff who are the drivers for our excellence in teaching and research.

Within the Aston Forward 2020 strategy, the “People and Values” section describes an agreed set of Aston Values: **Trust; Empowerment; Engagement; Learning and Scholarship; Innovation; and Ambition** which underpin the culture of the University and inform the way in which we do things at Aston. These values also underpin a set of Leadership Expectations and Staff Expectations, which in turn are the bedrock of how we behave, how we manage, and how we define performance.

We are a highly diverse and multicultural staff and student community. Over 120 nationalities are represented on our campus and this gives us a richness of culture, experience, faith, identity and language that we enjoy and celebrate. The wealth of diversity in our University presents the opportunity to make our culture one which truly celebrates individuals for their potential and creates an environment for everyone to thrive. A diverse community will be one which encourages the creativity and innovation needed to deliver excellence.

Vision

We have high aspirations for Aston and success means being Excellent, Different and Distinctive. We know what we are good at, and we must develop our excellence, work at being different, win recognition as distinctive, and grow as a University in the global marketplace. To achieve these goals we will implement strategies to deliver step changes in our performance, our culture and our environment to achieve and maintain excellence in the University’s core activities of teaching and research.

Purpose

There are two principal outcomes from the Aston People 2020 Strategy:

A high performance culture and a positive environment

A number of key activities contribute to these two outcomes (see Figure 1), and the activities are underpinned by the Aston Values and delivered through continually improving management and leadership capability.



Figure 1 Key activities and how they contribute to Aston 2020

Human Resources and Organisational Development: Outcomes

This latest updated version of the strategy:

- ▶ Continues Aston 2020's "People and Values" Vision
- ▶ Supports Excellent, Different and Distinctive
- ▶ Transforms the role of HR
- ▶ Enhances leadership and management capability
- ▶ Is underpinned by Aston Values

High Performance Culture

A principal outcome of this strategy is to continue to create a high performance culture where staff are inspired to strive for high performance in an environment which enables and supports them to achieve excellence when measured against standards which are clear. HR has a role in articulating what high performance means and in 'holding up the mirror' to the organisation. There are a number of areas which are fundamental to the high performance culture and these are articulated below together with associated outcomes.

At Aston we currently aspire to high performance, however, we have traditionally not been robust or timely in managing performance or in challenging performance which is average or below average. There is an expectation in some quarters (a minority) that we will be rewarded for simply “doing the job” and the approach of our managers often does not underpin the drive for high performance. A culture of performance management is lacking, and managers are not held to account for improving performance. Some of our organisational systems are effectively barriers to managing performance well.

Leadership

Everyone at Aston is expected to be a leader to some extent. Leading for some will be taking initiative for delivery of tasks and to share best practice to deliver Excellent, Different, Distinctive and thus will be expected to act as a role model and exhibit appropriate behaviours. Just under a third of our staff have formal management or leadership roles and will manage staff in some way. For some staff groups this is not an accepted role, and we need to affect a culture shift whereby they take responsibility for supporting and managing staff within their remit. We also have circumstances where some leaders take up their roles for a relatively short fixed period, which in itself can be a disincentive to manage effectively. Furthermore, the representation of women and ethnic minority staff amongst our leaders is not as strong as we would like.

Outcomes

1. Leaders will be helped to act as role models and exhibit Aston Values and Leadership Behaviours.
2. The organisational framework will encourage the right behaviours in leaders so that they feel accountable for the performance of their team and contribute to the leadership of their School/department.
3. Paths for promotion and progression will be clear, and formal development programmes will be available and supported.
4. The demographic of staff at all levels of leadership will be equitable.

Managing Performance

The building blocks which constitute effective performance management are simple – an effective performance assessment process, clear standards and objective setting, methods of acknowledging exceptional performance and of managing under performance. These building blocks are partially in place but need embedding. Furthermore, there has to be an organisational willingness to address poor performance robustly and effectively and managers need to understand that this is the case and that they have a key role in doing so.

Outcomes

1. Standards of performance will be defined and clearly articulated and it will be clear how individual performance contributes to the achievement of the Aston 2020 strategy.

2. Staff will be clear through their personal objectives in what way their own contribution impacts on the University's performance. The objective setting process is key.
3. Under performance will be managed in a consistent and robust way and managers will be confident and supported to do so by both their managers and by HR.
4. The Performance Development Review process will link clearly to reward, promotion and progression.
5. Barriers to effective performance management will be identified, evaluated and addressed.
6. We will continue to find creative ways of recognising amazing performance.

Reward, Recognition and Retention

It is essential that the reward framework at Aston recognises and remunerates staff for the right behaviours and delivery of the right outcomes. Much of our pay framework is nationally negotiated but we also have an established mechanism for linking discretionary pay to performance, and there are many other elements of the overall benefits package, financial and non-financial.

Outcomes

1. There will be a transparent and well-articulated Reward Strategy which ensures that the University has control of, and is clear about, what behaviours staff are rewarded for.
2. Leaders will acknowledge, reward and say thank you for high performance and will have a range of financial and non-financial ways in which to do so.
3. The processes for promotion and progression will be clearly articulated, transparent, efficient and based on merit, and directly linked to the achievement of the University's goals and strategy.
4. Key posts and individuals will be identified and supported, with a clear succession planning strategy which will support retention of our best talent.

Recruitment

The recruitment activity for the University is significant and creates a high volume of work for HR and recruiting managers. There is effective use of an online recruiting tool, but processes could be more streamlined. There is some reliance on using agencies and head hunters to recruit, and considerable potential for using social media and our own known networks more effectively as the expectations of the external talent pool become more sophisticated. School / Department and University recruitment strategies should be developed alongside a workforce model and succession plans.

Outcomes

1. The HR function will support Schools and Departments to define a local recruitment strategy taking into account the required skills mix, appropriate balance of resources and demographics.
2. The recruitment process will be examined and streamlined to improve efficiency and focus on the outcome not the process.

3. The mix of casual, fixed term and permanent staff will be constantly evaluated at a local level and at the University level to manage cost and appropriateness.
4. We will utilise a more streamlined online recruitment tool, social media and other communications technologies to their best effect to support our recruitment process.
5. We will recruit staff who are likely to be high performers at Aston and who are motivated by Aston's values and our success.
6. We will set expectations of staff at the recruitment stage.

Learning and Development

To be a high performing organisation requires a skilled workforce engaged in continuing professional development which is relevant to their current roles and responsibilities; which supports organisational change and innovation; and which also supports career progression, promotion and succession planning. Our current processes for identifying what learning and development is required are relatively weak, with an over-reliance on individual managers and staff determining what would be useful, and lack strategic oversight. We will develop a robust organisational approach to designing a cost-effective, timely and innovative development offer which contributes demonstrably to the achievement of world-class teaching and research.

Outcomes

1. The knowledge and skills required for key organisational roles and activities will be a major driver for designing learning and development interventions.
2. The learning and development offer will be cutting-edge, based on best practice in the sector and beyond, and will utilise the latest technologies.
3. The HR function will support Schools and Departments to develop and implement coherent learning and development strategies which are informed by the PDR process.
4. Staff will be take responsibility for their own learning, and be clear how every development intervention and activity contributes to the achievement of Aston 2020.

A Positive Environment

Employee Engagement and Employee Relations

Aston has an incredibly positive working environment and in the 2013 staff survey 66% of staff said Aston was a great place to work. We have highly effective working relationships with the three recognised Trade Unions with a track record of working in partnership with them. The survey highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement, and the "Positive People Group" is tasked with owning the biennial survey and ensuring that actions are taken to address issues raised and to communicate the results.

Outcomes

1. Employee satisfaction as evidenced by the staff survey will continue to rise, and Aston will be thought to be a great place to work by an increasing majority of staff.
2. The University will maintain excellent working relationships with the Trade Unions.
3. Staff will feel inspired by Aston, willing to give discretionary effort and will have a sense of belonging and loyalty to Aston.
4. Aston will be a University of choice and seen to enhance an individual's reputation and standing within their academic and professional networks.

Health, Wellbeing and Attendance

Aston has a well-established Health and Safety framework and the recent appointment of a new Health and Safety manager presents the opportunity for revitalising this area. Although there are some areas of specific risk within the University (for example laboratories and specific specialist equipment), the greater risk and cost is more likely to be associated with sickness and absence amongst staff and, potentially, stress related issues. A greater focus on the wellbeing of staff will mitigate this risk, but as importantly, promoting wellbeing creates an environment where staff feel valued, engaged and supported.

Outcomes

1. Managers will be aware of their responsibilities in relation to the wellbeing, health and safety of staff, and will actively promote wellbeing initiatives.
2. Managers will be confident and competent when implementing safety in their teams and departments.
3. All staff will be aware of, and acknowledge responsibility for, their own health and wellbeing.
4. Sickness absence data will be monitored and evaluated with timely actions when appropriate.
5. The oversight of wellbeing will be delivered through a strategic steering group and the operational elements managed through a Wellbeing Forum.

Embracing Diversity

The University currently has a range of activities intended to enable a diverse community amongst its staff and students, which in turn enhances the University's success. We are situated in the centre of a multicultural city and we offer courses which attract students from a range of backgrounds and cultures. Our demographic is monitored and we know where our challenges lie. We do not yet integrate this knowledge and these activities in a framework which ensures that they are sustainable and make a meaningful difference long term.

Outcomes

1. An effective governance framework will be established which embeds Diversity in the University's activities.
2. The enhancement of Diversity will be threaded through the business planning process.
3. We will celebrate individual difference and create opportunities to innovate and take risk, ensuring staff will be able to achieve their full potential without barriers.
4. We will treat each other with respect and dignity and will be intolerant of those who do not.
5. Aston's staff demographic will reflect and promote our commitment to social mobility and widening participation.

HR Service Capability

The HR service has suffered from inefficient systems, the large volume of transactional processes and a culture of line manager dependency on HR. Historically, the HR service has been relatively conservative in its approach although individual members of staff are highly thought of and appreciated by their internal customers. The business partner model is embryonic, and is hampered by some of the systems in place and the considerable administrative burden, particularly in recruitment. Looking forward, the HR service will be enabled to become more leading edge as management and leadership capabilities continually improve, and HR can be freed up to undertake a more strategic role.

Outcomes

1. HR will be an exemplar for excellence.
2. HR will be a key strategic business partner, trusted advisor and critical friend; understanding the business, challenging constructively and a catalyst to getting things done, risk taking where appropriate.
3. HR will work with Schools and Departments to develop their own internal strategies for recruitment, workforce planning, performance management, and learning and development.
4. Processes will be streamlined to align with and be responsive to business needs, enabling focus on the people, not the process, adopting an 'account management' approach.
5. As the leadership capability matures in the University, so can HR focus more on strategic objectives and less on day to day management activities.

Management Information

We are currently implementing a new and comprehensive HR system which will provide a range of modules underpinning HR and employee information. This will enable manager and employee self-service, encouraging greater individual ownership of HR processes and more direct access to HR reports and data. From this we will develop an enhanced set of HR reports and reporting capability working with the Schools and Departments to supply strategic HR data to inform decision making. Alongside this, we will develop a workforce model to enable greater control of our establishment and costs.

Outcomes

1. HR will become increasingly sophisticated in the provision of data to stakeholders to inform business and staff management decisions.
2. The ability to model the workforce and associated costs will facilitate improved planning in response to imposed or predicted budget constraints and business changes.
3. Data produced for internal stakeholders will be timely, accessible and easy to understand.