

1. Provider context

Aston University's mission is to be the UK's leading university for students aspiring to succeed in business and the professions, where original research, enterprise and inspiring teaching deliver local and global impact. Founded in 1895 as the Birmingham Municipal Technical College by local employers, we have a long-established tradition in work-based learning, with our Charter making reference to the institution's original objectives: *'to advance, disseminate and apply learning and knowledge by teaching and research, for the benefit of industry and commerce and of the community generally.'* This holds true today through our ['Aston Strategy 2018 to 2023'](#), which is structured around three beneficiary groups that we believe we exist to serve: Students; business and the professions; and our region and society. Our value proposition is to deliver outstanding education for our students that will enable them to achieve high rates of employment and progression into desirable jobs following graduation. In parallel, a crucial part of our offer to businesses, the professions and the region, is that, through our industry-informed curricula, we will teach the skills and knowledge that organisations identify are necessary to enable them to grow.

Building a strong dialogue with our diverse student body has been a key feature of our work, with the creation of a 'Student as Partner' culture identified as one of the strategic principles of Aston's ['Education Strategy 2021 - 2025'](#). Close partnership working has resulted in a number of initiatives that have enhanced the student experience. The creation of this Provider Submission exemplifies this positive working relationship with our Students' Union. The Aston Student Union's (ASU) President and Vice-President Education acted as members of the University's TEF Steering Group that was established to draft this Provider Submission, and shared updates, drafts and the final version of their independent Student Submission.

Full-time, undergraduate programmes form Aston's majority provision, with 45,840 full-time undergraduate learners and 890 part-time undergraduate learners recognised by the Office for Students (OfS) for funding purposes over the four-year TEF period. These students study across three academic Colleges: Business and Social Sciences (BSS), Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS), and Health and Life Sciences (HLS). Our course portfolio spans 18 of the 34 subject categories in TEF, with our largest student numbers in Business and STEM subjects. A snapshot of our UK undergraduate demographics shows:

- Our student body is ethnically diverse. During the TEF period, 68.3% of full-time UK domiciled undergraduates were from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds. The Times and Sunday Times 2023 social inclusion rankings place Aston University second in the UK for proportion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds. This pattern mirrors our city's super-diverse young population (Department for Education, 2021).
- Many of our students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. During the TEF period, 49.9% of our undergraduate student population were from the two most deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles and 25.7% were eligible for Free School Meals at Key Stage 4.
- Around 40% of our undergraduate student population come from the West Midlands region, and 60% of our students (excluding distance learners) either live with their parents or guardians, or at their own residence during term time, with many of these students identifying as 'commuter' students.

- A sizeable number of our graduates choose to remain in the local area after graduating, with nearly 40% of our employed 2019-20 graduates finding employment in the West Midlands.

We are particularly proud of the work we have undertaken to build educational gains for our students, enabling them to transition into Aston from diverse backgrounds, such that they develop and thrive during their time with us, achieve excellent outcomes and contribute positively to the local, national and international community. Developing a dialogue with local employers, our alumni and current and future students is an important part of this strategy, and we have built strong relationships with local and regional business through our engagement with groups such as the Birmingham Chambers of Commerce. Over many years, Aston has made a significant, strategic commitment to the UK's widening access and participation agenda - including the establishment of a sizeable Foundation programme which has been running for seventeen years; and the creation of Aston University Engineering Academy (AUEA) in 2012 (for 13–19 year-olds). Success measures include 89% of students completing Aston's Foundation programmes continuing into higher education; and 94% of AUEA students progressing to further study, employment, or training. Our strategy is based on research-informed evidence and evaluation that enables all our learners, whatever their background, to achieve their full academic and career potential. Our success in this regard can be demonstrated by our materially above benchmark performance for Completion and Progression.

As our student demographics illustrate, many of our students have not come from advantaged circumstances. Nevertheless, our graduates go on to achieve significant career success, demonstrating social mobility and educational gains. Data for the tax year 2019-20 shows that our graduates command strong salaries which are in the top 25% of the sector at one, three and five years after graduating (Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, 2022). Employed Aston graduates have the 16th largest median salary overall five years after graduation at £34,800 (LEO, 2022), with 15 out of 18 of our subject areas (Architecture, Building & Planning has suppressed data for Progression) included in the top half or upper quartile.

It is fitting, therefore, that the University has been recognised nationally for strengths in delivering social mobility. This is evidenced by being ranked second in the English Higher Education Social Mobility Index for two consecutive years (HEPI, 2022) and in gaining the Guardian 'University of the Year' Award in 2020 (The Guardian, 2020) which noted the impact that the University had made in reducing the attainment gap *'between black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their white peers, as well as its emphasis on sustainability.'* We are also one of only two universities outside of London that feature in the top 15 for intergenerational mobility, which tracks inclusivity of student intake against graduate earnings, coming 14th overall (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2021). Most recently, the University was recognised with the Race Equality Charter Bronze Award for its commitment in advancing race equality; and, in addition to our University Silver Award, we became only the second UK University to have an Engineering College awarded Athena Swan Gold, underscoring our commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

2. Student Experience

Learning, teaching and assessment

Aston is committed to offering all its learners a high quality student experience. This is evident in the prominence of students as the first of the three beneficiary groups around which our 'Aston Strategy 2018 to 2023' is framed, as well as our above benchmark performance for all Student Experience

measures, with 'Teaching on my Course' and 'Student Voice' both materially above benchmark overall (2.7% and 4.6% respectively). We are proud to have achieved performance consistently above benchmark throughout this TEF cycle and for all levels of study and demographics of students. As our strategy notes, our aim has always been '*to deliver outstanding education for our students,*' and we have a long history of successfully teaching a diverse body of students and preparing them well to gain and excel in their chosen employment. This is evidenced in our above benchmark performance for all 26 split indicators, with 21 of the 26 materially above benchmark. When viewed at subject level, Aston performs materially above benchmark in ten subject areas (e.g. Law, Chemistry & Biosciences); above benchmark for three subject areas (e.g. Medical Sciences & Economics); on benchmark for Mathematical Sciences; and just four subject areas less than one percentage point below benchmark (e.g. Politics & Languages and Area Studies).

To respond to our diverse student population, we have worked hard to ensure that we adopt a wide range of learning, teaching and assessment methods that build educational gains and enable learners to achieve their potential. Our success in this regard is demonstrated by our above benchmark performance (+2.1%) for learners characterised as 'Other' and our materially above benchmark performance for all other registered ethnicities: Asian, Black, Mixed and White (+2.8%, +2.9%, +4.0% and +3.1% respectively). The above benchmark performance can be seen across all other student demographics and levels of study, and in every year of the TEF period. We have a long history of successfully teaching a diverse body of students and preparing them well to gain and excel in their chosen employment and are pleased with the progress we are making in this regard, as evidenced in our strong performance against benchmark for geography of employment (+5.3%, +5.6% and +7.1% respectively for quintiles 4/5, 2/3 and 1).

As a dual intensive University, Aston has a strategic commitment to providing excellence in both learning & teaching and research. The majority of Aston's teaching staff are active researchers, and 76% hold a PhD (HESA, 2021). Wherever possible, staff teach in their specialist research or industry areas, so that our students benefit from the latest knowledge and debate. In the last Research Excellence Framework (REF), 79% of the research submitted was evaluated as 'world leading' (4*) or 'internationally excellent' (3*). Many of our programmes offer specialist final year options where students can engage with current areas of research and/or problems which have direct application to current business/industrial concerns.

Assuring high quality, scholarly teaching and professional practice is a key part of ensuring that student learning gains are achieved through a high quality academic learning experience. This is driven institutionally through a number of University policies and initiatives, which include Peer Observation of Teaching; provision of a University-wide Continual Professional Development (CPD) programme in learning, teaching and assessment offered by the University's central Education Department, co-designed with strategic leads for Education within our academic Colleges; and a requirement for all teaching and clinical staff at grade 8 or above to hold Fellowship of Advance HE on appointment, or obtain this within two years as a probationary requirement via either the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert LTHE) (for those with less than three years' full-time teaching experience); or via the University's Advance HE-accredited Research-Inspired Teaching Excellence (RITE) scheme (see below). Additionally, the Introduction to Learning and Teaching Practice (ILTP) is offered to those who teach and/or

support student learning, including Postgraduate Research (PGR) students, Professional Services teams, and teaching and clinical staff at grade 7 or below.

Excellence and innovation in pedagogic practice is supported and recognised through the University's RITE scheme which reviews and recommends staff applications for professional recognition against all four descriptors of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). In terms of professional recognition for learning and teaching, Aston has 527 academic staff with Fellowship status, 214 with Senior Fellowship and 20 with Principal Fellowship for 2021-22 from a population of 950 academic staff. As such, our 55% academic staff with Fellowship recognition is 8.9% above the sector average of 46.1% (Advance HE). Holding appropriate levels of Advance HE recognition are necessary for promotion (whether through teaching or research excellence), alongside the need to evidence high quality teaching practice through excellent student feedback (e.g. Mid-module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs), National Student Survey (NSS) and Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)); internal/external awards for excellence in learning and teaching (e.g. Aston Achievement Awards, ASU Academic Awards and Advance HE National Teaching Fellowship Award); and external endorsements, such as feedback from External Examiners, employers and professional bodies.

The above approaches demonstrate our commitment to CPD, a long-term investment for the University, that enables our staff to effectively deliver our 'Education Strategy 2021 – 2025,' and feel supported as members of a thriving academic community. Our approach enables colleagues to continue to develop, innovate and enhance their practice beyond the introductory elements covered in the ILTP and PGCert LTHE, through a suite of 'in person' and online CPD activities and resources and the provision of a Master's in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (MEd) and a Professional Doctorate in Higher Education (EdD). These programmes, together with the PGCert LTHE, embed a scholarly approach to teaching that supports our staff in providing a learning environment that helps our students achieve their potential. Projects undertaken as part of these programmes have informed and shaped developments in the subject disciplines within, and beyond Aston (e.g. 'Implementing Best Practice in Training Problem-Based Learning Tutors' (Johnson, 2021)). Building upon this work, we are now strengthening our scholarly approach to learning and teaching, through the adoption of a strategic drive towards potential contributions to the next REF.

The University is committed to reward and recognition for excellence in learning and teaching, alongside the sharing of good practice (Strategic Principle 10 of the University's 'Education Strategy 2021 – 2025'). We are proud to celebrate our achievement of four National Teaching Fellows between 2017-21. This builds upon internal awards that are offered for excellence in learning and teaching, such as the annual 'Aston Achievement Award in Learning and Teaching,' where recipients have been identified by students and fellow staff as having made an exceptional and tangible contribution to learning and teaching; and the ASU annual 'Academic Awards' co-hosted with the University's Education Department, where nominations and votes come directly from the student body. These popular awards give students in all disciplines the chance to reflect on quality learning, and identify and value specific teachers, technicians and learning support staff for a range of awards that recognise for example, Personal Tutors who have gone above and beyond in their support, and those who have adopted some form of Technology and Innovation to make teaching more engaging. As we move into the post-Covid world, the University has returned to termly 'Learning & Teaching' days, bringing together colleagues from all areas to share examples of excellence and innovation

and focus on aspects of learning, teaching and assessment that have been identified as key priorities by the senior management team; students through internal surveys (e.g. MEQs) and via their Student Representatives; and external data (e.g. NSS outcomes and External Examiner comments).

As part of the University's standard quality assurance procedures, all programmes are subject to Annual Monitoring. Every six years, our programmes undergo Periodic Review with students acting as full members of the review panels, together with external academics, practitioners, employers, and members of relevant Professional Services departments (e.g. Library Services and the Education Department). This provides an opportunity to undertake a thorough and detailed review of the programme, exploring the pedagogic model, student and employer feedback and learning resources. Outcomes from both Annual Monitoring and Periodic Reviews are reported to College Learning and Teaching Committees and then upwards to the University's Learning & Teaching Committee (ULTC) to provide institutional oversight.

Aston places great emphasis on providing high quality assessment and feedback, and sets out its approach to assessment in its 'Education Strategy 2021 - 2025.' This builds on institutional learning from the changes that were necessitated in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. We have a determination to offer our students a varied and purposeful approach to assessment, including opportunities for authentic assessment. Given Aston's high proportion of professionally accredited programmes, this authenticity is often shaped by the accreditation requirements of the designated Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB); and/or our links with business, industry and the professions. By engaging our students with simulated, and real-world problems/research questions, we develop their ability to apply and synthesize knowledge, rather than simply recall it. This is based on critical and divergent thinking skills, as well as learner autonomy that will serve students well once graduated and in employment. In addition to written essays and examinations therefore, students at Aston can expect to encounter assessments involving interviews, exhibitions, presentations, debates, fieldwork, research projects, case studies, mock consultations, briefs and reports. Staff are supported in providing timely and effective feedback through our 'Policy on Giving Effective Feedback on Assessed Work', whilst quality standards are ensured by institutional requirements for internal and external moderation and review in our 'Assessment Regulations.'

The effectiveness of the University's drive to build high quality, engaging assessment and feedback into its programmes is borne out in the TEF dataset, with our overall measure for 'Assessment and feedback' +1.5% above benchmark. This has been consistently above benchmark throughout the four years of this TEF cycle (with Year 2 materially above benchmark) and for all levels of study, across all demographics of students except males, where performance is in line with benchmark (0%); and students aged between 21-30 years (-3.1%). It is difficult to know why this latter group compares less favourably to benchmark than do the other two age groups which are both above benchmark (+1.7% for Under 21 years and +2.0% for 31 years and over). As there are only 300 students in the 21-30 years age group, this result seems unlikely to be statistically meaningful.

We are above benchmark for 'Assessment and feedback' in 25 of the 26 split indicators, with the vast majority of our subject areas above benchmark: Eight materially above (e.g. Language and Area Studies (+8.0%)) and three a little below benchmark (albeit not materially). Mathematical Sciences, however, is materially below benchmark (-7.1%). Work undertaken by the School has indicated that this relates to changes that were introduced to the nature and timing of assessment for online

examinations. As we have adapted post-pandemic, working with the students to better prepare them for their assessments, and ensure a clear understanding of, for example, assessment criteria, the early signs (mid-term student feedback) suggest that things have already improved in this area. The 21 to 30 year learner population is the other area we have been looking to address.

The majority of programmes in BSS have now moved away from traditional closed book examinations (the exception being Accounting and Finance courses where this is required by their accrediting body). We believe these changes to the assessment mode have had positive outcomes for our learners, with six of the seven subject areas in this College performing above benchmark for 'Assessment and feedback,' four of which are materially above (e.g. Law, +9.6%). Programme teams in BSS embed workplace practices and technologies within module assessments, for example working with Salesforce who provide examples and technical delivery of training, using their software in a new module (2022) in BSc Business Computing and IT. Other examples include BSS's introduction of the Product Intellectual Property and Entrepreneurship (PIPE) scheme, and the development of a Business Enterprise Development Hub which is underpinned by a Team Academy approach to Business Education utilising a highly distinctive student-led curriculum design, as illustrated in the College's termly 'Houston Calling' Business Challenge event. Our Business students also take part in a business simulation exercise using the Accounting Bissim software developed by the University with external partners, which links to applied assessment activities.

In HLS, four of the five subject areas are above benchmark for 'Assessment and feedback,' with three of those materially above (e.g. Allied Health, +8.1%). The institutional commitment to authentic assessment is demonstrated with examples including professionally-oriented interprofessional learning sessions, where students from Audiology, Pharmacy, Medicine and Optometry learn from one another; and Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs), simulated and live clinics with patients that contribute to Clinical Competency logbooks, and professional portfolios which develop the reflective practices required to function as registered clinicians.

This strong showing in 'Assessment and feedback' is also echoed in EPS, with four of the six subject areas above benchmark, and Chemistry materially above (+10.2%). Examples of authentic, employability related approaches to assessment include design briefs drawn from a range of sources reflecting contemporary problems co-constructed with industry professionals using leading edge industry standard software, such as Building Information Modelling. Some programmes also offer additional professional mentorship (e.g. Construction Project Management), or the innovative Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme introduced in partnership with the University's Learning Development Centre (LDC) on the BSc Mathematics programme. EPS also run multiple, annual co-curricular events and competitions aimed at further enhancing students' enthusiasm for their subjects and future careers (e.g. The Placement Poster competition).

Over the years, as part of its institutional strategy, Aston has built and maintained strong links with business, industry and the professions. This has led to the creation of employer-led/informed curricula which enable students to gain the most up to date knowledge, skills and work-based learning experiences necessary to progress into strong graduate level outcomes. Examples include our response to regional financial services and other businesses' digital needs through the introduction of a BSc Cyber Security programme which began in 2019-20; and the reintroduction of a BEng Civil Engineering programme in 2020-21 in response to employer demand. Through

partnership with industry, further, and higher education partners, we have also played a key role in the establishment of the Department for Education-backed Greater Birmingham and Solihull Institute of Technology for Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing. Our Medical School, with a focus on widening participation, opened its doors to undergraduate medical students in 2018, recruiting 335 Home undergraduate students from a wide range of backgrounds, opening access to the medical profession from underrepresented groups.

To support appropriate and relevant educational gains, Aston's curricula are research and industry-informed by academic staff who are active researchers in their disciplines, and professional staff from industry who provide current context and relevant practitioner experience. In HLS, for example, we have many joint appointments with National Health Service (NHS) practitioners; and in BSS, we have many ex-practitioner, professionally qualified staff particularly in Law, Human Resources (HR), Accountancy and Finance. In EPS, we employ staff with extensive experience and ties with relevant industrial sectors, and Professional Engineering Institutes who are Chartered professionals in their own fields of expertise. Where appropriate, we also draw on visiting experts and our alumni to ensure our programmes align with industry needs.

Our strategic commitment to building our students' employability skills is evidenced through the development of learners' independence, knowledge and skills via active, practical learning known to encourage deeper forms of engagement and lead to new ways of thinking (Obradovic-Wochnik and Hayes, 2016). Work-related learning extends to each year of our degree programmes, and we develop initiatives that go beyond the standard curricular offer. An example is the EPS 'Engineering for People Design Challenge', run in collaboration with the Engineers Without Borders (EWB) UK. This is a College-wide module delivered as a one-week intensive block during reading week, in which students work in multidisciplinary teams to solve real life Sustainable Development issues from developing communities from around the world. During this module, which is linked to an annual international competition organised by EWB, students concurrently develop and apply their technical and professional skills. Another successful example is the integration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, used to develop critical thinking and data analysis skills in final year HLS dissertations in Biomedical Sciences (Russell, 2022). Students recognise the value of this approach: *'My favourite part of this experience is getting to work with students and academics from disciplines other than my own. I have also gained leadership and presentation skills.'* (MEQs, 2019).

Elsewhere in EPS, we are proud of the impact that the innovative assessment in the Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate (CDIO) curriculum has had on student engagement and achievement (Leslie *et al.*, 2021). Using the CDIO problem-based learning approach, our Mechanical Engineering and Design Engineering students work in diverse groups on the whole life-cycle of a design project in workspaces and laboratories that support the learning of product, process, and system, building skills concurrently with disciplinary knowledge. Our CDIO is recognised nationally and internationally and linked to an internationally renowned innovative way of transforming mechanical engineering education. This was highlighted by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE) in their accreditation visit report (2020) and endorsed by one of the programmes' External Examiners in 2020 who stated: *'The innovations in curriculum and pedagogy related to the CDIO initiative represent best practice in Engineering Education.'*

The value of interdisciplinary learning for the majority of businesses and the professions is well-understood at Aston, as is the importance of building interdisciplinary learning opportunities for our students to aid with their graduate employment. An example of professionally-orientated interprofessional learning sessions is the MSci Design, Enterprise and Innovation programme run jointly by the Schools of Engineering and Business, in which students take product development ideas from the first two years of their Engineering-based part of the degree into the second two years with the Centre for Enterprise, Coaching and Innovation, turning their ideas into a business reality. The success of other interdisciplinary teaching initiatives at Aston are captured in a publication produced by academic staff from all three Colleges: '*Business Teaching Beyond Silos*' (Traczykowski *et al.*, 2023), with the University making a commitment to staff appointments in this area, such as an academic lead for interprofessional education within HLS.

A significant proportion (61%) of Aston's undergraduate programmes are accredited by industry-recognised PSRBs. This gives our graduates a competitive advantage in the marketplace, as the programmes they have studied cover the knowledge and competencies required by industry and the professions. Examples include Aston Business School, which has maintained its longstanding "triple accreditation" over the TEF period, placing it among just 1% of Business Schools worldwide accredited by three leading global accreditation bodies; in EPS, accreditation from IMechE and British Computer Society (BCS); and in HLS, accreditation from the General Optical Council (GOC) and Institute of Biomedical Science (IBMS). The expertise of our academic staff is also recognised by PSRBs, with many colleagues contributing actively at a senior level to the work of these external organisations. As such, it is not just the adherence to PSRB requirements that our staff engage with, they also help to shape and lead the requirements in their professional fields, drawing upon their own research-based evidence and our students' experiences. For example, Aston is home to the President of the College of Optometrists; and members of staff in EPS were directly involved in developing the most recent version of the Engineering Council's (EC) Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes (AHEP 4.0). These links help ensure our programmes offer students the most up to date knowledge and skills they need to be successful in the current and future workplace.

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The recent COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to our *de facto* model of teaching. However, through the tailored support provided by our Education Department, and the provision of appropriate digital tools, technologies and infrastructure by our IT department, our teaching staff were able to effectively pivot to online teaching and assessment. In addition, the University undertook a substantial piece of work to support students' wellbeing and provide them with safe, quiet places to study and undertake online assessments (including library opening throughout the pandemic). It is notable that our year three (2020-21) TEF metrics are all above benchmark, with two Student Experience measures ('Teaching on my Course,' +3.2% and 'Student Voice,' +5.4%); and both Completion (+2.8%) and Progression (+5.4%) all materially above benchmark, indicating the success of our response to the pandemic.

The vision and strategic direction for Aston's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: 'The Aston Approach' was set and led by our PVC Education, who established and chaired a cross-institutional group: The 'Aston Delivery Group' (ADG) comprising senior academic and Professional Services staff from all three Colleges, relevant Professional Services Departments, and most importantly, members of the ASU. The ADG was responsible for leading the implementation of 'The Aston

Approach', setting in place eleven strategic principles that included the need to provide all learners with high quality, multi-mode delivery and assessment, ensure inclusivity and accessibility, and maintain a sense of belonging amongst learners. The strategic focus was to ensure that students continued to receive a consistent, high quality learning experience that enabled them to continue, complete and progress, despite the challenges that evolved through this period. To help monitor the work, regular Pulse Surveys were co-produced with ASU members and outcomes from these iterative surveys were used to inform our approaches to learning, teaching and assessment during the pandemic and beyond. For example, we adapted the balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning activities in response to student feedback.

Whilst COVID-19 impacted upon the opportunities to come together for learning 'in person' on campus, the ADG recognised the need to support teaching staff in developing and innovating their pedagogic practice through appropriate staff development as the University made a rapid shift to online and blended learning. CPD therefore continued online, and led by the University's Education Department, the Active Learning and Teaching Online (ALTO) institutional staff development programme was delivered as mandatory training for all teaching staff from 2020. The aim of ALTO was to support staff to continue to deliver consistently high quality online and blended learning so that disruption to student learning was minimised, and they could thereby continue, complete and progress. To support staff working in different locations, the approach adopted was a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, supplemented by a comprehensive set of online resources, opportunities for drop-ins and focussed design clinics with Academic Practice and Technology-enhanced Learning specialists. ALTO was identified as an example of good practice by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), with details presented in their publication: '*A Launch Pad for Future Success*' (2021). Experience of running the ALTO sessions, and feedback from attendees, further informed Aston's continued approach to CPD post-pandemic, with blended and asynchronous CPD now part of the Education Department's standard offer, in line with the University's strategic move to blended learning.

Listening to our students, they also felt the benefits of online lectures: The flexibility and convenience to undertake asynchronous learning activities at a pace and time that suits their learning preferences, which is an important consideration for a large percentage of our students with significant family and work commitments; the opportunity to replay some, or all, of the learning material to reinforce their understanding; and in synchronous learning, a strong preference expressed by many for the ability to ask questions in the chat function, rather than raising their hand in a large lecture theatre in front of their peers. As a consequence of this learner feedback, we have maintained the blended approach across our programmes, with the vast majority of large group lectures held online, alongside a rich mix of 'in person' seminars, practicals, workshops, group work and tutorials to further facilitate the dialogue and develop the critical, practical and evaluative skills that support learning. Combining learning from staff and students' experiences during the pandemic (e.g. via our formal and informal Student Voice mechanisms), alongside findings from published research and sector reports (e.g. OfS '*Gravity Assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future*' report (2021) and JISC '*Learning and Teaching Reimagined*' publication (2020)), we developed Aston's 'Education Strategy 2021 - 2025.'

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, government restrictions meant that a number of 'in person' practical activities could not proceed as originally planned. Teaching staff were creative, adopting a

range of innovations approved at College level through the Associate Deans Education and their College Senior Management teams, with endorsement from External Examiners, and where applicable, PSRBs. Examples of the innovations adopted include online debate assessments, online exercises replacing field trips and more in class self-tests to help with self-evaluation. As government restrictions allowed, the University prioritised the delivery of practical sessions, as well as providing additional resources to enable students to continue and complete their studies.

In line with most universities, Aston adopted a 'no detriment' policy during 2019-20. To maintain academic quality, and ensure a consistent, standardised approach to assessment across all programmes, additional 'Guidance for Boards of Examiners' was approved through the University's Regulation Sub-Committee (RSC), ULTC and University Senate. In addition, specific guidance was provided to Boards of Examiners considering the performance of students enrolled on programmes covered by external PSRB requirements. To guide staff, and ensure consistency in operation of the Regulations, flowcharts and links to relevant information were provided to all Chairs/Vice-Chairs/Secretaries of Boards of Examiners, alongside the main guidance document, and a series of online training workshops, run by the Chair of RSC, were provided to assist staff in understanding the guidance and to provide a forum for questions. In parallel, the University hosted several drop-in online sessions for students to ask any questions they had on the University's approach to managing assessment during the pandemic. The work we undertook to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 for our learners was commended by the vast majority of External Examiners in their annual reports. For example: *'The team did an exceptional job of creating rigorous, challenging and yet fair and equitable "alternative assessments" in a very short space of time in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was excellent to see that these open-book style online exams allowed students to demonstrate their full potential, being unrestricted by exam conditions...the team's rigorous application and meticulous checking of the "no detriment" policy was also exceptional'* (BSc Biomedical Science, 2020).

Student Voice

Over recent years, there has been a strategic move towards greater partnership working with our students. Driving a 'Student as Partner' culture is explicitly stated in the University's 'Education Strategy 2021 - 2025.' Our strategic approach is to establish and maintain effective dialogue with the different student voices that constitute our diverse student body, mirroring our blended learning and teaching approach in our Student Voice activities, with students offered different ways to contribute both in person and online. This has proved popular with our learners, particularly our commuter students, who have told us they now find it easier to engage in Student Voice activities. The positive outcomes of the work we have done with 'Student Voice' are reflected in our exceptionally strong performance for this TEF indicator (73.2% overall, +4.6% above benchmark), with above benchmark performance for all 26 split indicators, and materially above in 22 of these. This demonstrates the strength of the partnership between our students and the University. The breakdown by year shows this to be an improving trajectory (with a significant increase during the COVID-19 period) and one which applies universally to students from all backgrounds. We are above benchmark in 15 of our 18 subject areas, materially so for eleven (e.g. Law, +14%; Chemistry +13%; Allied Health +12.9%). Only Materials and Technology falls materially below benchmark on this measure (-4.1%). Given the small number of students (n=60), and our improving performance in this measure over the last two years (including 100% overall satisfaction in the most recent NSS, 2022), we are content that improvements are being made.

The ASU Vice-President Education meets fortnightly with the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education to discuss all matters relating to the Education portfolio. This has led to a number of student co-creation projects, such as the creation and delivery of a new, contemporary suite of informal and social learning spaces in 2021; the co-design of student surveys (e.g. Pulse surveys and MEQs in 2020-21 and 2021-22); and work to promote the recognition of excellence in learning and teaching, with the University's Education Department supporting the ASU 'Academic Awards.' In addition to meetings focussed on learning and teaching, all ASU Sabbatical Officers meet monthly with members of the University's Executive team responsible for the Education and Student Experience portfolios. The ASU hold a termly Union Senate meeting, at which members of the University's Executive and Senior Management teams attend to present updates on their areas of responsibility, and answer any questions posed by the ASU Student Representatives. These events are well-attended (c. 100 Student Representatives), with questions raised on academic matters and all other aspects of the student experience. Closing the loop and feeding back to the ASU Student Representatives on actions taken in response to points raised is an important element of this work.

This joint working between the University and the ASU enables us to provide the best experience for our learners, understanding the areas that they are concerned about, so that we can employ the most appropriate measures to aid them with their learning and overall student experience. Most recently, we have worked together to provide support for the cost-of-living issues raised by students in a survey launched by the University. Outcomes from this included free fresh fruit made available to all students in the ASU Building; hot lunches available for all daily for £1 on campus and the development with the ASU of a Pantry in the ASU building for students to collect recipes and food parcels. Other previous initiatives that have resulted from listening to our student voices include the return to online assessment in January 2021 in response to serious health concerns raised by our students (particularly those with significant underlying health conditions and/or caring responsibilities) following the significant peak in Omicron cases; a move to provide free on campus printing for all students, which has been maintained; and the creation of additional Muslim and multi-faith prayer room facilities to accommodate increased demand.

The ASU Vice-President Education is a full member of ULTC, and has a standing item on every meeting agenda. Outcomes from ASU-led initiatives, such as the annual Speak Week (held in the first term to gather feedback from the student community on various aspects of their academic learning experience) are shared and discussed at ULTC and used to inform the future direction of learning and teaching at Aston. There are a number of examples where outcomes from Speak Week have led to change within the University, such as the creation of additional study space (from 2020-21 outcomes). The most recent Speak Week has highlighted the value of online and blended approaches that have been adopted by the University. Where working groups are set up for matters relating to learning, teaching and the student experience (e.g. Learning Spaces and Timetabling Task Force), the University ensures that students and/or members of the ASU are full members to ensure student voices form part of the decision-making process. In terms of curriculum development and review, our students are involved from the beginning of new programme development and throughout each process that follows. Student Representatives act as full panel members both in reviewing proposals for new programmes and in Periodic Reviews, and their highly valued input is recognised on their Higher Education Achievement Reports (HEARs). An excellent recent example is our BSc Nursing Studies programme, where both students and service users came together to sit on a joint University-Nursing and Midwifery Council approval panel.

Building on the work undertaken on Student Voice during the COVID-19 pandemic, a strategic initiative was embarked upon to enhance student feedback and increase response rates to our student surveys. This objective was captured in Principle Seven of the University's 'Education Strategy 2021 - 2025': *'Encourage students to engage proactively in shaping their learning experiences through an embedded set of digital and in person 'Student Voice' activities that form part of the University's 'Student as Partner' culture.'* Following a series of focus groups with students, and academic and relevant Professional Services staff in 2020-21, the University moved away from end of module evaluation questionnaires to MEQs, aimed at developing more effective dialogue with our learners. The question set for these MEQs was co-designed by the University and the ASU to capture, and respond to the student learning experience, and was launched in 2021-22. Module Leaders are required to share and respond to MEQ outcomes within a week of the surveys closing, with a summary housed in the 'Student Voice' section of our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): Blackboard). This is aimed at supporting our strategy, creating dialogue with learners and co-developing changes that benefit the current cohort, rather than acting on feedback at the end of the module when it is too late to have any impact.

Whilst all programmes engage with the University's standard MEQ system, many subject areas supplement these data with other forms of student feedback. This takes a variety of forms, but mainly includes short pulse surveys at key times of change to capture broader thoughts and a range of 'town hall' style meetings at Programme and College level. EPS has been piloting the use of Student Experience Champions to drive forward Student Voice and independently audit staff activity, helping to address any areas of inconsistency. Changes resulting from these actions include an increased focus on tutorial support; a greater adoption of online tests, with the opportunity to provide immediate feedback to students; and some student-led choices over their assessment mode.

Each stage of every taught programme has at least one Student Representative who will have the opportunity to co-chair termly Staff-Student Committee (SSC) meetings, with a member of University staff acting as Secretary. This places the emphasis on Student Voice to drive the agenda, and further demonstrates our partnership approach with students. The SSC provides the formal mechanism through which students can make their voices heard on a wide range of topics relating to learning, teaching, assessment and the wider student experience. Additionally, each School has a School Representative responsible for leading and co-ordinating the Student Representatives that work at Programme level within their named School, working closely with the ASU Vice-President Education. The University supports the ASU in ensuring that the Student Representatives are properly trained, and ensures their contributions are recognised through their HEARs. Topics relating to quality assurance outcomes (e.g. Annual Monitoring, Periodic Review and External Examiner reports), and student surveys (e.g. MEQs and NSS) are discussed at these meetings, together with consideration of action plans that have been developed by Programme teams to address the student feedback. All SSCs report into College Learning and Teaching Committees, which in turn, feed up into ULTC.

Academic Support

At Aston, academic support is a key strategic strand within our 'Education Strategy 2021 - 2025' (Principle 8), and significant work in this area over the TEF period has contributed to our success with Continuation, Completion and Progression (See Section 3). Our TEF metrics for 'Academic Support' are consistently strong, with an overall score of 74.6 % (+1.3% above benchmark). Ten of

our eighteen subject areas are above benchmark for 'Academic Support,' with six subject areas materially above, including Chemistry (+9.7%) and Law (+8.4%). In addition, 23 of the 26 split indicators for 'Academic Support' are above benchmark.

We believe that the student journey begins before students enrol, and as an institution, we have established a range of activities and initiatives designed to establish a sense of community and belonging amongst our students. This starts with Offer Holder Days, where students have the opportunity to engage with subject specialists in Colleges and gain guidance on their chosen programmes of study to best inform their study choices. Student transition is a key focus of the induction activities held during our 'Welcome Week,' and we offer a variety of events to orientate students with the University and their studies. These include an induction to Library Services, laboratory spaces and IT support, and meetings with Personal Tutors. The University's 'Personal Tutoring Policy' provides that students will normally have the same Personal Tutor throughout their studies who will act a key point of contact for general academic guidance and support in study, and help with engagement as part of an academic community. Students are offered a minimum of three opportunities a year (full-time) and two opportunities a year (part-time) to discuss their academic progress and any other student experience matters. All students can, and do, request additional meetings both online and in person.

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, government and local restrictions meant that many of these activities had to be moved online. The positive aspects of this approach have been retained, with, for example, those elements that students benefit from revisiting during their studies continuing to be provided asynchronously online; supplemented by other engaging 'in person' subject-level activities designed to build a sense of belonging and learner community with peers (e.g. collaborative gamified subject introductions, and interactive campus tours with Personal Tutors). Our 2021 Annual Enrolment survey to first year students received nearly 900 responses and demonstrated that over 82% were 'very happy' or 'happy' with the 'Welcome Week' activities and their overall experience of the University in the first four weeks. As part of the University's strategic commitment to partnership working, the ASU also contribute in supporting students in their transition to higher education and subsequent student journey as part of our community through programmes such as the 'Aston Aunties,' which provide peer student support for new starters from day one; and through the provision of academic societies and fresher events.

Recognising the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on all levels of student education, particularly amongst the most deprived areas of society (51.2% of our full-time undergraduate student population and 27.6% of our part-time undergraduate student population were from the two most deprived IMD quintiles in 2019-20), we co-designed and built with students the 'Get Ahead at Aston' online platform in Summer 2020. This platform is available to students from the point at which they accept their offer, and it provides a range of synchronous and asynchronous learning materials to aid transition to University through the development and enhancement of the academic skills necessary to succeed in higher education. Given the significant issues surrounding student mental health and wellbeing, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the site additionally offers a range of materials to aid with student wellbeing. Whilst the 'Get Ahead' platform was originally developed and introduced to support students whose pre-University studies had been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown, positive feedback from our learners through Union Senate and student focus groups in 2020 indicated that students had been promoting

the site to their peers and recommending that all students accessed the materials, not just new starters. Working in partnership with the ASU, the value of the resources was highlighted across the student community and resulted in 400 attendances at online sessions, and 29,976 hits in the first term of its introduction in 2020-21.

To further facilitate support throughout the student learning journey, we encourage and monitor student engagement through an institutional learner analytics system: MyEngagement, which was introduced through a phased approach in 2018-19. The system measures student engagement with a range of learning and teaching activities (e.g. physical attendance at lectures, and engagement with both library resources and the learning materials available on our VLE). Both students and their Personal Tutors have access to these data, with automatic alerts set up to trigger interventions where students have not met the minimum engagement thresholds set annually by ULTC. This enables Personal Tutors to provide informed guidance and where necessary, make appropriate interventions to provide specific support (following Foster & Siddle, 2020). During the time of government COVID-19 restrictions, the thresholds were regularly reviewed and revised to reflect differences in the proportion of online and 'in person' learning and teaching activities and availability of physical and digital resources. MyEngagement data are also valuable for our UKVI monitoring requirements. Personal Tutors record engagements with students via the University's central records systems, and there is institutional oversight of personal tutoring practice through regular audits to ensure engagement from both staff and students in line with the University's 'Personal Tutoring Policy.' In addition to the support provided by Personal Tutors, all teaching staff offer students weekly support hours to discuss their academic and pastoral needs, and there is a dedicated team available to support students with their health and wellbeing based on campus in an area known as 'The Hub' (See Section 3). Further targeted support is made available to aid students with decisions about optional modules and preparing for, and engaging with, the placement year (where applicable).

An important feature of our module design and delivery is the development and enhancement of students' academic study skills, supported by the LDC through drop-in support sessions and embedded teaching within programmes that has been co-designed by the LDC and academic module teams. This ensures that students benefit from inclusive, relevant, and timely academic skills and Maths support within their programmes, which has been shown from our own research to improve student outcomes (Knight, Powell & Woods, 2022). The additional benefit of this approach is that it reaches students who may not independently seek learning development advice, as well as encouraging students to seek additional help outside of these classes. Between 2018-19 and 2021-22, there has been an 88% increase in the number of teaching and support sessions offered to students by the LDC. In addition to embedding academic study skills support within the curriculum, the LDC also operates peer support systems, including Peer Mentoring and PAL. PAL schemes (operating across all three Colleges), in combination with diagnostic testing, have been shown from our internal research to enhance Continuation and grades, with marked benefits for cohorts with diverse experience and abilities.

Mathematical Sciences dipped materially below benchmark for Academic Support (-4.2%) with Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy also performing below benchmark (-2.4%). With regard to Mathematical Sciences, the Department has now adopted a proactive approach that has been operating elsewhere in the University to improving the Academic Support available to *all* students through initial diagnostic testing, group and individual support. Bookable weekly support hours with

academic staff have been promoted to students, alongside awareness raising of the open-door policy. Dedicated Mathematics sessions have been established and embedded in the curriculum for this specific group of learners to supplement the LDC support. These activities have already received positive feedback from our students at SSC meetings and via MEQs. In the case of Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy, a review of student feedback obtained through our internal QA mechanisms and NSS free text comments has shown that some of the student dissatisfaction was due to situations beyond our control. These arose during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, where for example, some teacher-practitioner staff were recalled by the NHS, several clinical placements had to be cancelled by the NHS and some study options were unavailable due to the nature of the programme and its professional accreditation requirements. Despite this, many of the NSS free text comments refer positively to the support received from staff, and we are confident that the measures we have undertaken in response to the data, together with our continued dialogue with students and colleagues in this professional practice area, will result in improvements for our learners in this measure.

Academic Support was materially below benchmark (-4.4%) for students aged 31 years and over (n=40) with a sizeable proportion of the uncertainty distribution materially below benchmark (63.2%). All split indicators for Ethnicity perform comfortably above benchmark with the exception of 'Other' (n=160, -3.0%, 56.2% of the uncertainty distribution materially below benchmark). Whilst we recognise that these are small numbers relative to the overall student population, we are keeping a watching brief to identify how we can best enhance the academic support for these learners.

Learning Resources

For 'Learning Resources,' Aston performs above benchmark overall (+0.7%), and on 21 of the 26 split indicators. Notably, our metrics for students with a reported disability are good in comparison to those with no disability reported (+1.1% above benchmark versus +0.6% above benchmark, respectively). Furthermore, we perform above the sector benchmarks for all ethnicities (materially above at +3.5% for 'Mixed'); students with markers of potential disadvantage, such as eligibility for Free School Meals (+1.1% for those eligible) and lower IMD quintiles (0.7% for quintiles 1 or 2). Together, these metrics reflect our approach of supporting the success of all students and demonstrate the positive outcomes resulting from a substantial investment in our learning resources.

Where students require additional adjustments beyond those provided for all, our Disability and Academic Support team works closely with the student and the relevant academic team to develop a personalised support plan and provide additional resources as required. As the University introduced digital pedagogies, through its strategic move to blended and hybrid learning ('Education Strategy 2021 - 2025'), we have worked to ensure that our students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the necessary access to personal devices and technology both on, and away from campus as part of our strategy to ensure digital inclusion for all our learners. This is pertinent in enabling our students to continue and complete, given that recent Office for National Statistics (2022) data highlighted that a significant proportion of university students are studying at home where possible to save on costs associated with attending campus sessions. Examples of the initiatives we have introduced include:

- i) Establishment of the Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) at a cost of approximately £2 million in September 2020 to address issues of digital poverty when Higher Education Providers (HEPs) were

required to make the rapid shift to online learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The VDI allows students to connect to a virtual University computer off campus from all forms of personal device (e.g. mobile phone or tablet). Minimal bandwidth is needed, so the system works well for users who may have poor broadband connections, helping to minimise the digital poverty gap. This was a significant investment, but has enabled our students to continue their learning and complete their programmes of study. There are now more than 1,200 users of the VDI.

ii) Provision of £1.02 million of financial support between February 2021 and April 2022 for 2,267 Aston students with low household incomes (<£25k p.a.) to purchase laptops (£400 per student) and pay for internet access charges (additional £100 per student). We extended the initial government-backed scheme so that we could benefit more of our students, providing an additional £547,000 of investment from the University and our Alumni Fund.

iii) Enhancement of our *Aston Apps* application streaming service in May 2020, which provides access to hundreds of different academic software solutions, both on- and off-campus. Usage data show that during term time, there are now over 49,000 logins per month to the service, from more than 7,000 active users.

iv) Provision of laptops to second and final year Computer Science students in 2021-22, at a cost of £1.3m, which enabled these students to complete activities that required high-specification computing off-site. The scheme was extended across all levels of Computing in 2022-23, as the impact on learning accessibility was considered a sound investment.

v) Providing home kit equipment for Electrical and Electronic Engineering students during the COVID-19 lockdown period, which enabled them to continue hands-on learning from home. This was praised by the Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) at their accreditation visit in 2022.

The University has continued to make significant investments in its physical estate and resources to enhance the 'on campus' student experience. This includes a £9.5m investment on a brand-new Students' Union building at the heart of our campus that was opened in 2019 and received the Guardian 2020 'Buildings that inspire' award. This ASU building offers social space, as well as a range of individual and group study spaces; dedicated prayer space, washing facilities; and for commuter students, a dedicated kitchen to cook or heat up food as well as access to desktop computers and lockers. During the TEF period, new, accessible study spaces on campus have been co-designed and created with the ASU and wider student body. The most significant of these are our aforementioned contemporary suite of informal and social learning spaces opened in November 2021, constructed in an area formerly occupied by the University's Executive team that was given up to provide an additional 265 study spaces at a cost of £1.5 million.



Suite of contemporary learning spaces for students (2021) and ASU Building (2019).

The University's Library Services provides an important element of our Learning Resources offer to students, and holds the Customer Service Excellence accreditation, having achieved 'Compliance Plus' in a range of areas, including for the level of service provided during the pandemic. Measures

put in place to aid students during the COVID-19 pandemic included the introduction of a 'click and collect' service for books; postal loans; the delivery of books to students who had to isolate in accommodation and the scanning and digitisation of chapters and articles sent directly to students. Subject-specific Information Specialists provided support with online enquiries and appointments throughout, with the Library building re-opening to students as soon as government restrictions allowed. To reduce any anxiety about return dates, these were extended, and any fines/charges removed from student accounts. Post COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the Library resumed its normal opening hours: Until midnight seven days a week, and 24/7 opening during the main assessment periods. With many of our learners choosing to come onto campus to do their online learning, we have made a number of upgrades to our IT equipment. Over 300 onsite Library PCs and loan laptops have been upgraded during the TEF period, with a refresh of Computing Lab equipment, such that there are now 1,500 PCs available for student use on campus.

Following feedback from our students that accessing print copies of textbooks in the library could be difficult, and the costs of purchasing their own books in some subject areas prohibitively expensive, we responded by significantly expanding the range of e-textbooks available. As a result of the positive outcomes received from running an e-textbook programme pilot with a leading publisher in 2020-21, where online access was provided to approximately 7000 titles, we have made further investments (over £830k in total) in the e-textbook programme. This provides digital access on an unlimited basis to *all* key texts. In cases where textbooks have been made available as digital copies for the first time at Aston, online access has been significantly higher than the number of print loans that would have previously been possible. The positive impact of our substantial enhancements to library facilities and services is demonstrated by the significant uplift in Aston's institutional performance in NSS question 19 (library resources) from 74% in 2021 to 84% in 2022.

Aston's overall mission has always involved a strong focus on applied disciplines, and as such, we invest heavily in specialist facilities that help simulate work environments. For example, investments have included the first dedicated ophthalmic simulation suite in Europe (c. £453k to date); development of a new tissue culture laboratory (c. £400k); a hospital emergency simulation room and skills room (c. £1.1million); and through our partnership with the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Institute of Technology, we now have a state-of-the art smart and digital manufacturing cyber rig and technology hub (c. £10 million) on our Aston campus which will be integrated into our undergraduate teaching and learning.

None of our programmes are materially below benchmark for 'Learning Resources,' with strengths in Materials and Technology (+2.7%), Architecture, Building and Planning (+7.7%) and Chemistry (+5.2%), all materially above benchmark. Where our metrics appear weaker for students of older age on entry (-7.7% for those aged 31 years and over), given the low denominator in this category during the TEF period (n=40), these results may be skewed by the small number of students.

Our small number of part-time learners has meant that we do not have sufficient returns for the TEF Student Experience measures. However, as a University, we adopt a holistic approach in all we do to support our students, and this is borne out by extremely strong performance in Continuation and Completion for our part-time learners: 17 of the 19 Continuation indicators and all of the Completion indicators for which we have data are materially above benchmark.

3. Student Outcomes

Continuation and Completion

Aston has a mission and strong strategic commitment to widening access and participation. We have a very diverse student population whom we support and enable to continue, complete and progress to excellent graduate outcomes. Our TEF metrics show consistently high overall Continuation and Completion rates of 94.8% (+1.7% above benchmark) and 94.1% (+2.5% materially above benchmark). We perform above benchmark for 30 of the 33 split indicators for Continuation, and 31 of the 32 split indicators for Completion. Our materially above benchmark performance for Completion includes: Students who were eligible for Free School Meals (+3.5%); those in the lowest quintile of the IMD (+3.3%) and the ABCS (Associations Between Characteristics of Students) (+6.7%); Black students (+4.1%); and students aged 21-30 years old (+4.8%), all with 0% of the uncertainty distribution materially below benchmark. There are also high levels of Completion for students progressing from First degree with integrated Foundation programmes (+5.8%, 0% of the uncertainty distribution materially below benchmark), indicating the transformational impact and educational gains that these programmes are having for our learners. Overall, these patterns provide convincing evidence of the impact of our learning and teaching approaches aimed at supporting our students, whatever their background, 'getting on' as well as 'getting in' (Higson, 2018), supported through the 'Aston Strategy 2018 to 2023,' and in line with our ambitious Access and Participation Plan commitments (2020-2025).

We show as materially below benchmark for Continuation in the 'Other undergraduate' level of study and 'Other undergraduate level 4,' where the same issue has negatively impacted both split indicators. Aston used to run a short course for Language students entitled 'UK Explorer and Insights into Modern Engineering,' which ceased after the 2016-17 intake. Students would not be expected to continue into a second year of study at Aston, and hence this short course does not meet TEF criteria for a positive outcome. The 21 students on this short course represent 5.4% of Aston's 'Other undergraduate' students (where we are -3.2% below benchmark), and 21% of our 'Other undergraduate level 4' students (where we are -21.8% below benchmark). A second programme that impacts these data is the 'Developing Skills in Academic English' with 31 international students studying for a Certificate in Higher Education (Cert. HE). These students would not normally be expected to continue their education in the UK and as a result have a Continuation rate of just 38.7%. In addition to the 'Other Undergraduate' and 'Other undergraduate level 4' impact, this programme feeds into the Language and Area Studies subject area (-2.9% below benchmark). If we remove these two programmes from the 'Other undergraduate' and 'Other undergraduate level 4' split indicators, then Aston's Continuation indicator would change to 90.7% for 'Other undergraduate' (compared to 81.6% in the TEF dashboard) and 93.2% for 'Other undergraduate level 4' (compared to 55.2% in the TEF dashboard).

Just one other subject area falls materially below benchmark on Continuation: Allied Health (-2.7% below, with 57.1% of the uncertainty distribution materially below the benchmark), albeit Completion is better at +2.3% above benchmark. This provision represents our Optometry programmes, although in the sector, this subject area encompasses a wide range of programmes. In terms of this result, it should be noted that the Continuation benchmark for this category is flagged as high (above 95%) and our indicator measure on this subject is also high. Since 2018-19, work to optimise Continuation within our Optometry programmes has involved increasing support for students in the two Stage One modules that they find most challenging. Measures have included: Embedding Optics

Simulators that can be downloaded onto personal devices; allowing students to recreate practical activities which support theoretical learning; developing bespoke video tutorials to explain difficult concepts and support practical skills development; the creation of student-directed tutorials covering topics identified for extra support by the cohort, and redesigning handouts into highly visual mini-guides which aid understanding. The set of initiatives introduced across the two modules have received excellent feedback from students, and have formed the basis of a new Optics textbook (Strong, 2022). Internal feedback from our 2021-22 MEQs indicated that our students valued the additional academic support they had received in these modules. In the most recent Guardian University Guide (2023) for the Health Professions category (where Optometry is represented), Aston was ranked second in the UK for Continuation (98.2%). The Guardian measure aggregates two to three years of Continuation data, taking the effect of entry qualifications into account.

The only other subject areas that are below benchmark for Continuation are Mathematical Sciences, (-1.2%); and Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy (-0.1%). Whilst Completion for Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy is marginally below benchmark (-0.3%), it is slightly above benchmark (+0.3%) for Mathematical Sciences. This is an area which the University has been focussing attention upon, through enhancements to academic support, and in particular, partnership working between academic staff within Schools and the LDC. Pharmacology benchmarks for both Continuation and Completion are flagged in the metrics as high (above 95%), so challenging to meet and exceed. With a Continuation rate of 96.2%, we have non-materially missed benchmark performance in both cases by -0.1% and -0.3% respectively (with 99.8% of the uncertainty distribution for both measures broadly in line with the benchmark), whilst remaining above the 95% threshold consideration for TEF excellence.

We believe that the academic and pastoral support we provide for all our students (See Section 2), aids their Continuation and Completion, particularly in the case of our disadvantaged learners. Our ethos is to support individuals through a range of measures aimed at recognising and supporting need, and building educational gains. These measures include:

i) *Learner analytics*

As discussed in Section 2, an institution-wide learner analytics system: MyEngagement was introduced through a phased approach from 2018-19 to measure student engagement. Both students and their Personal Tutors have access to these data and use the information to identify and where appropriate, try to rectify any issues that arise early in the students' learning journey. Our own research (based on data from 2018-21) has shown that measures of engagement in the first three weeks predict subsequent activity and attainment in first year undergraduate students (Summers, Higson & Moores, 2021).

ii) *Financial support*

Significant financial resource (c. £2-3 million) is committed each year in the form of scholarships, because our evaluation of the impact of these has shown that they improve Continuation, especially for students from households with lower income (Moores & Burgess, 2022).

iii) *Learning Development Centre (LDC)*

The LDC provides support in academic study skills, mathematics and study strategies, as well as offering PAL. Students can choose to access the support online or in person, as best suits their

needs and study preferences. Over the TEF period, the LDC has had over 4000 engagements annually with students for academic support; and a doubling of the number of sessions run in conjunction with Colleges between 2018-19 and 2021-22. We have found that students who use the LDC services are more likely to progress to their final year, thereby enhancing our Completion rates.

iv) *Student Health and Wellbeing*

Recognising the significance of mental health and wellbeing amongst our student community, we have invested heavily in 'The Hub' (c. £400k in additional posts in 2021-22): The front desk that signposts students to the University's Student and Academic Services, which include Student Advice, Counselling and Mental Wellbeing Services and Disability and Academic Support. The individual and tailored support we offer our disadvantaged students through the Hub, and via our academic and Professional Services staff, helps them to continue and complete their studies at rates similar to those without these disadvantages. Where learners have specific learning differences, they are provided with specialist academic support to aid them in their learning; and students with a declared disability and/or diagnosed long-term health condition (including mental health) are given support and reasonable adjustments by our Disability and Academic Support team. The University also has a Multi-faith Centre that offers pastoral support to all students, particularly at exam time.

The Hub's services proved an invaluable resource for students during the pandemic period. In 2020-21, for example, the team had 608 interactions with students relating to mental health and wellbeing; and 3708 interactions with students relating to disability advice and/or specialist academic support. The scale of this activity has only increased post-pandemic. The efficacy of these services is borne out by recent research which has shown that having a disability of whatever nature at Aston, (whether supported by a Disabled Students Allowance or not), had no significant impact on Continuation rates when controlling with other characteristics (Moore & Burgess, 2022). In 2020-21, due to additional concerns around the impact of COVID-19 on student mental health, further support was provided through the University's Student Wellbeing 'Call back scheme,' which contributed to Aston's shortlisting for the Times Higher Education 'University of the Year Award' in 2021.

Our engagement with the national student mental health agenda is further evidenced through our work on an OfS-funded project as part of a consortium with the University of Derby, King's College London, Student Minds and Advance HE, which culminated in the 2022 publication: [*'Education for Mental Health: Enhancing student mental health through curriculum and pedagogy.'*](#) Outcomes from this project include a national Advance HE [*'Education for Mental Health Toolkit'*](#) which has been shared with Aston colleagues, and used to shape recent enhancements to the University's Personal Tutor training for academic staff.

Progression

Aston has a long-standing commitment to work-related learning, stemming back to its 1966 University Charter, and our most recent 'Aston Strategy 2018 to 2023' aims for students to *'have high rates of employment in desirable jobs following graduation.'* Many of our students choose to study with us because of our strategic focus on employability based on our strong links with business, industry and the professions, and our positive graduate outcomes data. Given this strategic intent, we are exceptionally proud of our Progression rates, performing materially above benchmark overall by 5.8% at 78.6%, with 100% of the uncertainty distribution materially above benchmark. This outstanding level of performance has been consistent over the years of the TEF period, and for

students from all backgrounds and geographies. We perform above benchmark for all of the Progression split indicators, materially above for 28 of the 30. Notable materially above benchmark successes in line with our strategy to serve students from all backgrounds include: IMD Quintiles 1 or 2 (+6.5%), ABCS quintiles 1, 2 or 3, 4 or 5 (+6.5%, +5.4% and +5.8% respectively), Asian students (+5.6%) and 21-30 year olds (+11.1%), all with 100% of the uncertainty distribution materially above benchmark. Twelve of our subject areas perform materially above benchmark for Progression (e.g. Politics, +11.6%; Mathematical Sciences +10.4% and Allied Health, +8.2%); as does our First degree with integrated Foundation year (+5.2%).

Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy is the only subject area which is materially below benchmark for Progression, with Aston offering just one programme: MPharm Pharmacy in this wider subject grouping (which also affects our 'Undergraduate with postgraduate components' metric). As such, our benchmarks are influenced by subjects we do not offer, and sector average performance for some measures is much higher for Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmacy than it is for Pharmacy alone. Progression at Aston is 76.4%, which is -6.7% below benchmark. As one of the largest Pharmacy schools in the UK, however, (the contribution to our own Progression benchmark is 16.6%), we consider the programme an important engine of social mobility. It is noteworthy that the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2021) report '*Which University degrees are best for intergenerational mobility*,' states that Aston's MPharm was the only programme outside London in the top 20 for social mobility in terms of access and success. This is despite the majority of job postings (452) being found within the South-East between 2018-2020 (Brewer, 2022), compared with just 14 postings in the West Midlands. Within Pharmacy, student mobility can prove challenging in any year, with many students preferring to work locally due to family and caring responsibilities, but during the pandemic, this challenge was particularly acute. With the introduction of the new Pharmacy Education Standards, however, we are already seeing an improvement in the job opportunities for our students through the regular monitoring undertaken by the Programme Team. Importantly, pass rates in the General Pharmaceutical Council's Registration Assessment for our MPharm graduates are excellent at 91.85% in 2021 against a national average of 83.39% (General Pharmaceutical Council Minutes, 2021) and 83.97% in 2022 against a national average of 82.38% (General Pharmaceutical Council Minutes, 2022), showing we prepare our students well for employment. Despite the challenges, the latest LEO data (LEO, 2022) shows that three years after graduation MPharm graduates' median salaries are £34,800 (ranked 7th amongst HEPs in the UK). We are also slightly below benchmark (-2.0%) in 'Materials and Technology' (which encompasses our Logistics programmes: 30 students across the TEF period). This small student population means that each respondent contributes 3.2% to performance here, and hence just one additional positive destination would have moved performance above benchmark.

Aston's commitment to work-related learning is demonstrated through measures that embed and integrate work experience within all our undergraduate programmes, of which 63.3% have compulsory placement experiences. The University has a longstanding reputation for the success of its undergraduate placement year and for its clinical programmes (e.g. Optometry, Pharmacy and Audiology) which embed clinical practice within programmes to ensure our students acquire the knowledge, skills and attributes sought by employers. We see placements and work experience as drivers of student success with our research showing it improves attainment (Jones, Green and Higson, 2017) and employment (Moores and Reddy, 2012). Between 2017 and 2021, an average of

71% of Aston undergraduates completed a placement year or integrated work experience as part of their degree programmes.

Preparations for work experience begin early in year one, where students are provided with activities based around embedding careers and personal development planning, and given links to dedicated online resources produced by the University's Careers and Placements (C&P+) team to build their career management skills to aid with sourcing a meaningful placement in their second year. Around 80% of programmes have career development embedded in the curriculum, and suitable employers are identified in conjunction with academic staff in Colleges to support the delivery of these modules. An example is the 'Introduction to Organisational Behaviour,' developed in conjunction with the graduate recruiters Unilever, available in the majority of degree programmes in the Business School. The close partnership working between academic Schools, the C&P+ team and industry to prepare our students well for future graduate work is evident in the Industry Clubs run by a number of Aston's subject areas (e.g. Chemical Engineering). These Industry Clubs function with focussed industrial partners to develop students' employability skills and develop their links with industry. In the second year, the C&P+ team co-ordinate a comprehensive schedule of timetabled sessions for all students that includes application making skills such as mock interviews and assessment centres, discipline-focussed placement fairs, employer-led webinars and live chats.

When students embark upon their placements or clinical practice, the C&P+ team actively work with over 1,000 employers and advertise over 25,000 graduate and placement opportunities each year on a dedicated online platform: 'Aston Futures.' The 'Talent Bank' has been created to provide an enhanced placement matching service offering tailored one-to-one personalised support for students, particularly those struggling to secure a placement, in line with our Strategy. We work closely with employers to promote placements that are mutually beneficial, and whilst local employers are a significant source of our placement activity, Aston also has strong links with national and international organisations. For example, HSBC, where the University saw a marked increase in the volume and calibre of Aston students hired into their industrial placements, internships, and graduate programmes (recognised by the award of 'Best Collaboration between University and Employer' at the National Undergraduate Employability (NUE) Awards in 2020 and the Institute of Student Employers 2020 Award for Outstanding University Partnership with an Employer and/or Supplier). Other organisations that work closely with Aston include local NHS trusts, GlaxoSmithKline (GSK), Mondelez, Samsung, IBM and Proctor and Gamble. Feedback from these organisations has been very positive (e.g. the CEO of UK Electronics Skills Foundation noted Aston offers: *'a clear focus that is placed upon preparing engineering students for work...includes really positive encouragement and support to finding work placements and extensive networking and engagement with employers...and a strong connection with alumni'*).

Every student on placement or clinical practice has a contract or learning agreement with their employer or clinical placement organisation, and job descriptions are jointly agreed between the employer and the University to ensure that these are of an appropriate quality and standard, aligning with programme outcomes, any PSRB requirements and employer needs. In the case of clinical placements, appropriate 'fitness to practise' checks are additionally undertaken. Placement Tutors provide ongoing academic support throughout the placement year, coupled with regular contact with the C&P+ team. To consolidate learning through reflection on practice, our placement year is assessed via a range of assessment options chosen by academic staff working in partnership with

the C&P+ team. The approach supports the development of independent learning and self-evaluation; and by maintaining an academic component, this helps to prepare students for their integration back into their final year at University. Preparation and returner sessions are also made available for placement students to aid transition between study and workplace.

Whilst outward mobility opportunities have been more limited in recent years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the implementation of visas following Brexit, we have supported students to work and study abroad by taking advantage of the Erasmus and Turing funding streams. The C&P+ team was voted 'Best University Placement Team' in the NUE Awards 2022, in recognition of their work embedding employability in the curriculum and the ways in which the service adapted to the new virtual world during 2020-21 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included supporting 1600 students (64% engagement) to complete a placement (either in person or through a virtual or hybrid approach), and offering a Virtual Careers Fair in which 62 employers held over 2000 meetings with students. The success of these initiatives has impacted on future practice at the institution, with opportunities for virtual and flexible placement continuing, alongside the expansion of virtual events and careers and placement support.

Student employability is further enhanced through a suite of workshops and initiatives that are hosted throughout the year, open to all students from any year group. These include support in key areas such as 'Developing your LinkedIn profile', 'CV success' and 'Networking tips for beginners.' The University also partners with business to offer a Professional Mentoring Scheme, in which business professionals are matched with 100 second and final year students each year, enabling them to work one-to-one, helping to enrich students' learning and give them further insight into the workplace and professional life. We also provide our learners with support in entrepreneurship through 'BSEEN,' our entrepreneur support scheme that develops the enterprise skills of our students and graduates. We are proud to have won the Times Higher Education's 'Outstanding Entrepreneurial University' in 2020 for our strategic and inclusive cross-institutional approach to supporting businesses, the West Midlands region and student entrepreneurship. The C&P+ team won the 'Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity Award' at the AGCAS Awards for Excellence in 2022, recognising Aston's determination to seek excellent outcomes for students from all backgrounds. This award was for the Re:action 24/7 programme run in collaboration with Enterprise Rent a Car and six other universities.

In line with our strategy to support the whole student journey, our engagement does not stop when our graduates leave us. A dedicated team within the C&P+ department focuses on supporting graduates for up to three years after graduation. 'Aston and Beyond' is the overarching descriptor for initiatives and projects under this area. Of note, is the Graduate Projects Office, which offers paid work to graduates undertaking projects across both Professional Services and academic areas of the University, to upskill and support a career springboard, and provide a resource to aid the University on aspects of student experience where it is beneficial to have input from recently graduated learners (e.g. Research into employment opportunities for international graduates).

Alumni too play a significant role in supporting the employability of both our students and our graduates through a variety of means. These include advertising placements and graduate jobs; acting as mentors; contributing to the curriculum through the delivery of guest lectures/panel events and provision of real-world business case studies; providing career profiles, advice and inspiration; and in terms of entrepreneurship and enterprise activity, providing case studies and acting as

speakers and 'Dragon's Den' judges. Over 750 alumni are active supporters each year, as volunteers, donors, or both. Donations from alumni to Aston's Forward Fund are used to support access, funding Pathways programmes working with secondary school children and sixth-formers to raise aspiration in STEM, Healthcare, Law and Business. They also provide £5k undergraduate scholarships to 50 new students with low household income (<£25k p.a.) each year, and up to four £25k scholarships a year for forced migrants. Other funds have been directed to areas of greatest need. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, significant alumni funds were directed to purchase laptops and provide support with Wi-Fi costs for students with low household income (<£25k p.a.); and similarly, alumni donations have funded international study trips to Stockholm and Brussels for those who would not otherwise be able to go.

Concluding Remarks

Through its mission and strategy, Aston has driven and delivered its commitment to its student beneficiaries, providing a high quality, research-informed, employer-led academic learning experience which builds educational gains and enables our diverse student population to achieve their full potential and progress to high calibre graduate outcomes. We view our responsive, partnership working with students, and our expansive and growing relationships with business, industry and the professions, as real institutional strengths that make Aston what it is today.

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