

PUBLIC AFFAIRS POLICY



This document sets out the University's policy governing political engagement and lobbying.

Version	1.1
Executive Sponsor	Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications
Officer Responsible for Policy/ Procedures	Policy Advisor
Consultation Process	EA to the VC and CEO Director of Marketing Director of Regional Strategy
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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Aston University is proud to tell its story externally and works hard to maintain a strong advocacy profile across all tiers of government. It is important to play our role in local, regional, national and international policy discussions, and to showcase our academic expertise by sharing insights with stakeholders at local, regional, national and international levels. With such high-profile engagement can come reputational risk though, so care must be taken to ensure that our relationship with the world of politics and policymaking is subject to appropriate governance and procedure.

This Policy outlines the University approach both at an institutional and individual level to maintaining reputation in relation to political matters and when dealing directly with policymakers. The University's press and communications team is focused on furthering our reputation amongst our stakeholders, including but not limited to government officials and those in elected office.

1. SCOPE OF THE POLICY

1.1 What is covered by the Policy

This Policy sets out:

- the standards governing the university's dealings with elected politicians and policy-makers at an organisational and individual level; and
- directions in respect of involvement in political matters by staff.

1.2 Who is covered by the Policy

All those engaged by the University, must be aware of and comply with this Policy. This includes staff and non-staff such as consultants, casual workers and those engaged on an Emeritus, Visiting or Honorary basis.

1.3 Breach of this Policy

Any breach of this Policy and its associated procedures by staff will be investigated in accordance with the University's disciplinary procedure. A serious breach may amount to gross misconduct and could therefore result in summary dismissal.

Any breach of this Policy and its associated procedures by non-staff will be investigated and steps taken in accordance with the law and any relevant contract.

1.4 Policy Ownership

The Executive has approved this Policy, the Executive Director of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications is the Executive sponsor and the Policy Advisor is the officer responsible for the Policy. Any questions about the operation of this Policy or any concerns that the Policy has not been followed should be referred in the first instance to the Policy Advisor.

2. POLICY STATEMENTS

2.1 The University's engagement

The University engages with external organisations and elected representatives, locally, regionally and nationally, to advocate on matters of importance to the institution. The University also contributes opinion and information on request to a wide range of policymakers and influencers. However, the University never involves itself in party political affairs, and remains studiously politically neutral.

2.2 Political funding

The University does not fund political organisations or political parties. Staff and non-staff may attend party conferences or other political events as an official representative of the University, but only with the prior written approval of the relevant Executive Dean or Head of Department. The University does not provide political donations to any party or political organisation.

Staff may attend such events in a private capacity without connection to their employment at the University. However, staff must ensure that any social media communications or other publications that they share in respect of the event make clear that they are attending as a private individual and not as a representative of the University.

2.3 Corporate engagement

Any engagement at a corporate level which is undertaken by senior management or those working in policy roles reporting centrally to the Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive to help the institution coordinate and successfully advocate on behalf of the University. Support can be accessed from the Policy Advisor/Regional Public Affairs Manager when considering any approach to politicians or political bodies.

2.4 Lobbying activity

The Policy Advisor, the Regional Public Affairs Manager and other colleagues lobby relevant organisations and representative groups (such as UUK, the Higher Education Policy Institute, All Party Parliamentary Group and other formal and informal lobby groups on current issues affecting the sector (e.g. Brexit, widening participation campaigns and the status of international students in the UK).

Colleagues undertaking any lobbying activity on behalf of the University must ensure they accurately reflect the University's position and that their activities are in the best interests of the University. The Policy Advisor is responsible for managing key relationships with partners such as HEPI and UUK and can advise colleagues on the University's position on a particular issue.

2.5 Even-handedness

On matters directly related to the work of the University, staff and non-staff should be even-handed in all dealings with political parties.

2.6 Political activities

While the University encourages and supports involvement in community activities, the use of University resources or any action/or omission made by an person subject to this Policy which may create the appearance that the University is supporting, endorsing, or opposing any particular political position or political party/candidate, charity, product, or specific religion is not permitted. This is in line with the University's commitment to political neutrality.

Staff and non-staff may engage in political activities, including standing for election to public office, if such activities are:

- undertaken in their own personal capacity;
- carried out in their own time or during any period of leave agreed under the Parliamentary Leave policy; and
- not in conflict with their responsibilities to the University or applicable laws.

Staff and non-staff undertaking office-bearing roles within political parties which could lead to conflicts of interest or publicity linked to their roles at the University should inform their managers in advance of commencement of such role. These roles may include, but are not limited to, those within a local political party such as Secretary, Treasurer or Equalities Officer.

2.7 Pre-election period

The pre-election period, previously known as 'purdah', describes the period of time immediately before elections or referendums when specific restrictions on communications activity are in place.

During election campaign periods, there are laws and conventions that restrict actions and announcements that could show affiliation to a political party or have an influence on the outcome. As it is imperative for the University to remain politically neutral and ensure

institutional communications, the University does not endorse any political party or candidate throughout the pre-election period.

Furthermore, as a politically impartial organisation, the University must not:

- advocate for or endorse the views of any individual party or candidate;
- explicitly compare the University's views to those of individual parties or candidates;
- donate funds to any individual party or candidate; and/or
- allow itself to be cited in any candidate's manifesto or publicity materials.

2.8 Political statements

In accordance with the Marketing and Communications Policy, only the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive and members of the Executive are the principal spokespeople for all policy and corporate matters. Academic experts for the three Colleges who have been trained in working with media also speak to the media on behalf of the University, in conjunction with the Head of Press and Communications.

In any event, the principal spokespeople may make only political statements or engage in any other political activity with the prior permission to do so by the Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive or their nominee.

2.9 Discretion

Proper discretion and judgement must be exercised on matters directly related to the work of the University and those subject to this Policy should recognise that certain political activities may be incompatible with public facing or senior roles within the University. Particular attention must be paid to the Public Sector Equality Duty that binds the University. It is incumbent upon the University to retain the trust and confidence of its beneficiaries and as such those subject to this Policy should therefore give consideration as to whether their political activity is consistent with these priorities.

2.10 Reputation

Both staff and non-staff are ambassadors for the University and should be mindful not to allow themselves to become embroiled in matters of political controversy which could serve to damage the reputation of the University.

2.11 Social media

Both staff and non-staff should be mindful at all times of the impact which statements or responses on social media could have on reputation and political relations, particularly if reference is made to Aston University, and refrain from any activity which might negatively impact on the institution in accordance with the Social Media Policy.



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