

HR Excellence in Research Award 10-year Review Report: September 2021

Our commitment to the HR Excellence in Research Award aligns closely with Aston University's mission to deliver for its beneficiaries, with our Early Career Researchers (ECRs) being integral to our core activities of collaborative research with high translation and impact, and skill development and industry building. The [Aston Strategy 2018-2023](#) explicitly recognises the importance of attracting, retaining and supporting high quality staff; and our recruitment processes ensure that candidate's career aims align closely with our strategic objectives. This is especially important given the growth of our research staff detailed below. The University is further committed to increasing the representation of minority groups amongst all staff and students, and The Guardian newspaper named Aston [University of the Year in 2020](#) in recognition of our track-record in realising this. Aston's [Research Strategy 2019-2023](#) is constructed around four mutually reinforcing elements: Impact, Collaboration, Excellence and Sustainability. Together with our [Knowledge Exchange \(KE\) Strategy](#), this provides a framework to prioritise strategic investment in research and assess how research and KE activities deliver for our beneficiaries. Our commitment to excellence informs all our activity, including the recruitment and development of our researchers. This commitment reinforces Aston's position as a 'dual-intensive' university which prioritises excellence in both research and teaching.

Process for internal evaluation

Internal evaluation and monitoring of the action plans for the HR Excellence in Research Award has been undertaken by a dedicated committee since our 8-year review in 2019. The HR Excellence in Research (HREiRA) Oversight Committee has been chaired by Professor Jacqueline Blissett (ECR Facilitator) and attended by an ECR representative, the Researcher Development Advisor, College Associate Deans for Research (ADR), Dean of the Graduate School and the Associate Director of Organisational Development. Members of this committee have served as 'Concordat Champions', providing strategic leadership around the Concordat to support the Career Development of Researchers, and ensuring that operational steps identified by the group are implemented effectively. This committee reports directly to the University Research Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, Professor Simon Green. Research Committee membership includes academic research leads, key colleagues from Professional Services, Dean of the Graduate School, ECR Facilitator and an ECR representative.

An Early Career Researchers' Committee (a sub-committee of Research Committee) has been involved in the evaluation and monitoring of the action plans since its establishment in 2014. The HREiRA Oversight Committee has met termly since the 8-year review in 2019. At each meeting, progress against the Action plan formulated in 2019 is discussed and next stages planned, alongside issues raised by the ECR committee and CEDARs surveys. Amendments to the Action plan and decisions are then approved through Research Committee. Additional input is sought where relevant from Executive Deans, ECR Committee, research staff, Associate Directors of HR, HR Business Partners and Organisational Development Business Partners, Research Knowledge Exchange (RKE), Research Integrity Office, and the Director of HR. All these stakeholders have been consulted regarding the 10-year review report and have had the opportunity to contribute and comment.

Documentation and evidence of progress

Aside from the obvious disruption caused by COVID-19, the last two years at Aston have given a period of consolidation and stability that has allowed us to make considerable progress against the Action plan. The 2019 Action Plan was developed as a result of a gap analysis, and the improvement in management and delivery of progress against the current action plan has identified further areas for improvement in the forthcoming 2-year period. This is articulated in the attached HREiRA Action Plan which states our strategic goals for 2021-23.

This review demonstrates our success and the progress that we have achieved, focusing on the last 2 years, in establishing and refining our infrastructure to support researchers' career

development. It also identifies areas where good progress has been made but further work is required. In the [2019 Action Plan](#), we included 10 actions outstanding from the 2016 review alongside new areas for improvement, resulting in over 40 targets for action in total. The majority have been fully achieved, (elements of) 14 are in progress, and 2 have been paused. More detail of progress, actions and decisions can be seen in the *Action Plan Update 2019-2021*. A small number, particularly those related to institutional policies, practices and awards subject to external review, had original dates for completion beyond 2021 and thus are carried forward to the *HREiRA Action plan 2021-23*. Links to both documents can be found [here](#). We have undertaken longitudinal analysis (where possible) of prior PIRLS and CROS results to the results of the 2020 CEDARS review to evidence change, although numbers of responses to CROS 2019 were small which limits interpretation of change. Nonetheless, we had a good response to CEDARS 2020 which gives us a new baseline from which to reliably measure change moving forward. We have also, where possible, examined routine statistics collected by the institution on training, career development, and include references to newly developed resources.

Addressing issues raised by the Review Panel in 2019

One concern raised by the previous Review Panel in 2019 was ensuring that the needs and views of ECRs were distinguished from those of Early Career Academics (ECAs). Some infrastructures accommodate all beneficiaries, which is necessary in an institution of Aston's size. However, the needs of each group are accommodated with specific activities, sessions and services targeted at ECRs (e.g. A complete training cycle for 2020, followed by a new one for 2021-22; a library of training resources from both external and internal events; a series of interdisciplinary lunch time networking events, which will continue in the next academic year, as well as several events with external presenters). The ECR committee includes ECAs but a clear distinction is made in its membership which is documented in the Committee's Terms of Reference. An ECR (independent research fellow) is the current chair of the ECR Committee. A different ECR, who has recently made the transition to ECA, sits on the HR Excellence in Research Award Oversight Committee.

Communication process with 'hard to reach' ECRs was a primary concern in the prior review. We piloted several methods of maintaining up-to-date communication lists to ensure inclusivity whilst remaining appropriately focused on the ECR and ECA community. As a result, we now have a new mailing list which is updated on a monthly basis, using information we receive from HR about newly recruited research staff. The mailing list is used for regular communication (normally once a week) with ECRs (through the RKE ECR Forum inbox), as well as *ad hoc* e-mails for relevant events, funding opportunities, etc. Furthermore, we have a Blackboard module, with all ECRs enrolled on it, which we use for training, networking events and as a second line of indirect communication. Further mailing lists are also created in the RKE ECR Forum inbox, for those ECRs who are also part of a different subgroup, (for example, participants in the Broadening Horizons 2021 pilot Mentoring Scheme).

Key achievements and progress 2019-2021

Aston has seen a substantial increase in the number of ECRs since 2019, when we had 115 ECRs. We currently have 164 staff on research-only contracts (Grade 7-9), of which 78 are within their first 2 years at Aston. In total, we have 292 staff defined as ECRs or ECAs. Research Support at Aston is provided by the RKE team, under the direction of the P-VC for Research, and includes support from Strategic Funding Managers, business development, knowledge transfer partnership, technology transfer, international research, contracts, impact, and research integrity. RKE staff are regularly involved in one-to-one support of ECAs and ECRs as well as group training. RKE also includes the Graduate School support infrastructure, and in 2019 there was one dedicated 'Professional Development Adviser for Researchers' to support researcher development and doctoral student supervisors by promoting the Researcher Development Framework and providing training opportunities, which complement those offered by Organisational Development (part of Human Resources). In 2020, we appointed a second person into this role with primary responsibility for the development of ECRs. This long-term investment has dramatically increased our capacity to provide tailored provision and support exclusively for this group. The development and delivery

of a training programme to develop core research and transferable skills explicitly for ECRs in response to their needs has been a major achievement for us since 2019.

We have further embedded our ECRs into our organisational structures and decision-making processes, in recognition of the essential role they play in our research culture, their value to the institution and as an aid to regular and collective review. Our ECR Committee continues to play an important role in the development and review of our infrastructure and processes, and representatives of this committee are incorporated members of the HREiRA Oversight Committee and the University's main Research Committee. Dialogue with ADRs in the Colleges and with School and departmental heads, together with the incorporation of this material into training activity, have produced more opportunities for ECRs to participate in committee and decision-making structures more generally, as evidenced by CEDARS. The importance of these 'citizenship' activities to the existing promotion criteria has also been made more transparent to ECRs, as has the promotion criteria and their application at College-level promotion committees. We have seen some successes in staff being transferred from Research to Teaching and Research or Teaching-only contracts to aid job security, thus providing a good basis upon which to build. More generally, we have also made early progress on strengthening our monitoring of ECR progression, including into roles outside of higher education.

We have also made progress on developing inclusive, equitable and transparent institutional policies and practices, and communicating the importance of these to ECRs and their managers. EDI issues feature regularly at ECR Committee meetings through reports from the P-VC Equality and Diversity and HR, and there is evidence of greater uptake of EDI training among managers. All members of recruitment and selection panels must complete EDI training, and the commitment to EDI is further evident in the development of consolidated University policy and the clear targets and timelines for applications to external awards and charters to gauge progress towards these. Awareness of, and how to access, the University's Wellbeing Toolkit and other resources promoting good (mental) health and resilience, have also been widely advertised to ECRs. To further aid wellbeing and inclusivity, the ECR and HREiRA Oversight committees actively engage with Deans of College and Associate Deans Research on how to substantiate our commitment to delivering fair workloads to support ECR research and career development, and we have made provision to monitor this commitment via audit and researcher survey. Similarly, while we now communicate annually to ECRs their entitlement to a minimum 10-days professional development per year, the modest take-up as reported by CEDARs and difficulties in monitoring this is further part of our committees' dialogue with college Deans.

Specifically, our key highlights are:

- Improvements in communication structure, ECR forum, ECR committee, Yammer, Twitter (#AstonECRs) and web-based information for researchers, both general <https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/supporting-our-researchers> and specific for ECRs <https://www.aston.ac.uk/research/supporting-our-researchers/ecr-development>
- ECR committee has been re-established and social events have been established (COVID permitting & will resume)
- ECR specific Aston training programme, which consists of 36 sessions, divided in six thematic clusters. Namely, Wellbeing, Communication and Publishing, Finance, Management & Impact, Career Paths, Collegiality and Collaboration, Practical Skills for Researchers.
- Reinvigorated Blackboard resources for ECRs, namely training videos and relevant materials from external and internal sessions, additional readings, step-by-step guides and instructions, discussion boards and online meeting rooms for ECRs to network.
- Induction/on-boarding project completed with accompanying updated ECR Handbook <https://www.aston.ac.uk/sites/default/files/ecr-welcome-pack-digital.pdf>
- ECR committee now hold their own budget. This year the majority has been spent on ECR self-selected training from external providers where in-house training was not available.
- Appointed 2 Professional Development Advisor for Researchers, one focused on ECRs.

- Established specific reporting routes for outcomes of CEDARs and planned actions, as well as assessment of progress against other key strategic plans (e.g. around inclusivity <https://www.aston.ac.uk/about/our-values/inclusive-aston>) to ECR committee and HREiRA Oversight committee.
- Significant advances in our Mentoring programme development (<https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/hr/development/mentoring>) including formalisation of the process to match mentors and mentees that can be accessed by all. This will be evaluated in our next phase of action.
- Improved access to and awareness of our resources for research leaders and managers <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/hr/development/organisational-development>; see <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/documents/hr/OD/od-brochure-2020-2021-web.pdf> (for managers).

Next Steps

In our 2019 report, we stated that ‘Aston has all the essential building-blocks in place to make a step-change in the quality of our provision over the coming years; our aspiration is the provision of an outstanding researcher-development experience, underpinned by effective and enabling policies and practices’. Our Action Plan review presents the evidence that we have set in place many of the processes and infrastructure required to realise that step-change. One example of the continued commitment Aston has to the development of its research and researchers is the creation of a new Senior Management position: *Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Researcher Development (APVCRD)*. This position combines responsibility for the Graduate School as well as Early Career Researcher provision and is led by Professor Phillip Mizen, supported by Professional Development Advisors for Researchers and an administrative team. This constitutes a further investment of central resources, together with a ring-fenced early career researcher budget to support training and development activities, and will help ensure the needs of Early Career Researchers are represented in all key aspects of University’s Research strategy and provision, as well as ensuring streamlined access to the administrative infrastructure needed for operational management and delivery of the Action Plan across the Colleges. Under the leadership of the APVCRD, our focus of action for the next two years combines evaluation of the impact of our new processes and systems on our beneficiaries, undertaking remaining actions from the 2019 plan as well as new actions identified over the last 2 years. New actions have been identified via CEDARs analysis, ECR committee input, and HREiRA Oversight committee input, and are listed in [HREiRA Action Plan 2021-23](#).

The primary areas of action under each of the following areas are:

Environment and culture

1. Evaluating impact of 2019-2021 actions (awareness of concordat, improvements in research integrity resources, bullying & harassment policies, induction resources) on ECR experience.
2. Continued Institutional progress against external charters for Equality and Diversity.
3. Audit of University commitment to fair workloads for ECRs.

Employment

1. Evaluating impact of our 2019-2021 actions regarding new resources (induction, management training, mentoring, and ECR specific training) on ECR experience.
2. Identification and advertising of ECA opportunities to participate in decision making processes
3. Automation of ECRs into relevant school and college email distribution lists

Professional and Career Development

1. Promote and audit 10 day per year CPD for all staff.
2. Evaluating impact of our 2019-2021 actions regarding new resources (career support and ECR specific training) on ECR experience.
3. Devising mechanisms for improved monitoring of career pathways of Aston ECRs.