

**Institution: Aston University**

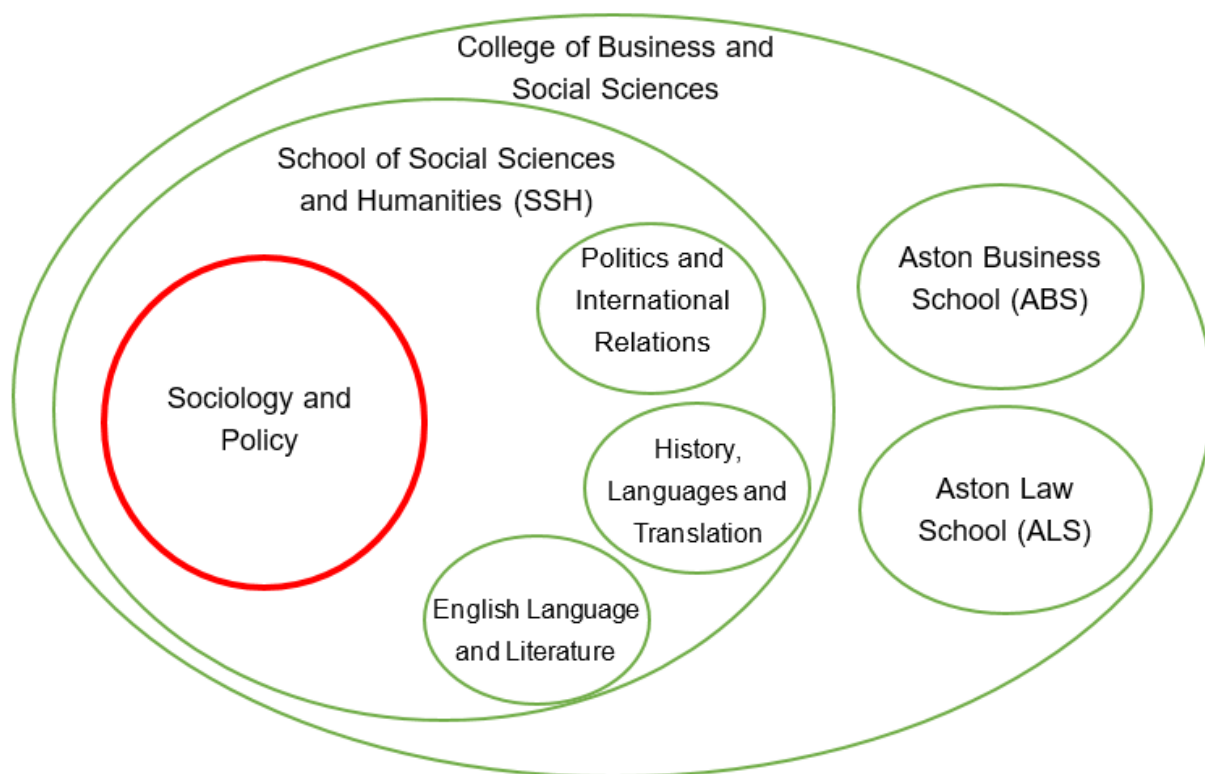
**Unit of assessment: UoA 21**

### **Section 1. Unit context and structure, research and impact strategy**

#### **Context and Structure**

Aston has a strong and distinguished tradition of public sociology, founded on public engagement with civil society organisations, political activists, and policy makers. The Sociology Unit of Assessment (UoA) corresponds to the Department of Sociology and Policy (DoSP), which sits within the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), which is part of the College of Business and Social Sciences (Figure 1) (Institutional Level Environment Statement [ILES] 2.1). Our research in sociology has grown in recent years following significant investment in Sociology and Policy staff. This strategic investment has centred on building a collaborative and interdisciplinary research ethos, underpinned by a dynamic culture of public engagement and knowledge exchange that speaks to local, regional, national and global publics. Our aim is to foster an enabling and inclusive environment for rigorous empirical research, underpinned by methodological innovation and diversity, which addresses issues of real-world importance.

**Figure 1. The Location of the UoA within the College of Business and Social Sciences**



The Department's foundations are built on a diverse student population, comprising a high proportion of regionally-based and first-generation university students, and a majority BAME student intake (ILES 1.6). In line with the University's Mission, these foundations have enabled major strategic investment in the Department's staff base during this REF period. At the time of REF2014, the sociology group comprised 8 staff, three of whom contributed to the Area Studies REF2014 submission. For REF2021, the Sociology UoA now comprises 18 (17.8 FTE) researchers. In turn, this strategic investment has produced a step-change in the scope and scale of sociological research at Aston, creating a strong platform for the Department's staff to make our own first REF submission.

While the recruitment of staff has been guided by research excellence (ILES 1.2), our strategy has sought to organise research capacity around six groupings with overlapping membership and interests. These interconnections are central to the sustainability, cohesion, and vitality of the UoA as a whole. The groupings are:

- 1) Children and Young People - work, labour and economic life, political activism (Mizen), time-use, the family (Mullan), youth culture (Popov, Soytemel, Stamou);
- 2) Gender and Sexualities - contraception, drug-use, reproductive care (Geampana), reproductive rights (Hayes, Lowe, Page), religion (Page, Pilcher), leisure (Pilcher), work and employment (Pilcher);
- 3) Health and Society - evidence-based policy (Fooks), public health governance, the commercial determinants of health (Godziewski and Fooks), health technologies, clinical trials (Geampana), bioethics, health policy (Paton), public participation, lay experience, service delivery (Tritter), sexual health (Lowe, Pilcher);
- 4) Migration and Diversity - asylum seekers, citizenship-making, social movements (Maestri), southern Russia and North Caucasus, (Popov), belonging, housing (Soytemel), critical citizenship, national identity, post-nationalism (Tonkiss);
- 5) Social and Cultural Inequalities - social movements, protest strategies, activism (Hayes, Lowe, Maestri, Mizen, Page, Popov), Islamophobia (Mills), cultural identity (Popov, Soytemel, Tonkiss, Stamou, Schimpfössl);
- 6) Social Power and Elites: media and communication (Mills, Schimpfössl, Mullan); elite political influence (Fooks, Mills, Schimpfössl, Godziewski).

These groupings are organised within an over-arching interdisciplinary Research Centre, the Centre for the Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture (CCISC). The result of a strategic initiative taken during the 2008-14 REF cycle, CCISC is one of a handful of interdisciplinary research centres in the UK, bringing sociologists together with researchers from the Departments of English, History, Languages and Translation, Politics and International Relations, and from Aston Business School and Aston Law School. The Centre offers a series of resources to support the UoA's research (financial, organisational, administrative, and intellectual), and has three organising objectives: to create a bridge between research, policy, and social practice; to facilitate inventive interdisciplinary research contributing to the public understanding of major social issues; to evaluate the evidence base for policy and practice.

As well as providing support for UoA staff, CCISC has therefore encouraged the growth of a wider sociological research environment across the University. The Centre further facilitates collaboration and networking beyond Aston, supports public engagement and impact activities, and is an incubator for innovative research around interdisciplinary clusters. Within CCISC, these clusters organise autonomously around specific projects or activities, according to particular needs and opportunities. This is consistent with our bottom-up approach to fostering interdisciplinary and collaborative research projects (ILES 2.9).

### Research and Impact Achievements

Decisions on staffing, collaboration, funding applications, project development, and publication are informed by the University's strategy to pursue research that is interdisciplinary, collaborative, excellent, and sustainable (ILES 2.3). The UoA implements this strategy by emphasising three interdependent strands of activities: 1. fostering the excellence and public recognition of Aston Sociology; 2. strengthening interdisciplinarity and international collaboration; 3. developing the impact and public understanding of Aston sociological research.

1. **Excellence and Public Recognition.** Several forms of support have been introduced and/or further developed during this REF period at Departmental, School, and University

level to strengthen the public recognition and excellence of Aston sociological research (Section 2). The benefits of this strategy during the REF cycle include UoA staff publication of 12 monographs, 120 peer-reviewed journal articles, 11 edited books, and 54 book chapters. These sit alongside 8 edited special issues, 111 papers at overseas international conferences, and 48 (non-CCISC related) academic blog posts.

A further focus of our research publication strategy is non-academic audiences and engagement with our research users and beneficiaries. In this REF period, these activities extend to TV (13), radio (39), and newspaper interviews (44), authored newspaper articles (34), non-academic blog posts and online articles (54), and podcast interviews (15). Consequently, our research is now widely reported and/or cited in newspaper (including online) articles (228), and colleagues routinely deliver talks to non-academic audiences (89 in the UK; 9 overseas). A dedicated CCISC blog (from 2017) also helps sustain our research's visibility (2017) by sitting alongside the institutional CCISC website, which attracts just over 9,000 unique visitors a year.

Many of these engagement markers indicate the importance we give to high-quality research, which is further evident in the publication of several well-received monographs with leading academic publishers, among them Schimpfössl's prize-winning ethnography *Rich Russians*. UoA staff also regularly publish in leading journals in sociology and the broader social sciences, a number of which have been shortlisted for prestigious awards (Fooks and Mills, Lowe, Tonkiss).

2. **Interdisciplinarity and International Collaboration.** The UoA's embedding of interdisciplinary working and international collaboration has produced notable successes. This is exemplified by Popov's (with Soytemel, Tonkiss, Stamou, Fooks) Horizon 2020 Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future (CHIEF) project. CHIEF is rooted in an international network which brings together researchers from political science, media and communication studies, psychology, religious studies, history, social anthropology, film studies, and educational sciences. Other examples include: Lowe and Pilcher's NHS funded project on the sexual health of sex workers (medics and psychology); Hayes' research on narrative and power in the criminal trials of social movement activists (law and political science); and Mizen's ESRC research on precarious youth employment (social geography, business studies, economics, history). Paton (appointed April 2020) will further strengthen this through her involvement in interdisciplinary research team of neonatologists, health economists, and biostatisticians. Fooks and Mills have recently begun working with scholars in computer science and data analytics on conflicts of interest in biomedical research and UK elites.
3. **Impact and Public Understanding.** Our focus on research with impact and public engagement is supported by the School's now-well established infrastructure. This includes an Impact Director and Deputy Director, and an Impact Steering and Strategy Committee mandated by the School Management Committee to encourage and enable impact across the School. All staff are encouraged to develop impact portfolios, irrespective of whether they develop into REF impact case studies, and are supported by a series of impact workshops. Impact has also been embedded into the School's study leave (ILES 3.11) and promotion policies (ILES 3.3). This is supported at University level by the appointment of a full-time Impact Manager and Impact Officer located in the Research Knowledge Exchange (RKE) Department (ILES 4.12), and an Impact Acceleration Fund to provide resources alongside organisational support (ILES 4.13).

In line with the University's Mission, this strategy has helped deepen our relationships with our research users and beneficiaries, and sharpen our engagement with political, policy, civil society organisations', and professional bodies' agendas (ILES 1.1). It has also aided the development of a strong impact activity portfolio from which our two Impact Case Studies for REF2021 have emerged. UoA impact stories not selected this time

include Mills' work on the democratisation and decentralisation of the BBC and the introduction of a digital licence fee; Paton's work with The Royal College of Physicians (whose Ethics Committee she chairs) supporting the health workforce in maintaining good ethical processes during the COVID-19 pandemic; Popov, Soytemel and Stamou's work with museums and other cultural organisations promoting community engagement through music and photography; and Tritter's work with Public Health England promoting patient involvement in the delivery of health care.

These impact activities complement our extensive public engagement work with a range of organisations, including: the Progress Educational Trust, Fertility Network UK, Royal College of Nursing, Ministry of Defence, Church of England, the Saltley Trust, Midlands Institute for Children, Youth and Mission, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the U.S. Embassy, and interfaith groups like the Women's Federation for Peace. The research of UoA staff has also informed policy documents by major national and international organisations, like Public Health England, the Work Bank Group, and the World Health Organization; and has been cited in national and international legal judgements in the High Court of Australia and dispute settlement procedures of the World Trade Organization. UoA staff engage with wider audiences through our extensive contributions to major written and broadcast national and international news outlets, through to regional and local news organisations and the campaigning press. UoA staff routinely give talks to local, regional, and national groups and organisations, and participate in TV and radio interviews, and podcasts.

### **Future strategic aims and goals for research and impact**

Looking forward, we will develop and strengthen our commitment to excellence, impact, interdisciplinarity, sustainability, and internationalisation. Building upon existing expertise, our key aim is to shape research agendas in health and society, gender, sexuality and inequality, cultural heritage, and the sociology of elites. To this end, we will:

- 1) Further internationalise through cross-national networking and collaboration to develop innovative comparative research with a strong interdisciplinary emphasis. We have an excellent basis for this through our existing international networks (Section 4) and to which our newly appointed colleagues will further contribute. For instance, Geampana is already exploring potential links on contraceptive risk and risk communication with researchers from McGill and Gonzaga Universities and the U.S. National Institutes of Health. Likewise, Fooks and Godziewski are in the early stages of work with epidemiologists, urban planners, health promotion academics and practitioners, nutritionists, health geographers, and political scientists on the commercial determinants of health. This will be supported by seed-funding allocated at College-level, through the Research Centres, and via the University's International Collaboration Fund (ILES 2.9).
- 2) Strengthen our funding base to add further depth and sustainability. We will do this by utilising University, College, and external small funding opportunities (e.g. the British Academy) to support the development of large, interdisciplinary grant applications and leverage our international networks to facilitate opportunities via overseas funders. Current examples are Godziewski's UACES (academic association for Contemporary European Studies) successful application to support an EU health governance network, as the foundation for an application for a Jean Monnet Network with Erasmus and Amsterdam Universities; Page's partnership with Deakin University on a joint application to the Australian Research Council (Discovery Project) for a project on young people and religion; and Popov's work to develop the CHIEF network of European researchers for a further application under the Horizon Europe Programme.
- 3) Invest in existing research groups to expedite internal and external collaborations, build capacity in the new research centres and strengthen links across the University. From summer 2021, the UoA will launch a new Centre for Health and Society, co-directed by

Paton and Fooks, and supported financially and administratively for the first three years by the College. The Centre will build on the UoA's investment in staff expertise to develop health and healthcare research and inform policy and practice; foster its interdisciplinary and cross-College/University membership; and establish a strong user focus. At the same time, Departmental staff (Maestri, Tonkiss, Popov, Soytemel, Hayes) will join colleagues from the Department of Politics and International Relations within the School's new Centre for Migration and Forced Displacement which, again, possesses a strong interdisciplinary and international orientation.

- 4) Expand the audiences for our work, and optimise our engagement with research users, to better shape social and policy agendas. Work aimed at strengthening our engagement is already in train. For example, UoA staff (Schimpfössl, Paton) have contributed to the College's new professionally produced Society Matters podcasts, in which staff discuss their research. More generally, staff have produced short, professionally supported videos to promote discrete projects and the College has commissioned the Conversation's Managing Director, Matt Warren, to work with UoA staff (Godziewski, Paton, Schimpfössl) in disseminating their research to a wider audience.

## Section 2. People

### Staffing Strategy

In line with the growth of the University's FTE (ILES 1.3), staff recruitment has significantly expanded the breadth and depth of the UoA's research. Alongside teaching expertise and quality, our recruitment prioritises existing or potential excellence that adds strength in the key areas of our collective research strategy. During the assessment period, the DoSP made 16 new full-time permanent academic appointments, with eight departures. New appointments include one Chair, one Reader, one Senior Lecturer, and 13 Lecturers. Staffing strategy has been guided by three mutually reinforcing objectives: recruitment of mid-career and senior scholars to enhance research leadership; investment in early career researchers (ECRs) with outstanding potential; and the addition of complementary interests, methodologies, and perspectives to facilitate collaborative, interdisciplinary, internationally relevant research. We now have a cosmopolitan, outward facing, and multilingual staff group of Austrian, Turkish, Russian, British, Canadian, Luxembourgish, and Italian nationalities whose research is national and global, and increasingly collaborative (Section 1).

We detail research support for staff below but note here that the results of this strategy have been evident in career progression. Six internal promotions have been achieved over the census period: two to Reader (one female) and four to Senior Lecturer (three female), including two colleagues recruited at Lecturer since 2014. The current staff profile is now more evenly distributed, with two Professors, two Readers, five Senior Lecturers, and seven Lecturers (five of whom are ECRs). All permanent research-active lecturing staff have balanced workloads (33.3% teaching, 33.3% research, 33.3% administration), irrespective of their seniority, and as calculated using the School's workload model. All staff have one timetabled research day per week during term time to support research continuity across the busiest teaching times of the year. Reflecting the University's commitment to flexible working (ILES 3.7), one Senior Lecturer is employed as 0.8 FTE.

A further measure of our growing success is the appointment of two fixed-term Research Fellows (one still in post) to work on externally funded research projects, and nine fixed-term Teaching Fellows (two still in post) during the REF period. All Teaching Fellows possess PhDs, are active researchers, and receive active career support. This includes full integration into our research culture and practice, a mentor, up to £1,500 p.a. research and conference support, peer support/review of research and funding applications, and engagement with the University's ECR Forum, including targeted careers advice and individualised career interviews (ILES 3.13-14). The effectiveness of this is evident in the success of all our Teaching Fellows in securing



subsequent academic appointments at leading Higher Education Institutions in the UK and overseas.

### Staff Development

The University supports staff career development, including training and development courses, pathways to Higher Education Academy (HEA) recognition, and mentoring (ILES 3.9-10, 4.5). SSH and DoSP further support staff research development at all career stages, including:

- 1) A continuous "My Development Conversation" (MDC) process, held with HoD (Hayes), to agree development targets and plan career development (ILES 3.8). MDC is used to agree balanced workloads and ring-fence research time; assess individual research activities and objectives; and identify training needs. The MDC is a genuine conversation, and is supported by rolling one-to-one meetings with the Departmental Research Director (DRD - Fooks) to provide bespoke research planning, and support for public and user engagement. It is not School practice to set annual minimum research output targets.
- 2) A formalised, transparent, and generous study leave policy that permits application for one semester (i.e. six months) of leave in seven, subject to an agreed research plan and final report approved by the DRD, HoD, and School Management Committee. ECRs may apply for their first period of study leave a semester early (ILES 3.11). All but two full-time permanent members of staff (Mizen, Popov) in post prior to 2015 have had two periods of study leave during the current REF period.
- 3) A School-wide workload system (from 2015) to allocate fair teaching loads. Amongst other things, this provides for a weekly term-time research day free of teaching or administrative meetings; and allows variations in teaching allocation to be smoothed out over time.
- 4) An annual individual research support allowance of up to £1,500 p.a. to fund fieldwork, conference attendance, or other research related expenses. This is a marked increase from £400 in 2014/15 and is also available to Teaching Fellows.

In addition, the School provides support through several further initiatives available on a competitive basis. These include:

- 1) From 2017/18, support to complete a monograph through a semester of teaching relief (Page, Schimpfössl);
- 2) Seed-funding for large grant applications (also from 2017/18) for international and national networking, short-term teaching buyout, or essential pilot work. This initiative supported Popov and colleagues' successful H2020 CHIEF application;
- 3) A similar facility up to £3,000 (from 2018/19) to complement support from the University's Impact Accelerator Fund (ILES 4.13);
- 4) An annual long week-end writing retreat (introduced in 2017) at Bamford Quaker Community in Derbyshire, oriented towards ECRs, and including a women only event in 2018, to encourage collaboration and provide research mentoring.

These measures are complemented by a range of smaller-scale initiatives supporting career development and progression:

- 1) Core funding for School research centres (£5,000 p.a. in 2017/18 rising to £15,000 in 2018/19) to provide, *inter alia*, seed-corn funding for fieldwork/research projects, networking, methods training, and impact. For example, CCISC funded two two-day workshops on multiple correspondence analysis/field analysis delivered by Bühlmann, University of Lausanne, to support CHIEF and Mills' work on elites;

- 2) Peer review support for published outputs undertaken by a small, gender balanced group of staff, which meets three times a year, and provides tailored individual feedback and departmental reflection at an end of year 'awayday';
- 3) Bespoke advice from the DRD and supportive peer review of draft research grant applications, consistent with the University's Policy for Peer Review (ILES 4.5);
- 4) Presentations of work-in-progress at departmental and CCISC seminars;
- 5) School financial support for staff exchanges with the University of Auckland, which saw Page travel to New Zealand in 2018 and Professor Alan France's return visit to Aston in 2019.

Career development is further supported by staff access to University-wide support (ILES 3.13-14), including: a) DoSP staff participation in the annual University Grant Writing Programme (ILES 4.15) which concludes with the drafting of a final research application (Schimpfössl); b) nominations to the University's International Visiting Scholars Fund (IVS - formerly Distinguished Scholars Scheme) (Section 4) to promote international research networking and collaboration (ILES 2.9); c) University provision of (social) media engagement to raise research visibility and promote public engagement and impact.

Where appropriate different sources of support are co-ordinated to leverage their value. CCISC, for example, supported Page's participation in a roundtable discussion on sexuality and religion at the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Seattle in 2016 with Heather Shipley (University of Ottawa) and Pam Dickey Young (Queen's University). Dickey Young has since visited Aston under the IVS Fund and continues to collaborate with Page. Page has also subsequently published a monograph with Shipley, aided by the support for monograph writing, and both currently have a joint article under review. Likewise, Popov received School support for large grant applications to visit Dusan Deák at Comenius University, Slovakia, who was then invited to Aston under the IVS Fund as part of the development of the successful CHIEF EU's Horizon 2020 application.

Further career development support, strategically mapped to the Vitae Framework, is also offered to newly appointed ECRs beyond that provided by the University (ILES 3.14). This is especially important given our investment in ECRs with significant research potential. In addition to the career support detailed above, ECRs can access: a) a start-up research fund of £5000; b) a reduction in their teaching and administrative workload for the first three years of appointment; c) the ability to apply for their first study leave period one semester early; d) pairing with an experienced mentor in line with University policy (ILES 3.9), to advise on publication strategies, grant applications, and career development; e) peer support and review from an experienced staff member with a track-record of successful research funding applications; and f) membership of the School's ECR Forum (chaired by an ECR staff member), which represents ECRs on School committees and on the University Early Career Researcher's Forum. The School ECR Forum further organises School-wide reading groups and seminars, and participates in the University ECR Forum (ILES 3.13).

### **Research Students (PGR)**

The UoA has a lively and growing community of post-graduate student researchers, some of whom are supported by full or fees-only School doctoral studentships. During the assessment period, the UoA has achieved 8.25 doctoral awards (REF4a). This figure comprises 7 women and 3 men who have successfully completed their PhDs, some of whom were co-supervised with colleagues from other UoAs. At the end of 2020, a further eleven PGR students (eight women and three men) were being supervised by UoA staff. We have had no research-based professional doctorate students during the assessment period.

A key objective is to provide PGRs with an immersive, high quality scholarly environment by integrating them closely into the UoA's research culture. At the institutional level, PGRs receive support from the Aston Graduate School (ILES 3.15), which is responsible for programme quality and PGR training in a range of research and transferable skills. PGRs are also supported by the School's Director of Research Degree Programmes (DRDP), who organises induction, monitors progress and quality, and organises core research methods training (see below). The DRDP also oversees the organisation of the School's annual PGR-student conference, which is coordinated by two PGRs. Pastoral support for research students is offered by a dedicated PGR-Tutor.

The University has been a member of the ESRC Midlands Graduate School Doctoral Training Partnership since 2016. At School level, membership is focused in the Area Studies and Business and Management pathways. As a consequence, all the UoA's research students are required to undertake research methods training in all core ESRC requirements on a School-wide programme: Research Design, Philosophy of Social Science, Qualitative Research Methods and Quantitative Research Methods. A UoA staff member (Pilcher) convenes the qualitative methods module, and UoA staff contribute to this and to the Philosophy of Social Science module. While our PGRs thus already benefit from existing DTP membership, our strategy is to add a sociology pathway to the DTP in the post-REF period.

All PGR students carry out a training needs analysis carried out with their supervisor, to agree an individually tailored training programme. The training needs analysis is revisited at the beginning of each year of study and all PGR students must complete 90 hours of additional research methods training beyond the core modules during their full-time or part-time registration. This includes access to the annual training programme provided by Aston Graduate School (ILES 3.17), which includes courses supporting Qualifying Report preparation, academic writing, and viva preparation. Our PGRs can also access training from the University's Library Services (ILES 2.14), such as advanced literature searches, measuring publication impact, EndNote and citation training, and journal publishing. All PGRs complete the Introduction to Learning and Teaching Practice course run by the University's Centre for Learning Innovation and Teaching Practice. The University-wide Centre for English Language and Communication provides additional English language tuition for international PhD students whose first language is not English (ILES 3.19). Career support is provided to PGRs by the Careers and Placement Department. PGR students have access to support for their well-being and mental health from the University's Enabling Service (ILES 3.17).

At School level, PGR students are integrated into our research culture in several ways. All PGRs are encouraged to join one of the School's research centres giving them access to research networks, seminar and workshop activities, centre-funded initiatives, and experience of a wider university research culture. By their final year at the latest, all are expected to have presented their research at a centre seminar/workshop and/or the UoA's seminar programme. PGR students can also access up to £1000 over their registration period for conference presentation/attendance, fieldwork and transcription costs, summer schools and research methods workshops, and further training. All PGRs have shared office space located on the same corridor as UoA staff to encourage further informal opportunities to participate in academic life. The School also provides resources for the SSH PGR annual conference. This is organised and run by PGR students and provides experience of conference planning and organisation, issuing calls for papers, reviewing submissions, selecting abstracts, and organising streams and panels. Our PGRs are further integrated into the UoA through opportunities to gain higher education teaching experience, which is remunerated at a set hourly rate. Finally, PGR students are encouraged to stand for election as student representatives with membership of the School's Research Committee and the University's Graduate School Management Committee, thus providing opportunities to learn about university administration and workings of a higher education institution (ILES 3.18).



**Equality and Diversity**

The UoA is committed to creating a positive research culture that is both diverse and inclusive in ethos and orientation, and which offers all staff the same opportunities to achieve their full potential. We believe we have made good progress towards this, but we are aware that significant further work is required. In particular, and as the Table below details, following the departure of two senior colleagues we now lack female staff at Reader or Professor levels; and female colleagues outnumber male colleagues at lecturer and senior lecturer levels. Despite efforts to diversify our staff group, including prioritising candidates from ethnic minorities on short-lists, we currently have no BAME staff in post. Like the University (ILES 1.2), this is a priority for DoSP as new posts become available.

**Table 1. The Gender Composition of Staff in the UoA**

	Male	Female
Professor	2	0
Reader	2	0
Senior Lecturer	1	5
Lecturer	2	5
Research Fellow	0	1
Total	7	11

We have made significant equality and diversity progress in other areas. The University holds a Silver Athena Swan award since 2018 (ILES 3.6) and SSH successfully applied for an Athena Swan Bronze award in 2020. UoA staff members (Fooks, Mizen, Page, Tritter, Hayes) contributed to the preparation of the application, and were involved in working groups established to analyse staff and student data and review School-level processes governing equality and diversity. The working groups confirmed good practice around maternity, paternity, and adoption leave, flexible working, and support for colleagues returning from leave through a 15% reduction in teaching and administrative responsibilities (ILES 3.7). UoA staff have taken up these opportunities, including:

- 1) Two female colleagues took maternity leave during the REF period, with a third taking two periods of adoption leave. Leave was supported by a positively-evaluated Keep-in-Touch (KIT) process that includes up to 10 paid KIT days to help colleagues on leave remain connected to the intellectual life of the UoA and support their return to full duties.
- 2) Support for flexible working via applications to move to part-time working. During the assessment period, one female staff member moved to a 0.8 contract following adoption leave.
- 3) All UoA staff with caring responsibilities can apply for timetabling restrictions that identify periods when they are not available for teaching. A clear policy has been developed to ensure parity and fairness in approving these requests. Furthermore, no meetings are scheduled before 9.15am or after 4pm.

Analysis by the School's Athena Swan working groups also revealed several issues on which action has been taken at School level:

- 1) Since 2014, 12% fewer women applied for research grants compared to men, and women were 5% less likely to submit successful applications. To help address this issue, the School launched an all-female writing retreat at the Bamford Quaker Community (see above).

- 2) Analysis of the gender composition of the School's major committees revealed that men tended to be over-represented on the School's Management, Research, and Promotions Committees, and under-represented elsewhere. In response, measures were taken to increase female participation on the Research Committee and to encourage male service on teaching and learning committees. As a first step, Chairs of all major School Committees were asked to develop measures to improve the gender balance and to reflect on gender-bias in chairing Committee meetings. To support this, a half-day training programme on gender bias in chairing meetings was held for members of the School's Management Committee in June 2017. Female representation on the Research Committee increased from 21% in 2017 to 43% in 2018, and by 2019/20 47% of members of the Research Committee were female. Since 2017, the School's Promotions Committee has a policy of strict gender balance.
- 3) Equality and diversity have been increasingly embedded into all administrative processes. They are standing items on all School Committee agendas. The School's Equality and Diversity Committee was strengthened in 2019/20 and its Chair now has full membership of the School's Management Committee and reports annually to the School staff meeting. Since 2016, unconscious bias training has been mandatory for staff serving on appointment panels. While single gender appointment panels have not been convened in practice, they are now formally prohibited.
- 4) As part of our Athena SWAN commitments to support female colleagues' career progression and increase the number of women in senior positions, we are currently establishing an enhanced mentoring scheme for female colleagues, to support career planning and their engagement with the promotion process.
- 5) The location of our HR partner within the School to provide ready access for support on equality issues and to ensure that HR policies, including those supporting staff with caring responsibilities, are clearly communicated and implemented.

Importantly, our commitment to equality and diversity has been integrated into preparations for REF2021. For this REF return, Aston committed to a 100% submission of eligible staff. Section D of our Code of Practice sets out the process for selecting outputs, with the peer review process for outputs set out in more detail in its Appendix 6. UoA staff participated in three School-wide workshops to explain these processes, and those involved in selecting outputs underwent EDI training developed in conjunction with Advance HE. Our selection of published outputs for our submission took gender, ethnicity, and career stage into account, and the inclusive nature of our return is reflected in our final Equality Impact Assessment (conducted January 2021), which showed no significant differences.

Our Individual Circumstances process (Code of Practice, Appendix 7 and 8) was run centrally through RKE, and the unit level reduction (REF6b) submitted for this UoA reflects the inclusivity of our return. In line with our commitment to inclusivity, all colleagues submitting a declaration of individual circumstances were invited to indicate if they wished to be contacted by an HR Business Partner to discuss their circumstances, and any support that they may require.

### **Section 3. Income, infrastructure and facilities**

#### **Income**

Our research income for the REF period totals £836,337. The UoA's strategic aim is to develop our research through more effective external grant capture to sustain the scope and scale of our research activity, and to develop further our commitment to research excellence. This aligns closely with the University's Research Strategy (ILES 2.4). During the REF period, UoA staff secured 30 externally funded research grants with a total value of £1,394,541, which we feel represents a strong performance from a new UoA and emerging DoSP that has invested in a high proportion of ECRs. 65% of Category A and B staff secured external research funding during

the REF period, including six (Mills, Page, Pilcher, Tonkiss, Schimpfössl, Soytemel) recruited as ECRs. This success, we believe, demonstrates the effectiveness of a strategy focused on recruiting strong ECRs who are likely to emerge as future high-profile principal investigators. Success in securing grant funding is underpinned by the research support we offer to staff generally (see Section 2), and will continue to drive our research strategy into the next REF period.

In line with University and School strategy, we have sought to diversify our funding base to increase research sustainability, targeting both traditional research funders (EU, ESRC, British Academy, Leverhulme Trust) and alternative sources of research funding (charities, local government, NHS). Among the more substantial grants secured by UoA staff were:

- 1) European Commission: 'Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future (CHIEF)'. £918,267, 2018-2022 (Popov, Soytemel, Tonkiss, and Fooks).
- 2) European Commission: 'MYPLACE - Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement'. £59,395, 2015-2016 (Mizen).
- 3) Economic and Social Research Council: 'Precarious Pathways to Work'. £57,483, 2018-2020 (Mizen).
- 4) Cancer Research UK: 'Low Visibility Tobacco Industry Political Activity and Contemporary Tobacco Regulation'. £42,477, 2015-2016 (Fooks).
- 5) Leverhulme Trust Fellowship: 'Care-less Spaces: Prisoners with learning difficulties and their families'. £38,890 2016-2017 (Rogers).
- 6) University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust: 'Improving the sexual health of 'online' sex workers in Birmingham'. £38,728, 2016-2017 (Lowe and Pilcher).

### Infrastructure and Facilities

Research support infrastructure has been fundamentally remodelled since 2014 at University, School, and Department levels. As we detail below, the University established a dedicated Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) Department to advance research strategy and enhance and rationalise research support (ILES 1.3).

Overall responsibility for research in the School lies with the Associate Dean Research (ADR, Mizen) who reports to the Executive Dean and the College Management Committee and chairs the College's main Research Committee. The ADR is also a member of the University's Research Committee. The ADR works closely with the School's academic Departments and research centres, which are also key to the College's collaborative, interdisciplinary research culture (Section 1). Within SSH, the ADR supports the four Departmental Research Directors (for this UoA, Fooks), DRDP, PGR Tutor, and the School's Impact Directors (Section 4), each of whom is a member of the College's Research Committee. The DRDP deals with all matters related to PGR students, works closely with Aston Graduate School and represents the College on the University's Graduate School Management Committee (ILES 3.16). DRDs further support researchers by organising peer review of draft publications and funding applications (ILES 4.5), advising on publication strategies and open access requirements (ILES 2.15), research integrity and ethics (ILES 2.12), and developing individual impact strategies.

The College also has a research office comprising a Senior Research Manager, Research Manager and Research Administrator and provides additional support for the organisation of conferences, workshops, and other research events. As of 2019, the admission and progression of PGR students across the University is administered by Aston Graduate School (ILES 3.16). The College has a dedicated full-time Strategic Funding Manager (SFM) working out of RKE to provide funding and application support, information, bespoke briefings, and engagement with

the wider funding landscape (ILES 2.9, 4.5-6). Our SFM also organises weekly School-based drop-in opportunities during term-time and runs regular research funding surgeries. A further dedicated full-time SFM from RKE provides similar support for all European and international research applications. We receive support from the central University team responsible for research integrity and research ethics (ILES 2.11-12). From winter 2020/21, a new College research ethics board will operate, chaired by a UoA staff member (Paton) who is an expert in social research ethics. A dedicated specialist from the University's Library and Information Service (ILES 2.14-15) offers advice on all issues related to open data, open access and copyright, and access to and searches of library resources.

### Facilities

Each staff member has an office situated along the same corridor, with a bookable meeting space and shared kitchen. PGR students from the UoA have access to open plan office space situated adjacent to UoA staff offices, to help further their integration. In addition, our PGRs can access the Aston Graduate School teaching and common room, including kitchen facilities. These facilities were specifically designed to support PGR student well-being and to foster University-wide opportunities to socialise and exchange ideas and information (ILES 4.2).

This suite of changes has further underpinned Aston's investment in sociological research. We have fostered collaboration around shared interests that has brought together different conceptual, methodological, and disciplinary approaches, and has helped link PGR students and ECRs to more established colleagues. The results of this are illustrated by:

- 1) a growing number of publications jointly authored by UoA staff (e.g. Fooks and Mills; Mills, Mullan and Fooks; Tonkiss and Stamou; Lowe and Page; Fooks and Godziewski; Lowe and Pilcher);
- 2) joint research projects on cultural reproduction (Popov, Fooks, Soytemel, Tonkiss), social movements and political activism (Hayes and Lowe), women's reproductive rights (Lowe and Page) and sex workers (Lowe and Pilcher);
- 3) joint funding applications (e.g. Popov, Fooks, Soytemel and Tonkiss; Lowe and Pilcher; Maestri and Hayes; Maestri, Hayes, Popov and Soytemel); and
- 4) joint public engagement activities (e.g. Paton, Lowe, Maestri and Fooks' joint submission to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on people with protected characteristics).

## Section 4. Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society

### Research collaborations, academic networks and partnerships

Collaboration is one of the four principals of Aston's research strategy (ILES 2.3), along with excellence, impact, and sustainability. During the assessment period, the UoA and the School have aimed to develop stronger collaborative research relationships at national and international levels. At School level, the new role of Associate Dean International provides support for the development of international networks and collaborations, and access to allocated funds for their development. Under this initiative Tritter, for example, led the UoA's involvement in a series of collaborative events with colleagues from Örebro (Sweden) around our mutual interests in health.

Collaborative, international, and interdisciplinary working is also an organising principle of financial and in-kind support for research provided by SSH and CCISC (Section 2), and a key part of the mentoring provided by the Head of Department (HoD) and Department Research Director (DRD) (ILES 3.9). CCISC has funded a series of workshops, one-day conferences, and symposia bringing together overseas scholars, civil society groups, and academics from multiple disciplines, including: development and governance in Latin American (involving scholars from sociology, economics, modern languages, international relations, business, and public policy);

nationalism and the making of ethnicities (sociology, history, European studies, international relations, cultural and social anthropology); approaches to discourse (sociology, public policy, English, politics, linguistics, and business communication). This has produced long-lasting collaborations leading to important research outputs. A CCISC-funded workshop on Religion, Gender, and Sexualities (Page and Pilcher), for instance, led to a recently published edited collection (*Embodying Religion, Gender, and Sexuality*, Routledge) with researchers from The Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, and Morocco, working across sociology, social anthropology, cultural anthropology, theology, and English literature. Equally, a jointly funded workshop by CCISC and British Academy/Leverhulme Trust explored journalistic practices in different post-communist countries (attended by social and cultural anthropologists, and linguists) and led to a special issue of *European Journal of Communication* ("Self-censorship narrated: Journalism in Central and Eastern Europe") and forthcoming special issue in *Journalism*.

These achievements sit alongside invitations to UoA members to participate in academic dialogue through invited academic talks in the UK (90) and overseas (55), and keynote conference invitations (11 in the UK; 12 overseas), including the National Australian Health Promotion Association Conference (Scarborough), the Vectors of Present Russian Development Conference (Moscow), and Collective Behavior and Social Movements Conference (Chicago). CCISC research clusters (Section 1) are also designed to work as hubs for like-minded scholars to collaborate internationally. During the current REF period, 15 colleagues from overseas universities and research institutions (e.g. University of Maastricht, Curtin University, and Deakin University) have joined the centre as associate members.

International collaboration has been further strengthened by support for overseas conference participation (128 papers), publications with colleagues from overseas institutions (43), externally funded projects involving colleagues from institutions overseas (9), and participation in international networks. The success of our strategic emphasis on the development of international networks and collaboration is also evident in visiting fellowship/professorship positions at non-UK institutions, including: Yale (Tonkiss); Flinders (Lowe); Maryland (Mullan); Tampere and Curtin (Fooks); Deakin (Page); Sciences Po Lille (Hayes); the University of Education and the University of Energy and Natural Resources, both Ghana (Mizen); and the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (Maestri).

The UoA has, in turn, welcomed 17 visiting fellows, 11 of whom have been invited to Aston under the University's International Visiting Scholars Fund, including: Dr Olga Shevchenko (Williams College, USA), Dr Dusan Deák (Comenius University, Slovakia), Dr Igor Kuznetsov (Kuban State University, Russia), Dr Bühmann (University of Lausanne, Switzerland), Dr Sharron Fitzgerald, (Ludwig Maximilian University, Germany), Professor Pamela Dickey Young (Queen's University, Canada), Dr Margarita Kuleva, Professor Elena Omelchenko, and Dr Guzel Sabirova (Higher School of Economics, Russia) and Dr Arseniy Svynarenko (University of Tampere, Finland). While resident at Aston, these scholars have presented their research, provided support to PGR students, and worked on collaborative publications and funding applications.

Importantly, our publications profile comprises a growing range of collaborations. Over the REF period, we produced 74 peer reviewed research outputs with non-Aston, UK-based partners, and 43 with overseas scholars. CHIEF, for example, involves colleagues from academic and research institutes in India, Turkey, Georgia, Latvia, Slovakia, Croatia, Spain, and Germany. Maestri collaborates on a project funded by France's Agence Nationale de la Recherche ("Marginalization/Inclusion: Regulatory Policies Effects in the Long Run. The Case of Romanian Roma Migrants"), which includes researchers from Italy, France, and Spain; and which has led to a forthcoming edited collection. Other examples of our international collaboration include:

- 1) long-standing research on working and street children with the University of Education, Winneba, and the University of Energy and Natural Resources, both Ghana (Mizen);



- 2) Popov's collaboration with the Centre for Youth Studies in National Research University Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg, Russia; and
- 3) research on 'Big Food' with members of GECl-PH, an international collaboration of academics and civil society actors centred on the commercial determinants of health (Godziewski and Fooks).

### **Relationships with key research users and beneficiaries**

A second cornerstone of Aston's research strategy (ILES 2.3) is impactful research. We are committed to embedding our research users and beneficiaries in the formulation, conduct, and dissemination of our research. The clearest example of this is our two impact case studies, but these are only the most prominent examples of user relationships from which other impact case studies could have been presented. This includes Mills' extensive involvement as Vice Chair with the Media Reform coalition on the future of public broadcasting; and Titter's long-term work with Public Health England as Chair of PHE's High England Equality Forum around their public involvement strategy.

Other examples of our strong relationships with research users include Paton's role as Chair of the Royal College of Physicians Committee on Ethical Issues in Medicine and as a trustee of the Institute of Medical Ethics. Mizen was also co-founder of the Midlands Youth Labour Market Forum and is a member of the Research Expert Forum of the international NGO, the Consortium of Street Children. Other UoA staff have fostered key relationships with a wide range of research users and beneficiaries, including: Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Netpol (Hayes); Voice for Choice (Malta), No More Shame (Gibraltar) (Lowe); the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (Lowe and Geampana); the European Public Health Alliance and NCD Alliance (Godziewski); the Church of England (Page); and Transparency International (Schimpfössl).

### **Contributions to the research base, economy and society**

UoA staff have made a strong contribution to sociology and to the social sciences more generally through the following activities.

Colleagues are widely represented among the editorial offices and boards (7) of leading international journals and book series. Hayes is the joint editor of *Environmental Politics* and consulting editor of *Social Movement Studies*, where he was editor-in-chief until 2015 and editor until 2017; Mizen is editorial board member of *Adolescents*; Mullan is Managing Editor of *The Journal of Time Use Research*; Paton is an associate editor of *BMC Medical Ethics*. Mizen previously completed two terms as editorial board member of the British Sociological Association's journal *Work, Employment and Society*, including two years as its Deputy Chair (2017-2018). Pilcher was editorial board member of *Sociological Research Online* (2015-2018). Hayes is editorial advisory board member of the Amsterdam University Press book series *Protest and Social Movements*.

- 1) All UoA staff have acted as peer-reviewers of academic articles during the REF period, covering over 50 journals across the social sciences. Examples include: the American Sociological Review, the British Journal of Sociology, Childhood, Children and Youth Services Review, Children's Geographies, Development and Change, Discourse, Ethnography, Journal of Youth Studies, The Sociological Review, Sociology, Subjectivity, Globalization and Health, the American Journal of Public Health, Social Science and Medicine, Sociology, Policy Studies, BMC International Health, and Human Rights.
- 2) Staff have reviewed work for over 20 different book publishers, including Bloomsbury, Oxford University Press, Palgrave, Routledge, Sage, and Polity.
- 3) Colleagues have contributed peer review expertise to Research Councils and other research funders (21 different funders in total). These include the British Academy, ESRC, The Leverhulme Trust, the Wellcome Trust, Cancer Research UK, the European

Commission, the Swiss National Science Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

- 4) Colleagues have acted as external examiners for 19 PhDs at wide range of UK and overseas institutions (e.g. the universities of Sydney and Rennes, Rutgers University, ULC, and Queen's University, Belfast).
- 5) Staff have lent their expertise to leading researchers in their respective fields through membership of Steering Committees (9) of major projects funded, among others, by the Wellcome Trust, Swiss National Science Foundation, and ESRC.
- 6) Staff have assumed leading roles in professional and scholarly associations during the assessment period. Mizen, for example, is Sociology sub-panel member for REF2021 and formerly an Executive Committee Member for the International Sociology Association's Research Committee 53, The Sociology of Childhood. Page was the Convenor of the BSA's Sociology of Religion Study Group between 2015-2016.

In addition to the public engagement work outlined above, colleagues have made the following contributions to the economy and society:

- 1) UoA staff have performed a wide range of advisory and consultancy roles for third sector organisations (9 in total). Third sector organisations assisted include UK organisations (e.g. Hillz Fm (Soytemel), the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (Popov), Public Health England (Tritter), overseas nationally based organisations (e.g. the Ryabkov Foundation, Moscow (Schimpfössl), the Shiloh Project, Auckland (Page), the National Heart Foundation, Jamaica (Fooks) and international organisations (e.g. the Consortium for Street Children - Mizen).
- 2) Finally, colleagues have performed advisory and consultancy work for a range of regional and national government organisations. Mullan, for example, provided expert advice to the Well-being Team at the Office for National Statistics and the Scottish Government on analysing and interpreting time-use data. Equally Soytemel and Popov are advisors to the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit on the relationship between youth cultural needs, young people, and the police in Coventry's most deprived neighbourhoods. Finally, Schimpfössl has provided advice to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the economic and security implications of Russian Oligarchs in the UK and the potential ramifications of sanctions on Russia.