

HR Excellence in Research Award *Revised 8 year Review Report*

October 2019

Process for internal evaluation

This report has been revised to take into consideration the feedback provided by Vitae's review report dated 30/04/2019.

Approval, internal evaluation and monitoring of the action plans, for the Award, continues to be undertaken by the University Research Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, Professor Simon Green. Research Committee membership includes both academic research leads, key colleagues from Professional Services, Dean of the Graduate School and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) from each School. 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 early in 2014. Professor Jacqueline Blissett was appointed in 2019 to the role of academic lead for the professional development of ECRs; she is also a member of Research Committee.

At key review stages plans are discussed, amended and approved through Research Committee, with additional input from Executive Deans, ECR Committee, all research staff, all Associate Directors of HR, HR Business Partners and Organisational Development Business Partners, Research Knowledge Exchange, Research Integrity Office, Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee and the Director of HR.

The last two years at Aston have been characterised by considerable change at senior management level including a new Vice-Chancellor, a new Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, a new ECR Academic Lead and a new Research Strategy, which underlines the importance of the University's beneficiaries (students; business and the professions; our region and society). Planning for Brexit has also taken time and resource, the extent of which was not clear at the time of our previous submission. This has included some important work on communicating with and reassuring researchers from European countries and supporting them in making applications for settled status.

To ensure that Aston University has embedded a robust mechanism to keep track of and regularly review its action plan, and appropriately updated its strategy and actions, we have established an **'HR Excellence in Research Award' oversight group**, co-chaired by Professor Jacqueline Blissett, and Dean of Aston Graduate School, Professor Gertrud Reershemius.

To ensure strategic leadership of this important area and that operational steps identified by the group are implemented effectively, Concordat Champions have been nominated by the PVC Research within Schools (Associate Dean Research or Deputy Dean level) and HR (at Associate Director Level). This group reports directly to Research Committee. This will ensure that "*loss of corporate memory*" will not happen again. The group now has a dedicated folder structure within Aston's network, which provides ease of access from different parts of the university to all members of the group. This will also ensure that data is not lost with those moving jobs/institution and reliable records for new team members.

Due to these changes, the introduction of the new Concordat, and taking into consideration the Vitae's reviewers' recommendations, we have undertaken a new gap analysis to demonstrate the success and progress that we have achieved over the years in establishing and refining our

infrastructure to support researchers' career development. In addition, we have utilised this opportunity to identify new and emerging needs, and missed opportunities (including steps to mitigate them in the future) and aligned our plans with the new Concordat. While taking a '*Fresh Start*' approach, where possible, we have linked to and reported on our previous achievements and plans. The new gap analysis and action plan did identify and bring forward previously planned actions.

The gap analysis addresses the Concordat's three main principles: Environment and Culture, Employment, and Professional and Career Development. We have addressed the three principles in relation to Researchers and Managers of Researchers in addition to the institution's perspective. We have endeavoured to identify the infrastructure available to achieve the requirements for each of the stakeholders. This has helped us in identifying further gaps and actions to support Researchers and Managers meeting their responsibilities in line with the Concordat. The action plan combined gaps and actions but only presented from institution's perspective.

We were keen to take the reviewers' recommendations to undertake longitudinal analysis of the PIRLS and CROS results to identify trends and gaps that would feed into our future plans. However, the response rates from 2019 PIRLS and CROS were not sufficient to provide a representative view. This is now in our new action plan where we intend to undertake meaningful longitudinal analysis of past PIRLS and CROS (2015 & 2017) and future 2021 results.

We appreciate reviewers' concerns regarding ECRs' voice not being distinguished from Early Career Academics (ECAs) and lecturing staff. We would like to assure the reviewers that there is a clear distinction within Aston regarding ECRs (in line with the Concordat definition) and ECAs/lecturing staff. However, there are overlapping and common interests, and to ensure efficiency in the services we provide, some infrastructures will accommodate all beneficiaries. Although the ECR committee includes ECAs a clear distinction is made in its membership and this will be documented in the Committee's Terms of Reference.

To reassure the reviewers with regards to 'hard to reach' ECR groups in the University; the ECR committee receives reports of all ECRs and ECAs staff twice a year, which allows direct communications to all ECRs across Aston.

Key achievements and progress 2016-2019

Aston has maintained numbers of Early Career Researchers since 2016 and currently has 115 in post. Research Support at Aston is provided by the Research and Knowledge Exchange team, under the direction of the PVC for Research. The team included a dedicated '*Research Development Adviser*' 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).

Aston University Graduate School's main objective is to provide a supportive environment for all research students across the University, with a view to widening and enriching their experience during their research studies. The '*Research Development Adviser*' is now based within the Graduate School and they are mainly responsible for the development and delivery of a training programme to develop core research and transferable skills. The latter overlaps with some of the needs for ECRs, and therefore some sessions are tailored and made available to ECRs.

In the 2016 Action Plan, we identified 15 areas where there were opportunities for improvement. One third of the proposed actions have been completed. The other two third of actions were identified as requiring further work (4 actions) or ongoing monitoring (6 actions), have been included

in the new action plan of 43 actions for completion during the next phase. The 'HR Excellence in Research Award' Oversight Group will directly monitor and facilitate the delivery of these actions, e.g. sharing best practice across schools, implement a strand of the Aston Mentoring Scheme dedicated to ECR mentoring, and increase awareness of alternative and unusual career pathways inside and outside academia.

The success of our initiatives to increase research managers' awareness of their responsibilities is evidenced by the 2017 PIRLS survey, where 90% of respondents felt confident in leading their research group which is also reflected in our internal survey, which was conducted between August and October 2019 (33 out of 34 respondents). CROS 2017 showed that 77% ECRs are engaged with their own career development, and 90% are taking ownership of their career development. We are confident that these findings demonstrate that research managers they have a greater understanding of their responsibilities.

Our key highlights are summarised below:

- The University's Research Development Advisor, together with the academic lead for the professional development of ECRs (Professor Jacqueline Blissett), have a key role in the implementation of Aston's Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research Staff and now direct responsibility in delivering monitoring and facilitating the action plan through the HR Excellence in Research Award oversight group.
- As noted earlier, the Graduate School training programme to develop core research and transferable skills, overlaps with some of the needs for ECRs, and therefore is now available and tailored to ECRs. The Graduate School/ Early Career Researcher Professional Development Training Programme is now publicised at the start of each academic year, with additional courses being added to meet any additional demand and as opportunities arise. Work with Organisational Development team has ensured a clear distinction between the opportunities that are available for ECRs, Early Career Academics, and postgraduate research students through targeted and tailored programmes.
- Early Career Researchers, with the Graduate School and Organisational Development, continue to determine the content of professional development activities throughout the year as well as the annual conference, which takes place every September.
- The HR Business Partnership model in the Schools continues to be effective in providing support to both Principal Investigators and researchers in improving practice when recruiting research staff and in managing staff as they come towards the end of their contracts. There is good evidence from CROS that Career Development Planning is being implemented and improving. CROS 2017 showed that 77% ECRs are engaged with their own career development, 90% are taking ownership of their career development and 74% maintain a formal record of your continuing professional development activities, which 12% increase, compared to 2015 CROS results.
- In response to feedback in the 2017 PIRLS, the former approach to staff appraisals (Professional Development and Performance Review - PDPR) was changed to an online recording system. This facilitated the introduction of a new approach for all staff appraisals – My Development Conversation (MyDC) – that offers a continual cycle of performance conversations throughout the year, rather than a single performance development review annually. This is particularly important for research staff employed on temporary contracts so that they can work with their managers from the outset to identify the professional

development opportunities they wish to pursue to improve their employability and to develop core research and transferable skills. This approach also empowers research staff to take responsibility for their professional development and ensures that they are encouraged to consider a wide range of career options, including those in other sectors, as well as in higher education research or teaching roles¹. We were anticipating that the 2019 CROS and PIRLS surveys would provide us with an early opportunity to assess the acceptability and effectiveness of this new approach to reviews, however, the response rates were not sufficient to provide a representative view.

- We were pleased to achieve a response rate of 38% for PIRLS 2017 at Aston, compared with a national response rate of 25%. Aston's response rate for CROS 2017 of 24% is an area we intend to improve.
- The Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM)² and coaching courses³, offered by Organisational Development, continue to be popular. There is also now a range of online resources to support managers and leaders with quick reference guides, including Vidcasts available on via the HR *intranet* page (see appendix for screenshot). The acceptability and usefulness of these online Vidcasts will be assessed through the PIRLS going forward.
- Aston University was successful in its 2018 application for the Institutional Silver Athena SWAN award and has retained the Silver Athena Swan Award held by the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences and by the School of Life and Health Sciences⁴. A Gold Athena Swan Award remains an aspiration for the School of Engineering. Engagement with the Athena SWAN Charter has highlighted the importance of being able to efficiently access and interpret data relating to all aspects of the University's activities. By evaluating our data, we are able to make meaningful assessments of our position, and therefore identify key opportunities for change. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion leads have been working across the University to advance this area and communicate our commitment in this area and we will shortly publish "*Inclusive Aston; Diversity and Inclusion Strategy*"⁵ on the HR webpages. Aston's commitment in this area has resulted in the increase of female researcher representation within the university from 37.7% in 2016-17 to 40.7% in 2018-19, which shows a welcomed progression toward the UK 2018 benchmark of 47% for research only staff. Aston's Gender Pay Gap⁶ work has seen an improvement in the proportion of women in the top quartile of pay at Aston from 35% in 2018 to 37% in 2019 and likewise the proportion of women in the upper middle quartile of paid roles has increased from 48% in 2018 to 51% in 2019.
- The series of seminars and workshops, delivered by Research Knowledge Exchange and organised with the individual Schools, on writing for publication and writing proposals for Research Fellowships have been well received. The programme of activities offered in the Early Careers Conference⁷ held annually in September has covered areas ranging from Mentoring, Promotion, Flexible Working, the USS pension scheme, applying for research funding and grant management. The Programme is determined by Early Career Researchers themselves at their regular Early Career Forum meetings, so progress and enhancements are made without being driven by 'top-down' actions. This reflects a very

¹ further information is available via the Organisational Development intranet page see <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/hr/development>

² 3 in 2018-19 and 12 for 2019-2020

³ 37 trainees in 2017-2018 and 34 in 2018- 2019 for the Introduction to coaching course, and 10 in 2018-2019 for Manager as coach course.

⁴ see a <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/about/athena-swan/index>

⁵ <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/hr/policies/equality/index>

⁶ <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/staff-public/documents/hr/policies-guidance/equality/Gender%20pay%20gap%20action%20plan%20v2.0.pdf>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/profblissett/status/1172082516024541184> and <https://twitter.com/profblissett/status/1172156639086088192>

positive consequence of the work arising from the Concordat. Researchers now have a greater understanding of their own ability to take responsibility in a number of defined areas. Many also take the opportunity to participate in the PGCert and PGDip courses, these also lead to Higher Education Academy Fellowship status.

- Aston continues to promote Mentoring among research staff and has begun to recruit mentors from among senior researchers and professional services staff across the University. A cross-institutional mentoring scheme is now in place for Research staff where Mentors are independent of the researcher's line manager. A range of factsheets and a mentoring agreement are among the resources already available online for both mentors and mentees. Aston University is already very active in promoting its popular Peer Mentoring scheme for researchers. A case study based on this has been published on the Vitae web site⁸. We are planning an initiative this year to recruit more non-academic mentors from University professional services and from industry. We are planning a significant piece of work between now and the end of 2020 to recruit academic colleagues to mentor ECRs – the plan will be to ensure every ECR has a mentor and the goal is around 150 mentors.
- We have introduced an online video presentation for ECRs on Research Integrity and the infrastructure and support available within Aston University and will be assessing the uptake of this in the coming years.
- The Research Integrity Office has introduced Research Integrity and Ethics Drop-In Surgeries embedded within the schools for all researchers. These are now available four times a month across the schools.
- We continue to engage with other Universities across the West Midlands to offer professional development activities for researchers. A recent example is an Intellectual Property event led by the Intellectual Property Office and organised in collaboration with Birmingham City University.
- The ECR Development Programme has been reviewed annually and addresses any needs highlighted by CROS and by the ECR Committee, e.g. A free text question regarding ECRs research training requirements was added in the CROS 2017 survey. Survey results highlighted the following needs: Application writing, Public Engagement, and Scientific production / writing. Although training in these areas is already available at Aston, there is obviously work to be done in publicising these.
- The University website⁹ is being restructured to make it more researcher focused and easier to access the different functions across the university. This includes a range of services to support academics and researchers throughout the research lifecycle, including:
 - opportunities to discuss and formulate ideas for research proposals;
 - investing in facilities and equipment, and technical support for research;
 - support with research grant applications (including bid development, peer review and costing);
 - all aspects of research integrity and ethics;
 - engaging with collaborators as co-creators of research;

⁸ see <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/engagement-influence-and-impact/coaching-and-mentoring-researchers-articles-and-case-studies-from-our-network/the-unexpected-outcomes-of-cross-cultural-mentoring-for-research-students>

⁹ <https://www2.aston.ac.uk/research>

- publication and dissemination of outcomes of research (including open data and open access);
 - working with our partners in business, government and industry to translate the outcomes of research into impact.
-
- The internal Virtual Learning Environment platform “Blackboard” pages are also being revised and developed to make the infrastructures available for ECRs within Aston more visible.
 - Between August and October 2019 we carried out an internal survey (comparable with the PIRLS and CROS surveys) to collect more data and feedback from ECRs and researcher managers. While the response rate to the survey was low¹⁰, the feedback has helped us identify several gaps, actions, and areas of success, for example:
 - Requests for more online resources that were easily accessible.
 - A desire to improve researcher recognition and pathways for promotions.
 - Further personal development and training needs highlighted.
 - Desire to increase the job security of researchers.
 - Diversity and equality “*seems to be a very proactive aspect of this university's culture and activities*”.
 - “*Aston is an institution that recognises the importance of research-related activities and values the contributions made in that domain. This is exhibited in resources/support made available and rewards.*”

Next Steps

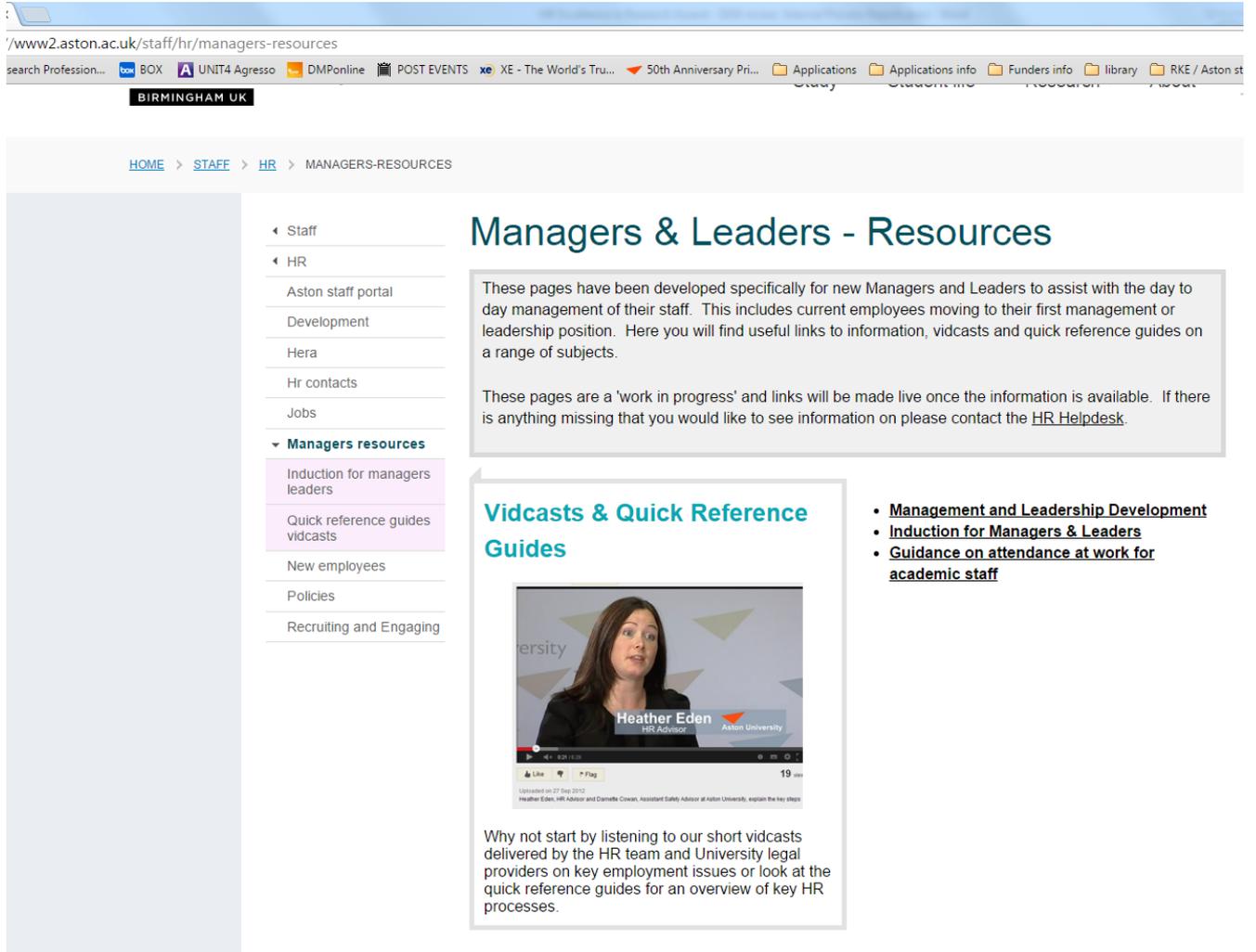
Aston has all the essential building-blocks in place to make a step-change in the quality of our provision over the coming years; our aspiration is the provision of an outstanding researcher-development experience, underpinned by effective and enabling policies and practices. Evidence indicates that our ECRs are a highly satisfied group; we will continue to put in place new ways of engaging with our research staff. With a new PVC Research and new ECR Academic Lead in place, our priority is for our strategy to deliver demonstrable impact for ECRs at Aston. The ECR Committee will continue to be a central pillar of our activity. There are numerous success stories amongst our existing and previous staff, and we also see these as a key resource.

We will implement our new action plan and monitor closely through our new established ‘**HR Excellence in Research Award**’ oversight group. Given the annual reporting requirement of the new Concordat, we will ensure even closer monitoring and planning of activities to align our mission and processes with The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

We are committed to work with funders across the academic landscape to find achievable ways to improve employment conditions for researchers through their policies and guidance. We will also seek to engage with new initiatives emerging as a result of the new Concordat with UUK and universities within the West Midlands and nationally to ensure we improve job security for researchers.

¹⁰ 12 responses out of 115 (10%) ECRs and 34 responses out of 194 (17.5%) for Researcher managers

APPENDIX – Screenshots of relevant intranet pages:



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL www2.aston.ac.uk/staff/hr/managers-resources. The page title is "Managers & Leaders - Resources".

Navigation Menu:

- HOME > STAFF > HR > MANAGERS-RESOURCES
- Staff
- HR
 - Aston staff portal
 - Development
 - Hera
 - Hr contacts
 - Jobs
 - Managers resources**
 - Induction for managers leaders
 - Quick reference guides vidcasts
 - New employees
 - Policies
 - Recruiting and Engaging

Main Content:

Managers & Leaders - Resources

These pages have been developed specifically for new Managers and Leaders to assist with the day to day management of their staff. This includes current employees moving to their first management or leadership position. Here you will find useful links to information, vidcasts and quick reference guides on a range of subjects.

These pages are a 'work in progress' and links will be made live once the information is available. If there is anything missing that you would like to see information on please contact the [HR Helpdesk](#).

Vidcasts & Quick Reference Guides



Heather Eden
HR Advisor
Aston University

Uploaded on 27 Sep 2012
Heather Eden, HR Advisor and Danielle Cowan, Assistant Safety Advisor at Aston University, explain the key steps

- [Management and Leadership Development](#)
- [Induction for Managers & Leaders](#)
- [Guidance on attendance at work for academic staff](#)

Why not start by listening to our short vidcasts delivered by the HR team and University legal providers on key employment issues or look at the quick reference guides for an overview of key HR processes.