

**The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers**

**Aston University Self-Assessment: 2021-2023**

**September 2023 (revised March 2024)**

## **Institution Context**

Aston's commitment to the Concordat closely aligns with its [strategic objectives](#) and the importance these place on the contribution of Early Career Researchers (ECRs<sup>1</sup>) to delivering excellent research. Aston is a 'dual intensive' university that prioritises excellence in both teaching and research. At REF2021, 100% of eligible staff were submitted and 79% of research was classified as 'world leading' or 'internationally excellent'. This was the culmination of the University's [2018-2023 research strategy](#) and the commitment to research excellence is reinforced by the new [2030 Strategy](#) and its vision for Aston to be a leading university of science, technology and enterprise, measured by its positive transformational impact on the people, students, businesses and communities it serves.

Aston has 1002 (934.8 FTE) academic staff at all levels. In February 2024, this included 268 ECRs<sup>2</sup> on teaching and research or research-only contracts i.e. 164 Lecturers and 104 Post-Doctoral and Research Fellows/Associates (PDF/RF). It is these 268 ECRs who are the focus of our activities, but our action planning makes clear we provide specific actions to support our PDF/RFs. We also extend support to our 218 ECAs on teaching-only contracts and 533 doctoral researchers where appropriate and as resources allow.

Researchers at Aston are based mainly in three Colleges: Business and Social Sciences (BSS), Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) and Health and Life Sciences (HLS). Colleges, in turn, organise research in Schools, academic departments and research centres. Our four University Research Institutes (URI) provide cross-university centres of excellence and interdisciplinary working. Research support and leadership in Aston Colleges is provided by Deputy/Associate Deans Research (D/AD-R). University research support is provided by the Research and Knowledge and Exchange (RKE) department, directed by the Pro-Vice Chancellor Research (PVC-R), including application support, translation, commercialisation and knowledge transfer, research ethics and integrity, and research data and contracts. RKE also includes [Aston Graduate School](#), where our small core [Early Career Researcher development team](#) is located: a 0.6 FTE Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Researcher Development (APVC-RD, which includes Dean of Aston Graduate School), a role established in August 2021 to give leadership to ECR development; and, since 2020, a full-time ECR Professional Development Adviser. This team draws on the support of the College D/AD-Rs and professional services colleagues as appropriate.

## **Mechanisms for Internal Evaluation**

This evaluation was coordinated by the APVC-RD, supported by the ECR Professional Development Adviser. It utilised Aston's HREiRA governance structure, especially our HREiRA Oversight (HREiRA-OC) and ECR committees (ECRC) which meet at least termly. Both have responsibility for the implementation and progress of our Action Plan 2021-23; and both have been widely involved in the development of the Action Plan 2023-26 which emerges from the evaluation of the management, and delivery of the previous plan and in the submission of our final application. Membership of HREiRA-OC comprises the ECR development team, College D/AD-Rs, the Associate Director Organisational Development and two representatives nominated by the ECRC. The ECRC includes the ECR development team and 8 elected PDF/RFs and ECRs from the Colleges.

Our evaluation has included other key stakeholders who have provided continued and ongoing engagement with our plan: the PVC-R, D/AD-Rs, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor Research Integrity (APVC-RIE) and Director of Research Strategy, Funding and Impact. Evaluation has further involved senior researcher managers as part of the APVC-RD's reporting to key College research committees/forums; the main University Research Committee (URC), again through regular updates; the Deans of Colleges; the Director/Assistant Directors HR/OD; and

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<sup>1</sup> A separate HREiRA Glossary of Terms document is supplied with this submission.

<sup>2</sup> Aston's ECR Committee defines ECR/ECAs as Grade 8 and 9, and <7 years after appointment.

the University Executive. This consultation and discussion have produced valuable input and innovation for both action-setting and implementation, and key examples of this include the alignment of our researcher development activity with other charters and external awards; efficient and timely communications; participation in research decision-making and research integrity; appraisal, career development and formal mentoring; and the review of the ECR training programme.

### **Governance Structure**

Our governance structures are robust, transparent and inclusive, but we seek further improvements as we integrate researcher development action into other areas of activity, accreditation and award, such as equality, diversity and inclusion, and research integrity and ethics. Our ECRC has become a vibrant forum for oversight and innovation as its membership and activities have grown. It meets at least four times a year and is now an important 'voice' in decision-making and planning across the University (see next section). As detailed in the 2021-23 Action Plan review, ECR (including PDF/RFs) 'voice' and participation also occurs through their representation on College and University research committees.

Two nominated representatives of ECRC are also members of the HREiRA-OC (see above), which oversees action plan implementation. Members also act as 'Concordat Champions', ensure actions are implemented and review progress, and contribute direction and leadership. HREiRA-OC reports to the main URC, chaired by the PVC-R. Its membership includes senior College and URI research managers, APVC-RIE, D/AD-Rs, senior RKE representatives, professional services leads, and elected representatives from the ECRC and Aston Postgraduate Research Students Society. Researcher development updates are included in the URC's Upward Report to the University Senate, as appropriate.

### **Past Progress and Achievements**

The previous action plan period was defined by stability and consolidation, as we sought continual improvement through achievable objectives, workable solutions and effective delivery appropriate to our small core team. In reviewing implementation and progress, we integrated feedback from our 2021 award encouraging better data use to evidence progress against actions and establish longitudinal trends, and to include other data sources. Feedback further encouraged strengthening ECR involvement in the implementation and development of our action plans, and we have detailed considerable progress on this above. Overall, the 2021-23 Action Plan included 32 actions of which: 17 have been successfully achieved, 4 dropped after internal review, 1 deprioritised and 10 carried forward. In more detail:

1. **Environment and Culture:** importantly, we possess better data to judge progress towards a positive research culture that supports excellence, provides ECRs and their managers with excellent training, and promotes wellbeing, (mental) health and resilience. We have further progressed aligning researcher development activities to other charters and external awards to ensure a positive and inclusive researcher experience, and to ensure that ECRs and their managers are better integrated into decision and policy-making committees. In more detail:
  - a. **At institution level**, data gathering, analysis and reporting is more robust, and we have recorded improvements in beneficiary experience. This includes positive trends in the uptake of well-being, mental health and EDI training, and the latter has been aligned more closely with Aston's wider EDI activity. Specifically, training and support for research integrity and ethics has been aligned to the RI Concordat, research ethics policies and processes rationalised, and foundation training in research ethics became mandatory for all staff in 2023. Progress on auditing 'fair' ECR workloads has been included in the new Workload Management Allocation System for pilot in 2023/24.

- b. **At Manager level**, data demonstrates that uptake of EDI, wellbeing and mental health training has been strengthened, as have formal opportunities to contribute to research policy and decision-making. ECR requests for flexible working are low, but we attribute this to Aston's hybrid working policies. The action to introduce an automatic resource checkpoint at induction was dropped after the webpage project upon which it relied was paused. Qualitative data nevertheless confirms significant improvement in ECR induction.
  - c. **At researcher level**, training uptake has improved, as has ECR confidence in support for wellbeing, and research integrity and ethics. ECRs are now well-represented on key college and university research, and research integrity and ethics, committees. ECRC influence on shaping and implementation of actions is strong, notable examples of which include 'fair' workloads, training programme development, and the review of CEDARS data. The ECRC also contributed to writing the ECR Handbook, the introduction of personalised inductions for PDF/RFs, understanding better key challenges in order to implement action and shape future planning, especially the need for timelier, engaging and differentiated ECR communications; more visible guidance to drive take-up of professional development day entitlements; and to promote engagement with formal mentoring opportunities.
2. **Employment:** we now possess an expanded and well-regarded suite of training opportunities as judged by our beneficiaries to deliver high quality training in support of ECR employment needs. We have also progressed actions for researcher managers to enable them to contribute to a rounded and coherent ECR support structure that begins at induction and continues throughout the ECR phase of career. In more detail:
- a. **At institutional level**, training engagement remains strong, although progress towards targets for researcher manager training in fair and open recruitment and selection training has slowed. In response to our inability to progress automation of elements of the induction process, we have implemented improvements to the workflow between HR and RKE to ensure up-to-date email distributions lists. We also introduced a personal induction with the Professional Development Advisor for all PDF/RFs, and ECR focus group data has confirmed that the experience of this is both positive and lasting.
  - b. **At manager level**, as well as the positive developments in training take-up reported in 1.b above, researcher managers report high levels of confidence in their ability to review/appraise staff effectively and that their role as appraisers is valued. However, the aim to strengthen the value of annual appraisal/review to career development planning remains constrained by wider challenges relating to academic staff engagement with the formal appraisal system.
  - c. **At researcher level**, the commitment to audit understanding of and compliance with institutional policies and procedures was dropped due to difficulties integrating this into current HR procedures. More positively, ECRs report good opportunities for appraisal/review and that these are valuable, as are the opportunities for career development and planning discussions with managers.
3. **Professional and Career Development:** our ECR professional and career development now comprises an extensive range of professional training, career support and networking opportunities, to which new peer-led and external expert-led sessions have been added. This programme also supports more diverse ECR career pathways and employment planning. In more detail:

- a. **At institutional level**, opportunities for training are judged fair, and the training programme has been expanded through ECRC-initiated sessions on career development, leadership, the Research Excellence Framework, equality, diversity and inclusion, and decolonising the curriculum. New training has been led by external experts and (importantly) our own ECRs, and our engagement with the British Academy ECR Midlands Network is strong. The commitment to 10-days professional development per year has been mainstreamed into communications, induction, ECR and researcher manager training, but we recognise that there is still more to do. Action to promote job security has been aligned more closely to PDF/RFs through newly created fund to bridge gaps between research contracts and the proposal for a Vice Chancellor's Post-Doctoral Fellowship scheme. Consolidation of ECR training in knowledge exchange and commercialisation has begun.
- b. **At manager level**, we have more mentors than mentees registered on our online system, but levels of both remain low. In addressing this challenge, we have gained feedback from the ECRC that mentoring is far more extensive than data from the formal system shows; and that more clearly targeted communication is needed to drive uptake. Both insights inform action under our new plan.
- c. **At researcher level**, our training programme has completed its third full cycle, and this has been assembled into an online library of training and career resources. Feedback on both is strong, as is that for the reintroduction of in-person training and cross-university and interdisciplinary networking events for all researcher managers and doctoral researchers. Data demonstrates positive ECR evaluations of career planning and research identity development opportunities, and ECRs also report significant professional development activity not captured in the self-report and systems data. ECRs also report their positive involvement in college and university research committees.

### Strategy Objectives and Implementation Plan

Our 2023-26 Action Plan is informed by the new [Aston 2023-2030 Strategy](#), which also provides a number of the objectives against which the longer-term impact of our actions on beneficiary experience, behaviour, policy and organisation will be judged. A core aim of the Aston 2030 Strategy is to *'make the world a better place through education, research and innovation'*, and among its five core values are the elevation of research ambition and excellence, an inclusive research culture distinguished by its collaborative and innovative character, and the commitment to research integrity valuing honesty, trust, fairness and ethical behaviour. By 2030 Aston's aim is to become *'the best place to work'* and to possess a sector leading reputation as an institution that *'nurtures an inclusive, collaborative and supportive environment'* able to *'develop and empower our people to realise their ambition and full potential'*. Providing excellent support for our ECRs is central to realising this aspiration.

In more detail, our priorities for the 2023-2026 Action Plan are:

1. **Environment and Culture**: the creation of an excellent and inclusive research culture, underpinned by positive behaviours. We will thus continue to align our Concordat actions to other charters and external awards [ECI2, ECI5/ECM2] and to the University's new People Strategy and Enterprise Strategy [EI2, ER1, PCDR6]. We will also ensure that ECR and PDF/RFs representation is included in the terms of reference of research committees and decision-making bodies [EI7]; raise the uptake of training and support to ECRs and their managers in equality, diversity and inclusion, including mental health 'champion' training [ECI2, ECI4, ECR2]; tackling discrimination, bullying and harassment [ECI3]; supporting researcher well-being [ECI3, ECI4, ECR3]; and

strengthening engagement with research integrity and ethics [ECI5, ECM2]. Specific actions and success measures are directed to support PDF/RFs, including healthy working [ECI3], induction [ECR1, EI2], job security [EI6], professional development [PCDI1/6], research funding applications [PCDM5], bespoke advice [PCDR1], career development planning and guidance [PCDR3], and research translation [PCDI5, PCDR56]. Actions also prioritise more robust and diverse data to better establish benchmarks and minimum targets, and judge progress against clearly defined success measures [ECI6, EC14, ECM1, EI1, EI4]; and to deepen our understanding ECR experience of policy, EDI, and professional development [ECM3, ECR4, PCDI6]. Success measures are sustained positive trends in training uptake, ECR representation, and satisfaction ratings from an annual CEDARS survey [ECI6], increased levels of participation as recorded by the new iLearn system (MS LMS) [ECI6] and we will explore the data potential of the Aston all-staff survey. The selective use of Pulse Surveys will snapshot progress for specific actions.

2. **Employment:** Our actions will support the Aston 2030 Strategy's objective to *'differentiate ourselves by providing our people and beneficiaries with a unique value proposition'*. Aston has a relatively small number of PDF/RFs, but we will contribute to this long-term aim with actions promoting job security and more effective redeployment opportunities, the roll-out of a new Vice Chancellor's Post-Doctoral Fellowship Scheme [EI6] and research leave arrangements [PCDI4], and the deployment of central funds to bridge gaps between fixed-term employment contracts [EI6] and support re-engagement in research following periods of extended leave [EI3]. Actions also empower ECRs to take greater control of their careers by driving forward user-friendly, fair and inclusive recruitment, promotion and reward processes [EI1, EI3, EI4], further training/advice to support diverse career pathways and employment outcomes [PCDI5], industrial, knowledge exchange and commercialisation opportunities and fellowships [PCDR6], and support for competitive grant writing [PCDR1]. Success measures include beneficiary take up and perceptions of training and job security initiatives as measured by RKE and HR data; data from specific CEDARS questions to judge progress against ambitious minimum targets; and data from the new iLearn tool, which will also be used to better identify baseline and minimum participation targets, and to judge progress against these.
3. **Professional and Career Development:** Our actions will support the 2030 Strategy's ambitions to improve Aston's international and national standings for research excellence, and reputation as a leader in high impact and interdisciplinary research. ECRs are recognised as central to achieving these long-term goals, and actions ensure that extensive training and development opportunities are communicated in more timely and engaging ways by using the new iLearn tool and creating an ECR 'space' for information, advertising and communication on the new One Aston staff intranet [ECI1, ECR3, ER1, PCDI2]. Action on career development and review is also our priority, and this will ensure all PDF/RFs receive a 'buddy' on induction, and that rates of formal mentoring, annual review/appraisal, and professional development day entitlements increase significantly [PCDI6, PCDI1, PCDI2, PCDR4]. Important here are actions to improve researcher manager awareness of and support for these initiatives [EI4, EM4, PCDR3, PCDI5]. Success in these areas is the creation of more effective and timely communications and guidance, including the new ECR 'space' on the One Aston staff intranet. Success will also be demonstrated by sustained positive trends in response to specific CEDARS questions from both ECRs and their managers, and from the creation of new baseline data and progress against minimum participation targets derived from HR data and the new iLearn tool. Our actions will also use qualitative focus group data to inform how we address the challenges of developing effective and useful communications [PCDI6].